

# An Ever-Fixed Mark...

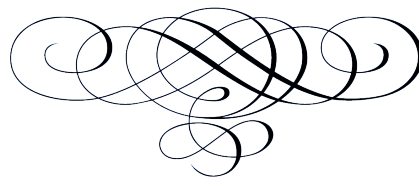
Judith Nolan



*'Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.  
If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved...'*

**William Shakespeare**

**Sonnet # CXVI**



Catherine lay in her wide, comfortable bed listening to the distant crash of thunder. She'd been jerked rudely awake by the lightning's brilliant flash piercing the balcony curtains of her bedroom. Initially unsure of her surroundings, she had floated in a delicious, half-dreaming state, slowly becoming aware that her whole body was feeling taut and humming with unfulfilled reaction.

*Unfortunately it had only been a dream...she grimaced, reluctant to abandon the last fragments of such a delicious torment, tasting an intense dissatisfaction that it was only a wanton fantasy.*

*It had all seemed so real and unbelievably sensual... Vincent's chamber, his bed and him...his half-closed eyes watching her slow, deliberate progress across his bare chest as she traced the flexing lines of his pectoral muscles with seeking fingers and her mouth. Candlelight glowed against the taut golden planes of his naked stomach and flanks.*

*With infinite slowness Catherine had worked her way downwards, towards her ultimate goal, her seeking hands travelling greedily before her exploring mouth to suddenly encounter the heated length of Vincent's straining erection and his sudden cry of need, filled with elemental power and raw desire as she —*

The lightning had flashed then, jerking her brutally awake and aware. She'd tried to hold onto the image and complete the journey her subconscious mind had begun, but it slipped away beyond reach. *Which was probably just as well...*

“Oh, Chandler, you truly are a lost cause.” She bit down on the fullness of her lower lip, arching her back on a groan, feeling lost and very much alone. She turned her head to glance at her bed’s other pillow, but it was empty, of course. Vincent was not here, close beside her, no matter how much she wished it. She collapsed back with a disappointed sigh. “What am I going to do with you?”

She prayed that not too much of her emotional turmoil had communicated itself to Vincent through their shared connection. Her cheeks heated with the idea he could perceive the sensual trend of her thoughts and understand all too well her sense of frustration. But she was a normal, healthy young woman after all, with appetites and needs; and even listening to Vincent reading volumes of love poetry — however deep and meaningful were the words, and how beautiful his voice — can only take you so far.

She also knew well the boundaries of what Vincent was prepared to discuss with her, and making love with her was not a topic on any agenda. She had accepted that fact long ago, but it didn’t mean she always agreed with it. *And now...*

*Sometimes, Vincent, we must leave our safe places.* Catherine grimaced as she thought of the Brigit O'Donnell quotation Vincent had repeated to her. That Halloween night had been pure magic, a night out of time...if only there had been more of them. If only Vincent would consent to stay over at her apartment.

Allow her to do the small things for him that couples did together, such as hang out and eat a meal together. Order a couple of pizzas and see who could eat the most slices. Or just curl up on the couch and cuddle while watching some soppy old movie. Nothing too daring, nothing to challenge the decided views Vincent had of himself. *What could it hurt?*

“If wishes were horses...” Catherine turned to thump her pillow into shape before dropping back again to stare at the ceiling.

She remembered when Vincent had come to her apartment a couple of months ago — at her invitation — to watch some old home movies she’d discovered in her old family lake house after her father had died. Vincent had consented to come inside and it had been a magical and special evening. In fact he’d stayed all night because she’d needed him to be there for her — to comfort and hold her. He had not left until the sun had almost crested the skyline, turning the dark night into muted tones of grey, and Catherine had worried that he might be seen leaving.

But he’d arrived safely at the tunnel entrance below her building where she’d waited anxiously to know he was safe. Still reluctant to part, they had talked for hours, standing so close together with Vincent’s arm around her shoulders as she shared her memories of her father and cried for him. And when Catherine finally realised she needed to leave him there, Vincent had pulled her close and kissed her gently, telling her again how much he loved her. It was only the certain knowledge

that he had pressing duties to perform — and so did she — that finally forced her to say farewell, to leave him watching her depart once more.

It had almost broken her heart then. And after than one night Vincent had not offered to stay with her again, and she had not asked. But the same sense of restlessness remained. She knew he had his reasons, but she was more than willing to work with him to move past them and come to a new understanding in their relationship.

