

Memory Lane Is Bittersweet

By Cindy Rae



*For the Valentine's Day Celebration
in the Treasure Chambers, 2018.*



Their lovemaking had been sweet, their ardor sated; temporarily, at least.

Vincent and Catherine rested, half-entwined in his sheets, while he played an odd game with her fingers, clasping and unclasping them, with his. Sometimes he would stop, and turn her hand so he could see the differences between them. On one side, his longer, heavily nailed fingers rested against the back of her supple, feminine hand. On the other, her white, manicured nails settled gently against the back of his fur-covered one. He would study her lovely fingers, then kiss them, and rub his thumb along hers, in an almost absent gesture. And then repeat the entire process, again.

"You're here. And yet you're lost in thought," she prompted. Her voice was a husky, gentle thing, in his candlelit chamber.

His reply was a considered one. "I was thinking of this day. And of how many others I had, which were so very... unlike it."

She couldn't help but smile at that. "Thinking of Valentine's Day?" she asked.

"Mm," he replied. He stretched out one long leg, as she curled hers up, higher. The action caused the sheet to ride dangerously low. He was growing more free with her, both in his thoughts and actions, since they had become lovers. For the first few weeks, he'd barely let go of the bedclothes when they were making love, initially concerned about what her reaction might be to his hirsute form.

Now, at least, he was at the point where he would lie with her, half draped, as he petted her, or as they dozed. He was learning. Learning her. Learning them. What had begun at Winterfest, in December, was now bearing its own kind of fruit, in mid-February.

She planted a soft kiss over his heart, and settled her head there, just for the pleasure of hearing the steady beat. Various obligations had kept them apart, much of the week. But today was one they both knew they wouldn't miss. *Valentine's Day. Our very first. In a way*, she thought.

She shared her own recollections of other Valentine's Days, her voice rich, with memory. "At some point, growing up ... my Dad would always send me this huge box of chocolates." She lifted her head so he could see her smile, and it was one he softly returned, as he listened.

"I never ate it all. It was too much for one person. So I'd take it into his office, and we'd share some of it before one of us finally threw the rest away, after a few days. It was silly, and wasteful, but it was the way we did things, between us. It still is," she said, knowing a large, heart-shaped box of candy was sitting on her dining room table, even now.

Vincent knew that her telling him of one of her Valentine's Day memories was an invitation to share his own. He wasn't sure he wanted to do that. He didn't want to sour the relaxed, languid mood, between them.

He knew that his memories of Valentine's Day were somewhat less pleasant than hers were. But she was looking at him with soft her soft green eyes, and the expression of a woman who had just been well-loved. He marveled at that. And even before their latest development, she had always invited his confidences.

How do I tell you? He thought. But then, he simply did.

"I... did not care for this day, very much." he confessed. At her raised eyebrow, he felt compelled to explain, at least some: "If the sight of

my face reminds people in your world of what they are most afraid of ... of their aloneness... the sight of this day on the calendar... reminded me of my own."

Catherine took in his words with quiet understanding, and she knew that for many, a day that celebrated romantic love left them wistful.

"I think, sometimes, that a lot of people feel that way: that this day marks their aloneness," she replied, letting him share as much or as little as he would.

When he added nothing more, she simply settled her head back on his chest, and kept the conversation light. "I admit I wasn't even sure if all of you really celebrated Valentine's Day, here." she said. There was no grand celebration, to be sure. This was not like Winterfest, or even Halloween.

His voice was a low rumble of sound, beneath her ear. "The children make cards for each other, or for the Helpers," Vincent said. "That hasn't changed much, from when I was young."

Catherine smiled. "Ah, so that explains why I got those," she said, looking over at the small pile of construction paper cards, settled on the corner of his writing table. "What else did you used to do?"

"William usually baked special cookies. The married couples had their own celebrations... privately." Vincent kissed the back of her fingers. "I knew that it was a day to be with your love," he stated.

Yes. Yes it is. And now you're with me, she thought, just as he thought something similar. They both knew he was now part of that society, that group of people who celebrated Valentine's Day in an intimate, personal way. That though they'd been fairly ... circumspect about the changes in their relationship, the tunnel community was aware of it. Vincent's tied-down drape and Catherine's somewhat disheveled

appearance when she left his chambers late at night were all the hint anyone with eyes or understanding needed.

