

Series 13 - Love Forever

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- by Angie

Two Roses

*Only connect the (p)rose and the passion,
And both will be exalted.*

- with apologies to E.M Forster

Two mature rose bushes grew in the garden of the brownstone, on either side of a narrow pebbled path.

They were cut back with deliberation in the late fall, stood grey and stark under the winter sky. Then each spring they began to grow, stretching out slim green fingers and uncurling pale green leaves. By early summer, both bushes had become a tall, thick fan of dark leaves on barbed green branches, each ending in a large bud. As the summer warmed, the taller of the two stretched out an arm, topped with an extravagant white blossom, towards the smaller bush. It in turn, reached out with a luscious, but slightly smaller red blossom. By mid-summer, the blooms were touching tentatively across the pathway.

She stood by the window. Every year, she watched as the roses mirrored the story of their love. Now it was late summer. The rose bushes were caught in a last clinging embrace. Red and white roses together meant unity – a melding of love and passion.

She sighed as she felt him come up behind her. He encircled her with an arm and drew her to him. She leaned her head against his broad chest as they gazed out at the roses together. When she looked up at him at last, he bent down to plant a soft kiss on her lips.

“Forever,” he whispered

“Forever,” she agreed.

They glanced out at the garden again, as a breeze shook the heavy blossoms. A few petals floated down to carpet the pathway in a red and white mosaic, catching the mellow light of the setting sun.

They turned to each other then, their eyes affirming a silent need. Wordlessly, he gathered her in his arms and carried her to their bower, there to confirm a love that would never know a frost.

END

Guilty Pleasures

O ruddier than the cherry

O sweeter than the berry

- John Gay

Vincent and Catherine lay on his huge bed, half propped up on cushions, the covers pulled up to their necks against the chill. Vincent's hand rested on her belly, where the slight swell of her fourth month of pregnancy was evident.

Catherine loved the feel of his hands on her bare flesh. They were always warm and his palms smooth, despite his rough labour. She stroked the long silken hair on the back of his hand and knew he enjoyed it as much as she did. Now, if he would just move his fingers just a few inches south, her enjoyment would increase substantially. The thought made her warm.

She reached to her side and grabbed another chocolate cherry. They had become her latest addiction. These were the real thing – not some candied maraschino in pink goo, but a real cherry floating in cherry liqueur inside dark chocolate. There was even a warning on the box about possible pits. She popped it into her mouth, closed her eyes, squeezed it gently between her teeth - and sighed.

She suddenly felt Vincent's soft mouth on hers. She allowed some of the liqueur to seep through her lips and he obligingly nuzzled it off them, moving his tongue between them to find more.

"You're incorrigible," she told him, when he was finally satisfied he had left nothing behind and her arousal was becoming urgent. "You can have one, you know."

She plucked another from the box and reached over to pop it into his waiting mouth. Vincent closed his eyes to savour it and she leaned over to plant her lips on his and suck his mouth in turn.

He had not moved his hand off her belly and she moved her free hand to his stomach and felt the muscles contract there. Their bond was shimmering and Catherine became a few degrees warmer. Vincent's skin was vibrating with what she thought of as his "pre-coital" purr. It was a little rough, like a car engine warming up. That was a good sign, but she sensed his hesitation.

"I'm not made of blown glass you know," she told him, turning a little to get more of herself against him, loving the warmth of him - and his purr reverberating along her length.

"No, you're like one of those cherries," Vincent told her, his silken voice deep. "A delightfully tasty exterior filled with something precious."

"And to think I used to wish for a man who would love me for my mind."

Vincent chuckled. "Catherine, that's unfair. I've always admired your intelligence. You have that fortunate combination of beauty and brains – and you know precisely when to employ each."

She felt his happiness meld with her own. They almost basked in it these days. Some of that contentment, she suspected, was coming from their child. If a fetus could purr, this one certainly was.

"He's very mellow," Vincent whispered, *sotto voce*, as if he had read her mind.

