

Help Me Make It Through the Night

by Avril Bowles

Catherine's mood was lighthearted. After months of waiting, she and Jenny had finally managed to get tickets for 'CATS' and after the show they'd discussed the performance at length over a meal at a nearby restaurant. The two women shared a cab home and parted with the familiar, well-worn promise that next time they wouldn't leave it so long before getting together.

As the cab drove on with Catherine as its sole occupant, she couldn't help smiling to herself. She always enjoyed Jenny's company and wished their respective professions allowed them to see more of each other. Their occasional theatre trips and dinners always heightened her awareness of just how much she had given up when her path had crossed with Vincent's. Not that she would change that part of her life. Nothing was as important as him; he was worth everything. It was just that sometimes it felt so good to actually go out and mix with people on a social level again. No matter how hard she tried to disguise it, Vincent knew how much she enjoyed herself on those occasions, and it inevitably caused him pain that she wasn't living the life a part of him wanted for her.

His distress at those times provided yet another challenge for Catherine; to convince him that he was worth every sacrifice their relationship demanded of her; that she'd prefer never to see daylight again than lose him to an eternal round of social engagements. She smiled mischievously. While she hated to cause him distress of any kind, nothing gave her greater pleasure than to reassure him at those times, both emotionally and physically. Even in her present effervescent mood she experienced a sharp twinge of sadness that she wouldn't see him tonight.

As Catherine paid the driver and crossed the sidewalk to her apartment, she absently hummed one of the numbers from the show, her regret at the evening she was leaving behind her meeting the warm tingle as she imagined the next.... which she would spend with Vincent.

Suddenly.... a hand was clamped over her mouth and she was dragged backwards into an alley beside the apartment building. Unable to scream, she twisted and turned furiously against the iron grip which held her around the waist while another arm yanked her head back roughly until a hot, fetid breath spread its vile warmth across her face.

"Wha' ya go for me then, baby?" The male voice was thick and reedy, of indeterminate nationality. "Pretty little lady like you gotta have money. Bet ya got some other goodies too, huh?"

Catherine's anger blazed, battling for superiority over terror. She managed to deliver a vicious kick to the man's shin with the steel tip of her high-heeled shoe, and heard him curse. Using the moment to wriggle out of his grip she swung her purse at his head, but he was too quick for her and, ducking underneath it, reached for her again. This time slamming her against his body, so it was with a sick realization that she felt his desire for her and his intention to satisfy it.

"Oh, I like the ones that fight," he jeered in a voice that made Catherine's skin crawl. "It's a lot more fun that way.... and they usually do."

"Yeah, they would," she sputtered. He smothered her yell for help with a sweating hand, his dirty fingernails cutting into her cheek, and she tried desperately to bite it. Catherine steeled herself against the nausea

which beckoned as his other hand ripped open her blouse and groped inside, before moving downwards to slide underneath her skirt. Her attacker was a big man and despite all her training from Isaac, and although she fought like a wildcat, Catherine seemed unable to maneuver herself into a position to really hurt him. When she finally managed to sink her teeth into the soft, fleshy part of his right hand, he yelled in pain and hurled her from him, smashing his fist into her face in rage.

"Goddamned motherfuckin; bitch!" he hissed. "I'm gonna teach you some respect!" Yanking off his plastic belt, he advanced toward her.

Vincent had been sorting through some books he would need for the literature appreciation class the next day. They had finished their latest project, and he had asked the children if they had any preference as to the next one. Some of their suggestions had caused him to raise an amused eyebrow, not completely wasting his time in trying to bring the classics to the often streetwise tunnel youngsters of today.

It was as his hand closed around a copy of *'A Midsummer Night's Dream'* that he felt Catherine. Felt her panic and terror travel through the bond and trickle into his heart, as clearly as if it were himself under attack.

Dropping the book he snatched up his cloak and ran from the chamber, the lesson forgotten. Enroute he passed several people who recognized his thunderous expression as that seen many times in the last two and a half years and knew better than to try and detain him.... for any reason.

Onward and upward he ran, his suede leather-soled boots making little sound for a man of his size, so swift and lithe were his movements. He raced through the amber-hued passageways, leapt across the stream and took the Spiral staircase two steps at a time, so desperate was he to reach Catherine in to time prevent one of the most violent and depraved criminal acts being visited upon her; because Vincent knew exactly what her attacker was about to do, and the thought of his beloved being violated in such a manner drove every other thought from his mind. His lip curled in a snarl as the dark being, which Vincent fought so hard to keep buried deep inside him, began to claw its way to the surface.

