

# Morning After

By Cindy Rae



*For the Halloween Celebration on Treasure Chambers, 2018.*

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*While much is written about October 31<sup>st</sup> and our couple, not as much is written about the morning after. So I thought I'd have a go at that.*

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Catherine Chandler heard the rustle of her skirts as she turned to face her apartment door. She'd had to push it open just a bit wider to accommodate the wide drape and long flounces of her gown, as she entered her apartment.

Now, she stood there, tucked safely inside, facing the white wood.

*Our third Halloween. Our third one.*

Sunlight was filling the room. Morning was here, and no mistaking it, it was full morning. Not "just dawn's beginning" or "daylight creeping in." Morning. The morning after October 31<sup>st</sup>; and all that that implied.

*All that that implied. Both good and bad. It's morning. It's over. I can't believe how fast it went, but it did.*

They'd sat near the water, again. If she closed her eyes, she could picture it in her mind. The faint smell of salt still clung to the folds of her elaborate gown. *If I close my eyes...* she thought, letting them drift shut.

*"Are you sure you want to go there, again? We saw it last year, after all. And the year before..."*

*"I'm certain, Catherine."*



It had been such a simple, unequivocal reply. Catherine had wondered if Vincent might not prefer someplace else this year, but she knew that “near the water” was free of the huge buildings that cut off the view of the sky. It allowed him to see the dawn from almost the first moment the November (for it was November, now) sun inched its way up the horizon, casting a narrow sunglade on the water, once it cleared the scaffolding.

The bridge had been bathed in platinum, for a moment.

And then, so had he.

Even as she opened her eyes to face the door, the image of Vincent sitting near the water with her stayed in Catherine’s reminiscing mind. She remembered it, because he’d intuitively turned his leonine head toward that sun, toward that rising orb, as if his face had been seeking its warmth, instinctively. The all-but-foreign-to-him star had beckoned, and he’d turned to it, in answer; a pilgrim to the dawn.

The framing, blonde beard on his cheek and jaw had been painted bright gold, and his coppery skin had gleamed with both inner and outer warmth. Catherine had watched his blue eyes close, peacefully, and the head lift, just a little, like a sunbather worshipping at a vacation beach.

But then, something just a bit odd had happened, Catherine remembered, because then, he’d snapped the head back to *her*, as if the sight of her, painted in sunlight, was far more precious to him than the sight and feel of the sun itself.

Catherine’s hand remained on the cool, smooth door, bare of the long white gloves she’d spent half the night in. She knew once she closed it... that the beautiful, incredible night would be over. Officially.

*November 1<sup>st</sup>. Three-hundred-and-sixty-four days until the next Halloween. An entire year, before we'll know such freedom, again - or at least, before he will know it.*

The thought was almost too sad to contemplate. So of course, she found herself doing just that. *We can't go there, again. Not for another year. We can't just... sit there, can't just enjoy the morning being born. He can't. It's so unfair.*

The trial lawyer in Catherine's brain, the seeker-of-truth, the verifier of facts, both pleasant and unpleasant, wouldn't turn off, just then. The educated woman who assessed reality rather than fantasy came to the fore, and as her hand laid calmly against the solid wood of her living room door, the facts of the new day swallowed her whole: *Three hundred and sixty four days. Three hundred and sixty five, if next year was a leap year. Was it?* She had to admit she had no idea. And she couldn't even say why if it was, the one day seemed to make it so very, very much worse.

*Twelve months. Fifty two weeks. Four seasons, going around again. Both of us a year older. Hopefully a year wiser. Certainly a year more spent ... waiting.*

