

THE ROAD TO FRIENDSHIP

by Rhonda Collins

(from PHOENIX ONE)

Diana brushed her hair and carefully braided it, staring ruefully into the mirror. *Didn't sleep well again last night... it's obvious. Wonder if he'll notice?* She sighed. The dreams were coming more and more often now, the dreams of Catherine... always Catherine... sometimes Jacob... but mostly Catherine and Gabriel.

Her eyes blurred with tears and she dashed them away angrily... reaching for her makeup. *Darned if I'll let him see me crying. He has enough on his plate.*

A week ago had been Jacob's naming ceremony and he had shown her his world. It was such an amazing place... like a fairy tale come true... just like him. Closing her eyes, she pictured him, with his fantastic mane of chestnut hair framing that gentle face. The imagined eyes opened, and she was lost in the depths.

Shaking herself, the dream becoming more real than the reality of her loft, she dug under the bed for her boots. She needed to be ready when he got here.

She'd talked him into coming tonight to stargaze through her telescope. She felt as though it were quite a victory; pulling him out of the doldrums had become her mission in life - something that her state of being quite literally depended on. If he felt happy, she felt happy. If he felt grief over Catherine, she felt it as well. When he dreamed... she dreamed with him. *I've tried to stay out.... not intrude... but I wonder if he knows?*

She surveyed her image in the small mirror on her battered dressing table. *Satisfactory. Nothing special, but it will have to do.* As she walked out of the bedroom she heard a soft tapping at the window and pulled the curtain. As Vincent peered down at her through the high windows, she nodded, then climbed the stairs to the roof.

As always, she was speechless the moment she came into his presence... like a lovestruck teenager. He rarely touched her. *(Just as well: his empathic sense would blow how I feel about him... and he'd be gone like a shot.)* Most of the time she was able to block: she'd learned that long ago. Now there was nothing in, nothing out, unless she wanted to receive impressions or send them. *(Damn it, except with him.)* Nothing could keep out the impressions she received from this man. In close proximity, at a distance, it didn't matter. That was something she'd never done before... just like his bond with Catherine. But this time she was receiving, not he. On the contrary, he seemed totally oblivious to her. He stood facing away, looking at the lights of the city.

His incredible voice came almost as a shock when he finally spoke. "There are so many lights. Are you sure we will be able to see anything at all?"

Clearing her throat, glad to have been given an opening, something to talk about, she said, "Perhaps not as clearly as I'd like to show you, but some things we can see."

She set up the telescope first for the moon, which was at half-phase. After she had it in focus, she

explained to him how to use it and stepped back.

As he bent to look through the telescope, Diana stepped back, just admiring him... and itching to touch him... to hold him and tell him that there was still life and magic out there; to awaken him from one dream and lead him to another. But she knew it wasn't time.

As Vincent examined the moon through the telescope, he told her a story of his childhood, about someone named Devin (*his brother?*) who had shown him the moon for the first time. As she listened, she let the sound of his voice wash over her, lulling from her the tension of the day, of her case... of Joe's and the Commissioner's anxiety and frustration over their lack of progress. She was not even listening to the words, only the rhythm, the *emotion* of the words... leaning into the strength and gentleness as best she could and trying desperately not to reach out and grab him.

He was becoming a lifeline to sanity for her. And though she'd tried to avoid it, there was nothing she could do about it. So she'd decided to quit fighting it and live with the joy and the misery the bond gave her; and at the same time, try her damndest to keep her feelings from him and let him heal.

She thought about how little she knew about this man, and how much she wanted to know. And yet about what mattered, she knew him as she'd never known anyone else.

His voice startled her when the tone changed and he said her name: "Diana - Are you all right?" He reached out to touch her, automatically seeking touch for his empathic sense, knowing that what he felt would always be more true than whatever anyone would say. But she moved back out of reach, avoiding the touch.

