

## DREAMS AT ODDS

by Fraser Sherman

(BATB/FANTASY ISLAND CROSSOVER)

The small, dark man fidgeted in eagerness as the first passenger -- balding, haggard, yet distinguished -- got out of the seaplane. He looked up at the man beside him and asked, as he always did, "Who are our guests on Fantasy Island today, Boss?"

Tall and urbane in his white suit, Mr. Roarke smiled down at his closest friend and most trusted employee.

"Our first guest is Dr. Kevin Stanson, once considered the most brilliant surgeon in America. His career ended four years ago, when he lost a malpractice suit for \$30 million; since this rendered him uninsurable, no hospital in America will risk employing him.

"His fantasy is to test an experimental surgical technique he has developed. If successful, it will save hundreds of lives - and re-establish him as a giant in his field."

Tattoo recognized the note in Roarke's voice. "This technique - is it dangerous, Boos?"

"Very dangerous. And the subject for the experiment will be - his own brother."

A raven-haired woman in a designer suit stepped out next, wincing as a wave splashed over her Italian shoes.

"Miss. Antoinette Demornay, whose two marriages were both arranged by her father for business reasons - and both ended in divorce. Her fantasy is to marry a man of her own choosing, and to do it for love."

Tattoo raised an eyebrow. "Do you think she's interested in a good-looking man whose maybe a little *'shorter'* than she is, eh, Boss?"

"She might be, Tattoo - except that she is lying about what she really wants. Lying even to herself."

The last passenger got out and Tattoo gave a low whistle. "Oh, Boss - I see why you gave this one a cut-rate price, eh?"

"Tattoo, Tattoo...." Roarke raised his eyes heavenward. "You know I only lower my prices when the fantasy is of unique interest - and detective Diana Bennett has just such a one. You see, the man she loves is in love with another - a woman who died in his arms, months ago."

"And she wants him to get over that and marry her, right, Boss?"

"Not exactly, Tattoo." Roarke watched the redhead as she stepped onto the dock and one of the island girls threw a lei over her head. "Miss. Bennett wants to reunite the two lovers for one last day, so that they may say and do all that went unsaid and undone - even though she may lose him forever to a memory.

"And there is more. Though she does not know it, she and the man she loves are about to become part of another fantasy, the fantasy of a man whose only goal is their destruction. The man Diana Bennett killed."

Tattoo shuddered as Roarke stepped forward, took a glass of wine from a servant, and raised it in a toast.

"Greetings, my friends. I am your host, Mr. Roarke. *'Welcome'* to Fantasy Island."

Diana entered Roarke's modest bungalow, brushing past her fellow guest - the man who'd gotten the strange look in his eyes when he said he was a doctor. If she was on duty, she thought, she'd pay close attention to that man.

The dwarf, Tattoo, escorted her to the chair before Mr. Roarke's desk. Roarke looked at her, his face expressing polite, discreet curiosity. "Miss. Bennett - may I say this is a most unusual fantasy. What makes you think that I can raise the dead, even for a day?"

She met his look. "I did my research, Mr. Roarke. I'd heard all the hype about Fantasy Island - the impossible things that happen here. I talked to some of your guests. I think I've got a pretty good idea just what you're capable of."

"Oh, do you indeed?" he smiled. "But even granting that, this is still an unusual fantasy - to reunite a man you love with your only rival?"

"Mr. Roarke.... I've never been lucky enough to have my emotions cloud my judgment. I love - this man - but I know his love for Catherine Chandler will never die. I - I can't have him, ever, and I can't fool myself into thinking otherwise.

"But at least I can help heal the scars her death left - give him a chance to speak to her again, to say what he needs to say, to show her their son.... He's never spoken of it, but he wants that, more than anything."

She didn't feel as uncomfortable saying it as she'd expected, something in Roarke's eyes invited trust, as if he could take up her burden and more.