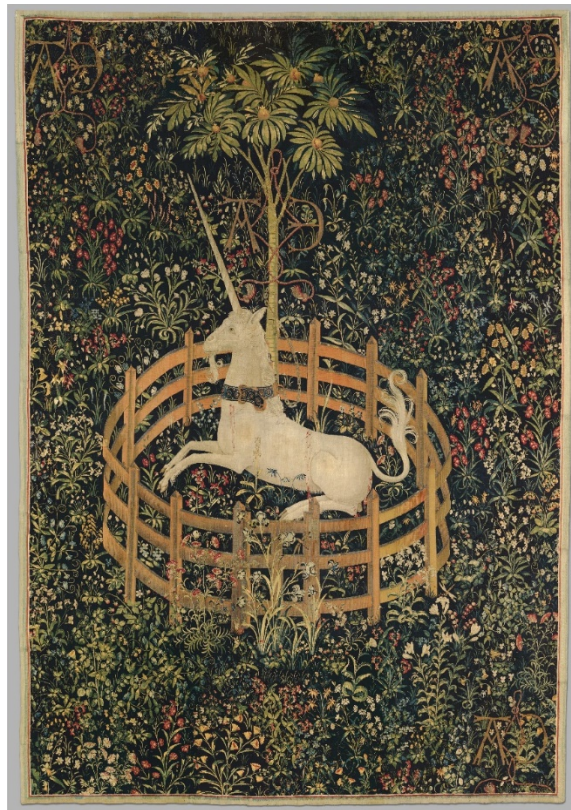
Waiting for the time to pass. Waiting for the one night when he could all but stroll up to her door and knock on it, and escort her to... to, well, wherever it was they wanted to go.

Last night had been different than the Halloween before. Rather than hurry to as many landmarks as she (or they) could squeeze in, they'd lingered, more. A costume ball at the Cloisters had enchanted them both, and he'd stood as close to the art as he could get, basking in its glory. The unicorn tapestries on the wall had made him smile with the almost-familiarity of them, and their age had astonished him.

*"These remind me of the ones that hang in the Great Hall, and yet..."*

*"They're different, aren't they?"*

*"Different, yes. Older, perhaps. What a marvel these are..."*



*The Unicorn in Captivity, 1495-1505*

A string quartet had shimmered with Haydn, as fat pillar candles flickered, encased in glass globes. Unobtrusive waiters had moved silently among the guests, offering champagne. The refined patrons had paid handsomely for the privilege of being there. Catherine had considered it money well spent.

Then, another steep financial outlay, tickets to the opera. *La Boheme*, and another stop at the gorgeous Metropolitan Opera House, where

costumed guests mingled, and balcony seats meant they had at least some privacy, after the lights went down.

*“The costumes, the colors... The music is... sublime. Thank you, Catherine. Thank you for this gift.”*

He’d been charmed. By all of it.

They’d ridden in a horse-drawn carriage down Wall Street, again, and taken in the elaborate window displays in the shops on Fifth Avenue. For a while they’d simply... drifted... among the flotsam of New York, talking, holding hands, recounting the show, enjoying the liveliness of a city that didn’t sleep even on the quietest of nights; and this was far from that.

They’d bumped elbows with fellow revelers, and been greeted as such. Thanks to the popularity of the Broadway show, many were even dressed as large cats. It was a thing they’d both smiled over.

He’d wanted to see St. Patrick’s Cathedral again, so they had, but the place he told her he truly wanted to be was by the water near the bridge, for the sunrise. After making sure it was what he truly wanted, it was a wish she’d been happy to grant. So, they’d gone there.

And though this time, no morning jogger had prompted them to part (the rising sun was doing that well enough, along with the increase of uncostumed patrons of the area around the bridge), they’d had to, eventually. It was inevitable.

*‘All our revels now are ended,’* she quoted *The Tempest*, internally; and more than a bit regretfully.

And as Catherine pushed the door gently inward, the soft click of the metal bolt sliding home felt as loud as the shot from a gun. *It’s done. The night is over. Halloween is over. Well over.*



She knew that meant that Vincent's freedom was over. For what night save Halloween gave her Vincent more liberty than this one?

And though the night may indeed be over, the day was just beginning. That meant something, as well. And it was something Catherine knew she couldn't ignore.

She went to her bedroom and changed clothes, trying not to let her somber mood overtake her. The beautiful gown was hung, and the feeling of stepping out of the 1800's was hung with it. Back to 1989. Back to the twentieth century, and all its concerns, rather than the nineteenth, with none of its. *The past is passed*, she thought, running a thoughtful hand down the brocade front of the gown. *No more pretending.*

Catherine wondered about that for a moment, as she settled a pair of short, lace-up boots near her dress. She'd been able to dress like a fine lady, a bit of a southern belle, without such a woman's actual concerns, such as they would have been. As a dress-up costume, she'd had only to worry about whether or not her long petticoat had dipped into the New York street grime, or whether or not a fan kept in her reticule would be enough to keep her cool, at the crowded museum party.

