

Once Upon A Time...

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“Love is that condition in which the happiness of another person is essential to your own.”

~ Robert A. Heinlein

“Are you really sure you’re okay with this, Cathy?” Charles Chandler looked around the open door of his daughter’s bedroom. “It’s getting late. You’ve been in here for hours.”

“Of course, Dad.” Catherine turned from her dressing table mirror to smile at him. “Stop worrying. I’ll be fine. I just needed to make sure I looked my best.”

“And yet, here I am, dragging you to another corporate event, when you’ve just turned sixteen.” Her father shrugged, entering the room. “I would’ve told my old man he’s crazy to even ask. That I had better things to do.”

“It’s fine, Dad, honestly. You needed a companion. This is an important night for you, so where else would I be?”

“Now there’s a question that makes me shudder.” Charles laughed as he came up behind her, laying his hands on her shoulders before bending to place a kiss on the top of her head. “A Saturday night in summer, New York City, and sweet 16 – a terrifyingly volatile mixture. I know I found some new grey hairs when I looked in the shaving mirror this morning.”

“Come on, Dad. You know you can trust me.” Catherine shook her head at his reflection. “I’m not likely to run into trouble with you there to protect me. Besides, going to corporate functions with my father is about as exciting as my life gets right now.”

As she spoke, she lifted a denying shoulder against a rising sense of dissatisfaction. It was an unpalatable truth, but it was still a fact. Even at sixteen, she already knew that any interesting man who wanted to get to know the real Cathy, who did not see

her as just a rich man's daughter, were very few and far between. And there would be none at the party tonight.

"Oh, Cathy, I know..." Charles sighed. "Being my daughter will never be easy for you. Sometimes I wish it could be different. You're still young, but some day, somewhere out there, in that great, big city, is the man for you. I know he'll find you one day, and I hope he makes you as happy as your Mum and I were. I just hope I'm there to see it, to give you away at your wedding."

His mouth compressed with regret. "And if only your mother could have been here to see you, to help you make your way in the world, now that you look so grown up and very beautiful. I know Cathleen would be so proud of you...you look amazing. I have no idea what I did right, but it must have been something."

"Thanks, Dad. I know you've done your best, and I love you for it. I must say you don't look too bad yourself." Catherine smiled mistily as she admired his King Lear costume.

Charles grimaced as he looked down at himself. "I'm still struggling to understand why anyone would want to throw a masked ball themed on Shakespeare's characters. Corporate bonding is apparently the new catch phrase around the office these days. Whatever happened to throwing a good, old-fashioned, meet and greet cocktail party. It was so much simpler." He frowned at his daughter's reflection. "Remind me. Who are you supposed to be again?"

“Rosalind...” Catherine dabbed at her eyes as she tilted her head to study her own image critically. “She’s the heroine in *As You Like It*. I am the beautiful, intelligent daughter of Duke Senior, before I was exiled to the Forest of Arden and forced to disguise myself as a shepherd boy called Ganymede and go around dressed like a man.”

“I knew your expensive education that I slaved day and night to pay for would come in handy one day.” Charles laughed, shaking his head. “But it really does my heart good to see you in a dress for a change.”

“Now don’t go all old-fashioned on me, Dad.” Catherine stood, shaking out the satin and organza skirts of her Elizabethan costume before picking up her mask. “Trousers are cool too.”

“Yes, but only on a man.” Charles spread his hands in bewilderment.

“Oh, Dad...” Catherine turned to press a kiss to his cheek.

“Lighten up a bit. It’s 1974, not 1874.”

“I wish. Men knew what to do with their disobedient daughters back then.” Charles hugged her carefully, not wanting to disturb her extensive preparations. “Shall we go and be fashionably late?” He bowed as he offered her his arm with old world gallantry.

Vincent stood in the shadows of the drainage tunnel entrance to Central Park, testing the warm night wind as it sighed through the trees. A gibbous moon floated lazily overhead, unhindered by clouds. In the distance he could hear music and laughter coming from the Tavern on the Green. No doubt there was yet another party going on, and his curiosity about the world Above often drew him forward to investigate.