Smiling at him cheerfully, she only commented, "I'm fine. Did you try for Venus? Sometimes I can see it quite well if it is in position." She tried for him, but was unsuccessful. There was just too much light tonight. "Maybe we can try again when there's no moon." She leaned back against the wall and watched the moonlight on his face. She hugged herself, "Getting a little cool. Would you come downstairs for awhile? I'd really enjoy the company. I had a rotten day."

Vincent hesitated a moment... but only a moment. She wondered about that hesitation.

He smiled briefly. "Yes. I think I would enjoy that."

He followed her down the stairs - still hesitant, but less so with every moment. After all, it wasn't as though the place were strange to him.

"Sit down. Would you like some coffee? Hot chocolate?"

The intense look on his face almost made her laugh – as though she'd offered him such a difficult decision. "Hot chocolate... please."

As she was fixing the chocolate she watched him, as restless, he could not remain sitting, but wandered the apartment. His hesitation was lessening with every step, and his curiosity was almost palpable. He went first to her bookshelf to read the titles: mostly science fiction and mysteries, and her textbooks from college.

Her high school yearbook sat on the shelf and he glanced at her before picking it up, asking, "May I?"

She shrugged permission and brought in the chocolate. He stood leafing through the book. When he found her picture, he smiled. "You appear to be extremely uncomfortable. It is a good picture."

When he saw she'd brought the chocolate, he returned the book to the shelf and came to join her on the couch. When she handed him the cup, his hand brushed hers. He looked puzzled a moment, as if something bothered him, but when he looked up, he smiled. "Thank you. I have not had hot chocolate in awhile." He glanced down and chuckled. "Especially with so many marshmallows."

She started to get up. "Too many?"

"No – no. It's fine. You are very... generous."

He was laughing at her, she could tell, though his face was serious. *That's okay, too. Anything that makes him happy is fine with me.* He seemed very much at peace tonight, and she wondered why. He even had marshmallow on his lip and reached up unselfconsciously to wipe it away.

"You seem pleased with yourself tonight. Any special reason?"

Vincent leaned back, resting his right arm on the back of the couch, holding the cup with his left. He smiled at her in that quiet way he had, that conveyed so much. Perhaps it was just that the eyes smiled more than the mouth... something.

"Jacob sat up by himself today. Just a moment, but he was so pleased with himself." He shook his head musingly. "It is strange, Diana. Jacob eases the pain... and intensifies it as well. But every time I see him, I see Catherine. And it is as though she is with me; that she never left and none of the... evil ever happened. The bond I share with him also speaks to me of Catherine. So, sometimes I can remember the love and the joy... without the pain." He looked at her questioningly, "Do you understand?"

Her eyes met his and she smiled. "Yes. She will never be gone from you Vincent. Try to remember the joy and revel in the sheer wonder that Jacob will bring to your life. Catherine would like that, I think."

"Thank you, Diana – for everything. Just for being here. Father, everyone Below... they love me, and they love Jacob; but they do not really understand. Father does... in a way – he too, lost the woman he loved. But no one can understand how it was when I lost the connection. The bond. Then, to have her die like that... right after finally finding her ..."

She could feel the desperate grief beginning again, and was equally desperate to head it off. "I understand." Then, thinking perhaps she had said too much -- or not enough -- she stammered, "At least I think I do. But remember, Vincent: the bond did not die. And neither did the love. You have Jacob. He is a living reminder of that love. And the bond is a continuation... just as he himself is."

Vincent reached out to touch her face -- and she drew back. He looked stricken. She caught his hand impulsively, blurting, "No, Vincent. It's not what you think. I just don't like to be touched. By anyone. It's just an... idiosyncrasy, I suppose. A reflex. It's not you... it's everyone."

Looking at their clasped hands, Vincent said slowly, "It's strange."

"What is?" Diana responded nervously.

"I am accustomed to get stronger impressions of people through touch. But now, there's nothing. Only a fuzzy blankness."

"That's me," she agreed, grinning brightly. "A kind of fuzzy blankness. Some people got it, some people don't, I guess."

He went on, "You are very wise, Diana. Concerning Jacob. If I might, I would like to visit you again... if it would not be an imposition."

