

ENDLESS LOVE

by Mandy Hawthorn

(from CAROUSEL TALES TWO)

Winterfest was going well this year. William had excelled himself with his cooking. With help from Catherine, his very favourite assistant, he had managed to create more than enough food for this special occasion.

Catherine, meanwhile, was with Father, deep in conversation.

"Did you bring your chess set this year, Father?" she smiled.

"Of course," he looked at her affectionately, "you are the only one of my children who allows me to beat them."

"Oh Father," she kissed his cheek and hooked her arm through his, "don't tell Vincent, I think he enjoys teaching me."

"Don't worry my dear, your secret is safe with me," he patted her hand. They had become so much closer over the last few months since her father had died and he had come to love her so much - as if she were his own daughter.

Sensing his thoughts she just smiled, "I love you too, Father."

The look they exchanged was one of sheer adoration, one which Vincent did not miss. He was overjoyed at the way they had become so close. It seemed everything was right now.

Catherine smiled at him as he approached them. They joined hands and he gave her brow a fleeting kiss.

"I see Father that I must take Catherine from you," he put his hand on his heart and gave a mock smile, "Can you forgive me?"

They both laughed, Catherine and Father, "Oh, I think just this once."

"I'll see you later, Father," Catherine smiled.

He just nodded happily and wandered off in Peter's direction.

"Well now, Vincent," Catherine put her arms around his waist and looked up longingly into his eyes. "It's been a whole hour since you last kissed me and I will go quite mad if you don't kiss me now."

Vincent was taken aback, they had never kissed in public before. He was pondering on his next action when Catherine suddenly pulled his head down to hers.

"I love you."

He needed no further prompting and gently pressed his lips to hers. It was a beautiful loving kiss, one which was not missed by anyone.

There was lots of elbow nudging and giggling from the children. Everyone but Samantha thought this loving action by Vincent and Catherine was sloppy. She somehow felt different from before, she no longer enjoyed the company of the younger children and she was somewhat overwhelmed by this and she felt quite scared.

Catherine was enjoying herself immensely. She protectively put an arm around Vincent's waist, "Was that so hard?"

"Oh Catherine," he sighed into her hair, "All I want to do is whisk you off to my chamber. I don't know how long I can control myself."

"Me neither," she sighed as she laid against him, resting her head with gently on his chest.

Kissing the top of her head he whispered into her hair, "Stay tonight?"

"You just try and stop me!"

Father stood with Peter and Mary. They had watched the loving exchange between Catherine and Vincent.

"She is a marvel," Mary smiled. "Look at the way she looks at him."

Peter too, had a lump in his throat, "Her father would have been so proud, you know. He was a good man."

"I only know how proud I am of her, of both of them," Father spoke with such an affection that both Peter and Mary looked at him. "Catherine is a very big part of us now."

"That she is," Mary patted his back, "If you'll both excuse me, I'll go and see to the children."

"Of course," both men chorused as Mary left them.

"Well now Peter, how about that game of chess?"

Peter laughed out loud, "Well, if you insist but, I promise you, I will show no mercy."

"We'll see," Father smiled with a twinkle in his eye. Both men sat at the table to set up their pieces.

Catherine still stood with Vincent as they watched the happy community enjoying the festivities. It was young Samantha who finally interrupted them.

"Catherine, can I talk to you, please?"

Catherine smiled down at Samantha, her eyes seemed to be full of tears about to suddenly spill over.

"What on earth's the matter, sweetheart?" It was Catherine's voice that caused Vincent's concern. He, too, looked down into Samantha's troubled face.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I need to talk to Catherine," Samantha said simply, "Please?"

Catherine nodded, then smiled. "Girl talk?"

"Yes, girl talk," the youngster nodded.

Catherine took Samantha's hand then looked at Vincent, "I won't be long. I'm afraid this is strictly girls only."

Vincent touched her cheek tenderly, "I will be with Father if you need me."

She smiled in Father's direction. "I think Father will need you first." They both laughed as Father sat opposite Peter, rubbing his brow.

"I see what you mean," he laughed, "I had better rescue him," with a last fleeting kiss, they parted.

"I'm sorry I interrupted you," Samantha sighed.