The warm room, closed off by the heavy, drawn drape, invited further confidences. "When I grew past childhood...Father and I used to spend this day playing chess, or sharing something we'd read, while Mary sat near, usually sewing, or adding to the conversation." The blue eyes held old memories. "Some others might be there, too, if they were ... alone. Pascal would come and sit, for as long as he could bear to be away from the Pipe Chamber. Or Winslow would, until he simply decided to go to bed. It helped pass the time. And kept us from thinking about how lonely we all were," he said honestly.

Catherine turned so that she sprawled her torso half over his, pinning him with her soft weight, letting him feel how substantial she was.

"You don't ever have to feel that way, again, Vincent. Neither of us do." It was said with the loving solemnity of a vow.

"I know that," he told her, brushing her forehead with a grateful kiss. He disentangled his fingers from hers, and wrapped his arms around her naked shoulders, cradling the smooth skin there beneath his palms. It was a marvelous sensation, and he felt her happiness at being so thoroughly embraced. Her contentment fed his own, and with the description of Valentine's Days past done, he simply lazed with her, enjoying her nearness.

They laid together several long moments more, with Catherine listening to his steady heartbeat, and Vincent idly toying with her hair, or stroking her naked skin. The sensation of running his hands along her nude back was a delight to him, and one of which he never seemed to tire.

You are beautiful, and warm, and mine, he thought, as his bare palm caressed the line of her back. It was a sensation he never ceased to revel in.

And one they both knew they would have to cease reveling in, soon. The late hour grew later, as they lingered, and it was a thing they were both aware of. Unfortunately, she needed to return home. It was a weeknight, and she had work in the morning. The both knew if they stayed this way much longer, they'd start to doze. He felt her fighting it, now.

"I hate that I have to go to work, tomorrow," she complained. She spared a thought to the notion that they should have started all of this in her apartment, so she could stay tucked in bed, and just go to sleep. But then he would have to be the one to travel home, rather than her. There was no help for it, one way or the other.

And besides, they'd spent only one such intimate evening in her apartment. In spite of its obvious privacy, Vincent seemed more comfortable in his home than he did in hers. In that, some things hadn't changed, even if others had.

"And I should have walked you home an hour ago," he said, knowing full well what they had been doing "an hour ago" and that neither one of them wanted to stop it. "Will it be a hard day at your work, do you think?" he asked, gently easing her away from him so they both could sit up to dress.

"I don't think so," she answered, rising regretfully. "The court docket is all but non-existent. Judges are married men and women, for the most part," she stated, putting on her clothes for the second time, that day.

He reached for his work pants, and buttoned into them hastily, as she bent for her blazer. They'd been careless with her things, in their ardor. One of her shoes was kicked under his bed, while the other sat as a solo, in the middle of the rug, looking abandoned. His boots were little better.

After a few more minutes of attending to the chore of re-dressing, she looked rumpled, and bit tousled, and quite thoroughly adored. She tugged a comb through the soft fall of her hair, repairing her appearance, at least a little. He fought down the mischievous urge to rumple her, again, just on general principle.

Sighing, he tugged on his work boots, and the rest of his clothing. The large pillar candle beneath his window told him the time was burning down, along with the wax. But if he took her home now, she could still get a decent night's sleep. – Barely. He reached for his cape as she tugged on her jacket.

She gathered her cards from the children -- and one from him -- and tucked them in her bag, ready to go. They both knew he'd walk her to her exit. And given the lateness of the hour, they'd likely do that without encountering any of his people.

He'd been unsteady, at first, about that; about encountering others after they'd been together, intimately. Not embarrassed, exactly, but certainly protective of the very private thing that had passed between them. It had been unplanned. Delightful, and delightfully fulfilling, but unexpected. Vincent, often tentative when it came to new ground, was unsure of what this might mean for both of them, and for how his family might react.

Their reactions had ranged from cheerful acceptance to quiet concern, on Father's part. Even the children too young to understand

adult relationships understood that something had changed with their favorite teacher. Mostly, his tunnel family simply respected the change, and knew better than to raise it, as a topic of conversation; that such a thing would be déclassé. They all seemed to be giving him as much privacy as they could, considering.

Still, Vincent was grateful for the empty hallways as they made their way back. If nothing else, it gave him just a little more time to be alone with his love.