Diana's heart leapt to her throat. *Imposition? you crazy, crazy, man!* But aloud, she said simply, "Anytime. Friends are always welcome. Some friends in particular." She was still holding both her block and his hand. She couldn't drop the one in order to hold the other. The lack of emotion he felt in her stemmed from that. But as long as she kept her block in place, she could hold his hand a little longer... and she was reluctant to release him. The hair on the back of his hand was long and silky

and the texture of his palms rough. She resisted her desire to explore the nails, knowing that would upset him; but they, too, were beautiful to her.

Vincent squeezed her hand softly, then released her. And she looked up to meet eyes so blue and deep you could dive into them like a pool. He smiled. "I must go. Jacob is waiting for me. But thank you, Diana, for your hospitality... and your friendship. I do not know what I would have done without you these past months. You have been... more than a friend. A great blessing."

She stood and wiped her hands on her slacks, then smiled somewhat sheepishly. "No one ever considered me a blessing before. You're quite welcome for everything, Vincent." Still holding her block tightly, she touched his face softly. "You *will* come back, won't you? You're welcome anytime."

Collecting both cups, Vincent took them to her sink and rinsed them. Then he stood a minute, leaning on the sink, as though thinking. In a puzzled voice, he commented, "I'm comfortable here. Comfortable with you. You're... quiet."

"The fuzzy blankness," she suggested, grinning, and he glanced around at her.

"Perhaps. Others feel so strongly that I have no wish to touch them. But..." As if suddenly aware of what he was saying, he faced her fully and let the silence be its own comment.

He reminded Diana for all the world of a teenager on his first date... not sure whether to kiss the girl or run. To spare him either confessions or denials, Diana said, "Thank you for coming, Vincent. Please come again."

He nodded, obviously relieved to have the awkward moment past. "I will. Soon. And thank you again."

He disappeared through the roof door. Diana allowed her block to drop. At once, when she allowed her mind to be open, she could feel him. He was never far away. Temporarily, he was at peace. She could feel that and was glad that she had, in some small way, helped to bring that about. Perhaps they could both sleep tonight. She walked over to her computer and booted it up, then sat and pulled up her journal.

He came tonight, just as the note said he would. He says he will come again. I think my being here is helping just a little. He doesn't understand me, that's obvious; and his inability to "feel" me when I'm blocked puzzles him. But it relieves him as well. He needs someplace safe to go to, to get away from emotion right now. I can certainly understand that. His need... his love for Catherine... runs so deep – like a sad, sweet river. He's finding it difficult to pull himself away, to get on with the normal, everyday motions that make up life. He's finding himself leaning toward Jacob and drawing on their bond more and more. It's good that he has him... but that cannot be all he has. I won't let it be.

Diana re-read the entry, saved it, exited the program and switched off, then went to bed.

After stopping by the nursery and picking up Jacob, Vincent walked slowly towards his own chamber, feeling Jacob snuggle into his shoulder as the baby fell asleep. He touched Jacob's sleeping mind and smiled. *Such sweet innocence.* He tucked the baby into the crib next to his own bed, then settled down at his desk to write in his journal.

I went to visit with Diana tonight. She is very unusual; she is a calming presence for me. With everyone else I am bombarded by their sympathy. I feel Father's irritation that I am not now "returning to normal"... whatever that is supposed to be. I suppose I have disrupted everyone's lives for a very long time now, and have been very self-involved. But... with Diana it is different, somehow. She asks nothing... and gives me her friendship... offering a gift of peace while I am with her. With her I can talk of anything... or even not talk--not say anything – and she seems to understand. Whatever she says always seems correct.

He sighed deeply, closed his journal, and began pulling off his numerous layers of clothing to go to bed. When his head hit the pillow, his exhaustion overtook him and he slept... not quite dreamlessly, but at least without pain.

Above, Diana was dreaming as well. She walked with Vincent in the dream, but she knew he didn't see her as herself, but only as Catherine. That would hurt, later... when she woke... but for now that didn't matter. She would be whatever he wished for her to be. Whatever gave him peace. Right now, that was all that mattered.

END