

Lovers Found...

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"It has been said, 'time heals all wounds.' I do not agree. The wounds remain. In time, the mind, protecting its sanity, covers them with scar tissue and the pain lessens. But it is never gone..."

~ Rose Kennedy

Catherine dropped the telephone receiver back into its cradle. A dull headache throbbed against her skull. She

reached to massage her temples. She had been making her hurried excuses to Joe. He wasn't at all happy she was taking time off at such short notice. But it couldn't be helped...

"What are we going to do, Vincent?" she questioned the silent, recumbent form lying behind her couch. As much as she willed it to be so, she didn't expect or receive an answer.

Having crashed headlong into the apartment from Catherine's balcony the evening before, Vincent had fallen to the floor, taking down her display cabinet. He had been completely unresponsive when Catherine had returned from the world Below, after speaking with Father about her deep concerns for her love. The chaos of Vincent's passage through her apartment had left Catherine stunned and confused. *But none of that mattered now...*

She listened to his fractured breathing. "We will get through this, Vincent, together. We must. We have to..."

Suddenly someone knocked on her apartment door. Lost in deep concern, Catherine started badly. Getting up from her small table, she cast an anxious look towards where Vincent lay, before she crossed the room

to open her front door cautiously, deeply grateful to see Dr Peter Alcott standing there.

“Thank you for coming so quickly. I prayed my message would reach you.” She hugged him briefly, before turning to lead him across the living room to where Vincent lay behind the couch, shielded from casual view. It had been all she could do the night before, using the vastness of his cloak to drag him there away from the worst of the shards of glass and broken wood. Afterwards she had removed the garment, tossing it over the back of the couch.

“I came as soon as I got your message.” Peter’s worried eyes assessed the chaos of Catherine’s usually neat apartment. “My nurse said you sounded frantic, now I can see why.” He opened his bag at Vincent’s side, quickly removing what he needed. He sank to his knees beside his friend, carefully working to extract a phial of blood.

“Is there anything more we can do for him?” Catherine questioned anxiously, watching his progress.

Peter sighed as he looked up. “Just stay close. Just what you’re doing.”

Catherine clung to the practicalities of the moment.
“You’ll tell Father?”

Peter nodded. “Of course. I’ll send this right through to the lab. Maybe we’ll find something out.” He looked back at her worriedly. “Catherine, you should know there is a risk sending Vincent’s blood to a lab.” Pocketing his glasses, he returned his stethoscope to his medical bag.

“What risk?” Catherine demanded to know, sinking to her knees.

Peter sighed. “The kind of analysis we need, they could very well see something they have never seen before. Could trigger a lot of questions.” He rose to his feet, patting Catherine’s shoulder for reassurance.

Though she knew Peter was doing his best, Catherine didn’t feel comforted. She stood and walked with him towards the door. “Well, we’ll just have to start thinking of some answers.”

“Will you be all right?” Peter paused, one hand on the doorknob as he studied her pale face. “I mean, Vincent could remain like this for days, perhaps weeks. We have no real idea about how or when it will pass. Or what his affliction even is. But until then he shouldn’t be moved, and his returning Below is out totally of the question. I

would counsel you to seek whatever help you can and quickly...”

“We’ll manage,” Catherine replied swiftly. “We will be all right.” She tried to sound positive, but her voice trembled.

“Very well...” Peter sighed at her determined expression. “If you want me to stay, I could send for my nurse and we--” He put a hand on her arm.

“Thank you, Peter, but we need answers and fast.” Catherine cast an anxious look towards Vincent. “But...” she looked back. “Very well then, when you send down that message to Father, can you also ask for Jamie to come Above and see me in the morning?”

“Yes, if you think it will help, of course. You shouldn’t be alone in this.” Peter opened the door and peering out cautiously before opening it more fully. “I’ll come back in a couple of days, but if you need me, call me...any time, day or night. Promise me?”