“So now...what?” She turned her head to frown at the clock on the bedside cabinet. The illuminated dial told her it was just after one in the morning. Tomorrow...*no, today...was* Saturday – she’d been planning a whole morning’s lie-in with lots of coffee and the newspapers! But it was far too early to do anything but fall back onto her pillows and think...perhaps try to recapture elusive sleep.

Ghostly flashes of the fast approaching lightning storm danced across the walls. A fretful wind rose from beyond the park and began to rattle the balcony windows, sending fingers of chill air to try and gain access into her warm sanctuary. Mentally she reached for some sense of Vincent and his whereabouts, but found nothing. No doubt he was resting peacefully, stretched out asleep in his bed, comfortable and wearing little or nothing — *Oh, God...get off that subject, Chandler. For your own sanity...it was simply not going to happen...*

She realised then that she didn’t even know what he wore to bed. She smiled at an unbidden image of her love clad in warm flannel pyjamas to keep out the chill of the tunnels! It just didn’t do it for her.

“And so you lie here in your bed, wide awake, all sexually screwed up and miserable...” Catherine sighed as she moved her hand, drifting it down across the inner curve of her moist thigh, fingers turning inwards, seeking to finish the journey her dream had started. But she stopped the gesture halfway, shoulders slumping on a groan of dissatisfaction. It was no use. Nothing was as good as the real thing, however tempting it was now to complete her body’s half-begun journey so she could relax enough to go back to sleep.

*Forget the flannel pyjamas!* She returned her thoughts to disturbing images of Vincent lying naked and glorious. They filled her imagination to exclusion, as they had done almost every night these last few weeks. Her heart contracted with her deep love for him. But with the renewed thought her unfulfilled body reacted, reheating her blood and making her wish once more that he was here right now, to hold her close, to love her as he had in her dream.

Allow her to love him, as he deserved to be loved. She could almost feel his hands on her body, *the whisper of his claws across her naked skin...* Her fingers curled deep into the yielding mattress as she stirred restlessly — wanting the very thing she knew she could not have.

“Okay, give it up. This is getting you nowhere but utterly frustrated and miserable.” Reluctantly she sat up, lifting the damp weight of her hair from her neck, kneading at the knotted tension in the base of her skull.

She stretched and yawned, not wishing to move from the bed, to abandon the faint remnants of her erotic fantasy, but knowing a cooling shower would feel good right now. Her skin was sticky, her body overly warm. Temporarily abandoning the pursuit of sleep she slipped out of bed, padding into her bathroom and turning on the light.

After showering she returned to her bedroom, dropping her towel and reaching for a fresh, lace edged silk nightgown she'd previously draped over the foot of the bed. It was so new it still had the sales tags. She removed them quickly before holding the garment up to the bedside light to admire it. Bootlace strapped and sensuously revealing down the length of her back almost to the curve of her butt, it had been an impulsive gift to herself on a recent morning when she'd been feeling down and depressed, overworked and stressed.

In the past a good dose of retail therapy had always helped, but she never seemed to have the time these days. Suddenly a string of annoying continuances on several pending cases had allowed her the necessary breathing space. Despite Joe's disapproving scowl and mumbled complaint about slackers, which she had studiously ignored with a lofted chin, she had made good her escape. A determinedly quickened step had taken her out of the building and onto the street, before he could corner her with the stack of new cases he'd been trying to shove at her.

Now she lifted the garment over her head and the silk fabric whispered over her skin like a lover's caress, drifting down her body to barely cover her thighs. She turned before her full-length mirror, studying her

reflected image over her upraised shoulder. It looked really good...*if only she had someone to share it with*...and she already knew her friend, Edie's opinion.

"There's no doubt about it, girlfriend. It's a guilty present to you." Edie had dipped into the bag at lunch that same day and admired the nightgown, fingering the luxurious silk enviously. "Or is there going to be some very lucky guy attached to this sexy piece tonight?" She bent closer to peer at the price tag and blew a silent whistle, her eyes widening. "*Whoa*, whoever he is, he'd better wine and dine you good first, so you're sure he's worth this kind of expense. Or are you just fishing from the bank to see what you can reel in?"

"I saw it, I liked it, and so I bought it." Catherine had shrugged; taking the garment from her friend's slackened hand and pushing it back into the bag. "There doesn't have to be a special occasion."