"Miss. Bennett - may I say you are an exceptional woman? Vincent is fortunate to have you among his friends."

She started. "I didn't tell you his name. How did you ..."

"I, too, have done my research, Miss. Bennett. I know who Vincent is and about your friendship with him, about Catherine Chandler - and about Gabriel. And rest assured, the secrets of the tunnels will go no further."

"I've no doubts about that. I wouldn't be here if I did. Well, then ..." she looked at him expectantly. "How do we get Vincent here?"

"Get him?" Mr. Roarke looked at her in mock surprise. "He is already arrived, Miss. Bennett. Come."

Roarke led her to a door at the back of the room and opened it. Vincent sat inside; when he saw them, he sprang up, eyes darting from one to the other.

"Diana?" he gripped her wrist gently. "Diana, where is this place? I - I was going to the Cavern of Winds when ..." He frowned, as if trying to place a particularly awkward memory.

With a beaming smile, Roarke took his hand. "Greetings, Mr - er, Vincent. You and Miss. Bennett are on Fantasy Island ..."

"I - I have heard that name. Catherine and her father vacationed here once...." Vincent shook Roarke's hand absently, completely at a loss. It wasn't just the shock of being here, it was the way Roarke greeted him, as if oblivious to Vincent's - differences.

"Yes, Vincent, the Chandlers did visit here - though not to receive a fantasy. But you, Vincent ..."

"I?" Still dazed, he turned to Diana. "You said ...you were taking a trip..."

'*My God,*' she thought. '*How do I explain this?*' "Vincent ... ah, Vincent. I ... that is, Mr. Roarke ..." she turned to Roarke. "Mr. Roarke, I don't know quite how to put this."

"Then allow me. My dear Vincent, Miss. Bennett's fantasy - for you - is that you share one last day

with Catherine Chandler. I have agreed to grant it."

His jaws moved, but for a second no sound came out. '*Catherine ... Catherine.*'

"The true power of life and death is not mine to grant, Vincent - but for one day - from now until sunrise tomorrow - I can bring Miss Chandler back to you. If it is your wish."

"*If?*" There was a world of longing in the word. "I would give ... '*anything*' ... '*everything*' ..."

"You don't have to give anything, Vincent. Just hold me."

He turned and his heart stopped beating. " '*Cath - Catherine.*'

Then his arms went around her and her lips were on his.... He was afraid to let go, afraid she'd disappear if he released her, but finally, gently, she drew back. Dressed in a simple white gown, she seemed more beautiful than ever.

Vincent felt tears trickling down his face, into his fur, and she reached up and caught them on her fingertips. "Oh, Catherine. If only ..." he turned to look at Roarke.

"Ah, no doubt you are thinking what a joy it would be to show Miss. Chandler your son. Tattoo?"

"Right here, Boss." Tattoo brushed by Roarke, Jacob cradled in his arm. He made a silly face at the baby and looked at Roarke, beaming, when the baby gurgled back. "I think he likes me, Boss!"

"My baby..." Catherine almost snatched him away from Tattoo. "Our baby, Vincent ..."

"We have a special bungalow reserved for you," Roarke said. "You can walk the grounds freely, without being disturbed by other guests. And if you wish to be alone, you need only call and Tattoo will take little Jacob for a while."

"It would be my pleasure, Mr. Vincent!"

Vincent managed to tear his eyes from the sight of Catherine holding their son. "Mr. Roarke - thank you. And..." he realized Diana wasn't there.

"Miss. Bennett did not wish to intrude, any more than I." Roarke bowed and turned to go.

"Will I get to see her before she leaves?" Catherine asked. "You told me how much she's done for Vincent, for Jacob, and now this ..."

"Oh, I am quite sure she will see you before sunrise, Miss. Chandler - quite sure." Roarke smiled, neither Vincent nor Catherine noticed how uneasy it was. "But now, if you will excuse me.... Tattoo will show you to your rooms."