He crept closer now, keeping to the fringes and the dark places beneath the trees where he could watch and not be seen. He was well aware of Father's deepening concerns that he should be so bold but, at nineteen, Vincent was still young enough to want to seek out the possibilities for adventure in his endless wanderings, instead of being mindful of the inherent dangers of imminent discovery. His big brother Devin had taught him that.

After a few minutes, the restaurant came into view. The bright lights of the Crystal Room spilled out into the adjacent garden. The doors had been flung wide to the night air, and the place seemed alive with people, all masked and in fancy dress. It appeared as if they were enjoying themselves hugely.

Vincent inched his way forward into a good position from where he could survey the party and contemplate the spectacle. But he wasn't in position for more than a few moments, before he heard someone arguing away to his left.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake. Let me go!” It was a woman’s voice, filled with intense exasperation. “Stop it!”

Vincent growled softly deep in his throat, as his hackles rose. The woman sounded as if she was having trouble with someone. Perhaps she was dealing with the unwanted attentions of a man from the party. Despite his innate sense of caution, Vincent knew he couldn’t just stand by and listen.

He moved forward slowly, treading noiselessly towards the woman’s position. As he walked, he reached back to draw the hood of his cloak up and over his head, secreting his unusual face within the voluminous depths where it couldn’t be readily seen.

The voice came again. “I’ve had enough of you. Oh, *please!* Come on...I want to go back to the party...”

Vincent pushed aside a low tree branch and peered around. The woman’s back was to him, but she was twisting to look down at something before her. He couldn’t immediately see anyone else. He was forced to assume whoever she was arguing with must be on their knees or very short.

“Let me go!” Her voice rose to a new level of exasperation, her hands working at something in front of her, making tugging movements. And then Vincent heard the sound of cloth tearing.

“Oh, help. Now look what you’ve done! This was such an expensive dress. Dad is going to kill me.”

Vincent frowned. He didn’t understand what was happening or the evidence of his eyes. Was her already small attacker also mute? He edged away quietly to the left, coming in from a different angle and, moving into the open, he immediately saw the problem.

The woman’s determined assailant was a rose bush!

He couldn’t stifle the laugh that escaped him then. He ducked his head guiltily, intending to step quickly back out of sight, but he was already too late. The woman’s eyes turned to glare in his direction. Trapped in the moonlight, Vincent stood indecisively, debating the merits of an immediate retreat or daring to step forward and offer his help.

The woman – he assessed her to be quite young, despite the fantastical white mask of lace and ribbons that concealed all the upper part of her face above the generous curve of her mouth – pointed an accusing finger at him.

“It’s all right for you to laugh. Obviously you think my predicament is very funny...” She drew herself up haughtily, staring at him disdainfully. “So I guess you’d rather laugh at me than help. Fine then. I don’t need your help. Go away!”

“I’m sorry.” Vincent shook his head. “It’s just that I have never seen anyone fighting with a rose bush before. And losing.”

“Yes, well, I guess you could say the bush is winning,” the woman agreed tersely, her lips compressing with displeasure. She spread her hands in appeal. “All right. Can you help me, please? I have got to get back to the party before I’m missed. I’ll already be in enough trouble for ruining my dress.”

Vincent stared at her, assessing the risks involved. If he was careful, if he worked quickly, he would soon have her free and he could be on his way. He ignored the echo of Father’s cautioning voice in the back of his mind.

Where is the harm in offering a helping hand?

“All right. I’ll see what I can do.” Vincent approached her cautiously, keeping his face partially averted, his body blocking her view of his unusual hands as he worked at the fabric of her dress carefully, disentangling it slowly from the rose bush’s thorny clutch. The young woman strained to see how he was progressing, but he managed to keep the broad width of his shoulder blocking her line of sight.