"Uh, oh..." Edie's narrowed eyes had assessed her flushed cheeks with compassion. "Geeze...and I thought I was the only one around here with an annoying vow of celibacy due to the complete lack of suitable temptation. I always figured you up-town girls had it all sorted. Had 'em lining up three deep to take you out, making you offers you can't refuse. I know Elliot Burch would pay me good money to get you to go out with him. He's rich and a good-looking guy. And, from what I've seen of him, he sure knows how to treat a woman. So, what's stopping you? And do ya wanna talk about it?"



“No, not really.” Catherine frowned into the middle distance, toying with her coffee cup. “I...it’s just...I’m sorry, but it’s all really rather complicated.”

“Ah, I see. But then it always is with you.” Edie nodded sympathetically. “Don’t say any more. I can see the problem right there in your sappy look. You’ve gone all out for one of those deep, mysterious types, who’d rather hold your hand and gaze soulfully into your eyes, than find the time to get down to the serious business of working out all your kinks and making you extra happy. Give you that whole just-been-all-the-way-to-heaven-and-back glow. I know the type all too well. My last guy, all he wanted to do was massage my feet and paint my toenails purple and pink.” She grimaced as she shuddered. “Creepy.”

“Oh, Edie...” The tension suddenly left Catherine’s shoulders as she dissolved into laughter at her friend’s frank description. It was also uncomfortably accurate, but not in the way Edie had meant it. “It’s something like that...” Catherine took her friend’s hand. “But I’m okay with it this way. It’ll work itself out in the end. I just know it will. I need to be patient. He is a complicated guy.”

“Well, you just make sure you don’t die a frustrated old maid before it gets worked out. I mean, to see you in this...” She waved a hand at the nightgown. “The man has got some serious grovelling to do. Let me know if it works. I want *all* the juicy details...”

“Thanks, Edie.” Catherine shook her head. “You are so good for me. Don’t ever change.”

“Hey, it’s what I live for, Chandler. Voyeurism around in your crazy, rich girl love life.” Edie grinned ruefully, her dark eyes sparkling with mischief. “What else have I got to entertain me right now? They went and cancelled my favourite TV show...again!”

She sighed as she stood, pitching the crumpled remains of her lunch into the trashcan. “Later, babe, and don’t make me come hunting you down. I want a blow by blow account after you’ve made good use of that gorgeous nightgown. Gotta go now, got some bad guys to hunt down and make very sorry.” Edie winked and blew a cheeky kiss at Catherine before she sauntered away, chuckling to herself.

“Thanks, Edie.” Catherine turned from the mirror now. “All right, let’s try this again.” She sighed as she turned out the light and lay down on the bed, pulling the covers over her body as she wriggled deeper to make herself comfortable.

Outside the lightning flashed and flickered; drawing fantastic patterns of light and shadow across the ceiling. The storm was now approaching fast, lighting up the room. She lay watching the shadows dance for some time, willing sleep to claim her; but even though her eyelids drifted shut, it didn't seem to help. She still felt wide-awake and unable to relax. Her whole body hummed with unfulfilled desire and wanton need...and now she discovered she was also thirsty. On impulse she got up, reaching to pull on her dressing gown and, after belting it around her waist, she walked barefoot towards her tiny kitchen to get something cold to drink.

Outside, beyond the shelter of the balcony, the lightning briefly lit the skies like daylight. The lights of the city paled into brief insignificance before some even winked out, leaving large patches of deep blackness. *A power cut!* That would be all she needed right now! She flicked the kitchen switch on and felt relieved when the light still worked. She opened the fridge to assess her options, which were fairly scarce. She seriously needed to get some groceries in — another insurmountable problem. Time to shop was the problem as usual. Dining out had become a tiresome habit, but one she was loathe to break. *It just made her life easier.*

But, walking back across the living room, the sheer power of the storm drew her away from any thoughts of trying to regain sleep. Carrying her glass of fruit juice Catherine approached the doors, knowing she was courting danger to go outside. But the roiling nature of the storm was surging through her blood like wildfire, answering some unknown need deep within her, drawing her towards the display of raw, elemental power. She reached out to depress the door handle and slipped beyond the frantic billowing of the curtains and into the night outside.

The bleak cold air hit her hard like a slap in the face. She huddled deeper into her dressing gown, tightening the belt. She jumped at every sizzling flash of light, and then the resultant thunder shook her whole building, as it echoed through her body from her head to the naked soles of her feet on the tiles. The storm raged and muttered, flexing its muscles and its might in an awesome display.