She'd not had to worry about whether or not a good crop would come in, or how many children in town might survive the winter, or fall to disease. She'd not had to concern herself with the morality of slavery, or the limits of a woman's narrow life, during those times. She'd simply worn the dress and enjoyed herself. It was the benefit of a costume, and the fun of pretense; one didn't "actually" have the concerns of anything one dressed as.

*If that's not fantasy I don't know what is*, she mused, settling a lacy parasol beside her gown. It would all go back to the costume rental

shop, tomorrow – today, if she got the chance. *Fantasy done. Time to get back to the real world*, she mused.

Then, a dark thought intruded. *Is that what we're having, Vincent and I? A... fantasy? Are we just... pretending, so much? Pretending... that it will all work out, that we'll all work out? As long as we wait for nights like Halloween, it can happen? Are we just... pretending we'll be all right, because we want to be, so badly? Are we ignoring our realities and holding onto our fantasies, because... that's what we both think we need to do?*

It was a somber reflection for the morning after an absolutely splendid night. And as her alarm clock buzzed, Catherine knew she didn't have any time to indulge it. Today was a work day. She was a shower and a business suit away from being in her office. Today was Wednesday. She shut off the alarm and headed for the bathroom, doubt trailing after her like last night's perfume.

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The rest of the day seemed as filled with “pretense” as the night had been; it just seemed to have a different flavor. Often, a very unpleasant one. Like most holidays, Tuesday night had been full of drinking, and no small amount of drug use. That often led to nothing good. Catherine took several statements, both from witnesses and victims:

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From a woman who'd been beaten by her husband: *“I stayed because he said he loved me. I thought he did.”*

Catherine couldn't help but think the thing she couldn't say. *I hear that so often. Did you still think that the first time he hit you? Or the fifth?*

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From a prostitute who had been robbed: *"Okay, so maybe I turn tricks. Ain't no big deal. It's not like I plan to be hooking forever..."*

*"How long have you been in the life, Marcie? How many years?"*

*"Um... seven. Since I was sixt- no, fifteen. But I'm getting' out. Someday."*

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From a man accused of stealing a valuable necklace at the store where he worked: *"I don't know why I did it. Maybe because I didn't think I'd get caught."*

*"There was a guard on duty and security cameras all over the building."*

*"A guy can dream, can't he? It was worth a fortune!"*

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The day seemed spent collecting confessions and statements, or being witness to those, as her office negotiated guilty pleas, sentences, and fines. Halloween costumes played their part in her caseload. At a car dealership, a man dressed as Dracula tried to take a sports car for a test drive – leaving a fake driver's license insisting his address was "Transylvania" on the counter. In a night club, a "toga party" had gone a bit too far, and had spilled into the street, complete with unwinding bedsheets. It was a day for the books. Or at the very least, it was one for the stack of file folders that kept hitting her – and everyone else's desk.

"Halloween," Joe muttered, dividing more work. "I swear they get crazier every year."

There was little in the way of "investigating" actually involved in the day, Catherine realized. Most people (who looked like they'd had just about as much sleep as she'd had) confessed their guilt. And the

confessions all had a similar ring to them: A mother didn't want to charge her addict son (who had been stealing from her for over a year) with the theft of her wedding rings, because "she thought he'd never go that far" after having taken everything else of value from her. A man who had vandalized his wife's car, thanks to her infidelity, swore the serial philanderer had stopped 'this time.' Abusers swore "it wouldn't happen again," to their victims. Victims swore they believed them – in spite of evidence which insisted they shouldn't. People with long records of DUI's racked up one more. It was a day for dealing with those who lived in denial – and the mayhem that often caused.

Phone call after phone call got made, to the police, for arrest reports, to the witnesses, to the accused and their attorneys...

And in all of it, Catherine saw (and not for the first time) the power people had to delude themselves. They all thought it would "get better" or "stop hurting" or "they'd get away with it." Victims and perpetrators alike all seemed to fall back on a bit of denial, and maybe more than a bit of that, to get them through the day.