“I only stepped outside for a breath of fresh air,” she complained on a ragged sigh. “It’s so hot in there. But my father worries about me; too much sometimes. I’m 16 now, and I’m no longer a child, but he treats me like one. If he can’t see me in there, he’ll

soon come looking. How embarrassing if he catches me like this.” She shifted impatiently. “Just as I was about to go back to the party, a breeze sprang up. It took my dress straight into the bush. I was so mad, I could have screamed.”

“That certainly would have brought your father to your rescue,” Vincent admitted, as he straightened from his task. He glanced at her over his shoulder. “There you are. You’re free at last.”

“Oh, thank you.” The young woman moved quickly away from the offending bush. “But what about you? Did you come from the party too? I know Central Park is not a safe place to be walking alone after dark. You should come back inside with me.”

“I...” Vincent hesitated, as he stepped away from her, still keeping his face averted, his hands tucked into the concealment of his cloak, praying she would not want to stand around making small talk. Hoping her father would soon come looking for her and he could make good his escape.

But on the heels of that fervent wish, he found he enjoyed listening to her speak. She was lovely, like a waking dream, and she possessed a truly beautiful voice, soft and warm, *and he...* He sighed. “I was passing, taking a walk just as you were. I heard you arguing with the bush. I thought you were in serious trouble.”

"I will be when Dad sees the state of this dress." She shook her head, smoothing fretfully at the long, jagged tear in the delicate fabric. "But thank you again for rescuing me. You're certainly dressed for helping a damsel in distress. You look like you should be at the party. Or do you always walk around in such a fancy outfit?"

She indicated his thigh boots, black leather trousers, and the fullness of his concealing cloak. "I mean, under that hood, you could be anyone from the plays. The party back there is a masked ball, themed on Shakespeare. Someone had the bright idea that we should all get dressed up." Her eyes assessed him carefully. "If I were to guess, I would say you're going for Othello, or perhaps, even, my very own Orlando." She passed a graceful hand over the front of her dress. "Tonight, I'm Rosalind."

"Ah, from *As You Like It*." Vincent nodded. "*All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages.*"

Rosalind clapped. "Oh, you do know your Shakespeare. We had to study it at school. I was never very good at remembering all the lines."

"My...father has a passion for the Bard." Vincent edged away. "Really, you must get back to the party before you are missed. I wouldn't wish to be the cause of your getting into more trouble."

“Oh, my father I can handle.” Rosalind waved a hand airily. “He’s way too overprotective, but really a decent man. Tell me more about your father.”

“He...he is a doctor.” Vincent fidgeted, anxious to be gone, but not wanting to leave...not just yet. “He and I, we live together.”

“Oh, just like me and Dad.” Rosalind nodded quickly. “My mother died when I was young. It’s been hard, and I miss her terribly sometimes. I guess that’s why Dad hates to let me out of his sight.”

“I never knew my mother.” The words were out before Vincent could prevent them.

“Oh, now that’s so sad,” Rosalind sympathised, moving towards him, but he stepped further back into the shadows. “You must miss her so much.”

“You should get back to the party. It is not safe for you to be out here...alone.”

“But I’m not alone, I’m with you,” Rosalind argued reasonably.

“You’re not dangerous, are you?” Behind the mask her eyes gleamed with speculation. “Is that why you won’t show me your face? Do you have something to hide? Or are you always this mysterious around a woman?”

“There are many dangers for a young woman alone, here in this city and this park, but no, I am not one of them.”

“Good, then we can still talk.” Rosalind smiled, and then she sighed. “But maybe we should get back to the party. All these dark shadows out here could hide anything. You never know.” She raised an inviting hand towards him. “Would it...is it too bold of me to ask, but would you like to dance with me?”

Vincent’s racing heart nearly stopped. His sharply indrawn breath hissed between his teeth. He’d never danced with anyone before, let alone a lovely young woman.

He shook his head sadly. “I...don’t dance.” He edged further away.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.” Rosalind made a moue. “You look like you should know how to dance. You look, um, oh, I don’t know...” She shook her head in frustration. “Somehow different, not like the men I know.” She grimaced at her own description. “Otherworldly, like...like...” She shrugged her dissatisfaction. “You really puzzle me.”