Losing all sense of caution, and energised by the power flashing all around her, Catherine put her glass down on the outside table before approaching the balcony wall and lifting her face up to the sky. Any moment now it would begin to rain. She could smell it in the moist air.

Even after her shower, her body still felt heated and on edge from her dissatisfying dream. It had been a very long time since she had physically loved anyone – anyone that mattered anyway. The regrettable Tom Gunther had been her last sexual partner and he'd been convinced the men who'd slashed her face had also raped her.

He did not believe her constant denials whenever he challenged her story of the events of that awful time. Why else had she refused to sleep with him after she resurfaced? *"After all, there's nothing wrong with me, Catherine; so it must be you."* His dismissing voice carped in her mind now, and the last thing he said to her before he'd slammed his way out of her apartment and her life echoed back to her. *"There's plenty more fish in the ocean, Catherine! I don't need to work for what I can get for free, any time I want it."*

"So this is where thinking about Tom gets you, Chandler?" Catherine stared out into the night, crossing her arms over her aching breasts. The charged atmosphere raised the fine hairs on her arms, teasing out the damp length of her hair, making the strands dance. The energy of the night continued to course through her, drawing her up onto her toes, making her yearn for more. Trapped in the crazy, impulsive need to face down the dangers of the storm, she spread her arms wide to the roiling night, breathing it all in.

*“Catherine...?”*

She shuddered, dropping her head back. Now she was hearing Vincent’s voice in her mind as well. Her body tightened with need. *But he was not here.*

*“Catherine, be careful of the storm...don’t go too near to the edge...”*

Catherine closed her eyes, putting her hands to either side of her head. *She was so tired of the need to be careful and* – suddenly the cold air began to sizzle and flash all around her. Catherine dropped her hands abruptly. “Maybe this is not such a good idea after all...” she quickly decided, as the violence of the storm burst virtually overhead and heavy rain began to sluice down, drenching her instantly.

*“Damn!”* She tried to jump back from the downpour, but in that same instant a bolt of lightning streaked down from the clouds, flashing past her eyes with vicious force to finally ground in a shower of sparks, somewhere in the park far below. Its searing path blinded her – the stench of ozone was thick in the air and the electric force of the bolt knocked her backwards. She tried to scream, but the sound became trapped in her throat as she battled to breathe against the sudden lack of oxygen in the drenched air.

She stumbled, trying to maintain her balance, but ended up wind-milling her arms as she suddenly pitched forward towards the tiles, her hands grasping for purchase on anything close enough to help and

missing. *This is surely gonna hurt...* she thought despairingly as the balcony's tiled floor rushed up to meet her startled eyes.

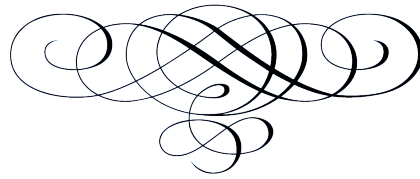
*"Catherine!"*

*"Vincent...!"* At the last possible moment, before her face smacked into the tiles, strong hands caught her, flipping her dexterously around and upwards into a firm embrace.

"Oh, Vincent..." Catherine's immediate reaction was to grip him tightly, flinging her arms around his neck, glorying in the feel of him so close and so powerful. She needed him and he was here!

Everything inside her began to sing a siren's seductive song of desire. *She needed...Oh, sweet heaven, she wanted...* "Don't let me go... please, don't let go..."

Shaking with reaction she burrowed deep into his grasp as Vincent surged to his feet, lifting her from the ground, bringing her high against his chest. It was a moment of pure shock and unalloyed joy. Once again he had saved her from certain harm. Now she found she didn't want to let him go again, not ever. Vincent's arms were around her as she'd been dreaming they would be. Her face was buried against the hard curve of his chest and her whole body pulled tight against the muscled length of his body. She could feel his great heart hammering against her breasts. She could stay here forever. *The reality was far better than any dream...*



Catherine awoke with a start. She put a questing hand to her aching head, before touching her face in puzzlement. She began to shudder with reaction and an unpleasant, metallic taste filled her mouth. The last thing she remembered was being outside watching the storm and being blown off balance by a lightning bolt that had come far too close for comfort. *And then Vincent had saved her...*and now she was back in her own bed.