The blow had dazed Catherine, but as the man covered her with his body and began his assault in earnest, her head cleared and she fought with every ounce of strength she possessed. It was as she battled with renewed desperation, to bring her knee up into his crotch that she heard the sound she had come to welcome and dread at the same time. *'Vincent!'*

Suddenly, her attacker was lifted bodily from her *'almost'*, Catherine thought, *'as if by divine intervention'* as he appeared to rise in one fluid movement, his face a mask of amazement. But the intervention was Vincent, as, with a blood-curdling roar he hurled the other man across the alley, as if he were no heavier than a rag doll.

"What the hell....!" Scrambling to his feet, the man shook his head, as if he couldn't believe what had happened. Then his face twisted in terror as Vincent's hood fell around his shoulders, and he was forced to confront his executioner. Vincent roared again and brought his left arm across and downwards, slashing clothing and ripping flesh; apparently oblivious to everything, but the need to protect his love. Three more times his arm went back and descended on his victim until all that remained of Catherine's attacker was a bloodied, crumpled heap beside the trash cans.

Catherine hauled herself to her feet and ran to Vincent, clutching at him in an attempt to break through to the precious, gentle, human Vincent which, for the moment had been eclipsed by his dark, bestial side.

"Vincent! Vincent, stop, *'please!'* Vincent, listen to me.... it's over! It's all over. Let it go."

Gradually, her voice penetrated his brain and he staggered backwards, flattening himself against the wall as the red mist receded and his features once again became recognizable as the man she loved, knowing the world was settling around him again in its usual night time colours. Now there would be another battle, fought even harder than the first, because this time Vincent would be fighting with himself, and Catherine knew how great the toll would be on him.

He glanced towards the broken body of the dead man and turned his head away, drawing air into his lungs through clenched teeth. He pressed his head back against the wall of the alley and closed his eyes, the powerful chest heaving - Catherine knew - with the usual mixture of emotions of these times; relief that it was done and she was safe, self-disgust at his lack of control, and horror at the sight of what the dark being was capable of.

Catherine knew she had to let him get a grip on himself again before trying to talk. She stood beside him in silent support, rubbing his arms gently, trying to soothe him. It seemed to be taking longer than usual. She looked around anxiously. They couldn't stay here for much longer. Someone would have heard Vincent's roars and the man's screams. Thank God for frightened New Yorkers; the all too *'human'* general public who never interfered in something that was none of their business. The irony shook Catherine. The very people who would make sure he never returned Below alive, once caught, were the ones who protected him now, if they only knew it. She shook her head in sad defeat.

Then another thought occurred to her. *'They might not come out of their apartments to investigate, but someone would sure as hell pick up the phone. Ready or not, Vincent had to be persuaded to move.'*

"Vincent, we must leave," she urged, tugging at his arm. He gave a huge, shuddering breath and pushed himself away from the wall.

"Yes. I must go back." He looked at her properly for the first time. "Your face, Catherine.... you are hurt. What else did he do to you?" He touched her swollen cheek with one finger.

"Nothing, really, I'm okay. Come with me, Vincent, please?" He shook his head emphatically.

"No! I must return home."

"Please don't. I know you, Vincent. I know what you're going through. Let me help you.... I don't want you going away like this!"

"I must. You should not be with me, Catherine.... no one should. I cannot even bear to be with myself!" He turned to leave but Catherine hung on to him with all her might.

"I *'want'* to be with you, Vincent; and you're wrong.... you *'should'* be with me. I know what you're feeling and it's because of me. I won't let you go. *'Please, please'* come home with me. It'll be okay, I promise." She could see the indecision in his face; the self-hatred fighting the need to feel her love during one of his darker moments.

"Please, Vincent?" He walked away a few steps, turned and appeared to come to a decision.

"All right, Catherine. If that is what you wish." She sagged against him in relief.

"I'll see you on the balcony."

Even as she raced into the building and rode the elevator up to her floor, she half-expected he would change his mind. But as she closed the door behind her and ran to the French windows, he was there and her heart lurched at the look on his face in the pale moonlight.

"Come," she implored, taking his hand and drawing him into the room. She turned to shut out the rest of the world before switching on a gentle light in the room. Catherine watched Vincent worriedly. He paced around the room for a few seconds and then stood still, covering his face with his hands. She went to him

then, and tried to hold him but he stepped back, refusing to look at her.

"Do not touch me, Catherine. I should not have come here. I should be Below."

"No. You should be with me.... you need me.... as I need you. Let me help you, Vincent."

He whirled away again and resumed his prowling around the room. Catherine was worried. It had been months since he had found it necessary to use his hands the way he had tonight, but she remembered only too well how it affected him. To lose the battle he constantly waged with his dark side, damaged him emotionally; chipped away at his fragile self-esteem each time it happened.

As he turned towards her, she stepped in front of him and before he could stop her, slipped her arms around his waist. She held him tightly, concerned that his breathing was still coming in ragged gasps. Glancing up at him, the pain etched on his face was like a knife in her own heart.