“Thank you, Peter. I promise.” Catherine reached to kiss his lined cheek, before closing and locking the door behind him.

Vincent thrashed around in an unending sea of nightmares, unable to find peace or redemption. Catherine had been in those dreams, surrounded by a nimbus of white light, her beautiful face full of fear and worry. But despite his best attempts, Vincent couldn't reach her, or save her from whatever it was she was so afraid of. He felt as if he was dying and she couldn't help him.

Then, in his all-too-brief moments of lucidity, he watched Catherine seated at a small table using the telephone to make excuses to her boss. Those conversations were never easy. At other times she was kneeling beside him bathing his brow with a cool towel as he shook with fever chills.

He watched as she toiled to set the room to rights, moving in and out through the balcony doorway carrying things. What they were Vincent did not know, nor could he rise to assist her, even though his mind demanded he should.

But always, just beyond his reach, there was that other being, watching and waiting for his chance to strike. The black beast with his feral look and cynically knowing stare of disdain. Clearly he dismissed his opponent's feeble attempts to rise and do battle with him.

And he was right. Whenever Vincent fought to rise, to come to grips with his unknown nemesis, his weakness both in mind and body shackled him, shaming him into immobility. He could only growl warningly, trying to alert Catherine to the perils of that other, ominous presence, but she seemed never to notice or react...

The next day Catherine opened her door to faint tapping to find Jamie hovering there, her expression anxious and alert. "You asked for me to come?" the young girl questioned, looking ill at ease. "Father said."

"Thank you, Jamie." Catherine drew the girl inside and closed the door. "I need your help."

"How's Vincent?" Jamie cast a worried look towards where she could see her mentor's booted feet protruding from behind the couch.

"Nothing has changed..." Catherine followed her glance. "Tell Father we can only wait and hope. But I need you to fetch me some things from Below."

"Like what?" Jamie's clear, candid eyes studied her closely.

“Peter thinks this could last for days, we just don’t know.” Catherine passed a hand around the back of her neck in an attempt to ease the constant pain of her headache. “For a start I need this mended...” She crossed the carpet to gather Vincent’s great cloak where it hung over one of the chairs. “I’ve cleaned the broken glass out of it as best I can. But it got torn when I moved him.”

“Okay...” Jamie came forward to take it from her, her eyes roaming the semi-cleared carnage of the room. “He surely did a number on this place...” She whistled low and long. “You need a hand? I could go fetch Mouse and a few of the others...they would all come.”

“I think the fewer people who are seen coming and going from here the better. But thank you for the offer.” Catherine had done what clearing she could for now, so no one would get hurt by the broken glass and woodwork. But there was still more work to be done. It would keep for now.

“Okay fine.” Jamie shrugged. “I’ll tell Father what’s happened. You need anything else?”

“Vincent’s clothes...” Catherine replied. “I will need at least one change...what he’s wearing now is soaked with sweat and making his chills worse.”

“I can do that, I’ll ask Mary.” Jamie tossed the weight of the cloak over her slim shoulder. “We all want him to get better, you know? It’s not the same Below without him around...Mouse is frantic.” She sniffed and shrugged. “You sure you don’t need any help?”

“I will let you know...” Catherine gave her a quick hug. “And we all want him to get better.”

“I’ll get back as soon as I can with what you need...” After casting one final worried glance towards Vincent, Jamie headed for the door. “See ya...”

The door closed silently behind her before Catherine could reply, leaving her alone once more with her doubts and fears...

Vincent had no comprehension of the passing of the hours, slowly melting seamlessly into days. In his sleep he fought faceless demons who tore at his flesh and never allowed him any peace. In his fitful wakefulness the only constant was Catherine kneeling beside him

with her soft voice and infinite care....and the rabid beast who always lurked in the shadows behind her, watching and waiting for the right moment to pounce.

Catherine cared and comforted Vincent's body, hugging him when he shook with chills and telling him it would be all right...*everything would be all right*...soon. He listened and tried to make sense of it all, but it was no use.