Catherine rubbed her temple as she consulted the phone message containing the next number she needed to call. *Another deluded soul. Are Vincent and I something similar? Are we also thinking the way these people think?* That life would, somehow, afford them many bright days together? Many "free" days, when in reality, they both knew it would only afford them very few?

She thought of the prostitute with the swollen jaw and the empty purse. The one who thought she wasn't going to be 'in the life' for very long, and had spent seven years there. Did she want seven years from yesterday to be one of only a few times Vincent would ever be able to walk the streets with her without fear of capture? Did she want that to be true, for them?

She knew she wanted more for him, and that *she* wanted it, desperately. And she also knew she was powerless to make it happen. One could not make every day be Halloween. *Are we seizing the moment? Or indulging in some kind of fantasy, because the reality is so harsh?*

The thought that in three more years, he'd have known a grand total of six Halloweens, six nights of freedom, galled her. What toll might that take, she wondered, as the sixth year slid into the seventh, and the seventh into the eighth, and they both ended up on November 1<sup>st</sup> every year, with her hand on a door, closing it, knowing that chance to walk Above was gone, no matter how hard they wished it could be different?

And knowing that the night was bought with a certain amount of "denial," for both of them? *If we pretend we can have everything we want, we can... for just that night. But of course that isn't enough.*

He endangered himself every time he came to her. They'd pushed their luck more than once, in that direction, and he'd paid for it, dearly. *Aren't we still doing that, as well? Pushing our luck, and hoping for a favorable outcome? A lucky break? With no "fact" to back that up, just... wishing?*

She realized she'd been staring at the number without doing anything about it. She dialed it and waited for the connection to get made, musing, all the while.

*Am I so much different from any of the people I've seen today? Are we? The ones who held onto some sort of dream, rather than face an unpleasant reality?* It was a thought that stayed with her, as she talked to Greg Hughes, then a witness, then next Public Defender on her list.

As the day wound down, the troubling thoughts lingered, and Catherine had no idea as to any answers for any of them. She just knew that by the time quitting time rolled around, she was tired from lack of sleep as well as breadth of effort, that she had more questions than solutions, and that the busy night had dropped a ridiculously large caseload on her desk, even as it had dropped its other realizations; ones that made her realize (among other things) just what a long year stood in front of her.

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"You're troubled." Vincent's voice was the gentle balm it always was. He'd been on her balcony from almost the first moment that being there was possible for him. "Your work. It is not ... going well?" he asked.

She was half-surprised to see him, considering how long they'd spent in each other's company last night. And very grateful that he was there, regardless. She tried to push aside his concerns, as she tried to push aside her own.

"It's... just the usual, I think. Not so much more," she replied, knowing there was more than a bit of a lie in the words. She closed the French doors to the chill as she stepped out onto her balcony. It was just after dark. He'd arrived just as the deepening gloom had claimed the stones.

"Not so much like the usual, I think?" He studied her concerned gaze. There was a subtle line between her brows, indicating she was worrying over something.

Catherine shrugged, and folded her arms across her sweater-clad chest. The temperature was falling fast, now that the sun was down. "It was, I just... it feels a bit like the day after Christmas, I suppose."

“Like... December 26<sup>th</sup>?” he queried. “And that bothers you because...” Vincent honestly didn’t know. And belatedly, Catherine realized that Christmas was not the mad, gift-giving holiday Below that it was Above. In the world Below, there was no “Christmas Letdown.”

“The day after Winterfest, then,” she amended with a wry smile. “Like we’ll have to wait an incredibly long time until we can enjoy such a wonderful... *unrestrained* time again.” She watched his expression as he comprehended her meaning. “I know how much it means to you, Vincent. I’d give you more nights like that, if I could.”

He had no doubt she was sincere, in that. But... had this been what had filled her with such a sense of... disquiet, all day? “I treasure all the time we spend. There is no one hour I value over another. How could there be? They’re all... a miracle, in their way.” His tone remained the soft, soothing one he so often used on her, when she was upset.

He was trying to calm her jangled nerves, and he was doing it by saying all the right things. Catherine wasn’t quite buying it, however.

“It’s just... on Halloween. You and I... we can walk freely, on that night. *Be* together. Enjoy a show, or take in a concert. We can go... almost anywhere. But then...”