"He?" Catherine sat up and looked at him. He was grinning, the tips of his canines showing. That sight made her core throb, but he pretended ignorance, not very convincingly.

"I'm afraid so, Catherine. There's no doubt about it now. You'll be outnumbered."

"Hmmm. I wonder if he'll love these cherries as much as I do?" she mused, to distract her lover, who looked annoyingly smug.

"He may be the reason you're so addicted to them," Vincent allowed, reaching over her to grab another. He popped it into his mouth and his purr ratcheted up a notch, as if the car engine was now racing just a little. "Whereas I have no such excuse."

"No, you just like to make me feel guilty for eating them," Catherine said sulkily, as she sucked on another.

“Never my love,” he declared, planting another kiss on her sweet lips. “But guilty pleasures should be shared. Sharing halves the guilt and doubles the pleasure.”

Catherine saw the immediate flaw in that argument.

“But Vincent, it also depletes our source of pleasure twice as quickly.”

Vincent was silent for a moment. Catherine was sure he’d have a good rejoinder.

“Then, lest my disappointment be added to your own guilt – and thereby doubled - you’d better make sure we never run out,” he intoned, reaching over her to grab the last one, quickly popping it into his mouth.

“Vincent! That’s not fair! You did that on purpose! Now what? I’m going into withdrawal already.”

Vincent smiled. “The box is empty, Catherine. You must make amends. Let me think. Ah, yes.”

He put a hand over her eyes and leaned over her. A moment later, she felt his lips on hers. His tongue pushed something very familiar into her mouth. She bit into it and sighed. Vincent removed his hand and she opened her eyes to look at him. His azure eyes were twinkling, but also held an unmistakable challenge.

She looked beside her and saw another box of chocolate cherries. A very much larger one.

She felt a giggle grow in her middle and soon had to hold onto Vincent for support as she let the laughter roll out of her. He hugged her close to him and let her humour run through himself as well. There was nothing more delightful than Catherine when she was laughing, he decided.

“I think we’re a mathematical marvel, Vincent,” she said, when she could catch her breath at last. “We not only halve the guilt, but triple the pleasure – since three of us seem to be enjoying these delights. Then, magically, they multiply as well.”

“There’s a fourth source of pleasure, Catherine - and an equation that the scientists would say was impossible,” Vincent remarked, his eyes filled with a passion that set her afire. He then proceeded to demonstrate that three could be melded into one.

The chocolate cherries bounced in their box for a while and then were still.

Somewhat later, Catherine conceded his logic was nothing short of miraculous.

END

Lost in the Dark

*Aye on the shores of darkness there is light
And precipices show untrodden green
There is a budding morrow in midnight
There is a triple sight in blindness keen*

- John Keats

Vincent was feeling at odds with himself – without quite knowing why.

Certainly, he had never been happier. He and Catherine were a couple and their lovemaking was a never-ending source of wonder and delight to them both. If there was any place or position they had not explored, he was certain they would do so eventually.

No, there was something else. He reflected back on the last six months, found nothing to give him concern. Then he looked further back to the time before his last illness when Catherine had rescued him from the darkness again, a much deeper one than that caused by Paracelsus' drug. She had brought him back to life and now nurtured a new life. What more could he want?

Then it came to him. He had not gone on one of his customary retreats to the Nameless River since before he and Catherine had consummated their love. He had always felt it necessary that he spend some time alone with his thoughts, away from Father and this community of friends. It was a three day trip, two of which were required for the trip itself. It was a long way down. It was quiet there, dark - and completely without distractions.

He never took any book but his journal and enough of William's food to sustain him, but no lantern. Just a small camping kit, a sleeping bag and wood to burn.

Did he need this temporary exile anymore? The thought of leaving Catherine for even a day was physically painful. His manhood throbbed with the thought of it. He sighed.