In spite of the fact that they both knew she needed to be in her own bed, the walk to her basement entrance was achieved at a casual gait, with at least a few stops for a soft kiss, or sigh. She was clearly in no hurry to leave, just as he was clearly in no hurry to have her go. It was St. Valentine's Day. Their first, as lovers. He would not pretend it was unimportant to him. Or to them.

Her exit came at last, and he experienced a bit of déjà vu as he remembered the very first time he'd sent her toward the rungs of the ladder. He remembered that he'd felt a bit lost, back then. A bit sad, and bewildered. *I sent you home. I knew I had to. You rested your head on my chest then, too*, he recalled, still able to feel the spot where she'd done that, earlier.

He knew he'd been falling in love with her the first time he'd ever said "good-bye" to her, here, but was still unsure of exactly what all that meant, for them; or even if it meant anything at all, for him. Her world had been sundered. So had his. And they'd had to part. *Bittersweet*. It was a word he now understood fairly well.

He kissed her good-night, and held her as long as he dared. *She has to go. I have to let her go*. He knew it was true. The date of February 14th didn't make that any less a fact.

He stepped back and watched her slow ascent, the light making a nimbus of her lovely hair, as it so often did. *You're my angel.* He thought it so loud he wasn't sure he hadn't actually said it, as well.



When he returned to his chambers, the unmade bed seemed cold, now, and lonely. He avoided it, for the moment, and tossed his cape across its foot, opting to sit at his writing table, instead. The New Year's new journal sat at the ready, a red leather one wrapped with a thong. Mid-February meant the pages had barely been dented, even though he'd had a great deal to say, considering.



Picking up the silver pen Catherine had given him for Winterfest, he opened the book and stared at the blank page for a long minute, unsure of where to begin. Finally, he did as he so often had, in the past: he dated the page and just shared what he was thinking.

February 14th, St. Valentine's Day

My beautiful love. My Catherine.

He paused again, and looked at his beginning. It looked very ... proprietary. There was a period after "Catherine" and not a comma,

for it wasn't a salutation. It was an observation. She was his beautiful love. And she was most surely his Catherine. He continued to write.

She is my soul, and I spent part of the evening wrapped in her embrace, knowing what it was to be treasured, as part of another. We are sacred, in each other's sight, and I am blessed...

Vincent paused again, words overfilling him. Then he set the pen to paper, once more, the good ink flowing freely.

There are times when I feel my heart shall burst, from the bliss of her, and what we share.

I hated to tell her "good-night." I know it must be this way, for us, but it was the only truly wistful moment in what otherwise was a perfect evening. Had this day fallen on a Friday or Saturday, she likely would have stayed with me, longer.

As it was, the children had made her cards, which they longed to give her. She held them to her breast after reading each one in front of them, and declaring all their fond wishes the best kind of gift she could possibly receive. They adored her attention. As did I.

She is my "best gift." Whatever happens, whatever comes, I will love her all my life.

There seemed to be nothing Vincent could add to the last, so he didn't try. He flipped the journal closed, content that he was done with writing, for the night. He placed the newer journal on top of an older one, the one he'd been writing in prior to having started this one. After a while, he knew he'd store the old one in a box beneath his bed.

As if thinking of his old journals called him backward, he looked at the shadowy area beneath the bed frame. *Old journals. Old times.* Catherine and he had both talked of other Valentine's Days.

For a reason he couldn't name, he crossed to the bed and reached a hand under, to draw out the small wooden crate that contained some of his older journals. He drew out a small stack of them, and carried them back to his writing table.

Looking at the dates, he removed the one from the year before he'd met her. 1986. Almost idly, he turned to Valentine's Day.

February 14th. Valentine's Day.

It told him.

The children have exchanged cards with each other, and with me. Their love warms me, and makes me happy.

Why then, do I still feel sad? Is that the right word?

How can I tell them that this day is meant for lovers, and that while I treasure the love they bear me, I still feel ... restless?

Kanin adores Olivia. Their marriage chamber is all but complete. I do not know where he found lilacs, but he has filled vases with them, for her. Today I saw her laugh, when he moved her braid to kiss her neck, just a little. She smiled, and her eyes were just for him, and he knew it.

Would that there were a gentle pair of eyes that held that same expression, for me.

I do not mean to be envious. Indeed, I should be happy for my friends, and I am.

But I am sorry for myself. More's the pity, as there is never anything that shall be done for it.