Jamie was as good as her word and returned the next day with everything Catherine had requested and Vincent's neatly repaired cloak. The messages of love and support the young woman also delivered lifted her troubled spirits.

Vincent had been vaguely aware of the first time Catherine had stripped both his shirts from his unresisting body and managed to replace them with one of soft material. He had tried to assist her struggles to disrobe him as best he could, but his weakness chained his limbs, making them heavier than lead. It had been a herculean effort, but Catherine had finally achieved her objective, though it had left her red-faced and breathing heavily, sitting back on her heels and releasing a shuddering sigh.

Lying helpless, Vincent had watched her watching him, and something in her confused green eyes stirred against his wandering consciousness. A sensation of endless wanting, a connection he could not grasp, but it felt almost as if she was somehow touching him, so closely did her look assess him. It asked a question to which he had no answer, beyond the formless sense of a fathomless, burning longing to possess her softness that surely could never be fulfilled. It would make him no better than the beast hiding in the shadows...

Catherine puzzled over the turn of events. She had fully expected Vincent to resist her determined attempts to partially unclothe him, but instead, in his state of fevered disorientation, he had done his best to help her. And what had finally been revealed had snatched her breath away, leaving her overly warm and confused. Soft golden hair lovingly clothed his massive chest, narrowing down over the hard flatness of his abdomen to the belted waistband of his trousers.

Those she had not tried to remove, deciding discretion was truly advised. The softness of the hair on Vincent's chest was echoed on his forearms, but his upper arms had only a fine covering and Catherine could see the

powerful muscles outlined clearly beneath his skin. They were moving, flexing as Vincent had tried to help her in her determined ministrations. But his strength was swiftly exhausted.

Their shared, rapid breathing at the end of the struggle had come from two completely different directions, and it was all Catherine could do not to reach out and touch him as she wished to touch him, to have him caress her. He was seriously ill and had no clear idea of what he was doing, while she was all too aware of what her own body craved and yet could not have...

She took her time carefully washing out his patched leather shirt, and ribbed under-garment, before hanging both out in the warm spring sunshine of the balcony to dry. The task gave necessary focus for her hands. But a wanton memory stayed with her, engraved on her mind's eye, and it was always there every time she closed her eyes...

“No, I don’t need anything, it’s just the stomach flu. Could you have Rita meet with the Wilkinson’s attorney? Okay, thanks, Joe. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Vincent woke to the sound of Catherine's voice. She was talking to her boss again. The sound of her soft voice relaxed him, he felt disinclined to move, even if he could. Time stretched endlessly, telescoping in on itself. He had no true sense of either day or night beyond the apartment walls. He floated in a place where no one and nothing mattered but Catherine and her nearness.

A little of his strength had returned and after a second visit from Peter to check on his progress, Vincent had managed to change his own clothing this time. But he still lay behind the couch, his head propped against soft pillows, drifting in and out of slumber.

He was feeling better, but rising to his feet still seemed like a task beyond his limited capabilities. His unfocussed gaze strayed to the half-open doors of Catherine's bedroom. A black shape lurked there, moving slowly in and out of view, its feral gaze focussed on Catherine, seated unaware and vulnerable at her table.

The dishevelled beast turned its head to glare at Vincent, a taunting smirk of disregard in its luminous blue eyes, as if daring him to get up and do his worst, which it very well knew he could not. Then its attention returned to Catherine, and it seemed finally ready to pounce on her unawares.

With a supreme effort Vincent launched himself from the floor, stumbling head-long through the latticed doors of Catherine's bedroom, and crashing down within, snarling and growling, head swinging from side to side, hunting for any sign of the beast only he could see.

"Vincent!" Catherine was beside him in an instant, throwing her arms around his shoulders, trying to retrain him from struggling to his feet and continuing the fight.

"No, Vincent!" There's nothing there. Please stop, before you hurt yourself. It's just a dream, an illusion, nothing about it is real."