Catherine looked at Vincent brooding in his big chair. He was holding a book, but was quite obviously not reading it. She could feel that he was mentally restless. Not unhappy exactly, just reflective. What could possibly be bothering him? He was always analyzing himself. Maybe he thought they needed some time away from each other, as couples often did. They had been living together for many months now, ever since she had moved Below. They were never out of each other's company for long – just hours at most. Perhaps he longed for a retreat to take stock of his life.

Then it occurred to her that they both probably needed some new stimulus. Their lives *had* become somewhat routine, wrapped as they were in the fabric of the tunnel community. The brownstone was almost ready for occupancy and their suite on the top floor would give them both some space apart from the tunnel life. But it would not provide excitement. Perhaps that's what they needed. Good, plain fun.

She got up from her chair and approached Vincent, bent down to kiss him. He put his book on the table and gathered her to him, pulling her onto his lap. Catherine lay her head on his chest and he nuzzled the top of her head absently.

Catherine took the initiative and lifted her head to look Vincent in the eyes.

"Vincent, I think we need some fun in our life."

He looked at her, his eyes glinting in amusement.

"Are you saying, Catherine, that we aren't having any fun anymore? That our lovemaking has become mundane, boring even?"

Catherine gave him a friendly punch on his well-padded chest.

"You know that's not what I mean, Vincent. But, I think we need to find some other amusements as well – ones off a mattress. I have a suggestion. Why don't we make a list of fun things we'd like to do, ones we can do together. No limits. No worries about whether they're possible or not. Even if they aren't possible – like going to the Moon – they may inspire other ideas. Okay?"

"That process sounds like fun in itself," Vincent said slowly. "But then what, Catherine?"

"Why, then we will take ourselves off and experience some of this fun, Vincent. What else? However, I suggest we each take tomorrow morning, separately, to make up our lists. I have to go to the brownstone to take some deliveries. We'll compare after lunch. Does that give you enough time?"

"I should think so, Catherine." He kissed her solidly and hugged her close. Really, she was amazing. She always found solutions, whereas he was always looking for problems. They were a perfect match.

The next day, Catherine put on old clothes and made her way to the brownstone. The entrance was invisible to any casual passers by – just another stretch of dirty wall, water-stained and bordered by rusty pipes. Mouse had hidden the latch behind a caged light fixture, identical to hundreds of others. It simply lifted away on a hinge, revealing a small lever.

Once inside, she made herself a pot of coffee and carried a cup into one room after another. The renovations and decorating had all been done, but furnishings were still arriving almost daily. The clinic's equipment was in place and the hospital room was ready, except for the personal touches. She wanted it to be soothing, welcoming. She had bought silk plants and bright yellow curtains to match the walls. She had found some nice colour prints of forest scenery - which still needed to be hung. Vincent would help with that.

Elsewhere in the house, the rooms were mostly unfurnished. Some of that would be rectified today. She had ordered an extra large bed for the suite reserved for herself and Vincent, and plenty of bolsters. She wanted him to feel at home.

She went back into the kitchen and poured a half cup of coffee. Father had suggested she limit her intake during her pregnancy. In truth, she did not find coffee as enjoyable as she had before, but herbal tea didn't always appeal either.

She decided to start on her list of fun things to do with Vincent. She had just managed to come up with a half dozen when the doorbell rang. She ran to it and opened it to a couple of burly moving men. They had the bed. She held the door while they manhandled the awkward mattress into the hall and up the stairs. She followed them and showed them where to put it – and the two piece rattan frame and headboard. She had opted not to get a boxspring, having discovered after a visit with Jenny that a mattress on a rattan base was much more pleasant to lie on and had a felt more like Vincent's bed below.

She closed the door and bolted it behind the men. She had just gone back to the kitchen when the bell rang again, this time with a selection of dressers, desks and chairs. They were placed in the upstairs rooms and the men let themselves out. That was all for today, but tomorrow she would have to get Vincent to help her arrange the stuff. He was so much stronger than anyone else.

