

The First Long Goodbye

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*“Never say goodbye because goodbye means going away,
and going away means forgetting.”*

~ J.M. Barrie

Vincent looked down into Catherine’s caring eyes. He did not wish this moment to end, but knew it must, for both their sakes. But the word of farewell stuck in his throat and he had to force it out. There was so much more to say than a simple, “Good-bye...”

It gusted out of him on a long breath of regret. She had seen what he was, what he could do when roused to terrible anger. *How can she love me? How...?*

Catherine didn't hesitate. "For now..."

She reached for him, throwing her arms around his powerful frame, hugging him close to her with all her might. She had seen his pain, his hesitation. She had witnessed what he was capable of when his anger was aroused, but it did not frighten her. It only made her feel more protective of him, of all that he stood for and all he shielded. His secret world far beneath the city streets...

Again Vincent heaved that long, sorrowful sigh, almost one of disbelief that his love did not shun him, that she could bear to touch him, even now. Behind her back his clawed hand rose to splay across her upper spine, softening their imminent separation. He hugged her against him, everything he could not say evident in his touch.

Slowly, infinitely slowly, they finally drew apart. Turning, they both began to go their separate ways. She to return Above once more, to the light and the open air, while he sank back into the bowels of the earth where he would be safe from hate and harm.

Walking slowly in opposite directions, suddenly they each turned back at the same moment...a held look of infinite longing passed between them before they both looked away, continuing on their respective paths...

Vincent lifted his face to the evening breeze. He breathed it in, right in, all the way down to the bottom of his great lungs. He closed his eyes, savouring the taste of the scent. *There!* His chest expanded mightily with relief. That elusive scent spoke to him on many levels, all beautiful and very dear to him. He thought he had lost her, but there she was, *his Catherine*...walking alone along a deserted street, towards the darkness of an alleyway, where she had no business being.

Vincent frowned. Ripples of sensual awareness moved through the many colours of their bond. Everything she was thinking and feeling echoed to him and through him. Right now Catherine seemed annoyed by someone, or something. Their shared connection hummed with whatever it was that troubled her so deeply.

Vincent had developed the habit of tracking her by using the rooftops whenever she decided to walk alone through the streets, as she had tonight. He'd spent many nights following her closely, making sure she was safe, but from a distance, always from a distance.

He knew she would not thank him for rushing to her rescue when she was not in any immediate danger. She needed to prove herself and he had to allow that. He had often witnessed her newfound confidence, and knew of the work she had put in, spending hours learning self-defence from Isaac Stubbs.

But those same waves of restlessness and distraction had been moving through Catherine for some time now. These confusing emotions were underscored by a troubling sense of longing. Vincent was at a loss to know why. All he could do was watch and wonder.

From a high vantage point tonight, he'd observed Catherine dismissing the cab that had been hailed for her, after her attendance at a Broadway musical with an older couple. They had parted company at the theatre entrance, Catherine holding up her hands, palms out, shaking her head as she backed away, seeming to deny whatever the man was saying to her.

She had obviously decided to walk back to her apartment despite the lateness of the hour, and nothing the older man was saying seemed to convince her otherwise. Vincent watched as she rose onto her toes and kissed the man's lined cheek with deep affection before turning and walking away down the busy night-time sidewalk. She seemed deep in thought. Now and then she glanced towards the rooftops, but she did not see him, because he clung to the shadows out of long habit.

Vincent watched until she walked beyond his vantage point before he followed her path. He now knew her habits intimately, and this was out of character. She should have taken the cab. He had thought Catherine possessed a better survival instinct after what had happened to her. Walking alone down the streets at night was not safe. The crowds leaving the theatre would soon thin out.

Vincent longed to drop down and walk beside her, draw her arm through his and show anyone who cared to look that she belonged to him. But of course he could not do that, because he was sure of nothing. He only knew he wanted to be near to her and this was the only way.