"Vincent, you *'must'* try and relax. You did what you had to do. That man wasn't fit to live, he...."

"*'Every'* man has a right to live! *'I'* did not have the right to take his life."

"And if he *'had'* raped me? As he certainly would have done if you hadn't arrived when you did...."

Vincent closed his eyes and twisted his head from side to side as if trying desperately to deny the facts.

Catherine realized she had been careless in her choice of words. She was anxious now to find some way to soothe him.

"Sit down, Vincent, please. You're doing yourself no good like this." She reached up to unfasten his cloak but he stayed her hand.

"I do not trust myself to stay, Catherine.... not the way I feel."

"How *'do'* you feel?"

He turned his head away as if he could not bear to have her look at him. "As if I am not yet myself.... as if it.... that.... other part of me is still there, waiting. Catherine, I am afraid it may return."

"It won't. Not while you're with me. Trust me, Vincent."

"How can you even *'look'* at me?"

"Because I *'love'* you! Because you saved my life. Because you're the most wonderful, gentle, compassionate man I've ever known!"

"*'Man!'*" he spat. "What *'man'* behaves like I did? I am something else, Catherine. Something that has never been.... something that never *'should'* have been."

"Don't talk like that! Don't you know how much it hurts me to hear you say things like that!"

Somehow that seemed to get through to him. He looked down at her and his expression softened slightly.

"I'm begging you, Vincent. Please, don't go. I promise, I'll help you come to terms with this." This time when she stretched her arms to take his cloak he let her, and she pulled it from his shoulders.

"Come with me, Vincent." Taking his arm, she led him into the bathroom. She ran some water, helped him off with his leather jerkin and rolled his sleeves up to his elbows. Then, slowly she lowered his hands to the basin. She heard him catch his breath as the water turned pink with dried blood. He closed his eyes, and she pulled the plug, holding his hands under the running tap so that the cold, clear water splashed over his hands and wrists. Catherine rubbed them gently, erasing the physical signs of what had happened. Erasing the emotional ones would be much harder. She rubbed wet hands up his forearms, smoothing the hair downwards and squeezing his fingers gently. After a few moments she turned off the tap and dried his hands with a fluffy towel. It was not until then that he opened his eyes again.

"Would you like to wash your face, Vincent?"

"Yes.... please."

"Would you rather I left?"

He shrugged, uncaring, so she stayed. He bent over the basin and splashed water on his face, rubbing his hands over his forehead and down his neck. He straightened and Catherine watched droplets of water trickle down his golden-haired cheeks while others traveled down his neck and transformed themselves into little circles of moisture as they came into contact with ecru muslin. Her fingers twitched, but he preempted her, snatching open the first two laces of his shirt.

She handed him a facecloth, and he moistened it with cold water, pushing it beneath his hair at the back before closing his eyes, tilting back his head and holding it against his throat and moving downwards inside the neck of his shirt. He was completely oblivious to the effect his actions were having on Catherine and, ashamed of the way her heart had begun to hammer in her chest, she handed Vincent a towel, unable to take her eyes off him as he dried himself. He dropped the towel on the side of the bath and leaned forward for a moment, bracing his arms on the edges of the basin. As he raised his head, he caught sight of himself in the mirror and Catherine held her breath. Knowing he saw something entirely different than she did when she looked at him, but he merely turned away and picked up his jerkin.

She took his hand and led him, unprotesting, into the bedroom. It was almost as if he didn't know what he was doing any more. As if he was with her in body but that his mind was somewhere far away. They stood beside the bed and Catherine slipped her arms around him. His breathing had slowed a little but his heart still pounded alarmingly and she laid her hand over the sound, stroking him soothingly. He took a deep breath then and bowed his head.

"What is it, Vincent?"

"I find I am very tired, Catherine. I should go." He seemed to sway slightly in her arms, and she tightened her grip on him.

"You're not going anywhere. Lay down, Vincent."

"No, I...."

"Lay down. Please?" She spoke firmly but gently and it was almost as if he were too exhausted to fight her any more. She pulled back the covers revealing the cream silk sheets, knowing they beckoned softly to him. He sank down on the edge of the bed and she knelt before him, unlacing the remaining hand sewn ties that held his shirt closed, and sliding it from his shoulders. She tugged off his boots and socks and watched as he lay down on his stomach, his arms stretched upwards around the pillow.

Catherine's own heart was threatening to explode. The sight of Vincent half-naked in her bed, tired and at his most vulnerable was almost too much, and she took a few deep breaths as she struggled to hold on to her self-control.

'Strange,' she thought, 'how Vincent was often at his most powerful and most vulnerable in the same short span of time.'

Slowly she reached out to touch him. "Are you asleep?"

"No."