He knew what she was driving at. “But then November the first comes, and the night is over. And you feel the limits of what we are,” he said, guessing at her sense of disquiet. He’d known it was more than her work that was bothering her. He’d sensed this concerned feeling from her almost from the hour they’d parted, as dawn’s sun had climbed the crystal blue sky.

She didn’t like the way he put it. But to be fair, he’d said nothing she hadn’t been stewing over since she’d stood facing her door, that

morning. "It's just... are we... fooling ourselves, sometimes? Over what we can have?"

His head tilted at a familiar angle, as she hastened to explain. "I just... it feels like I saw people doing that all day, today. Saw them... telling themselves some... some partial truth, so they could get through the day." *We don't withhold the truth from each other. Here comes mine:* "It made me afraid that we're doing that, sometimes, as well. Maybe more than sometimes."

He was confused by her assessment. "Do you mean you saw some people... accepting some falsehood, as part of their defense?" he asked, clearly puzzled by her. *I've felt you... struggling, all day. Why, Catherine? Help me understand.*

"I mean I saw a twenty-two year old prostitute who's been turning tricks since she was fifteen, tell me that living that life was only temporary. Yet it's the only way she's ever earned a living in her life, and right now, seven years is almost a third of the time she's been alive. In a few more years, it will be half. And after that..."

"And after that, you feel this woman's life will be engulfed by the thing she is telling herself," he finished for her. Catherine simply nodded.

Vincent stepped closer to his love, knowing that the stresses of her day were far different than his; that her job was often full of hopeless people in terrible situations. That sometimes, it was hard to navigate that, even when she'd had a decent night's sleep and an easy schedule. That clearly hadn't been the case, today.

"Perhaps the young woman says it and means it," Vincent replied. Catherine's expression told him she wasn't sure. "Who are any of us to take away her hope?" he asked. "To tell her that her plan for a better life, a different life... that it has no meaning, no chance of success?"



Catherine looked out at the lights, then looked at him. "That's just it. I think she does mean it. When she said it, she sounded... convinced. I just... I just think she's also deluding herself. That she won't stop until she has to. Until one of her customers beats her half to death, or she gets too old to work the streets, or catches some disease..." Her look was one of hopelessness.

*Is that what you fear, my love? That we will fight for our dream until we're spent from dreaming it? I understand your fear. And I can only hope it's true. I will fight for this dream until I can't, any longer.*

He kept his voice low, knowing that they were both discussing a prostitute, yet not. "Then her dream of a better life may be all that's keeping her alive, Catherine," Vincent reasoned. "And perhaps she'll find her way to it, before too much longer."

Catherine's voice dropped to just above a whisper. "Do you think we're doing that, too?" she asked, telling her of the fear in her heart. "Do you think we sometimes... ignore the bad and seize what we can from the good, when we can... grab at that?"

He gave her worried look a small smile, in return. "I think that's the definition of 'having a dream,'" he replied. "And we've always had one of those. It's what's... defined us, at times."

It had. And Catherine knew that was far more a good thing than it was a bad one. That it had been, since the night he'd first come to her balcony.

"The first night you came to me... to this spot..."

"I had a dream," he confessed. "Just a small one. A small one, that was also huge. That by some miracle, our lives would intersect. Just for a moment. Just long enough for me to leave you a book, to let you know

I was... thinking of you.” The blue eyes were full of a long-ago remembered plan. “So I set down the book. And made to leave.”

“But I heard you near the table. I came out.”

“The corner of my cape caught the chair, as I turned. To this day I’m not sure how Freudian an accident that was.” The small smile didn’t change.

“You know I’m glad it did. And...” she closed her worried eyes “so... grateful, for everything after.” She had to let him know she felt that, as well.

He knew her words were true. And felt sure her gratitude was a fraction of his. *Your love... opened the world for me.* It was a thing he’d told to Lena, another prostitute who’d had a dream for a better life, and was living that, now.

The grey-green eyes opened. “Are we... pretending, Vincent?” she asked, almost afraid of the answer.

The ease of his answer surprised her. “Yes. Of course we are. What else would you call a dream?” he asked. “Yet... we live with the realities as well. And many of those are not... so unpleasant,” he insisted.