Sleep will come. I will find respite in dreams. Tomorrow will be better.

They were the last words of the entry. And February 15th had been better, of course.

But it struck Vincent just how often he remembered writing those words, or ones similar to them, in other years.

He returned to the bed, knelt down, and reached far back, beneath it, tugging forward a squat, old chest. It brought forth dust and a long missing sock, with it. It had been there a long time, and the hinges gave a creak of protest, when he opened the lid.



Extracting the top book, he flipped through another journal, this one dated roughly seven years before he'd met Catherine.

February 14th. It is Valentine's Day.

Tonight, over chess, Father told me the story of St. Valentine, or at least what he remembered of it. That he defied an emperor, and married people in secret, and arranged for love letters to be sent between beloveds.

Would that I had someone to write to. Even if the messages were never delivered.

Perhaps I could do that, here, on these pages?

"For the Woman I Do Not Know, and Who May Not Exist."

Is that a proper enough salutation?

There are days when my loneliness is but a light burden. I know I am with people who love me. There is comfort in

that, and it is a comfort beyond measure. Others have much less. I know that.

But there are days, like today, when I feel the weight of my separation. It is hard to carry the knowledge that you'll never have a love.

I will go to sleep now. Tomorrow will be a lighter thing to carry, I pray.

Vincent closed the cover of the book, and held it to his forehead, a moment. *I remember writing this. I remember... feeling it. I remember the weight of the understanding, even as it came by degrees. I knew I was loved... even as I understood I... wasn't. Not that way. There was always bitter mixed with my sweet.*

He set the old journal to one side. Obsessed now, he dug deeper into the battered chest. Ten years back. Twelve. He flipped consistently to the entry for February 14th. The similarities to the day he'd just read could not help but leap at him.

There are lovers in the park, and rose vendors, everywhere. Even in the cold of winter, you can feel the warmth. I try not to feel envy. But no matter what, I cannot help but feel a little sorrow.

From another: *I still remember Lisa's face. And though I no longer love her the way I used to, I know that I once did, and it brought me to mourn. I pray she is spending this*

day better than I am. Tomorrow, if it is not better, will be different, at least.

He tossed the books back into the chest, knowing that it was a daunting thing, to look upon such... desolation. He knew there were other days recorded in those pages, when he decried his loneliness, as well. And while that was not true of every day (and indeed, that most of the pages were filled with either happy memories or simple musings), he knew that there were a great many journal entries describing those times when he felt the burden of his separation from others; that there were times when he felt that, keenly. Memory lane, it seemed, had more than a few potholes.

“Catherine.” He said the word aloud, as if it was an invocation against loneliness. Which, in a way, was exactly what it was.

He thought of her. How her soft eyes always looked toward the balcony when she anticipated him there, happy at his approach. He thought of how she always looked when he opened the metal gate that led inside his home. Like she was seeking something, and not happy until she found it.

And the thing she sought was... his face. His. And only his. The thing he, by necessity, hid from the world, was the thing she seemed to want to see more than any other. She would search for him, then her gaze would settle, when he came into view. Light would come into her beautiful green eyes, just a moment before her smile started. It was a look he utterly adored. He knew it was for him. Only him.

And right now, he knew that he was too far away from her.

Grabbing his cape for the second time that night, he all but ran down the tunnels, aware that though the night Above was cold, he had one more trip to make.



Vincent passed Pascal, unexpectedly, on his swift way to the drainage culvert. The balding man looked a bit like he'd seen a ghost.

"Um... Vincent, if you want to talk to Father, it might have to wait until morning." His longtime friend was visibly shaken by something.

Even though he was in a hurry, Vincent paused. Pascal was rarely this rattled, and never this late. Pipe traffic was at a minimum, now, so there was little reason for him to seem off-balance. "It is not Father I seek. What's wrong, Pascal?" Vincent asked.

"Wr-Wrong?" the smaller man asked, his eyes darting reflexively toward the passageway that led to elder Wells' chamber, "Uh, nothing's wrong... not exactly." He seemed confused.

"Pascal?" Vincent asked, trying to decipher his friend, and needing to go, at the same time.

"It's just that... well... Father and Mary... they're, um, together, right now. They're sl-sleeping, but...um..."

The redness of his face told Vincent all he needed to know.