He bowed and stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him. As he turned to walk back to his desk, his eyebrows rose.

Gabriel sat in the chair, feet up on Roarke's desk. "A touching scene, Roarke - truly touching. And to think, with all your power, you waste your time on such saccharine whimsies as that."

"I never find true love '*saccharine*,' Gabriel. Now, if you do not mind ..."

Gabriel got up. "Excuse me, please. It's so pleasurable having substance again. I forgot myself."

"I am sure." Roarke did not sit, but stood, facing Gabriel. "It is not too late for you to change your mind..."

"It's too late for second thoughts from either of us, Roarke. My spirit cannot rest, you know that."

"Because you insist on vengeance ..."

"Diana Bennett '*killed*' me!" Gabriel's look had driven men to suicide, but Roarke didn't flinch. "And, my followers, my vassals, fled instead of avenging me. But I will '*not*' die unavenged!" Slowly, maliciously, he smiled. "After all, I never got the fantasy you promised me while I lived."

"The fantasy you forced out of me - by threatening those I loved. Delphine Randolph (*Roarke's goddaughter*) Lilli Mars----"

"Love is a great failing among men of power, Roarke. Or perhaps it's *'your'* power that failed. If you could extend your magic beyond this island, it might have been different. Besides, are a few lives such a unreasonable trade for one small, insignificant fantasy?"

He stepped over to the bar and poured himself a drink. "Brandy. So pleasant to taste it again...."

He turned back to Roarke, sipping his drink. "Marvelous. Oh, I hope you don't mind my helping myself - but as I am a guest ...?"

"You are welcome ... Gabriel." The words ground out like gravel. "And what is your fantasy?"

"Why not take a guess?" Roarke only looked at him. "Very well, then. I want to destroy Diana Bennett, and Vincent. Tonight."

"Gabriel, you know I cannot grant you that. It is beyond my power to kill - or to guarantee their deaths at your hand."

Gabriel opened his mouth but Roarke held up his hand and continued. "I can only offer you the chance to destroy them, nothing more. If that is insufficient ..."

"It will be enough. I'll see to that. As long as you attend to a few minor details, as you're bound to do." Suddenly Gabriel laughed and drained his snifter. "Roarke, you're a fool. With your power, you could have done anything - but you chose to stay here, granting pathetic little daydreams to mortals so far beneath you ..."

"Like yourself?" Roarke snapped.

Gabriel's smile vanished. "I know what you think of me, Roarke, and I don't care. You're still bound to help me. In fact, it'll be a nice added touch to this fantasy - knowing that when I finally pass from this plane, you'll have to live the rest of your life with the responsibility for what's about to happen."

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*'I didn't think it would be so hard,'* Diana told herself. *'I didn't know....'*

Seeing them together, seeing the look on Vincent's face ... She'd known she had to get out of there before she cried. She didn't belong, anyway - not between them, not beside them.

She sat, eating without tasting, watching the sun-bronzed beautiful people passing by. Why did she have to fall in love with Vincent? Why couldn't she at least delude herself into thinking he'd respond someday? Why the hell did she have to be so damn self-aware!

Then she blinked and started. Vincent and Catherine stood in front of her, kissing, tongues mingling, there in broad daylight. Wearing tennis outfits. Seeing it brought a pang into her heart yet at the same time she told herself it was impossible, she couldn't be seeing them out in public like that, not even here on Fantasy Island!

And then, suddenly, it wasn't them. Just two ordinary people in shorts, necking publicly. "Damn, I must be worse off than I thought." Heads turned in her direction and she realized she'd spoken aloud.

She got up and headed back to her bungalow, wondering if a nice, private cry would do any good, when she saw them again. Walking along, Catherine's head on Vincent's shoulder, baby Jacob in a stroller, and it seemed so real ...

And then it wasn't them. But inside her chest, the knot around her heart tightened. She began to walk faster.