Somehow her frantic struggles to restrain him communicated through to Vincent, and he ceased to growl.

"Not real...?" he gasped, as he struggled to his knees and slumped back against the end of the bed, fighting for breath, head sunk between his outstretched arms. "I was so sure I could see..."

"No, Vincent. If I help you, can you stand?" Catherine fitted her slim shoulder beneath his right arm, urging him towards his feet.

“Maybe...” Vincent staggered, pushing his booted feet beneath him, rising slowly with her to slump down on the side of the bed.

“Catherine...” Vincent turned his head, looking deep into her concerned eyes. “Please stay...don’t leave me...I’m afraid.” The plea had not been what he intended to say, but the words had been spoken, he couldn’t take them back now.

“Oh, don’t be afraid, Vincent. Of course I won’t leave you...” Catherine hurried to reassure him. “Why would you think I could ever do that?”

“You have seen what I am capable of...” Vincent waved a weary hand at the new destruction he had wrought in his efforts to come to grips with the darkness within him. “How can you bear to be near me? I am not fit company for you.”

“I am here...always...” Catherine wrapped her hands urgently around his arm. “Oh, Vincent, don’t you know that by now? You could never lose me, not now. Not when we have come so far together...”

“Yes...always...” Vincent whispered, his head lowering as his whole body sagged backwards and sideways towards the wide comfort of the bed behind him.

Struggling to keep her feet, Catherine went with him, lowering him to rest against the pillows. The sigh that escaped him was deep and ragged, as if he was releasing some dark, inner pain.

“Oh, Vincent, I do love you...” Catherine stood for a moment looking down at him, her heart breaking to see him like this.

Dashing a hand across her eyes, she looked around the room. It was only mid-afternoon, but she felt deathly tired in every limb and sinew. Quickly, without thinking too rationally, she retrieved a large blanket from her wardrobe and draped it over Vincent’s sleeping form.

Rounding the foot of the bed she kicked off her boots and lay down beside him, to watch over him, but she didn’t expect to sleep. However, as tired as she felt in both body and soul, it was only a matter of moments before her eyes drifted shut...

Darkness filtered into the bedroom, slowly smothering every corner in velvet dusk. Catherine lay awake and watchful, cuddled close against Vincent’s broad back as he lay on his side facing away from her. She kept watch over his rest as he had once done for her.

Catherine sighed, edging closer, trying to share her warmth with him. To have her love here with her, in her apartment, beside her in her bed, had long been a closely-guarded and cherished secret wish. Of course that romantic and erotic dream had begun and ended far differently from her presently confused and troubled circumstances.

Vincent was not aware of her, or her closeness, only the terrible menace of the black shadows thrown up by his fractured consciousness. He had been seeing things that were not there and reacting violently to them. Now his rest seemed to be finally free of demons.

But Catherine sensed he was still trying to protect her from those same hateful nightmares. She glanced with resignation at the wreckage that had once been her bedroom doors and sighed. How she was going to tell her building super what had happened here was a worry for another day. She had cleared the remains of her display cabinet and its contents, adding them to the shattered remnants of her balcony doors, where Vincent had broken into her apartment in his desperate need to see her, to talk with her.

That too was for another time. She had consigned everything portable out onto the balcony and swept up

the shattered glass. She had found a slim volume of Dylan Thomas poetry thrown out onto the tiled patio and wondered if Vincent had brought it with him. The spine of the book had been broken, and its pages dampened by recent rain. It was not like Vincent to treat his cherished books with such disdain, but it was the only explanation.

Finally, taking the book with her, she had drawn the curtains, securing them firmly across the gaping hole that had been the French doors leading into her living room, thankful the rain had passed and early spring, making the air was not so cold as to be unbearable.

Rational explanations Catherine didn't have, and she could not immediately think of any that would fit the destruction of her property. But they were only things, after all, and could be replaced. People and relationships were far more important, a valuable lesson Vincent had taught her over the last couple of years. Now it was her turn to care for him, attempt to make him well again.