“Now, see here. This is no longer *funny!*” In the distance, a man’s raised and exasperated voice suddenly cut across their conversation. “Stop playing silly games and come back inside at once! Where are you?”

“Oh, *Lord*. That’s my father.” Rosalind’s hand flew to her lips. “I have to go. Are you coming back with me? I can introduce you to Dad. Supper will be served soon, and we can talk some more about our parents.” She extended her hand towards him once more, beckoning with her fingers.

“No, I cannot come with you.” Vincent stared at her hand for a moment, before retreating further into the darkness, then stopping hesitantly. “Please...” He half raised a detaining hand before quickly removing it from her line of sight. “Tell me your name...before you go...”

“My name...” She inhaled sharply, frowning at him. “But I already have. It’s Rosalind, remember?”

“No, not your character’s name.” Vincent shook his head. “Your own name. Can you tell me what it is...? So I can remember this night...and you...always...”

She took several steps back, watching him carefully, suddenly appearing to be unsure of his question and him. Then she shrugged. “Well, I guess it can’t hurt...” She watched him closely for several more heartbeats and then said, “It’s Catherine.”

“Catherine...” Vincent breathed, more to himself than her. “Thank you. It is a beautiful name.”

“And you...?” She moved back towards him. “What’s your name? You still haven’t told me.”

Vincent hesitated, before retreating deeper into the shadows once more. “Another time perhaps. We may meet again, in the park, on another warm night like this. Perhaps, then, I will tell you my name...”

Fourteen years later...

Catherine fussed with her preparations. She wanted it all to be so perfect. She’d invited Vincent to her apartment for a movie evening, but it was to be an evening with a difference.

After she’d recovered from the loss of her father, Catherine had given herself the task of clearing out his effects from the family summerhouse by the lake before it was sold. It was during this sad task, sorting through the cluttered attic, she stumbled across an old projector and a screen. There was also a trunk full of film reels. Kneeling before the collection, she carefully sorted through them, realising she’d uncovered the history of her own life. It was all here, everything she had thought had been lost years before.

On impulse, she’d set up the projector and screen, quickly losing herself in the bittersweet memories they invoked. But almost immediately her tears began to flow, and she missed half of the

images due to her impaired vision. When the telephone suddenly rang downstairs, she breathed a grateful sigh, glad she was forced to abandon her task. It was only later, when she was getting ready for bed in her old room, that she realised Vincent had never seen photos or anything of her childhood and what a wonderful gift it would be for the two of them to sit together one evening and watch the films.

She readjusted the projector now, straightening the screen once more. She had sent a message Below some hours ago and she expected Vincent to arrive on her balcony very soon. She had been deliberately cryptic in her note, wanting it all to be a secret until she was ready to reveal her discovery.

Besides, she doubted she would get through the whole evening without Vincent beside her, to hold and comfort her, as he had done so very recently, when the memories got too real, too sad, and she'd been forced to seek refuge with him, safe and secure in his unquestioning love.

She glanced through the balcony windows. "It will be dark soon..." She sighed. "This one's for you, Dad. Wherever you are, I pray you and Mum are happy together. I so miss you guys." She smiled sadly. "I wish you both could have met Vincent. You were right, Dad. I did finally meet a man who cares for me alone, for who I am."

Vincent dropped easily over Catherine's balcony wall. The night was closing in around him, bringing a hint of rain from the scudding clouds overhead. He pushed back the concealing hood of his cloak from his hair, turning to inhale the evening air, and all its sounds and scents.

He paused, sensing Catherine's rising sense of sadness over her father's recent death. It rippled through their bond, full of sensations and memories. Grief-stricken and confused, she had come to him, filled with the agony and pain of her father's passing, and he had kept her warm and safe as he comforted her, helped her come to terms with her loss. Now her level of pain was bearable, an abiding sadness that would lessen with time.

He looked again at the note in his hand. Catherine had invited him to a movie evening. It was such an unusual request and it brought a frown to his forehead.