She gave them again a second later, feeding each other french fries, then, as she drew near the

bungalow, Vincent, looking magnificent in bikini briefs, tossed Catherine into the pool, both laughing with glee.

She slammed the door of her bungalow behind them, but it didn't stop. Now she could hear the voices - laughing, cooing, murmuring endearments, gasping with hot, passionate need, speaking soft tones of love.... She clamped her hands over her ears but couldn't blot out the sounds.

"Dammit, no, no."

It wasn't fair, it wasn't! She couldn't win and she couldn't lie to herself, she was shut out from Vincent even in daydreams, and she wanted him. *'Why did I do it? Why did I make it twice as hard on myself by bringing her here?'*

"Dammit, Cathy. I wish I'd let you stay dead!"

It was one moment. Just one moment when she gave into rage, and hate, and jealousy, and she regretted it immediately afterwards.

But that was too late. In that moment she'd opened a path, and Gabriel had come inside.

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*'It was the best day of his life,'* Vincent thought - the best.

A part of him still didn't believe it, but it was true. Catherine - the same little smile, the same little movements, the same soft, gentle touch that reached all the way inside him. She lived again, for him.

They walked through a garden thick with trees, orchids, and roses, countless roses, and they saw no one else, just as Roarke had promised.

"The Boss don't want you to be disturbed," Tattoo had said. "You won't be disturbed. Trust him."

At first, Vincent had gloriied in the sunshine, in the way it made Catherine look. Then he'd started to get hot. First the cloak had gone. Then his jacket. Then his shirt. He'd spent the afternoon in trousers and boots.

He felt a little self-conscious - especially with the way Catherine kept running her eyes over him, but nothing could really upset him. Not this day.

And they talked. He gathered Roarke had told her everything, but he told her again, in his words, of Diana, of Gabriel, of Elliott's death and Joe's promotion, and she told him how glad she was he and Jacob were alive, and how much she liked the baby's name, and asked a hundred questions about little Jacob's well-being, his health, and how were Mouse, and Mary, and Father....

And then, after what seemed only a few minutes, the sun began to set. "Night is coming on. We only have - a few hours." Vincent looked at her. "It's so short a time ..."

She looked at him with a smile that made him feel warmer than ever. "You're right. We don't have much time."

"And it'll be cooler soon." Vincent went on. "I'd better put my shirt back on."

"Oh, I don't think there's any need for that," she said with a smile, looking around. "Tattoo!"

"You called, Miss. Chandler?" The little man appeared out of the bushes, beaming. "I should take the little baby now, right?"

"If you'd be so kind," she handed Jacob to him. "Thank you."

"I'll treat him like my own kid - don't worry."

"Catherine," Vincent said. "Are you sure? You've had him for such a little time ..."

"I'm sure, Vincent. Goodnight, Tattoo."

"Goodnight. Have a lovely evening," he said, chuckling. "I bet you will!"

And then he was gone. And Catherine was looking at Vincent in that way again. She smiled and moved closer, he could feel her through their bond, stronger than ever before, and it felt very different from ever before.

"Catherine ...You're sure you don't want Jacob with us?"

"I'm sure." She ran her hands lightly over the fur on his arms. "This is a time to talk of - other things. To do other things...."

"Catherine ..." he stared around them. "It's very hot out here, isn't it? Or am I imagining it?"

"No. It is - very warm." She stepped into his arms, so that her breast pressed against his. "Very warm...."

And then one arm was around his shoulder, one slim hand was drawing his shaggy head down, and they were kissing. He broke off and stepped back. "Catherine.... I...."

The sun dipped below the horizon and soft lights came on in the trees. Shining on her white dress, they made her look more beautiful than ever. "Catherine - you're so lovely ..."

She sighed a little. "You always say that - and I know you mean it - so why don't you ever touch me?" Then she giggled. " 'Nervous', Vincent?"