Catherine shrugged, thinking she could simply have to put on a brave face and inform the super she'd had guests who had gotten somewhat out of hand. She was rich and therefore seen as someone entitled to live an eccentric life. She doubted the poor man would say

anything beyond an eloquent look of confusion and despair. There was no other way forward that she could see.

Apart from asking Mouse and Cullen to come Above and repair the damage...she smiled wistfully at the idea. As if nothing had happened, as if all was well in her world and the secret world Below. As if there was no Paracelsus and he had not released his destructive hatred on her beloved Vincent, and threatened the uncertain hope of their future together...

If only...

Her mind returned to the troubled present, drifting once again to words that kept circulating in her head as she listened to Vincent's quiet breathing. She mulled them over, returning to a particular stanza that intrigued her...
"Though lovers be lost, love shall not and death shall have no dominion..."

Beside her Vincent stirred, his rhythmic breathing fracturing into wakefulness. *"And death shall have no dominion..."* he finished the quotation, his quiet voice raspy with disuse.

Catherine gasped, half-rising onto her elbow to peer over the height of Vincent's shoulder and down at his

face. She waited, but he still appeared to sleep, apart from the quickened pace of his breathing.

After a moment Vincent's lips barely moved as he asked, "You know those lines...?"

Her heart hammering within her chest with hope and trepidation, Catherine hitched herself higher against his back, leaning over to look down at him. She raised her free hand to grip his shoulder, trying to keep him alert and with her. She needed him to be well and over the worst of the terrible affliction that had overtaken him. She badly needed to feel not so alone and helpless. To have him close and aware of her once more.

"You've been repeating them for three days..." she whispered, watching for any sign of reaction. "Who wrote them? Was it Dylan Thomas?"

But her love appeared to have faded back into sleep, for he neither moved nor replied, and his breathing smoothed again into the same rhythmic pattern she had been listening to all evening. Frightened and feeling bereft, Catherine rose higher still, looking down and hoping against hope Vincent would stir again, talk to her, tell her everything was going to be all right. *Make her believe in miracles...*

After several anxious moments of indecision, she gave up the unequal struggle, relaxing once more against the solid bulk of his back, before pressing a kiss to his solid flesh and resting against him waiting for the new day that may yet take him far from her loving care as Paracelsus had tried so hard to achieve.

Not without me... her frightened mind silently clamoured...*No, Vincent, never without me. I promise you that...* Once more her eyes drifted shut and she slept.

“Catherine...where are you? I can’t see you...I need you now...”

Catherine started awake at the sound of Vincent’s voice, low and pleading, desperate in its entreaty. “I’m here,” she replied softly, discovering she must have burrowed beneath the blanket covering Vincent, and he now lay on his side facing her, his eyes wide and staring. She laid a comforting hand against his cheek and he immediately turned his face into it, his tongue scorching a path across her palm, making her gasp.

“I thought I had lost you...” he whispered wretchedly. “I would surely die if that ever happened...without you,

there is nothing...*He* will not win...never! I will *not* allow it!”

Tears burned in Catherine’s eyes. She had no idea who Vincent was talking about, but obviously whoever it was, they were very real to him. “I told you Vincent, you could never lose me. I’m with you, always. There is no one here but you and me.” Trying to calm his agitation, she laid the palm of her free hand flat against the rapid beating of his heart. “Always...”

“Always...” Vincent repeated the word softly, his lips moving against her palm, before he raised his head to stare at her, his blue eyes fathomless and tormented in the darkness. “*Though they go mad they shall be sane. Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again. Though lovers be lost love shall not. And death shall have no dominion...*” he quoted bleakly. “Do you believe that, Catherine?”

“Oh, Vincent, you’re not going to die. I won’t let you,” Catherine told him urgently, cupping his face between her hands. “We will get through this together, we must. You just need to rest now, and recover...the worst is over now...”