"Hey," Catherine lifted her young friend's chin to face her, "When we see how troubled you are, you are all that matters."

It was then that the tears that had threatened to overflow suddenly did. Catherine instantly held her, "Come on," she soothed, "let's go and find a quiet spot."

Mary had witnessed the incident and was there immediately. "What's wrong?"

"I think we have a rapidly growing young woman, who needs a long talk."

Cathy knew exactly how Samantha was feeling, but she also knew that Mary would feel a little left out. "I think we may need you on this one."

Mary squeezed her hand and smiled at them both. "You two have a good long talk and I'll come and see you later."

"Thank you," Catherine smiled. She knew that Mary would rather she talked to Samantha, as the child would probably listen to a younger woman. Knowing Samantha, she would probably feel that Mary had never been through what she was feeling right now. They found a bench a little away from the music and sat down. Catherine waited patiently for Samantha to start talking.

"I feel so angry all of the time," she blurted out. "Geoffrey wants to play stupid games and I don't like games anymore. I don't fit in anymore."

"You know," Catherine held her hands, "what you are feeling is natural. I felt like you do and I can bet that Mary did too."

"It feels awful," Samantha sighed, "I feel like ... oh I don't know how I feel."

"I do," Catherine smiled reassuringly. "You feel as if the whole world is moving but you are rooted to one spot and you're watching everyone pass by."

"That's it," Samantha jumped up. "That's exactly it."

"You also are starting to notice boys and the reason you don't enjoy Geoffrey's company is because you are outgrowing him. Believe me, Samantha, it is one of the hardest times in your life, but," she smiled, "it is also one of the most wonderful times."

"I feel as if I'm not alone anymore," the young girl smiled. "Thank you, Catherine."

Catherine hugged her warmly and watched her run back to the festivities. It only seemed like yesterday when she had felt all these confusing feelings. Sighing, she stood up and walked over to find Vincent standing beside Father, who was losing badly to Peter.

Vincent held his arm out to her as she approached. She laid against him as his arms engulfed her. "Is everything all right with Samantha?"

She smiled and looked up at him. "She's growing up."

Vincent smiled and nodded slightly. "Yes, she is."

The children and some of the Helpers had decided to call it a night. The Great Hall, which an hour earlier was full of people, was now only hosting a selected few.

Catherine was helping William clear away the remaining food, while Vincent and Pascal cleared the hall.

Mary and Father were discussing the evening's events with Peter. They all agreed this year had been the best Winterfest of all.

Finally after the Great Hall was once more in darkness, everyone headed up for Father's chamber.

"I'll walk you out, Catherine," Peter had said.

Vincent jumped to Catherine's side, "I am afraid you will have to walk up alone, Peter. Catherine will be staying Below tonight."

Mary smiled happily, "I'll make up the guest chamber."

"There is no need, Mary," Vincent spoke, "Catherine will be staying with me, in my chamber."

Everyone looked surprised except Father, he just nodded, chuckling to himself. He turned to Peter. "Well then Peter, I will walk you out, I want to set a date for our rematch!"

"Really Jacob," Peter laughed, "haven't you suffered enough?"

"I'm sure I will beat you," he sighed, "one day." The two men erupted into laughter.

Mary turned to leave.

"Mary," Catherine called.

"Yes, Catherine?"

"Thank you for a wonderful evening," she walked up to her and kissed her cheek "And don't look so worried, we love each other and we need to be together."

Mary smiled and patted her hand. "I know you do and I am very happy for you both. I just don't remember how Vincent grew up so fast."

Catherine laughed. "I'm sure that's what every mother says."

"Yes, I'm sure it is."

"I think Samantha would appreciate a visit tonight, Mary."

"Yes, I think I'll go and see her now," she kissed Catherine's cheek, "Good night dear, good night Vincent."

"Sleep well, Mary," Vincent called back.

When she had gone, Catherine put her arms around Vincent. "It's funny, I don't feel the slightest bit tired now," she had a devilish gleam in her eyes. "Come on, I'll race you back to your chamber."

She removed her shoes and was gone. Vincent couldn't believe the change in her, although he wasn't going to question it. Standing up, he raced after her, catching her and drawing her into a night of passion.

END