She knew it was so. That they’d both... struggled, to get here. “I’m not trying to say I don’t love other days of the year, with you. Just that... last night was special, and now...” She looked out again to the twinkling lights of the Manhattan skyline. “Now, it seems so far away. So far away... for you,” she lamented. “Sometimes... I’m afraid, when we have to wait so long. That we’ll... we’ll run out of time, somehow. There’s so long to wait, in between.”

Vincent regarded her soberly. There with things that needed saying here. Things he’d perhaps never told her. “Catherine, for me... the joy of October 31<sup>st</sup> isn’t that I can take a seat inside the Metropolitan

Opera House and see the beautiful show they have to offer. Or go to any of the wonderful places we visit.”

Confused, Catherine raised a well-shaped brow. “Do you mean you don’t care if we traipse all over New York? Without having to worry, so much?”

“I do care. I very much ... care,” he said thoughtfully. “But my consideration is not for the place, or for what happens there, or even for the beauty of the sunrise.” He nodded out toward the park, to the eastern horizon. “It’s as I told you that first morning. I knew there was beauty in this city since I met you.”

He let his sharp gaze travel toward the general direction of the Metropolitan Opera House. “I’m not... *looking* simply at the opera, or the cathedral, or the statues or the fountains in the square. I *see* them, yes. I know they’re there. But I’m not *looking* at them.”

Now she was thoroughly confused. “Then... what—“

“I’m looking at *you*, looking at them. Looking at you, while you... see it, then look back at me.” The blonde, arched brows furrowed, just a bit, with emphasis. “*Seeing* me, with eyes... so beautiful...” He stepped closer to her, then stared down into their ocean-shaded depths. “...that I don’t think I even have a name for the color. Especially when they’re lighted by the dawn.”

Realization struck, and Catherine exhaled, a soft, loving sigh. “So that’s why you wanted to go back near the water, again.”

“The reflection from the rising sun is ... lovely, there. And it... captures something in you. Some joy. Some... sweet pleasure I cannot truly describe, yet one I feel, all along our Bond.”

He brushed the back of her cheek with his furred fingers. “There is a beauty in you... that shines. Both in sunlight and by the light of the

moon.” The great head tilted, again. “I cannot... describe it for you very well. Perhaps there are no words. But I can... see it, in you. And I feel it in you, when I look at you.”

“When you’re looking at me, looking at you.” She smiled. *If there’s one thing I love to look at, it’s your amazing face. Your dear and amazing face. No matter where we are. I always will. Years from now, and standing here. I always will. I’ll never stop... loving the sight of you. No matter what day it says on the calendar.*

“Yes,” he replied simply. “When you are looking at me, looking at you. It’s then that I feel I can see... all our possibilities.”

Catherine caught his hand, turned it over, and planted a grateful kiss in his palm. “You save me from fearing we’re running out of time, and fooling ourselves, to knowing we can’t be, and that a hundred years might not be enough.” She settled his palm against her cheek, just for the pleasure of having it there. “And for what it’s worth, I’ve seen the Met. I wanted to watch you seeing the Met.” She smiled, again, gently.

He bent his head in a conspirator’s pose. “It seems we are of similar purpose, then.” He rubbed a thoughtful thumb against her cheek, then turned her gently around, so she was facing the park, again. Standing behind her, he wrapped her in arms that would never leave her, and watched the night, just as she did.

“I’ll take... every October 31<sup>st</sup> fate offers me,” he admitted. “And every winter equinox, when the day is shortest, and the sun sets early.” He tightened his hold on her, fractionally. “Every... mist strewn night, where the damp keeps almost everyone in, except for me.” He gave her a squeeze. “It was on such a night when I found you,” he recalled, letting her recall it as well.

"It was," she wrapped her arms overtop of his, not minding the memory. "It was just such a night."

The city lights scattered out, before them, an impossible tangle of stories and dreams, behind each and every one. The November air was dry and crisp, but she well remembered the spring night that had brought them together. But for the mist, he might have been inside. But for a sliver of luck, both good and bad, on both their parts, they might never have found each other at all. She knew it was true. They both did.