Now she could get back to her list. She got to the top of the stairs and looked down. The movers had dropped something. A few steps from the bottom was a square sheet of something, protective foam perhaps, probably fallen off one of the pieces of furniture. She went down the stairs and had just bent down to pick up the sheet – it was indeed foam - when her foot slipped on something. She caught a glimpse of torn plastic film before she slid with a whoop to the bottom of the stairs, bumping her backside and arm on the way down. She tried to rise and slipped again. She hit her chest on the bottom of the stairs and her head on the banister with a crack. Everything went dark.

She awoke in the dark, hurting in several places. She must have moaned, because a voice spoke to her.

"It's all right Cathy, I'm here. You're fine, just a few bruises and scrapes. You've got a slight concussion, so you're going to have to be still for a few days."

The voice was pleasantly deep, but she couldn't place it. Where was she? And why was it so dark?

"Where am I?" she asked the voice.

"You're in the brownstone's hospital room. We thought best not to move you any further. Vincent has just left to get some food for you."

She was still puzzled, but could not get her thoughts together into a question. She concentrated on the most obvious thing.

"Why is it so dark in here? I can't see you – or anything."

That was greeted with an intake of breath and silence for a few moments. Then the voice spoke again.

"Cathy, you bumped your head rather badly. There is nothing wrong with your eyes. I'm sure your sight will return

very soon. It's not uncommon with head trauma. Just be patient. You're safe and we'll look after you.

"Ah, Vincent. She's awake."

She heard a soft-footed approach and a deep silky voice spoke.

"Catherine. How do you feel? Are you hungry? William has put together a fine feast for you."

More puzzles. Names and places and things which made no sense.

"I ... I don't know," she admitted at last. "Who are you?"

There were two gasps this time and she realized she had shocked them, that she was supposed to know them. She seemed to be in a fog. Perhaps it was the medication. But she didn't feel drugged.

"I'm Dr Peter Alcott," the first voice said. "You just relax, Cathy. I'll send in someone to help you eat."

Two sets of footsteps left and a lighter one entered. A pair of hands helped her to sit up and began to feed her soup which made her realize she was very hungry. How long had she been here? Too many questions and she was afraid of what the answers would be if she asked.

"What's your name?" she asked into the darkness, choosing a safe question between spoonfuls of soup.

"Olivia," said a soft voice.

She was afraid to ask if she should know this woman. At least her nose worked and the food tasted wonderful.

Out of earshot, Vincent and Peter conferred in the hallway. Peter was still, but Vincent was pacing back and forth like a caged lion. He paused just long enough to ask a question.

"Peter, what has happened? She can't see and she seems to have lost her memory as well."

Peter looked worried. "I don't know, Vincent. She had a nasty bump on her head, but there was no damage to her eyes or the optic nerve, as far as I could tell. It's probably just a temporary result of her fall. It isn't uncommon. She was very lucky. If she had fallen from the top, or even half way down. she would probably have lost the child.

"What does your bond tell you, Vincent?"

Vincent stopped pacing and stood in front of Peter, his head bowed.

"I felt her fall, felt her pain, and then nothing. I knew when she awakened but our bond seems to be impaired. I can sense that she is alive and in some discomfort, but nothing deeper. Our bond had become very strong, you know - as if we were one. I can't feel that closeness anymore. It's as if there's a wall of glass between us.

"I shouldn't have let her come here alone this morning. We had wanted a few hours apart to make up lists. A silly thing - and my fault.

"Peter, I feel as if my heart has been ripped from me. We were so happy. Now she doesn't even recognize my voice. What would she think of the rest of me? What can I do?"

"Vincent, I think you should take it slowly. She'll recover, I'm sure, but it may take some time. Don't tell her anything about her life, past or present. You'll just confuse her until she starts to remember. Just surround her with love and understanding. I suggest you read to her, but keep your distance. If anything will bring her back, it's your voice. She loved it from the moment she heard it all those years ago. She told me so. Hold onto that, Vincent. Your love for each other will overcome this and endure."