"Y - yes!" The words came out in a rush. "Catherine, you've known other men - I - I - I haven't! Known women, I mean - except that one time in the cave and I don't even remember it! I ... what if I can't ... I don't even know what to do!"

She compressed her lips, holding back another giggle. "Vincent - I'll show you. And it doesn't matter how good you are or how much experience you have - it'll be wonderful, I promise. Just the two of us, together - it can't be anything else." The giggle came out. "Besides, we've got all night to work on it." She drew closer, touching him again, and he could smell the light beads of sweat on her forehead and feel the warmth of her body. "Will you take me back inside? Please?"

"I - I haven't felt like this since Devin used to tell me stories about ... well, things..."

"Next time you can tell him something." She took him by the hand and marched down the path. "Come on, now - let's not waste any time."

"Wait!" Diana stepped out from behind one of the trees. "Catherine - come here, please!"

Catherine stared at her blankly. "What?"

Vincent stared too, suddenly feeling acutely embarrassed. "Diana - ah, what are you ..."

"Catherine, please! Come over here. Like you said, there's isn't much time!"

Catherine stared at Vincent, uncertain. He nodded. "She would not do this without a reason, my love. Go to her."

"Well - all right." She released his hand and started back up the path. "Diana, I'm glad to meet you at last, but I hope this is important."

"Oh, it's important," Diana said softly. "In fact, it's a matter of life and death." She stepped out from behind the tree and she was holding a gun. "Yours. Don't move." And the voice was no longer hers.

"Gabriel!" Vincent started forward, but Diana cocked the hammer on her gun. "What have you done?"

"It's a simplistic term, Vincent, but you could say I've possessed our friend Diana. With a little help

from Mr. Roarke, of course."

"Roarke? He is helping you with this?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Vincent - did I shatter an illusion? You see, Roarke's just as willing to provide me with a fantasy as he was Diana. And this is it."

"A fantasy?" Catherine stared at Diana, at the gun. "My death? *'That's' your 'fantasy'.*"

"Please, Miss. Chandler, do you think I could possibly be that unimaginative? Your death is just the start," he smiled. "You see, Vincent. I'm giving you a choice. You can stand where you are and watch Cathy Chandler die again. Or you can kill Diana Bennett. It's up to you."

"No - no!" Vincent's clawed fingers clenched in fury.

"Oh, surely that's not such a hard choice. Catherine was special - I'll be gone at sunrise ..."

"It's no good, Catherine." Diana's lips curved into Gabriel's confident smile. "Suppose he does let you die - or you fling yourself on my gun as I suspect you're planning to do. You know the rage that burns inside him. Do you think he can contain himself when he sees you die? No, he will kill Diana - and then he'll have to live with the guilt. I've been speculating whether he'll go insane or not - it should be interesting to find out."

"Gabriel." Vincent's voice was almost a snarl. "If you do this thing."

"You'll kill me? Don't make me laugh, Vincent. The game is over - and I've won!"

She pulled back on the trigger and Vincent flung himself forward, trying to put himself between Catherine and the bullet, knowing it couldn't be done - and then he was there, between them, and the gun hadn't fired.

"No - no ..." Diana's body shook and quivered as Gabriel gasped out. "No, you're mine - I have control - I ..."

"Noooo!" the last scream was in Diana's voice and then she collapsed on the grass, dropping the gun. "Get out ... Get out ... Get - out!"

"Diana?" Vincent stood over her, carefully keeping between her and Catherine. "Diana?"

She looked up at him, and he knew. "He's gone," he said. "You drove him out."

"He's - gone - but..."

Catherine knelt down next to her and took Diana into her arms, but Diana pushed her away. "Don't touch me! I - I ..."

"You couldn't help it," Catherine said softly. "He made you do it."

"No, I mean, yes, but - he couldn't have done it if I ..." She looked away, fighting back tears.

"Diana?" Vincent said softly. She looked away from him too.

"Go, please! For God's sake, go!"

"No," Catherine said simply. "You saved my life. I won't leave you. Neither of us will."