But Vincent didn’t appear to understand. “And if it’s not...?” He lowered his head until his lips were the

merest breath from hers, and Catherine froze as the fullness of his bottom lip stroked gently across her mouth. “What then?” he whispered wretchedly.

A soft growl rumbled through his chest as he repeated the gesture. Then his forehead came to rest against hers, and their breath mingled in the scant space between them, as blue eyes stared intently into green. “*He* will win...”

“What is it, Vincent?” Catherine questioned softly, as he paused there, seemingly suspended and inert above her. “What do you need from me?” She didn’t dare move and risk breaking the spell that kept him there, watching her without speaking, as his body eased closer to finally cover hers from hip to breast, pinning her securely to the bed.

She was not afraid, this was Vincent, and she loved him without reservation. But his behaviour now puzzled her. She watched and waited for any kind of response to let her know he had heard her.

“*He* cannot have you, for you are mine...” he said eventually, when Catherine was sure he had lost the thread of his thoughts. “You have always been mine and I would tear the world apart to find you...” His gaze flicked briefly around the room, probing the shadows,

before returning to hers. “To keep you by my side... always...”

“I know...” Catherine breathed, her heart rate gathering pace at the look of naked longing in his eyes. “And you belong to me, Vincent. Never forget that.”

“Always...” he repeated again slowly, his gaze moving downwards to the rapid rise and fall of her breasts beneath her shirt and again he froze in place as if listening to some cautioning, inner voice he was trying to ignore.

“It’s all right, Vincent...” Catherine encouraged softly, as she sensed rather than felt his hesitation. “I love you... you are safe here with me.”

“Yes...safe...” On a long, trembling sigh he lowered his head to rest on her warmth, his stubbed cheek an electric contact against the front of her body. His powerful arms encompassed her, broad palms spreading out against her back as he scooped her up against him, holding her tightly now, the soft growling returning as he nudged his nose against the opening of her shirt, seeking and finding her naked skin, moving closer still.

The rough lash of his tongue against the soft upper curve of her breasts made Catherine gasp with need, pushing forward against him, offering easier access. Her arms lifted to loop around his neck, her fingers lacing behind his head. Where this would lead or why it was happening she couldn't guess, but the need to touch him was too strong to deny.

Vincent's hands travelled downwards, fingers hooking into the waistband of her sweat pants, his claws whispering against her bare skin as he eased them down. Then the only barrier to his touch was the filmy lace of her panties. They last only a moment before they fell to the assault of his questing fingers.

Catherine turned her face into his neck, running a line of caresses across the heat of Vincent's exposed neck. Her own hands were not idle in their quest for her body's ultimate fulfilment. She could not question what dark forces had prompted this intimate assault. Blind longing had replaced rational thought. She needed this as much as Vincent. She would claim him, as he would her.

His whole body shuddered against hers as her fingers dipping beneath the waistband of his trousers also found their ultimate goal. He cried out then, his body unused to so intimate a caress, and then he shuddered in Catherine's loving arms and she continued to stroke him

into burgeoning awareness of the scorching heat between them.

“Lovers...always,” he breathed raggedly as Catherine’s hands guided him towards the welcome, satin heat of her body.

Her hips rose to meet his, moving with him as his body took over from his conscious mind and he was driven onwards by a need so far beyond his control he had no power to stop, even if she begged him to do so. That odd sensation of floating returned, the sense he was living some other, unique life beyond his physical limits or endurance. Perhaps even beyond memory or recall.

Catherine’s softness was the only anchor he could cling to, needing her with him to make any sense of it all. He had to mark her as his, before that taunting demon of blackness returned to claim her for himself. That he could never allow to happen, not while he lived to prevent it...

Mindlessly, their bodies blended together, fusing into one motion, reaching towards ultimate fulfilment. Vincent’s great heart thundered in his ears. This was an intimacy for which he was totally unprepared. His rhythms increased as Catherine drew him on with her voice and hands, breathy cries of encouragement that

drove him beyond the limits of any control. If this truly was a dream born of fever, he never wished to wake again. This was the claim he needed to make for both their sakes...