Ever since they had parted company in the upper tunnels, each going their own way, he had visualised this moment when they would meet again. That thought kept him awake and aware at night, driving him to stalk the rooftops in search of her.

Their last encounter had been more than two weeks ago, and he was still no closer to a solution to his immediate problem. He longed to see her again, to talk with her; listen to her voice, so soft and feminine.

It soothed him. Made him think thoughts and dream dreams that were not possible, but still he persisted. He could not do anything else. Father watched and worried, but he said little. But his son knew what the old man was thinking.

Vincent was aware that the easy solution was just to return to Catherine's balcony, of course, yet uncertainty gnawed at his resolve. Was that to be their only meeting place, that tiny vantage point over the unseeing world? What if she had company, another man perhaps? He dared not take the risk of discovery.

So he continued to watch from afar. She was a beautiful woman with many admirers. He had read about her life in the newspapers both

immediately after her attack and then later, when she'd returned to her world. Surely there could be more between the two of them...but what? His broad shoulders lifted with resignation.

"Catherine..." He sighed as he sank slowly onto his haunches, his great hands dangling uselessly between his spread thighs. His cloak arranged itself in a great pool of shadow all around him. Despair marked every line of his face as he lifted it to the moon. A tremendous cry of longing welled up in his throat, but he managed to choke it back until it became a wrenching sob of denial.

Intent on his own troubled thoughts, Vincent didn't notice that Catherine had gotten much farther ahead of him and had disappeared around a bend and into the deserted alleyway. Suddenly there came the sound of a scuffle, a cry, and a body falling.

"Catherine!" Surging to his feet, Vincent took the rooftops in great leaping bounds, throwing himself to the edge without caution or care for his own safety.

Below in the alley, Catherine heard him cry out her name. Startled, she looked up towards the great dark angel hovering on the brink of the roof. Her racing heart leapt with anticipation, even as she asked, "Vincent...? What on earth are you doing up there?"

Kneeling on the broken pavement, she watched as Vincent nimbly traversed the drainpipe beside her, dropping to land in front of her like a great cat. A warning growl swelled in his throat. Like a hunting feline,

he turned, not seeming to notice her as his keen eyes swept the immediate vicinity, seeking something, anything, to attack if it had harmed her. But nothing moved...they were alone...

"I don't understand..." Vincent blinked aside the red rage clouding his vision. "I heard you cry out and then you fell. I thought you were being attacked."

Catherine shrugged. "Well, actually I was." Her soft mouth turned down wryly. "But not by anything you can help me with, Vincent. It's all my own fault. I stepped where I shouldn't have. I wasn't looking where I was going."

She managed to regain her feet, brushing at the dusty marks on her black evening dress with impatient hands. "The heel of my shoe got stuck in the pavement and I tripped." She picked up her fallen evening purse.

She gathered her ruffled composure. She had been scanning the rooftops, looking for any sign of him, and had paid the price for her inattention. But her plan worked...

Now Vincent was finally here, in front of her, she had no clue how to talk to him about the emotional issues burning within her. "Hello, Vincent," she murmured, dismayed at the lengthening silence between them. "Thanks for coming to my rescue."

“You’re welcome.” Vincent’s expression remained solemn and disapproving. “Catherine, you should not be out here alone. It is not safe. You should have accepted that cab.”

“I know.” Catherine jerked a dismissive shoulder. “But we both know I’m not alone, and never have been.” She looked down to where her left shoe was caught between broken pieces of pavement. “These shoes are Gucci. They cost an arm and a leg, and now look at what’s happened, they’re completely ruined.” She shook her head. “I still have to get home. I can’t possibly walk barefoot.”

Vincent stared at her without comprehension. “What are you talking about?”

“I broke my shoe.” Catherine pointed to her left foot. The heel of her elegant dress shoe was firmly wedged, and it now stood at an odd angle to her foot. “I’m stuck,” she observed hopefully. But he didn’t move.