Peter hugged Vincent to him and felt the larger man shake with sorrow, knew that he was sobbing quietly. Peter felt like crying himself. Was there no end to the trials the world had in store for his favourite couple?

When Vincent had himself under control, he stood back and lifted his eyes to the ceiling. He was calm when he dropped them to look at Peter again.

"You're right, Peter. I must take this slowly, allow Catherine to recover in her own time. It will be the hardest thing I have ever done. Ironically, I was wondering last night if I needed a retreat to take stock of my life. Seems I am to have one of a different kind - one I would never have imagined in my worst nightmares."

Peter patted Vincent on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Vincent. Cathy is young and strong, and she is carrying your

child. We'd better not tell her that either, just yet. All we can do is play it by ear, use our best judgment about what to tell her, and when."

"Yes," Vincent murmured. "Just like the time I found her in the park. It's as if the past three years had not happened."

"I'm going Below now. Father will want a report. I'll come back later with something to read. Thank you for coming so quickly, Peter. I'll send Mary up to relieve you."

He walked down the hallway and through the small door leading to the tunnel entrance.

Peter nodded absently and returned to the hospital room. Olivia was just packing up the tray and Catherine had fallen asleep. He thanked Olivia softly and she nodded and left quietly, closing the door behind her.

Peter sat down on a chair and put his head in his hands. All he could do now was wait.

Vincent returned to his chamber, suddenly unsure why he did so. How was he to tell Father what had happened? He looked down at the table and saw his "fun" list there. He picked it up and was going to crumple it but changed his mind. He folded it up and put it into a vest pocket. He had turned around to leave when Father entered, looking flustered and worried.

"Vincent. Olivia told me you were back. How is Catherine?"

Vincent sat down in his chair, his legs suddenly unable to hold him up. Father pulled over another chair and sat in front of him.

"Tell me," he demanded quietly.

"She's generally all right, Father, physically. Just a few big bruises. But she can't see and she doesn't remember anything – or anyone, not even Peter."

Father was silent and dropped his head.

"She has a concussion, then?"

"Peter says so, Father, but he can't explain the other symptoms. He says she will probably recover fully in time."

"Yes, that's often the way of it, Vincent. What are you going to do now?"

Vincent was silent for a few moments, thinking. Then he looked at Father with new determination.

"I'm going to pack some clothes and books and move a cot into the hospital room. I want to be with her all day, every day, until she is well."

"Yes, I think that would be best. I'll talk to William and make sure he sends enough food for yourself and Catherine every meal. Mary will want to help of course – the children too. They must be told, but we won't let them see her. I think we must try not to overwhelm her. She must be feeling very confused."

"Thank you Father. Yes, please ask Mary to go to there as soon as she can. Peter will need to get back to his own work. She and I can handle anything that might arise and we'll call you if any medical assistance is needed."

"There's one more thing, Father. My bond with Catherine is impaired. I can't sense much but her general well-being. She doesn't know me Father." Vincent's voice broke and tears rolled down his face and the pain shone in his eyes. Father rose and hugged his son to him.

"Vincent, you must be strong. Don't despair. She may feel that, even though your bond is not what it was. And there's the child to consider. We must keep her happy, any way that we can."

Vincent lifted his head up and shifted. "Yes, I know Father. But it's so hard. I feel half dead without her presence there in my heart."

"She's still there, Vincent. She just doesn't know it at present. Have faith."

Father left and Vincent packed a large backpack with enough clothes for several days. Then he looked along his bookshelves. One red volume caught his eye. Should he take it? He wasn't sure he could read that just yet. It was like déjà vu. Worse - as if he had to start all over again. He picked out a few books of poetry and

Shakespeare's Sonnets, another book with many memories. Well, memories were what he was trying to inspire, so perhaps these were best, after all. He packed them in his bag.

By supper time, Vincent had installed his cot in the clinic. He had changed his mind about putting it in the hospital room, deciding that Catherine might not like a strange man in her room day and night. But he would be just next door and aware of her, as much as he could be. When she recovered her memory and their bond, he would know.