*Had Vincent been there at all or had it all been another wishful dream?*

She lifted her head from the pillow to look down at herself. She was covered with her bedcovers, but when she raised them tentatively she discovered her dressing gown had disappeared and her sodden silk nightgown had been replaced with a fresh one of serviceable cotton. Her hair was still damp but someone had dried it enough so she wouldn't catch a chill.

"What gives?" She lay back with a frown, staring at the ceiling. Now surely she would have remembered getting changed again. Someone had dressed her, and she blushed to think Vincent had been forced to change her out of her saturated clothing.

It had been so stupid of her to go outside into the storm in the first place! Now curiosity made her push back the bedclothes and get up.

The clock on her nightstand proclaimed it was nearly 5am. *What had happened to the last four hours?*

Feeling as if she were still trapped inside some weird waking dream, she gathered her Chinese silk dressing gown from the closet and pulled it on. Belting it securely around her waist she opened the intervening doors cautiously and stepped into the darkened living room, looking for any sign of Vincent. But all the drapes had been drawn, keeping the room in near darkness despite the lightening sky outside.

*Perhaps he was waiting for her outside on the balcony and* — a sound from the darkness caused her to move cautiously sideways, trying to pierce the gloom. Pausing, she studied the familiar shapes in the darkness, trying to decide if she needed to make a dash for her gun. Then something moved again and a large hand lifted to switch on a side lamp. Catherine found herself staring straight at Vincent...

He was stretched out at one end of the couch, his long legs crossed at booted ankles. He was dressed in his usual clothes, a mixed patchwork of leather and wool, but he'd removed his cloak. It hung like a discarded shadow over the far end of the couch. He sat at his ease, his hands driven deep into the pockets of his leather pants, watching her hesitation with an assessing stare.

"I..." Catherine's throat dried. Vincent sitting quietly in her apartment was a fresh shock. How many times had she asked him to come inside and, until now, he'd often refused?



Except on that one magical night when they had sat together and watched her home movies. *And discovered they had known each other briefly, one magical night, long ago...* Catherine swallowed tightly against the memory, pressing a hand to her racing heart. There was so much that remained unspoken between them.

Now Vincent was here, sitting there on her couch as if he belonged. *Which, of course, he did...but it was already daylight outside. Was it already too late for him to retreat Below? Why had he waited until now?*

Suddenly tears threatened Catherine's vision and she had to blink them away rapidly. It just seemed so natural that he was there, because she wanted him to be – because she wished and dreamed it to be so. An intense tremor ran through her limbs, making her want to cry out. She pressed the back of one hand to her lips.

"Catherine..." Vincent sat up, watching her with deepening concern. "Are you all right?"

"You are really here." Catherine finally stated the obvious with a worried frown. She could not quite shake the feeling she was still dreaming. She was tempted to pinch her arm to be sure but instead she swallowed tightly. "How did you...?" Reaction rocketed through her. "I mean, when did you arrive?"

"I had been outside on your balcony for several minutes. I wanted to be sure you were all right. Our bond — our connection — has been so full

of sad thoughts and confused emotions these last few weeks. I know you are missing your father and I was aware you were trying to sleep, so I didn't wish to disturb you."

He lifted his broad shoulders and sighed. "I just wished to be near to you, to know you were safe. I was about to leave when you opened the doors and stepped outside onto the balcony to watch the storm. It was a dangerous thing to do on such a night. I tried to warn you, but you didn't appear to hear me over the thunder. And then the lightning struck and you began to fall. I managed to catch you before you could get seriously hurt."

"I...thank you." *Where does reality end and the fantasy begin?*

Catherine blinked. She began to understand he had remained here in her apartment by his own choice, keeping watch over her sleep, because he sensed she needed him to remain close. That he could do for her. Be there for her without stepping beyond the invisible line he had drawn between them. "But you shouldn't have been out in a night like this either," she reasoned. "You couldn't sleep?"

"No..." Vincent released a long slow breath. "Not when you have been in such turmoil. I have been sitting here for some time, thinking about you."

"Oh, I see." Catherine felt her cheeks begin to heat. She wasn't about to ask what he'd been thinking! There was already enough confusion within her for both of them!

In the far distance, lightning still flickered and thunder rolled, a distant, slumberous mutter. The storm might have moved on, but it left Catherine shaking with reaction. She caught her breath, striving to keep her emotional balance and her tears in check. "You should not be here now. Someone might see you when you leave..."