She sighed. “I waited for you, night after night, on my balcony. You chose not to return, to talk to me, face to face.” Catherine shook her head. “I’ve been trying to figure out how we could meet again. I admit this wasn’t what I had in mind, but I’ll take it. I knew I needed to be alone, away from other people. For the rest, well...I just hoped.” Her eyes meet him squarely. “I have missed you so much, Vincent...you didn’t come back to me.”

Her gaze studied him, standing so tall and powerful in the reflected street lighting. She wanted to hug him so badly it ached. He looked completely non-plussed, and it secretly pleased her, as much as it pleased her to devour him with her eyes.

Her plan *had* finally worked. She had dreamed and planned of ways to meet him again. Everything she had tried until now had met with abject failure.

She owed Vincent everything...*everything*. And yet she had not the first clue how to get in touch with him again.

She knew it would have been utterly impossible to try to find him below the city in the maze of tunnels and chambers he inhabited. To even try to rediscover the place where they had parted two weeks ago had been out of the question. She had hoped he would return to her balcony, and she'd waited up night after night. But he never came...

Of course, if he'd been like any other new man in her life, she would have picked up the telephone and dialled his number by now, asked him if there was a problem. She would have suggested coffee or a meal, even a night at the opera. She would have tested the waters in the time-honoured, socially accepted manner, to see if there truly was the chemistry she had hoped for. Every approach she knew and trusted had no place here.

Since she had no idea about the code of the pipes she could not even try to send Vincent a message. She'd been down to her basement

entrance several times and stared at the pipe work in frustration. She'd even given them a few experimental taps, but they had remained stubbornly mute. She did not know how to make them sing.

So, in desperation, she had opted for the only direct approach that had worked in the past. Determinedly leaving behind the cab her father had hailed for her after the musical, she had set out on her own. She had decided to have Vincent rescue her all over again. Nothing dangerous, of course, just a subtle push in the right direction.

After all, at their last parting he had said, *"I'm part of you, Catherine. Just as you're part of me... Wherever you go, wherever I am...I'm with you..."*

When he dropped down she realised he'd been watching her, especially since he knew she'd refused the cab ride. She also guessed he was aware of her feelings, but he was completely unaware of the reason behind them. Emotional turmoil did not offer explanations, just more confusion.

She shook her head now, watching his expression. "You didn't come back to me, Vincent," she repeated softly.

Vincent frowned. "I sensed you waiting on your balcony, but the sensation felt like restlessness, or nervousness, a vague sense of longing. I did not know until this moment. I had no way of knowing until right now, that what you were nervous, restless, and longing for was me. I am sorry." His great shoulders bent despairingly.

“You didn’t know...” Catherine’s lips parted in shock. “Oh, Vincent... aren’t we a prize pair of fools?”

“Yes...” he replied softly, on a long sigh.

It was a revelation for both of them. Vincent knew what she’d been feeling, but not why she’d been feeling that way. She finally grasped the unique concept that he was only now starting to understand that her confusing emotional moods might centre around him, the same way his had been centring on her all along.

Vincent was obviously unused to the feminine way of doing things, the subtleties women employed to get what they wanted. It took Catherine’s breath away. How incredible he must feel right now, knowing she was focussed on him to the exclusion of all others. And she was aware that he thought he was not worthy of her. He had stayed away because of that reason. *That had to change, and soon...*

She looked up at the surrounding rooftops. “I can’t go up there, so you needed to come down here, to me.” She looked down at her ruined shoe. “So I had to find a way to make you. To show you how much I have missed seeing you.”

“You waited...for me?” Vincent’s heart was pounding in his chest. She had been waiting to see him again? Wanting to see him again? “I...had not dared to hope...”

“I just figured that out. Men...” Catherine sighed. “You’re all the same. I should have guessed. You can’t see what’s right in front of you.” She smiled wistfully, before looking down at her trapped foot. “I thought you were different, but so be it. Are you going to help me with this shoe, or not?”

“Of course...” Finally galvanised into action, Vincent sank to one knee beside her.