He would have to treat her carefully, asking her permission to sit with her. She must not know how intimate they had been until she was ready. He reflected that this forced abstinence was probably good for him. A retreat would henceforth be out of the question. He had to stop brooding too. That was what had brought all this to pass.

Mary, who had gone back below when Vincent arrived, returned with a pot of stew, a loaf of cracked wheat bread and a small orange poundcake. Vincent made some tea and carried his own and Catherine's meal into the hospital room, but let Mary feed her.

He sat at a small table eating his own supper and watched as the patient ate heartily. He wondered if he would be able to feel the child. He had no bond with it yet, but could sense it when he touched Catherine's belly. That would have to wait too.

After supper, Vincent approached her.

"Catherine, would you like me to read to you?"

"Are you a friend of Dr Alcott's, Vincent?"

"Yes, Catherine. We are very old friends. He is my doctor as well."

"Vincent, I'd love for you to read to me. Anything. I feel as if I am struggling through dark molasses. Nothing makes sense. I can't recall the accident, or anything. Not even my name sounds familiar. I'm frightened."

She began to weep quietly. Vincent thought his heart would break. He couldn't touch her, but he did put a handkerchief in her hand, careful to keep his fingers from touching hers. He placed a hand on the cover over her legs, stroking her lightly. She seemed to calm.

"Catherine, I know this is all strange to you. But don't worry. Blow your nose. I'll read a sonnet or two."

He read Sonnet 29, mainly because the book fell open there. He had read it so often.

*When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon my self and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least,
Yet in these thoughts my self almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate,
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings,
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.*

The irony hit Vincent hard and he was silent for a time. Once he had thought those lines applied particularly to himself. Now they seemed to apply to Catherine. Were they never to put this one to rest? Picking another at random, he read Sonnet 57.

*"Being your slave what should I do but tend
Upon the hours, and times of your desire?
I have no precious time at all to spend;
Nor services to do, till you require.
Nor dare I chide the world without end hour,
Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you,
Nor think the bitterness of absence sour,
When you have bid your servant once adieu;
Nor dare I question with my jealous thought
Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,
But, like a sad slave, stay and think of nought
Save, where you are, how happy you make those.
So true a fool is love, that in your will,
Though you do anything, he thinks no ill."*

Vincent was quiet and Catherine looked thoughtful after this. She turned towards him.

"Thank you. You read beautifully, Vincent. That last sonnet seems appropriate now, doesn't it? Here I am, blind and a burden, requiring a slave to cater to my every need. I hope mine thinks as well of me as Shakespeare's did."

"They do, Catherine. Never fear. You are no burden." Vincent was glad she could not see the tears running down his cheeks.

"I'm feeling very tired, Vincent. I think I'd better sleep now. Thank you for your company."

"Do you need anything, Catherine?"

"Oh no, Vincent. Mary led me to the bathroom and I am quite able to walk. I just feel sore all over."

"Sleep well then. Good night"

"Good night Vincent."

Vincent left the hospital room and quietly closed the door. He wasn't feeling tired so he walked down to the kitchen. He saw the remains of Catherine's coffee and cleaned the pot and the cup. Then he noticed the lined pad on the table and the list in Catherine's clear hand. There was no reason to keep it secret now, he thought, and sat down to read it. As he read one after the other he smiled. Then he ripped off the page and folded it neatly, putting it in the same pocket of his vest as his own. Suddenly feeling much better, Vincent went to bed. The cot was too narrow and too soft for his taste, but he found himself easily drifting off to sleep. It had been a long day.

She did not go to sleep immediately. Her memory seemed peculiar, as if a wall had come down in front of it. Trying to reach into it, she couldn't come up with a single event of her life. Amnesia. She knew the term, but had no idea how she knew it. She was afraid to ask questions of Vincent, who obviously knew her well, although he had not said so. Was he her husband, a lover, a friend? She could not ask for fear of upsetting him. He and Dr Alcott were shocked at her lack of memory. No, she would just have to keep battering against the wall and hope that it broke down soon. In the meantime, it was pleasant listening to Vincent read. He had a lovely voice that seemed to make her tingle head to toe.