His explosive release shuddered through him, making him blind to everything but the woman linked so intimately to him. Catherine surrounded him, her body blending with his as Vincent surged forward one final time, deep within her, everything he was, he gave to her without reservation...

Vincent stood looking out through the gently billowing bedroom curtains screening Catherine's balcony doors. They stood open to the red glow of late afternoon sunshine and soft spring breeze. Even though his beloved had told him he had broken into her apartment, he could still not process it. And yet so much was missing from his memory, like everything about the last six days was a frustrating blank.

He knew had crashed through the doors and seen the terrible monster looking back at him from the mirror on the wall. His memory ended there when he lashed out and destroyed that too, before he'd finally passed out on

the carpet in the living room, taking down and shattering the display cabinet as he fell.

The thought that he had done all this brought him only shame and heartache. He wished to be gone from this place, from the pain and anguish the sight caused him, but he had to wait for the darkness that was slowly descending outside. The sun had painted the sky in blood-red streaks and the buildings were slowly dissolving into black shapes that gave no clues to the secrets they hid. And he waited silently for his love to come to him...

He felt rather than saw Catherine finally come to stand at his side, looking out into the gathering dusk. Her soft perfume surrounded him, her beguiling warmth touching briefly against his arm.

But the bond they had shared, the glorious, inexplicable connection that had bound them together as two souls both seeking love and acceptance had been broken, dissolved as if it had never been. Now that it had departed Vincent missed it as if a limb had been severed. It had defined him, made him who he was and gave him access and insight into his love's innermost thought and feelings.

Now all he had left was to turn to her and try to decipher her expression, the subtle movements of her body, gauging her thoughts and feelings. But he could not-- *would not*--look at her. He was too ashamed of what he had done, what he had wrought in this place that had been Catherine's sanctuary.

"You're feeling better?" Catherine's softly voiced question cut across his inner torment.

Though there was no longer a bond between them, Vincent could still sense something, some faint undercurrent in those simple words, as if Catherine was asking for more information, probing memories he did not possess. He frowned.

Was she trying to tell him something, without actually saying the words? Had something more happened here that she was loathe to share with him? He wanted to turn and look behind him to the bedroom, where he had just risen from the bed, threading his way to the spot where he now stood, uncertain and unsteady, but finally on his feet.

But the destruction of the bedroom doors had also been his doing. Earlier he had stared at the chaos he'd caused, asking how and why. She had honoured him with the simple truth, saying he was seriously ill and it

was of no consequence, it was just things, and they could be mended. And again his fractured memory drew a blank. *If he had not seen it with his own eyes...*so he kept staring at the spot between his booted feet and did not question what was brutally obvious.

He was a monster indeed, as Paracelsus had always said he was. That same dark creature he had seen in the mirror, a heedless, thoughtless, unfeeling beast that needed to be chained, safe from harming and hurting those he loved. He was not fit for civilised company...he truly needed to go far away from everyone. It broke his great heart, but it needed to be so...

“Yes...” Summoning all his great strength he answered Catherine’s soft question in a broken whisper. He kept his eyes down, slowly shaking his head from side to side in patent agony. Finally... “I’m sorry...” came tumbling unrestrained from his lips. His voice broke on the words.

Catherine reacted immediately. “Oh, Vincent, don’t be sorry...” She reached to rub her hand across his back, making comforting circles against his leather shirt, trying to convey she didn’t care about material things.

They had far more important issues to discuss, but she had no idea where to begin, or even how to begin. It was all so fresh and new, what had happened between them

in her bed beyond the ruined doors, in the sheltering darkness of the night. But her love showed no knowledge of their lovemaking, and she didn't know how to begin. Defeat weighted heavy on her conscience.