"Oh, that's *'so'* touching. So terribly touching."

They turned around and he was there. Standing in front of them, holding Diana's gun. "Did you think you'd defeated me? I told you, this is *'my'* fantasy."

"The gun," Vincent said. "It was right by my feet!" Gabriel's finger was on the trigger. There was no way he could stop or intercept the shot.

"I'm a ghost, Vincent, remember - even if I am solid, at the moment." His eyes shone, so much with

frustration as with hate. "Diana, you ruined a magnificent fantasy - but you haven't stopped me. I'll just have to kill all of you."

He fired the gun straight into Catherine's heart, three times.

Vincent sprang for Gabriel, knowing it was too late to save Catherine, only hoping he could stop Gabriel in time to save Diana. Gabriel fired at him, repeatedly, but in his fury he didn't even feel the bullets. He snatched the gun from Gabriel's hand and hurled him to the ground, raising his clawed fists and surrendering to the darkness ....

"Vincent, no!" It was the one thing that could have stopped him - Catherine's voice.

"Catherine?" he stared at her, unable to believe it. "You're ... alive." It looked as if she hadn't even been hit. "You're alive!" he hugged her, almost as thankful for what she'd stopped him doing as for the mere fact of her survival. "How?"

"The bullets didn't touch me." She ran her hands over his chest. "He fired point blank, but he didn't hit you, either. I don't know how ..."

"Roarke!" Gabriel was on his feet again, fists clenched, glaring around him. "Roarke! You cheated me! You betrayed me!"

"Oh, Gabriel, I did nothing of the sort." Roarke stepped from the shadows of an oak tree, shaking his head. "Vincent, Miss. Chandler, please step back. He is mine to deal with now."

Gabriel pointed an accusing finger at him. "You said I could '*destroy*' them! You promised!"

"You sought to take more than you asked for, Gabriel." Roarke smiled, and in a strange way it was more terrible than Gabriel's. "I agree you would have the chance to kill Vincent and Miss. Bennett. It does not give you the right to assault my other guest - including Catherine Chandler."

"No - no, you can't do this!"

"Oh, but I can, Gabriel, You broke the rules, and now ... now you are mine." For a long minute, Roarke stared at him without speaking. "Do you know how many people have asked - pleaded - begged me for even a few minutes of life? How few have received that boon? You had what every man dreams of, a second chance! And you wasted it on the most contemptible of fantasies - revenge."

"Don't preach to me, Roarke." The arrogance in his voice was strong as ever. "All right, you beat me - but you can't stop me."

"I told you before, my spirit won't rest while they live; sooner or later, I'll find another way. Vincent - Diana - I'll be back. And I won't stop until I've destroyed everything you both hold dear!"

With a triumphant laugh, he spun on his heel and strode away into the night ... exactly two feet into the night, then he jerked and staggered back. He glanced at Roarke angrily, turned and moved, faster now, in another direction. Two feet and he stopped as if he'd slammed into a wall. A third direction. Another wall. And a fourth, and a wall. And the arrogance was gone.

"Roarke! You - you can't do this!"

"I told you, Gabriel, you violated my rules. You may defy death - you cannot defy '*me*'." And Gabriel began to fade.

"Roarke ... No! No!"

"Your time is up, Gabriel."

"No - you can't!"

"And your fate, if delayed, is assuredly well-deserved."



"Roarke - I won't accept this! You can't do this!" He hammered against the walls desperately, urgently, but they did not yield. "Roarke ...!" He was almost completely transparent, but they could still make him out as he suddenly stared then recoiled in horror from something they couldn't see. Before he vanished altogether, they heard him scream.

For a few moments there was silence. Then Roarke spoke. "What a waste. What a senseless waste."

"Roarke." Clutching Catherine to his breast, Vincent approached him. "How could you let him do this? How could you help him attack us?"