She turned over and hoped with all her heart to wake up with all her memories intact one day soon. She could even live without eyesight – but she needed to know who she was.

The next day, Mary arrived with breakfast, followed closely by Father. He went in to see Catherine but said nothing and did not approach her or talk to her. He felt she had enough people to try and remember, he told Vincent in the kitchen.

"She looks remarkably healthy, Vincent. I'm sure her memory will return soon."

"How can you know that, Father. Our bond is still unresponsive. I feel as if I've lost a hand or a foot. I'm limping inside, Father."

"Have you been reading to her, Vincent?"

"Yes, just sonnets so far, but I think I'll start on a novel today. *Great Expectations*. I read it to her during those terrible days after I found her. I think it might jog her memory."

"Let's hope so Vincent. In the meantime, don't neglect yourself. And find some distractions. Perhaps get the furniture in place in upstairs. I think Catherine will want to stay here when she recovers. It's really very nice. My compliments to you both."

Vincent took Father's advice, but went up to their attic suite first. He attached the headboard to the rattan frame and then lifted the mattress onto it. He sat on it and was amused to find that it seemed to bounce a little – and not without a slight squeak. But he liked the feel of it. Perhaps they'd better confine their lovemaking to hours when there was no one else in the house. If and when Catherine recovered, Vincent reminded himself. He kept himself busy for a couple of hours getting the other furniture in place, then went down to relieve Mary. He sat down in the chair by Catherine's bed.

"I'd like to read you something special, today, Catherine. It's a favourite of mine. You used to love it too."

Catherine said nothing, merely nodding. She did not trust herself to ask anything. She was still groping in the dark.

Vincent began to read, once again losing himself in the Dickensian prose and social comment. Odd as the characters and plots were, things always worked out in the end. Vincent took heart from that.

Over the next few days, he read to Catherine every waking hour, stopping only long enough to let Peter give her an examination, Mary to help her change her hospital gown or bathe, and both of them to eat. He felt a compulsion to read the book to the very end. He remembered how Catherine had read the last chapter to him on her balcony, the one he had not had time to read to her while she recovered so long ago. This time he would finish it. It was the evening of the fourth day after her accident.

She listened intently, her eyes closed, letting his voice soak into her. It was magical, soothing, that voice. He seemed to need to read *Great Expectations*. For some reason, this particular book was very important. Perhaps a memory went with it. She hoped it would break down her inner wall.

Almost fearing, without knowing why, to come in view of the forge, I saw it at last, and saw that it was closed. No gleam of fire, no glittering shower of sparks, no roar of bellows; all shut up, and still.

Just like herself, she thought. Closed, without a spark – shut up and still. A person in a coma could not be so removed from life as she herself. At least they were unconscious. She knew her state and it frightened her, frustrated her.

Then a little later, Vincent read the lines which seemed to resonate in her heart, without knowing why.

"We are friends," said I, rising and bending over her, as she rose from the bench.

"And will continue friends apart," said Estella.

I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her.

"The End"

Vincent was silent and looked at Catherine. Her forehead was wrinkled in a frown as if she was trying to find an errant thought. He took consolation from that. He thought she looked tired as well.

"Catherine, you should rest. I've kept you up far too late – just because I wanted to finish the story."

"Thank you for reading to me, Vincent. It's wonderful to have you here every day. The time goes by so much quicker. But I am tired. What will you read next?"

"I think I'll keep it as a surprise, Catherine. Sleep well."

Vincent left. He felt an unaccustomed peace. He felt along the bond and found that Catherine was half asleep already, but that the glass wall across their bond did not seem so solid now. He let himself hope she would recover very soon.