In response to her compassion Vincent's great head sank lower, his chin coming to rest on his chest. "It's been my struggle always...now, when I have so much to fight for...I'm losing..."

Catherine moved forward to look up into his down-bent face. Her voice lifted as she replied, "Maybe the worst is over..."

She bit down against the inside of her bottom lip, trying and failing to make the words come, to make her love understand it was all right between them, it would always be all right. She reached out with her heart and mind, feeling for the connection that bound them together, but all she found was silence and blackness. All the colours were gone, the magical bond had fled...

Vincent's breathing fractured as his head sank lower still, as if he couldn't bear to look at her or the destruction he had wrought. "If it's not, I...it's best that I'm Below, I should go back..."

Against everything within him demanding that he run and not look back, Vincent raised his eyes to study Catherine. A silence descended as they stared helplessly at each other.

Finally Catherine nodded, accepting the brutal reality of his words. "It'll be dark soon..." Her voice hitched as she lifted her head to look out at the gathering darkness.

Emboldened by her look of compassion and love, Vincent drew her attention back to him saying, "Catherine..." He shook his head. "I don't know what will happen now..."

Catherine's breath pulled in sharply. She stared at him, trying to drive home her point with the raw emotion that choked her voice. "You must promise me one thing..." she demanded earnestly. "That you will share it with me..." She halted, shaking her head. "Whatever happens, whatever comes..."

Vincent gathered himself, understanding the compassion and deep need of her words, but knowing even Catherine's love and strength could not help him now. He was truly alone once more. He reached out, slinging one arm around her slim shoulders and drawing her close against him.

Despite everything, all that had passed in the last six days, all that he could not remember or understand, he also knew he could not deny her the uncertain comfort of his next words. “Whatever happens, whatever comes...” he paused, and then with his voice breaking he admitted, “Know that I love you...”

Catherine hugged his admission to her, even as she held him close in the red-gold glow of the sunset as they both waited for full night. For the time when her love would leave her once more, and she hoped and prayed one day soon she would have the courage to tell him what had happened in the room behind them. But now was not the time.

She turned away moving on reluctant feet to where Vincent’s cloak lay folded across the couch in the living room. It had been cleaned of the glass shards and Mary’s neat stitching had mended the many holes and tears in the fabric. Catherine lifted it briefly to her face, inhaling the scents of candle smoke and earthy flavours that made this cloak uniquely Vincent’s. She wished he would not leave, *not now...*

She looked up to see him framed in the remnants of her bedroom doors, then he too advanced slowly to accept from her outstretched hands and assume the mantle of his own world. Then, after one long lingering look of

regret and despair, he silently left her world as he had come, through the living room curtains and out into the night beyond. He did not speak, for there was nothing more to say, but long after he had gone Catherine remained staring at the slow moving curtains that masked the gaping hole where her French doors had been.

She knew she needed to return her apartment to some sense of normal and that she needed to call Joe to say she would be back at work on Monday. He had called again this morning, agitated and over-worked, demanding to know where she was and what the hell did she think she was playing at? *If she wanted to keep her job...* was the low-voiced threat from a harassed boss who really didn't mean it.

She sighed, passing a hand over her eyes. She must get her story straight on what had happened here, but still she remained rooted to the same spot, gazing out beyond the curtains and sending her love and prayers after Vincent.

Unconsciously her hand rose to press against the smooth plane of her abdomen. What if she *had* found the courage to tell Vincent about the events of the previous night. Would he have stayed? She knew then she couldn't have risked that.

He had risked everything by coming Above to find her, for now she must let him go back to where he felt safe. But soon, very soon, she knew she must go Below and speak with him, tell him everything. She owed him that much, and after the years they had known each other, surely this heralded a new beginning, a new chapter in their love.

Finally she turned away from the view of the empty balcony and went back to the duties of her own prosaic world...

~ FIN ~

"Love is like the wind, you can't see it but you can feel it."

~ Nicholas Sparks