"But you walked in to say good-night, not thinking," Vincent finished for him. *Good for you, Father. For you, and for Mary.*

The Pipemaster was clearly still dealing with his surprise. "How was I supposed to know? They've been friends for years!" Pascal's ruby complexion could have competed with a rose bouquet, for color.

"Did they look happy?" Vincent couldn't resist the urge to gossip.

"They looked asleep! And naked! In the same bed! But for a well-placed quilt, I'd have to wash my eyes!"

Vincent chuckled at the image Pascal presented him with, if not at Pascal's own embarrassment, itself. The larger man settled a steadying hand on the smaller one's shoulder.

"Tie down the corner of his drape, my friend." Vincent told his longtime companion. "Or they will likely be interrupted again, by morning."

"I don't even... why now?" Pascal wondered, even as he realized the advice was sound.

"It's Valentine's Day," Vincent answered. "Perhaps Father has been reading old journals he keeps. Or Mary has," he posited, not offering to explain further. "Go on, Pascal. Make sure they are not disturbed."

Pascal nodded, grateful to have some form of "solution" to this "problem," and Vincent hurried on. When he emerged from the drainage culvert, the cold air hit his face like a wintery slap.

The park held February's frost. Spring was a long time away, yet, in the Northeast. It had not been the hardest of New York winters, but it had been a substantially long one, having graced the park with snow back in late November. It had since warmed, melted, and snowed again, more than once, and the crisp sound of patchwork snow and dead grass under Vincent's boots reminded him of the times his hopes for love had once been as sparse as the lawn, and just as frostbitten.

Catherine had changed that for him; changed it, forever. The realization gave him speed.

He was a running shadow across the park, until he reached her building, and then he was a climbing one. His ascent was both silent and swift; muscles had memory, and his knew the way. The cold metal on the fire escape bit through his leather gloves, reminding him that it was nearly one a.m. The rungs had taken in no warmth since sunset, and even through his gloves, Vincent felt the sting of the cold. But he knew where “warmth” lay.

It was in the eighteenth floor, corner apartment. And right now, that “warmth” was sound asleep, tucked safely into her bed.

He knew he should go back. He knew he should simply turn around, return to his own chambers, and wait for this feeling of bittersweet to pass; to just let it go. He knew he should simply allow himself to settle. He would see her again, tomorrow.

Tomorrow. I'm doing it again. He was putting something off, waiting. Using patience, since that was the tool he used so often.

I used patience because patience was the only thing I had, he realized, climbing higher. That was no longer true. Now, he had more than patience, more than reflection, and more than introspection. Now, he had Catherine. *My Catherine.* The words alone, gave him comfort.

It is already tomorrow, he thought. And he didn't want to wait anymore. He hated that he'd even separated from her this evening, in the first place.

He dropped to her balcony, a silent presence under a chill half moon. Her terrace was a hard pallet of cold stones and metal furniture, all of which held onto the frigid temperature like an ice sculpture. This high up, the wind, an absent thing at ground level, was picking up, and made the mercury feel that much lower. The prohibitive temperature

on her balcony was another part of why she'd come to him, this evening.

He hesitated, as he crossed the stones to her door. For all their intimacies, her apartment was a place he still felt... foreign. The delicate furnishings, the brass and glass, everywhere... in spite of his nimble grace, he felt crowded in the small space, and as if he were apt to break something, just by moving past it. *Then break something*, he thought, looking through the pane. *Will the world end, if I do?*

Clearly, it wouldn't. And when it came to "breaking" things, he and Catherine's beginning had started with things being "broken." The Tunnel rules. Her beautiful face. Her old life. And for that matter, his. All of it.

There is no sense pretending we're cautious, now, he thought, with a bit of a smile. He wondered if, Below, a stirring Jacob was perhaps reaching a similar conclusion, for himself.

Her apartment was dark, and she was long abed. Vincent knew that if he'd come to her apartment this evening, they might have simply stayed indoors, by a good fire. *Warmth, again*. She brought it to him, every way she could.

He could see his breath. It misted on her bedroom window panes, like fog. She was curled beneath her comforter, dreaming. The blankets were tugged up high, on her soft shoulders. She was happy.

And he suddenly became aware that he wasn't.

For all their passion, for all the contented togetherness of the two hours or so before she'd left for home, he was not happy, not really. *Bittersweet*. It was the thing that had driven him here. And though it might have been prompted by looking at his distant past, his not so distant past was bothering him some, as well.