Catherine awoke feeling refreshed. The early sun was shining a reddish light on the bright yellow walls. It was a lovely effect. She noticed the pictures she had meant to hang were still in their cardboard covers leaning against the wall.

Then it hit her. She looked around her, suddenly realizing where she was. Why was she in the hospital room bed – and wearing a hospital gown? The last thing she remembered was ... oh yes, she had tumbled down the stairs. Clumsy. She felt her belly, was relieved to feel the slight bump. She hadn't lost the baby, then.

What had happened? Where was Vincent? She felt along the bond, realized he was nearby. Then suddenly the door burst open and he flew in, reaching her side in a flash. He was wearing something that resembled a long tank top. He was the most beautiful thing she could have imagined.

"Catherine!"

He took her hands in his own and looked into her eyes. She had never seen him so intense and was left speechless. Vincent was looking at her as if she had risen from the dead. As she tried to think of something to say, he caught her in a hug and mumbled her name over and over. He was delightfully cuddly and warm. It seemed like an eon since she had hugged him. She found her voice and whispered "I love you" into one of his hidden ears. She began to stroke his hair and found herself crying from the intensity of his love and relief flowing along the bond.

"Vincent, I feel great. Really. What?"

Vincent let her out of the hug but held onto her hands as if he was afraid to let them go.

"Catherine, you've been recovering from a fall and concussion. Don't you remember the past week? You couldn't see anything when you woke up and you didn't know anyone – not even Peter. We were so worried. My ... our bond had almost disappeared. I was afraid I'd lost you. All I could think to do was read to you. I couldn't even touch you. You didn't remember me."

Catherine cast her mind back through a dark fog. Yes, something was there. She remembered the darkness, the fear. And a voice that stroked her soul.

"Oh Vincent, something in me responded to you. The past few days are a bit hazy, as if I was covered in a dark blanket or drugged or something. I remember someone reading *Great Expectations* and sonnets to me in the dark – you of course."

"Yes," Vincent admitted. "I didn't know what else to do. I've never felt so helpless."

"Vincent, you're the man I love with everything that I am. My heart knew you, even if my brain was disconnected."

"Yes, Father said something like that to me that first day. He was right," murmured Vincent, as he bent his head to kiss her hands.

"A father knows, Vincent. He loves you. Remember Sonnet 116?"

"Love is not love, which alters when it alteration finds/

O no, it is an ever-fixed mark,/ that looks on tempests and is never shaken."

"Vincent, our love is embedded in our hearts. It can't be removed or hidden for long. This time, you led me out of the dark."

Vincent was silent. Catherine felt the guilt along their bond. She was about to speak when Vincent put a finger to her lips. She held her tongue.

"Catherine, that darkness was my fault. I had been brooding and you wanted to cheer me up. I'll never forgive myself. But there is a bright spot. Remember our lists? I have them here. I peeked at yours."

Vincent handed her the folded pieces of paper. Catherine opened the one on thick paper, knowing it for Vincent's. She read his fine script and smiled. Then she opened and read her own list on its flimsy yellow, lined paper. She looked at the man she loved sitting beside her on the bed.

"You see my love, although we wrote separately – and on quite different paper - we thought alike. Which one should we do first?"

"Catherine, my idea of fun right now would be to join you in this bed and hug you until the sun goes down. But I think I'd prefer some fun of less duration but a little more energy - if you are feeling up to it.

Catherine smiled lasciviously. "I'll bet you are 'up to it', my indefatigable lover. Let's test this bed out. Later we can test out our own. Oh ... I guess it needs to be assembled."

Vincent chuckled. "I did that the second day you were here, Catherine. It has been waiting for us ever since. I know making love was not on our lists, but it deserves a place of honour all the same. I promise not to brood any more. And you are never going to be alone here again. Not even to write up a shopping list. Never."

Catherine said nothing. What was there to say? She was never happier than when he was with her. Even in those days of darkness she had known that, somehow.

Vincent took her in his arms and carefully lay down with her. Before long, there was nothing between them at all - and the fun began.

END