"I am sorry, Vincent, but I had no choice. He ... paid for a fantasy a long time ago, and I was ... obligated to accept it. No matter what."

Vincent still looked angry, but Diana put a hand on his arm. "Roarke, what if you hadn't given him his fantasy. What would he have done?"

"Exactly what he said. He would have wandered the world until he found a spirit weak enough to enslave, and he would have used that one's body to take vengeance on the two of you."

"And you wouldn't have been able to help them, would you?" she said.

Roarke shook his head.

Vincent stared at Roarke for a long time. "I - I don't know what to make of you, Roarke."

"Few people do, Vincent." Roarke looked weary now. Very weary.

"But that doesn't matter." Vincent offered him his hand. "You've given Catherine to me again - and put an end to Gabriel at last. I thank you."

"Thank you, Vincent. And please forgive me the risks I forced you all to take."

"They're forgiven." Catherine took his other hand. "And - Diana. Thank you too."

"I didn't do anything, Catherine."

"You fought off Gabriel when he possessed you. I don't think many people could have done that. And you gave Vincent and me - tonight." She released Roarke and drew closer to the other woman. "For everything you've done for us - here and back home - thank you."

Diana managed a wan smile. "I did what I had to do. That's all."

"And I know what that cost you." Looking in Catherine's eyes, Diana realized she did know. "I'm glad Vincent has you for a friend."

"Th ... thank you." *'I am not going to cry,'* she told herself.

"And now ..." Catherine released her and took Vincent by the hand. "If you will excuse me, we only have a few more hours.... Vincent?"

"I'm coming, Catherine." Suddenly, she laughed, and as he followed her down the path, he wondered what the joke was. "Diana ..."

"I'll see you back in New York, Vincent." To her surprise, she realized she was smiling as she watched them leave.

Then there was just Roarke, looking at her, with a faint, sympathetic smile. "So, my dear, how do you feel?"

"Oh, great - just great." She leaned against a birch and thumped her fist on it. "Mr. Roarke - the things Gabriel made me feel - they were real. All the envy, all that petty resentment, all the ... the loneliness - they were mine."

"There is nothing to be ashamed of in that, Diana. Or do you seriously believe you are responsible for what happened tonight?"

"I let him possess me ..."

"And drove him out when he tried using you to commit murder."

"Which didn't mean a damn thing! It didn't make any difference. 'I' didn't make any difference! If he had kept possession, you'd have protected Catherine anyway. Not that I object, but ..."

"Diana, you said earlier today that emotion could not cloud your judgment. Tonight you proved it cannot corrupt our spirit. With his power - banked by mine, I admit - he entered the weakest parts of your being, yet he was not strong enough to conquer you, not in the end."

"That '*does*' mean a '*damn thing*.' That '*does*' make a difference. You have chosen a hard road in this life, Diana Bennett, because it is your '*own*,' and no other's, but if you ever doubted you are strong enough to follow that road, doubt no more. Tonight you have proved it."

Diana nodded wearily. "But there are times I wish I wasn't walking it alone." She stared up the path towards the bungalow.

"I know. I know what it's like to love someone so extraordinary, so incredible - and not to have it returned."

She studied him for a moment. "Yes.... you do, don't you?" he nodded. "Does it go away? The pain? The wanting?"

"The pain will pass. And though you will love Vincent all your life, you will find, in time, that you can love others as well. You will find the right one - someday."

"Optimist!" But she smiled as she said it. "You know, I told you this morning I had a pretty good idea what you could do. I was wrong. I had no idea."

"Why, thank you, my dear. Now, since I doubt Gabriel gave you much chance to eat, I had Tattoo prepare a late supper. If you would care to join me...?" He offered her his arm.

She took it. "Yes. Yes, I think I'd like that." They walked off into the night, leaving the quiet garden behind.

Not far away, on a bed where the silk sheets were rapidly falling into disarray, Vincent found out Catherine had been right.

It was wonderful.

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