"Don't be ... afraid to know what we can have, and what we can't. Don't let it... take away your joy," he said, knowing that's what dawn's light had done, in its way. "We have far to go. But I swear the journey, no matter how constrained, or even how free... would mean nothing, if you weren't there with me."

"Thank you," she replied, planting a kiss on his wrist.

"I'm being false if I say I never want to see the Cloisters again. But I'm being truly false if I say the joy of that place was just in the art; it wasn't. It was in sharing it all, with you."

He sighed deeply at the memory of their Halloween together, and Catherine felt it, all down her back. *I love you*. He might as well have shouted it.

"The first night we met... who knew such a night would lead to so many... beautiful dreams," she marveled, remembering his expression as he'd taken in the tapestries.

"Who indeed? We found something... miraculous, inside something terrible. If that isn't something to build a dream on..."

"I'm not sure what is," she finished for him, allowing his contentment to wash through her. *So what if we're dreaming, sometimes? Who says*

*it's a bad thing, to hope for better, while you're happy with what you have?*

"So you don't mind the wait?" she asked.

"Not when I know I will see you by moonlight, as we wait for the sun," he replied. "See you here, while we wait for... there."

"I think my heart skips a beat, every time I know you're on my balcony." She smiled as she said it, even though she knew he couldn't see it. *No. We don't need the balcony at the Met. We just need this one. And each other.*

"Does it?" he asked, his tone letting her know he was well aware that it did. The Bond forbade certain secrets.

"Don't pretend you don't know." She smiled again as she squeezed his sheltering hand. He then felt her slight weight sag against him. The long day had clearly taken its toll.

"And I know something else: that you are tired," he said, turning her to face him. Her lovely eyes were shadowed from fatigue. "We had a long evening, yesterday. Would you like to go in? Go to bed? Or would you like me to read to you, a while?"

"Your night was no shorter than mine was," she replied, nodding toward the place where they usually read together, in answer. *Here. Right here. I want to be here with you, tonight. And every other night we can.*

"Perhaps that's so," he replied, drawing her toward the balcony wall. He drew a book of poetry from the deep pocket of his cape. "But I spent the day in pleasure, while you spent it in pain." He settled her down on her stones, then sat down beside her.

"I wasn't in pain. I was just... unsure. Confused. Doubting, I suppose."



"Doubt *is* pain. All the world knows it. It's the thing that steals your happiness, that makes you... question all that's good. I learned it long ago."

"So you never have doubts?" She ghosted a smile as she asked it.

He turned to the page he wanted. "More than I can comfortably name, some days," he confessed, with a small moue of regret. "And none at all, on others; like this one, for instance."

He raised an arm and invited her in. In, to the very best place she knew in all the world: the space beneath his arm. From there, she could rest her head against his chest and listen, while he read. From there, she could hear the mighty beat of his steady heart, and feel the gentle rise and fall of his breathing, as his unique voice caressed each syllable, each line. From there, she could make a pillow of his strength, and a resting place built from all he was. From there, she could shimmer, and float. There was no better place on Earth than the space beneath his arm. No matter what day it was. She gratefully came into it.

"This is when I'm happiest," he confided. "When you're right here. When I can feel you near, and hold you close. This. This is my favorite place, Catherine. Not St. Patrick's or the Met. Anywhere we can do this." He cradled her close, then removed the torn scrap of paper that served as his bookmark.

"I feel the same way," she replied, breathing deeply of the November night. "Like no matter where we are, together is best. For both of us."

"For both of us," he repeated, drawing up one knee as he began to read.

*A Moment of Happiness*

*A moment of happiness,  
you and I sitting on the verandah,  
apparently two, but one in soul, you and I.  
We feel the flowing water of life here,  
you and I, with the garden's beauty  
and the birds singing.  
The stars will be watching us,  
and we will show them  
what it is to be a thin crescent moon.  
You and I unselfed, will be together,  
indifferent to idle speculation, you and I.  
The parrots of heaven will be cracking sugar  
as we laugh together, you and I.  
In one form upon this earth,  
and in another form in a timeless sweet land.*

*Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi*

Catherine wasn't quite sure if she heard the entire poem, as she drifted off to sleep. But she was very sure she felt the soft brush of his kiss, as even more dreams began to take her.



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