He had no real idea of her taste in movies. He knew he would enjoy anything she liked, but it was still a puzzle he had not quite worked out. And he didn't often enter her apartment, preferring the open air and space of the balcony. He was still hovering uncertainly, when she looked up and saw him through the glass doors.

"Vincent..." Catherine flung the doors wide, running up to him, throwing herself headlong into his arms.

He caught her, holding her close as she mumbled something incoherent into his vest.

“It’s all right; I’m here.” Vincent sighed, gathering her slender body closer against him. Slowly he rocked her from side to side, allowing the warmth of his body to calm her as she burrowed deeper into him.

Finally Catherine turned her face to one side. “I have missed you so much. I know I’ve only been gone a few days.”

“And I have missed you.” Vincent drew back fractionally to look down at her.

“How are you now?”

“I’m doing okay.” Catherine sighed. “I’m taking one day at a time. It was a wrench to let the house go, but I can’t use it now; too many memories. And Joe’s been very good about giving me some more time off work. So, once I got back from the lake, I had an idea for us, for tonight...”

“You know you don’t need an excuse to bring me here.” Vincent held up the note. “You only have to think of me and I will be with you...always...”

“I know, but I thought...” Catherine drew back to clasp his hand between hers. “I thought we might go inside tonight. It’s too cold out here. I thought we could spend the evening together.”

“A movie evening?” Vincent’s questioned with a renewed frown. “I will admit to being intrigued. What are we going to see?”

Catherine wiped a hand across her damp cheeks. “I thought we could do something different. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen a decent movie. And had someone I care about to see it with.”

“Catherine...?” Vincent took her face between his hands. “What are you up to? You are being very mysterious tonight.”

“It’s just a little something I thought you might enjoy...with me. Come on. Please come inside.”

She tugged at his hand insistently, and he allowed her to lead him into the softly-lit warmth of her apartment. She closed the doors behind them and drew the curtains.

“See, I’ve even splashed out on popcorn and soda. I can order pizza if you’re hungry.” Catherine smiled as she took him into her lounge, indicating the array of food on the coffee table. “Sit down here.” She pointed to the couch.

“So what are we seeing tonight?” Vincent did as she asked, looking from the screen to the projector with deepening curiosity.

“I have something special, just for us.” Catherine lit a few candles behind them before switching off the lights and returning to sit beside him, curling her legs beneath her. “You don’t mind, Vincent, do you?”

“Mind...?” Vincent shook his head. “Why should I mind? If you wish to show me something, Catherine, then I am happy to see it. I’ll admit the subject matter interests me. I have no idea of your tastes in movies, but I am prepared to be entertained.”

“Good.” Catherine slid her hands around his arm, laying her head on his shoulder. “Ready to begin?”

“Why all the secrecy?” Vincent raised her chin on the backs of his fingers. “What are you hiding?”

“All right...” Catherine pouted. “I’ll tell you.” She straightened up. “When I was going through Dad’s things the other day, I found a whole trunkful of home movies he’d made. I had thought they were lost years ago.”

“Home movies...?” Vincent questioned. He straightened to stare at her. “Of you?”

“Mainly of me.” Catherine nodded quickly. “Do you want to see them?”

“You know the answer to that.” Vincent cupped her cheek in his palm. “You know how much I have wanted to see something of your life before we met. To know you then.”

“Okay, good.” Catherine reached to switch on the projector. “But you must promise not to laugh. I only managed to look at a couple back at the house. They did make me sad, but, I know some of them are, honestly, a bit embarrassing.”

“I promise,” Vincent avowed in a mock solemn tone. “As long as you don’t laugh before me. Then all promises are off.”

“All right. It’s a deal.”

After a few moments, the screen flickered into life, and they were soon lost in a host of memories. Vincent placed his arm around Catherine’s shoulders, drawing her in close against him as they watched.

“I had forgotten all about that doll,” Catherine said, after some minutes when a Christmas scene unfolded. “I wanted a pony. Dad said we would have to see.”

“A pony in Manhattan would have been difficult to keep.” Vincent kissed her hair.