"Forget about me. Are you all right?" Vincent got to his feet and started towards her, his hands outstretched. "You look very pale. I have worried for you."

It would have been so easy to go into his embrace and surrender all her fears and dreams, but Catherine sidestepped his approach neatly. She needed to clear a few things up first. *Like her missing nightgown for a start.* "When did you...I mean, how did you..."

"You could have caught a chill if it hadn't been changed." Vincent's quiet words confirmed her worst fears. "Out on the balcony I wrapped you in my cloak, trying to keep you warm as I carried you inside. But you began to shake and shiver and then you would not wake..."

"I see..." *Be practical, Chandler, it's no big deal! So he got to see you naked first!* She shouldn't be jealous of the fact! But it needled nevertheless. She'd much preferred to have been awake and aware of what was happening between them!

"But I did not say that it was I who removed your clothing." Humour gleamed in Vincent's sapphire eyes.

“Oh...” Catherine’s mouth dropped open into a perfect circle. *Get it together, Chandler...*

Vincent indicated the telephone. “I phoned Peter, and he came over to examine you. I was concerned that your collapse was out of character. He changed you from your wet things and put you to bed. He is convinced your main problem is you are not eating properly, and I must say I agree with him. You appeared lighter than you once were.”

“Ah...” Catherine nodded. Hearing those words from any other man, she would have been offended. But this was Vincent, and he cared for her deeply. Still, she seemed incapable of speech and was beginning to feel very foolish. *Vincent, always the perfect gentleman...she should appreciate the fact more instead of...*

Vincent assessed her closely. “I agreed to stay in case you needed me. Peter had patients to see. He said I wasn’t to leave you and to call him back if I felt you needed to see him again. But he did insist I’m to make sure you eat something when you finally awoke. How are you feeling now?”

“I...I’m fine. Thank you, Vincent.” Catherine raised her shoulders at his disbelieving look. “Truly...I am all right now.” She glanced anxiously beyond the balcony doors. *So much for the stuff of dreams.* “It’ll be daylight soon enough. And I can get my own breakfast. You do need to go...but is it too late? Someone may see you.”

“Perhaps.” Vincent turned to frown at the brightening light beyond the curtains. “But you concern me more, and I have nowhere I need to be right now.” Vincent turned back to watch the varying expressions of hope and need flickering across her face.

He seemed to debate within himself before he continued. “I asked Peter to send a message down to Father, saying I will not be back until tonight and to explain the situation. You need me to be here now. I thought...if you are hungry, we might breakfast together.”

“I...would like that.” Catherine gasped as she pressed a hand to her breasts. Her racing heart skipped a beat. *Okay, forget reality, if this is a dream, then it was becoming more and more fantastical with every passing minute.* But she didn’t want to wake up just yet, and she could admit she was starving. Unfortunately what she was hungry for was not on the menu! “But, I — I mean, you —”

“You would prefer not to breakfast on burnt toast and cold coffee?” Vincent interrupted her mildly, gently reminding her of the times she’d complained of her lack of culinary skills. He smiled teasingly. “Nor do I, but I am sure I can find my way around your kitchen. Go and get changed and hurry back to join me.”

“You can cook...?” Catherine’s lips parted in astonishment as she retreated slowly backwards towards her bedroom under the imperious command of his waved hand. *She loved this waking dream!*

“Cook, yes, I can do that. But please do not expect Eggs Benedict or home-made croissants. I can prepare a simple meal...” Vincent shrugged. “Father insisted all the boys learned how to fend for themselves or starve. William is a very able and talented teacher, if not always a patient man. Devin insisted on calling him Mother behind his back, and he was always getting into trouble. But my little brother became the only chef among us. Of course he always excelled at everything he turned his mind to achieving.”

“Well, Devin is not here now and you are. I am prepared to be impressed.” Catherine retreated further — reaching to grasp the handles of her bedroom doors — shaking her head at this new revelation. *Who knew?*

“Edie, eat your heart out.” She chuckled as she closed her doors before rustling through her wardrobe and finally deciding on blue jeans and a soft, buttery yellow woollen sweater, before combing her hair and applying her make-up in record time. “The man can cook! But no, I will not ask him to paint my toenails...” She grinned down at her bare feet.