We were wrong to part from one another, this evening, he thought it so loud he could practically “hear” the charge, inside his sensitive ears, as an audible thing. Ears that were growing numb with cold, in spite of his hood and hair.

He felt his disquiet tapping on his heart. Not a piercing pain, not an agony, or even a sharp discomfort. Just a sensation, an annoyance, like someone drumming on a table top with their fingertips, who would not stop. Disquiet. *separate, again, but not by circumstance. By... choice? And right now, by a pane of glass.*



He tapped on it with his nails, not wanting to frighten her with his sudden and unexpected presence on her balcony. She heard him immediately. She always did. She was as conditioned for that sound as she was for the ringing of her phone, or the jangling of her alarm clock. She knew what it was. She always knew.

She kicked back the covers and grabbed her warm robe off the foot of the bed, as she made her way to him. The moment she opened the door, he came into the room.

"Vincent?" Her voice held the question, as he entered. February came in the door, with him. The sharp difference in the air temperature made mist.

"Catherine. I... I didn't want to let you go, this evening." He wasn't sure how to begin this conversation, or even where he wanted it to go. *Do I start by telling you about Father and Mary? No, that can't be right. And it has precious little to do with us.*

He tugged the door closed, firmly, letting the February air sweep past her, and settle, between them. "All is well," he said to her concern. *That is true, isn't it?*

Should I tell about old journals from an old life she wasn't even a part of? He wasn't sure if that was right, either. He only knew that he'd missed her. Badly.

Catherine, bless her, seemed to understand, as she studied his beloved face.

"Come here." she told him, holding her arms open wide. He simply tugged her forward, pulling her into the solid embrace of his body. She smelled warm, from sleep, and clean, from the shower she'd taken when she gotten home. The children's cards were on her vanity table. She'd taken the time to display them, before she'd gone to bed. He rubbed his cheek against the crown of her head, lovingly. *Is there a better treasure in all the world than you?* He was positive there wasn't.

And he was positive that he no longer wanted to send that treasure out, and up, to a place he could not travel freely. He knew he had no cure for that circumstance. But that didn't keep him from feeling that he didn't like it.

"I love you." he said, holding the moment in his consciousness, aware of what it was about to become. *And I think I've been writing to you since I was twelve years old.*

"I love you, too." she told him, her voice muffled in the folds of his vest and cape. Her arms gave his body a squeeze, and he felt her relax, a little, thinking that this was all he'd come for.

"Come in to the living room. Let me make us a fire," he invited.

She lifted her head, and her expression told him she found the request an odd one, at this hour. She broke the embrace, and stepped back, just a little.

"A fire, Vincent? Is that wise? I mean... we need to sleep, and you have your day and I have mine, and..."

"And I am deathly ill of treating those two things as if they must stay separate, and inviolable. Catherine. I would move here, if I could. If you would have me, and if I could. But we both know I cannot."

Catherine watched him, her eyes widening. Sleep was slowing her reflexes, some. *Did you just say what I think you just said?* she thought. Her quizzical look prompted him to elaborate.

"There is a box of journals beneath my bed, and a chest filled with others. Old ones. Old books, full of old memories; and on this day, every one of them, the same. That my heart was lonely, and begging. That I wished with all my might, all my heart, for someone I could love, who would return that love to me. For years. Too many to count, comfortably."

Catherine listened to him as he shortened the distance between them a step, and pulled the lapels of her robe closer together. His hands lingered. "And you are here," he said, both of them knowing she was,

and had to be. “And yet, there are still many days when we cannot be together. And I sleep stories below you and sometimes... desperately far away.”

Catherine’s tone was a careful one. “I know, and... we’ve been... dealing with that pretty well, I think. We even talked about it. About how some things would be the same, even though... even though things... changed, between us.” she said, using a delicate euphemism for their decision to be intimate together after their respective workdays were done, and before one or the other of them needed to get to sleep. Neither of them had stayed longer than the evening with the other, and they’d never woken up together, in the morning, for various and practical reasons, owing to either his limitations or hers. He couldn’t travel home, in broad daylight. And her life had its considerations, as well.

Baby steps, she thought. We’ve been taking baby steps. Even with this. And it’s all right that we have. We’re already so much farther along than I might have hoped. “I think... we agreed to try not to impact other people too much, with our, er, choices,” she said, again speaking euphemistically.