“I know...Dad said the same thing.” Catherine laughed softly. “But try telling that to a five year old with a mind of her own. My father hated not being able to please me. And I could be wilful when I wanted to be. He once said he should have sued me when I was five, because I always went my own way. Now I can see why.”

The images changed, and Catherine grew up steadily. Vincent held her, comforting her, as she cried softly for her mother, whose beautiful images flickered across the screen before she was gone all too soon. Then it was just Catherine and her father coming to terms with their loss. But time moved inexorably on, and the teenage Catherine began to grow into a beautiful young woman.

All too soon, they were drawing towards the end of the films. Hours had passed, but neither noticed. Dawn was beginning to break beyond the balcony windows. “Well, that certainly was a trip. Last one.” Catherine hugged Vincent before getting up to change the projector to the final reel.

She held up the case. “I don’t know what’s on this one. Dad didn’t label it, and I don’t recognise the box as one of his.” She came back to sit beside Vincent, drawing his arm around her shoulders and kissing the backs of his fingers, one by one, as the reel flickered into life.

“Oh, I remember this...” She gasped suddenly. “This was years ago. I think it was a really strange party some of the guys at Dad’s firm got the idea for. Corporate bonding, I think they called it. We all had to get into fancy dress. We went to the Tavern on the Green that night.”

“I can’t see you anywhere...” Vincent frowned at the images as they flickered across the screen. “What were you wearing?”

“I can’t remember now, it was so long ago. I wonder where Dad got this from...” She laughed as she shook her head. “I guess it was filmed to make some promos for the firm. If I’m in it, I’ll turn it off. I think it was just too awful.”

As she turned, Vincent reached to take her hand away from the projector’s off switch. “No, Catherine, we will see this all through to the end. I am truly curious to see this hideous outfit of yours now.”

“I’m really sure it was awful. Most of them were in those days,” Catherine complained, as she shook her head. “I know it used to take me hours to get ready, and I think I tore the darn thing in the end.” She frowned then nodded. “Yes, I did, and my father didn’t forgive me for days afterwards. If I remember correctly, it cost him a lot of money.”

As she spoke the camera angle panned away from the Tavern’s Crystal Room and took in the night scene outside. The operator

moved forward, leaving the crowded room behind, passing through the open doors and into the garden beyond. In the distance two figures could be seen, standing close together. One was a man, standing in deep shadow and barely visible, the other a young woman in a fanciful Elizabethan dress.

They appeared to be arguing, the woman suddenly extending a hand in appeal towards the man, who replied, then shook his head. He moved deeper into the shadows as the camera zoomed in on them. The woman seemed frustrated as she moved her shoulders, shaking her head as if she disagreed with something her companion said. The man was hooded and mysterious, the woman's face obscured by a fantastical white mask of lace and ribbons...

"Now see here. This is no longer funny!" A man's raised and exasperated voice suddenly shouted, not far from the camera's vantage point. *"Stop playing silly games and come back inside at once! Where are you?"*

The camera angle jumped and suddenly dipped, as if the operator didn't wish to be caught filming the ensuing incident. Then the camera swung quickly back to the party scene. Neither Vincent nor Catherine moved as the screen suddenly flickered to blank and the spool ran out. The silence that ensued was fraught with disbelief.

“I don’t believe it...” Catherine frowned. “That was Dad’s voice; he was calling to me. Now I remember what happened. That was me, in that weird fancy dress with the white mask. I was outside, in the garden...”

Vincent sat forward abruptly. “And your father came looking for you...”

“What did happen that night? I don’t remember meeting anyone in the garden.” Catherine stared at the blank screen. “Well, not that I can think of...and yet, there I am, talking to someone...”

“The rose bush...” Vincent shook his head. “You were fighting with a rose bush...”

“How can you fight with a bush...?” Catherine turned to him, grasping his shoulder. “I mean, it’s all too crazy. What are you trying to say?”

Vincent frowned into the middle distance. “You said you were taking a walk, to get some fresh air, and the bush attacked you. You needed help, my help, to get free.”

“What is this?” Catherine sat up to kneel beside him. “Are you saying we met once, nearly 15 years ago, in the park, at that silly party? Because of a rose bush?”