Without the added benefit of her high-heeled shoes, she was aware Vincent would tower even higher over her. But she resisted the urge to don footwear, finding she liked the warm feeling of being secure and cared for. *It was the weekend after all...*

“What can I do?” she asked, reappearing in the kitchen. Vincent — moving with deft purpose — filled the tiny space almost to exclusion.

Catherine felt decidedly in the way of his obvious expertise. She shook her head in wonderment. "Not much it seems." She frowned at his preparations and sighed. *So much better than her pathetic attempts.*

Vincent turned to glance at her. "There is nothing for you to do beyond going back into the other room, sitting down and drinking your coffee. Leave the rest to me."

"It smells heavenly." Catherine retreated to sit down obediently, peering into the mug Vincent placed on the table before her. There were two place settings, napkins and all. Catherine smiled at the care he'd obviously taken.

*There was even a candle...she felt her heart contract with the strength of her love for him. Oh, Edie, if only you knew...this is pure heaven... maybe I could stand to have my toenails painted after all.*

"Coffee brewing was the one area where I excelled and Devin sucked." Vincent's mouth curved upwards with satisfaction. "He always managed to burn his. And I always achieved a better brew of tea for Father. It's something Devin refuses to discuss, even now."

"All of this is beyond surreal." Catherine grasped the mug between her hands, sipping the potent brew. "But this is heavenly."

"To say your cupboard was bare is an understatement." Vincent frowned as he returned from the kitchen with a plate in each hand. "But

I have managed to rustle up something I think William would approve of greatly.”

Catherine blinked at her plate in wonderment. Two beautifully cooked eggs...*how did he know she liked hers sunny-side up*...nestled neatly beside a serving of canned tomatoes and some strips of bacon. Her stomach rumbled and she caught her lower lip between her teeth as Vincent delivered another plate to the middle of the table heaped with crisp toast done to a turn and a pat of butter beside a dish of strawberry conserve. Catherine’s eyes rose to meet his and she just stared at him, now completely lost for words.

“Hungry?” Vincent slanted his head at her in inquiry.

Catherine inhaled deeply. “Even if I could tell her, Edie is just not going to believe this...I’m not sure I believe in myself. I surely must be dreaming.”

“Eat, please, before it all gets cold.” Vincent smiled as he picked up his knife and fork. “Peter was concerned about your lack of nourishment.” Catherine obeyed with alacrity, and they spent long, companionable minutes eating in silence.

“You don’t perchance have a dinner menu to rival this?” Catherine pushed her empty plate aside. “I mean, if you’re stuck here all day... with me.”



“I would never describe spending the day with you in quite those terms.”

Vincent’s smile was lethally slow, and Catherine’s bare toes began to curl. “But, perhaps something could be arranged.”

“Thank God it’s Saturday.” Catherine reached for his plate. “Now the least I can do is clear the table and —”

“Not so fast.” There was a friendly tussle over the dishes that Vincent won easily. “A gentleman always clears. Father also taught the boys good manners.”

“Remind me to thank him some time.” Catherine laughed. “Okay, I’ll wash and you can dry.”

It was only after they had finished the dishes that she found herself lost for inspiration. What was there to do now? She had gone over and over this scenario so many times in her head, but now the reality was far more incredible. If they were Below in the tunnels or Vincent’s chamber he would read to her. Or they would have a friendly argument about some philosophical point and spend time visiting Father and the others.

She loved to wander into Cullen’s chamber and look at all his beautiful work. Recently Vincent had even begun to teach her to play chess and Cullen had agreed to craft a set just for her.

"I can hear you thinking." Vincent took her hand, drawing her into the sitting room. "How are you feeling now?"

"Confused," Catherine admitted honestly. "How many times...how often have I asked you to come inside? And now, here you are, and I don't know what to do about it."

"I am house-broken, you know," Vincent teased. "And I am capable of entertaining myself. Perhaps you have something we could read together?" He glanced hopefully at her bookcase. "Tell me what you would like to do now."

Catherine's mouth dried at the innocent request. *Oh, Lord...if only he knew...* "Forget reading for now. We could play cards," she offered hurriedly.

"Cards it is, then." Vincent nodded. "Now was that so hard?"

Catherine shook her head as she hurried to the side table, yanking open the drawer to find the playing cards. She turned back to stare at Vincent. "What do you play?"

"Anything you like." Vincent bent to clear the coffee table of its jumble of files and notes, stacking them neatly on the couch before settling cross legged behind the cleared surface.