“I know that we did. That we both said that was best, for now. And at the time... perhaps I even thought that was wise. I wanted...”

He paused, on the sentence. *What? What did I want, only two months ago, when all this began?*

He knew he’d not wanted to hide it, certainly, or to deny it. That was never his intention, nor had it been done. But just how to proceed, and when, had been a thing he’d been unsure of, throughout.

In a way, that piece of uncertainty had been with both of them, since their beginning: both of them had known they loved each other.

Neither one of them was absolutely certain what to do about that fact, or if anything particular even needed doing. It was a thing both of them had worked through, one month, one event at a time.

And now, here they were.

For Vincent, experience was doing for him what it often did. It was guiding him toward his decisions, and giving him confidence in those. He knew the next one was the right one.

"The next room is too far away from you, sometimes. Stay with me, Catherine. Be with me. In your home or mine. At night and sometimes, come the dawn... I will tell my work detail to go hang itself, if it interrupts us."

"Vincent, we can't just..."

"Yes. We can. I can. I need to. I swear it." His eyes held a naked plea. *I don't want them just to accept us, or even be glad for us. I want them to accommodate us. If we inconvenience anyone, then we inconvenience them. We deserve the right to say we can. And sometimes, your friends will have to do the same. Even if they don't know why.*

"Can you?" he asked.

"For just tomorrow... or always?" She answered a question with a question.

His answer was a sure, low, tenor of sound. "Tomorrow. Always. Whatever you can give me, Catherine. Always, whatever you can give me. Whatever you can spare."

His expression was penitent, and his beautiful face was pleading. *Please say "yes."*

She did, but not in the words he was expecting. "Come here." She repeated her earlier invitation. "Don't start a fire, just... come here, Vincent," she held out her arms, again. He nearly tackled her, taking her backwards.

"This is a big step, you're talking about," she warned. *There will be gossip like you've never heard, the first morning I wake up in that bed, then come down with you, for breakfast. There's a difference between how we've been handling this, and that.*

"More for you, than me," he replied. "No matter what we do... or when...or how much more often we stay in each other's company... you are the one with much to give up."

Catherine wasn't certain she agreed with that. "Oh, I don't know if it's more for me than you. You don't know all the ruckus it will cause, the first morning you don't show up for work. Or how it will be when I start moving clothes into your bureau."

I know a few people who are going to cause a ruckus, then, he thought, realizing that Jacob and Mary might be about to have a very similar conversation.

"I am more than willing to face what comes, if you are," he replied.

"Can we keep this place? Ultimately? I have a soft spot, you know."

"We." Not "I." "We." And... of course we can. This is your home. I don't want you to give that up. I just want to... share it with you, more. Try to... fit in here, more. Be more of both worlds, like I've always said you must be.

"We can do whatever we want... can't we?" he asked, the sensation utterly foreign to him.

Catherine, having been raised as a woman of privilege, was a bit more accustomed to the feeling. Her smile was a beautiful thing to behold. "My love, for all that you've taught me... and you've taught me more than anyone else ever has..." She gave him a squeeze. "I wasn't sure if that was an idea you'd ever be comfortable with."

He hugged her to him, tightly. She smiled against his neck as he held her, his mind racing. *I'll need to make room for some of your things in my drawers. And perhaps... ask if you would make room for mine, in yours?*

The fact that this was now a possibility for them was new. And unlike anything he remembered reading in his journals, in his trips down memory lane. *Good.*

"I want to make memories for us that are sweet, without the bitter," he said, positive they could.

"I think we can do that," she agreed, loving him. The bond practically hummed, between them.

"I'll want more for us, as time goes on. You know that," he said, sure it would be true.

"I'm counting on it," she replied. "Maybe by the time our anniversary comes around? We'd have a couple of months to... get used to the ideas we're both about to have. About what we want. And when we want it."

His voice was hoarse from all she was implying. All they both were implying. "By then. If not sooner. Happy Valentine's Day, Catherine."

"Happy Valentine's Day, Vincent," she answered, knowing it was her happiest yet.

He held her, warming her against the chill he'd brought into the room with him. And being warmed by her. In more ways than one.

If this year unfolds the way I think it will... oh, the things I will be writing in my journal by next Valentine's Day! he thought.

And he did.

**

No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~
Cindy

Happy Valentine's Day



Pacem Muros