“Rosalind...” Vincent mused slowly. “You said you were dressed as Rosalind. You thought...you thought I was Othello or your Orlando.”

“That’s right...” Catherine nodded slowly, pressing shocked fingers to her trembling lips. “Oh, Lord, how could I ever forget you? Please, tell me. Did I make a total fool of myself?”

“You were very sweet and direct.” Vincent drew her close against him. “You asked me to dance with you.”

“Oh, help...” Catherine swallowed tightly. “What did you think of me?”

“That you were the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. That, in another life, another world, I would have gone back to the party and danced with you.” He shook his head. “I do not understand this. How could I have forgotten you and that night?”

“Perhaps because it was simply a night out of time, for both of us. I was 16, and I’d been missing my mother dreadfully that summer. Dad thought if he kept me close to him, I would be all right. But my mind was scattered and too full of sad memories. I found it hard to concentrate on anything for long without breaking down.”

She touched his cheek in apology. "Did you...I mean, I seem to remember, when you were leaving, you said you would tell me your name. If we ever met again in the park."

"I did, yes." On an impulse he did not stop to question, Vincent leaned down to scoop Catherine up into his arms, turning to place her across his lap, her arms going around his neck, her lips only a whisper from his own. "I said if we ever met again in the park, on another magical night like that, perhaps then I would tell you my name..."

"I remember now; you asked me my name." Catherine looked deep into his sapphire eyes that gazed so seriously at her. "I wasn't sure if I should tell you. But Dad was coming, and I didn't want the moment to slip away...not so quickly."

"And I didn't want to leave you..." Vincent admitted slowly. "But I could not stay. There were things I could not tell you, or allow you to see. Secrets that were not mine alone."

"I understand that now. Oh, Vincent, do you know how much I love you?" Catherine sighed, leaning closer to place a soft kiss against his mouth. "In that last moment, you looked at me; you saw me. Truly saw me, who I was inside. I had never felt that before. No man had ever looked at me and actually taken the time to truly see me. Does that make any sense?"

“Perfect sense, my love.” Vincent traced the line of her lips with one questing fingertip. “You saw me that night as well. You didn’t run from me. You didn’t question why or how I was there; you simply accepted my presence as part of a magical night. As if we were old friends who just happened to meet in the park. In that moment, you were very young and innocent, but also very old and wise.”

“I think that is a compliment.” Catherine smiled. “If my father had not intruded then...what might have been?”

“Your father loved you and worried for you.” Vincent shook his head. “I had nothing to offer you, Catherine. He would have seen that in an instant and made sure we never saw each other again. He was a good and careful father.”

“But if you were all I wanted...” Catherine’s eyes dropped to his mouth once more. “My father would have understood. I would have made him see sense.”

“Ah, my sweet Catherine.” Vincent shook his head. “It is a pity your father and mine never met. They love us, but both would have stood on the sidelines, worrying and clucking over us like a pair of old hens, giving us no peace. And they would have found themselves in perfect accord. How could a love as impossible and as complicated as ours ever hope to survive?”

“Because we wish it to be so, Vincent.” Catherine laid her head against the broad strength on his shoulder. “Because Rosalind needs her Orlando to keep her safe and warm. To understand and love her, beyond everything.”

“Even in the Forest of Arden?” Vincent drew her closer still. “And from the impending attack of any marauding rose bush?”

“Oh, definitely from all the rose bushes. You never know when one might leap out and attack me again...”

“Of course. Then I will be here, to love and care for you.” Vincent kissed her with lingering tenderness. “Against whatever happens and whatever comes, and all the dangerous rose bushes of this world.”

“Thank you, Vincent.” Catherine laid her hand against his cheek. “And this time, I shall never forget you.”

Vincent smiled. “And I am truly glad I finally was able to tell you my name...one night, deep beneath the park...”

~ FIN ~

*“They say a person needs just three things to be truly
happy in this world: someone to love, something to do,
and something to hope for.”*

~ Tom Bodett