"Okay..." Catherine bit her tongue against the wanton thought of proposing a game or two of strip poker. She shook her head as she

returned to settle quickly into a kneeling position opposite Vincent.

*Stick to the safe ground!*

They agreed to play a few hands of rummy which Vincent won convincingly. Catherine proposed a game of Go Fish, but again she was beaten soundly. A frown creased her forehead. Was there nothing that Vincent wasn't adept at?

"Hang on." Catherine got up from the floor, stretching her cramped limbs. She rummaged through the drawer again to find a box of matches. She returned to the coffee table, settling behind it once more. "Five card stud. For matches, not money. Winner takes all." She had often played poker with her late father, and she fancied her chances with this one.

Vincent lofted an inquiring eyebrow. "Do I detect a note of desperation?"

"A girl's gotta win sometime." Catherine grinned cheekily.

"Very well," Vincent acknowledged, but Catherine was not too sure of the odd look of satisfaction that flickered through his eyes.

They settled into a friendly tussle once more, and this time Catherine managed to hold her own...for a while. But it didn't take long for Vincent to overtake her winning streak and begin to reverse it steadily.

“This is ridiculous!” Catherine finally surrendered her last matches with a rueful grimace. “I thought I had you in those last two hands.”

“Unfortunately your poker face is not all that poker.” Vincent rose to his feet, coming around to her side of the table to crouch beside her. He touched her cheek lightly with his fingertips. “You need to take some lessons from Devin. He is the master of the inscrutable stare.” He smiled, his eyes dropping to her lips. “He taught me everything he knew about playing poker which, of course, was considerable.”

“Is there nothing that you’re not good at?” Catherine asked in a slightly peevish tone, her heart rate picking up and tripping over its beat.

Her hands flew immediately to her lips. The moment the words were out she wished she could snatch them back. It had been a magical morning, why spoil it now with stupid questions provoked by her deepening sense of dissatisfaction?

“Many things...” Vincent lowered his head closer to hers. “There are things that you know, of which I have no knowledge. You could teach me those things, Catherine.”

“I find that hard to believe...” Catherine breathed, leaning closer than she had dared all morning. Suddenly it was so easy to tumble into his welcoming embrace. Vincent sat back and she slid slowly down the length of his thighs to settle into his lap. With his upraised knees enclosing her body, Catherine stared deep into the sapphire depths of his eyes, now so close to hers. “So now...what?” she breathed.

“Last night you dreamed.” Vincent drew her closer still, his hands at her waist. “But you were reluctant to share it with me. Even now I can sense you are pulling back, trying to hide what you are thinking and feeling. Why?”

“Oh, now that’s unfair,” Catherine complained, her cheeks heating with embarrassment. “You don’t ask any woman about her dreams...”

“What about her wardrobe then?” Vincent cupped her blazing cheek in his palm. “Who was to be the recipient of that ill-fated silk nightgown, if not me?”

“Another loaded question.” Catherine could hardly breathe. Surely they were not discussing this? She had imagined this scenario a billion times, but it had always been such a very lonely pursuit, ending in inevitable frustration, just like her dream from last night. *And now...*

“Are you sure about this?” She lifted her eyes to stare into his, seeing him solemnly watching every emotion that flitted across her expressive face.

“I am very sure.” He smiled, his hands moving slowly at the hem of her sweater, pushing steadily beneath to caress the smooth skin of her waist. “More sure than I have ever been...”

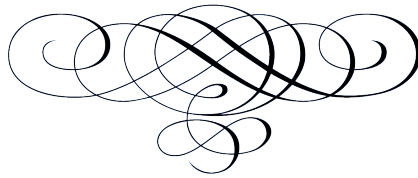
“Oh Vincent, I do love you.” Catherine’s knees slid to the floor as she rose against him, allowing his hands to travel the warm length of her back beneath her sweater. She stared down into the eyes looking up at

her with such wonder and love, as if she was the most precious gift in the whole world, and he had only just come to realise the inescapable truth.

“Tell me about your dream?” he asked, so softly she could barely hear him. “Please let me in, Catherine.”

“Better still, let me show you.” The incredible beauty of his acceptance and love gleamed up at Catherine as she rose above him, leaning down to capture his mouth with hers, and on a groan of pure, aching need, he allowed her to take him where she willed...

~ ***FIN*** ~



*“If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.”*

~ ***Albert Einstein***