The sound was muffled and not very convincing. Catherine smiled. Climbing on to the bed she placed a hand on each side of his waist and moved them gently but firmly up and around and down again. He was rigid; filled with tension. She frowned. He'd never get any proper rest until it was gone. Leaning over him she ran her hands firmly up and down his back then upwards over his shoulders, kneading them, smiling with relief

when she heard his stifled groan. She repeated the procedure over and over again, sometimes running her fingers around the circle of his arms, all the while squeezing the muscles gently and stroking his skin. She worked on him for a long time, her hands never leaving his body, soothing, gently pummelling and squeezing; fighting to ignore the sensations the action evoked in her.

Very gradually, she felt his tension easing, and as he slowly relaxed she heard his breathing change to a regular, deep sound she loved but heard only rarely.... He was asleep.

Catherine felt tears prick her eyes. She had finally managed to soothe him into the unusual state of feeling safe enough in her apartment to sleep. He could pay her no higher compliment. She continued to stroke him, merely for her own pleasure now, knowing she wore a silly smile on her face, until at last she too, grew tired.

Carefully, she climbed over him and snuggled down at his side, pausing to press her lips to his back in several different places, hoping the feel of her lips and her breath on him would penetrate his dreams and make him feel loved. She draped her left hand across his back and wriggled the other beneath him so that her palm was pressed tightly against his chest.

Enjoying the feelings that fluttered and pirouetted deep inside her, she held him like this and slept, content that for the moment she had been able to help him. They were as close as they had ever been.... and that he was hers alone.

Vincent awoke with a start, forgetting for a moment where he was. Then he realized there was a warm, feminine body pressed close to him and he remembered. Catherine. She had persuaded him to come here, against his better judgement, after the.... incident.... when he had felt in danger of losing himself completely.

Glancing up at the bedside clock, he realized he had to leave. Dawn was only a matter of moments away. Carefully he turned over, and in the muted light of the room saw the imprint of her splayed fingers and faint indentation of her nails in the middle of his chest. Realizing, guiltily that he'd been lying on her hand, he picked it up and kissed her fingertips.

She stirred then and opened her eyes. "Vincent?"

"I'm sorry, Catherine. I did not mean to disturb you. It is almost light." She tried to sit up, groggy with sleep.

"Ow! My arm's dead!"

He smiled gently in the darkened room. "That does not surprise me, Catherine. I've been lying on it. Forgive me." He took it between his hands and rubbed it briskly, stimulating the circulation again.

"Thank you, Vincent. A small price to pay for being able to hold you, touch you.... all night."

He sighed and shook his head in wonder. "What you did for me last night, Catherine.... there are no words to express my feelings. You led me from the darkness of my other self. I had thought never to feel this way again.... at peace."

His words had the effect of banishing any remaining sleepiness and Catherine moved closer. "I was so worried about you last night. It seemed to take longer this time.... to pull you back."

Vincent bowed his head. "Yes. I feel it too. As if each time.... it.... happens, I go a little closer to the edge. It is my greatest fear, Catherine, apart from losing you, that one day I will fall over that edge and be lost forever." He shivered involuntarily and she put her arms around him.

"You'll never go over the edge, Vincent, because I'll never let you. I'm usually with you when it happens and if I'm not then I'll come to you.... always. You've never let me down and I'll be there for you, whenever and

wherever you need me.... for however long it takes."

"Oh, Catherine."

He touched his forehead to hers and felt the unconditional love emanating from her. "You bring me such joy, such tranquility to the storm that rages within me." He held her to him and let out a long breath. He felt her stroke his head, winding her fingers around his hair as she buried her face in his neck.

"I love you, Catherine.... always and forever."

"I love you too.... so much.... so '*much*'!"

The kiss was deep and sensual, reminding both of them how much they needed each other. The first faint light of dawn filtered through a gap in the drapes and Vincent lifted his lips from Catherine's, regret filling his heart.

"I really must go, Catherine."

She smiled up at him gently, her expression one of love and longing.... just for him.

"I know."

He picked up his shirt from the floor and stood up while she watched him dress. As he began to tie the white cotton laces she knelt up on the bed.

"Let me do that for you." Before tying the last one she kissed his chest, and the expression on her lovely face made him catch his breath and take her head between his hands, clutching it against him. Only the coming of daylight prevented him from undressing fully and sharing the love they felt in equal measure, in the time honoured way. Forcing down his emotions he gently held her head away and touched her cheek.

"You are not playing fair, my love."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'll get your cloak for you." She tied the last lace and immediately left the room. He followed her out and bent down slightly so that she could swing the hooded mantle around his shoulders.

At the French doors he turned and looked down at her.

"Know that you have my gratitude, my love, and my heart.... forever. I will see you soon." Catherine reached up to kiss his lips lightly.

"Always and forever, my love."

"Always and forever, Catherine."

END