Putting out a hand, Catherine grasped his shoulder, balancing herself on one foot as he took careful hold of her ankle, deftly removing her foot from the offending shoe. Catherine tried not to shiver with awareness at the brush of his long fingers against her nylon-clad skin. In the next instant she was free. Then her ruined shoe was pulled from its entrapment.

“Perhaps it can be mended...” Vincent held it up to the light, surveying the damage. “Since they were so expensive.”

“No matter, I have others,” Catherine dismissed his concerns blithely. “But I still have to get home with only one shoe. And it’s already late. Do you have any ideas, Vincent?” she asked innocently.

“Ideas?” Vincent puzzled. If he were a braver man, and more sure of his place in her world, he would simply pick her up and carry her back to her apartment. He had carried her before, and she weighed so little. He felt he could carry her forever and never count the cost. *Wherever you go, Catherine, may I go, too?*

“It seems I stand in need of a knight errant,” Catherine persisted. “Do you happen to know of any who might be available at such a late hour?”

Vincent swallowed tightly. “You...I could carry you to your apartment balcony, across the rooftops.” The rash words escaped his control. “It’s not that far...” He pushed her ruined shoe into the pocket of his cloak and waited.

“I think I would like that.” Balancing against him, with her hand still grasping his shoulder, Catherine held out her free arm invitingly, smiling up at him mischievously.

“You planned all of this,” Vincent murmured, without rancour or heat, as he lifted her into his arms and held her high against his chest.

“I confess, Vincent. Guilty as charged.” Catherine nodded, as they set off down the alleyway towards a nearby fire escape that led upwards to the rooftops. “I said to you last time that our parting was only, for now. There is so much more we have to say to each other. Things better said in private.”

She laid her head against his shoulder. “But you did not come to me. I was so afraid I would never see you again. And I wanted to see you so much it hurt. You must teach me how to reach you.”

“I am so sorry, Catherine.” Vincent sighed. “I never imagined it would be so difficult. Whenever I followed you, watching everything you were doing, I was filled with such happiness to be so near to you, and yet so far. But it was also painful to be that close, pain I was willing to endure because it was sweeter than anything I had ever known. At the same time I needed to remind myself that ours is a life that may never be...”

“We won’t know unless we try.” Catherine nodded against his shoulder. “But I too have felt that same pain. Vincent... what are we going to do about it?”

They emerged onto the rooftop, and the lights of the city spread out around them like jewels spilled across a midnight velvet cloth. Vincent looked down into her eyes. “The only thing we can do. We will endure the pain and savour every moment of the joy, as if it was our very last.”

“Yes...” Catherine sighed, turning to look at the view. “I think we must...” She looked up at her love. “Take me home, Vincent, please. And then we will talk.”

Needing no further urging Vincent set off with her held so close in his arms their heartbeats matched as one. At the first leap over the yawning gap between two buildings, Catherine felt herself flying through the air, then suddenly landing safely on the other side. She gasped with the incredible feeling it gave her.

“Frightened?” Vincent asked, not wanting to scare her. “Do you wish me to stop?”

“I don’t think I’m ever going to be afraid, as long as you’re with me,” she answered, certain it was true. “And no, please don’t stop now. This is better than flying.”

She moved closer to him, turning her head against his shoulder so she could watch where they were going. In the distance she could see her own apartment building and the balcony where they would sit and talk about how soon they would meet again...

~FIN~

Love Story

Where do I begin to tell the story

Of how great a love can be

The sweet love story that is older than the sea

The simple truth about the love she brings to me

Where do I start...

With her first hello

She gave new meaning to this empty world of mine

*They'll never be another love, another time
She came into my life and made the living fine...
She fills my heart
She fills my heart with very special things
Angel songs and wild imaginings
She fills my soul with so much love
That anywhere I go I'm never lonely
With her around who could be lonely
I reach for her hand
She's always there...*

~ Andy Williams
