

ONE LAST ROSE

by Julie Crutchley

Step after step. Down, down, down. Was there no end to this stairwell? Catherine felt a flutter of impatience as she turned the corner and saw yet another flight of steps to descend. The droll music of her feet hitting metal-plated cement was pounding in her blood as it was. She was a little surprised that they would just let her go like this - no escort, no spies, nothing. She sighed and looked at the rumpled white gown she was wearing. The least they could have done was to let her put on some decent clothes. After all, people were bound to stare.

Down, down down.

Somewhere, in the back of her mind, a voice began to ask questions, but she brushed them off, as if the voice was an irritating tickle on her scalp. All she wanted to do was to reach the bottom of the stairs....

Abruptly, they stopped, and so did Catherine. A child stood at the bottom of the flight, a little girl, with long chestnut hair, big blue eyes and a welcoming smile. Catherine's jaw dropped.

"Ellie!"

The child smiled wider, if that was indeed possible. "Hi, Catherine. What took you so long? I've been here for almost an hour."

The tickle began within Catherine's mind again. She brushed it aside again, not knowing how to question.... not really caring to. "I'm sorry," she said.

Ellie took her hand and led her to the stairwell door. A flash of - sunshine? - caused Catherine to squint as Ellie pulled the doors open and they stepped through to meet the day.

But such a day Catherine had never seen before. This was definitely not the narrow streets of New York City. Bright light streamed everywhere, the grass was green and fragrant, and there were wildflowers as far as the eye could see. Catherine turned to question Ellie, but stopped when she realized that the child was gone. So was the door to the stairwell. She was alone in a big meadow, with the occasional chirp of a bird and the whistle of the wind for companions.

Strangely enough, Catherine felt no agitation. Everything was so.... quiet; so peaceful, so beautiful. She was reminded of Alice suddenly able to walk through the foot-high door into the garden she had so hungered for. But *'this'*.... this was better somehow. More *'there.'* More....

Suddenly the tickle in Catherine's mind was just too strong to resist, and she stopped roaming.

"All right," she said aloud. "What's going on?"

There was no answer. She continued walking, trying to puzzle out an answer. *'They simply let me go. I walked through a door with Ellie. Ellie? Yes.... and here I am. It doesn't make sense. It's like a dream. Dream! That's it. I'm dreaming....'*

"Well, not really, dear."

The voice pulled Catherine out of her confusion and she noticed a woman walking beside her. Her face and hair reminded Catherine of Rebecca, the tunnel candlemaker, but the dignity in which the woman carried herself gave the impression that she was much older... in an ageless kind of way. She wore a flowing white dress that reached the ground and a smile that once again wiped all the wary tension clean from Catherine's mind.

"Hello, Catherine," she said, her voice rich and low.

"Hello," Catherine replied, smiling back. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting, as well."

The lady laughed. "Oh, that's to be expected with newcomers. Ellie's been here only a short time. She was also eager to see you."

"And I her," Catherine said. "I've missed her."

They walked in silence for a few minutes before the lady beckoned Catherine to a nearby tree and they sat down. "I'm sure you're a little disoriented."

"Yes," Catherine admitted. "Who are you?"

The lady smiled. "Erin."

"Erin," Catherine repeated. "I really feel odd. I guess I don't know how I got out of there----"

Her companion nodded sympathetically. "Yes, it was a long confinement."

"And then they just let me go." Catherine continued. "Maybe I feel strange because I was cooped up in that room for so long. I thought I would die in there, you know...."

"You did, Catherine."

".... And to find myself ..." Catherine's voice trailed off as Erin's words sank in. She looked up at the other woman as Erin stood up and walked over to her. Raising her eyebrows and smiling, Erin repeated, "You did."

Now it all made sense. With those two little words, everything rushed back to Catherine's conscious memory; the abduction, the long imprisonment, the baby's birth, the morphine, the rooftop....

"Vincent!" she said abruptly.

Erin's eyes were full of sympathy. "He found the child, Catherine. He brought him home. But he's never stopped mourning you. And that's why you're here."

"Here?" Catherine's forehead puckered.

Erin's arm swept in a slow semi-circle. "Here. This place. Earlier, you thought you were dreaming. In simple terms, dreaming is the state between sleep and wakefulness. This place," again she gestured, "is also a halfway point, the state between life and ..."

"Death," Catherine finished, understanding.

Erin nodded. "So it's been called. That's why I said you weren't really dreaming."

Catherine took in Erin's words. "So.... you said I'm here for a reason?"

"Oh, darling," Erin sighed. "I think you already know what it is."

"Yes," Catherine whispered. "Vincent."

"You must draw him out of his mourning," Erin said. "His grip on you is very strong, and he doesn't know how to let go. That's what you're here for. Everyone comes here to discover and to help before they can move on." She paused and smiled, remembering. "Even little Ellie had to convince some people to stop mourning."

It took a few seconds before Catherine said. "Eric's letter."

"Her own idea," Erin nodded. "She urged Eric to write to her, and as he did, she told him she loved

him, and he healed."

"Did she....?" Catherine couldn't finish, but Erin nodded slowly.

"She got them all." Catherine smiled at that, wishing there was a way she could tell Eric.

"Your father is another example," Erin continued. "He was most adamant about you seeing him, so he came to you in a dream. And see," Erin spread her hands. "It worked."

Catherine looked around. "How do I begin?"

"There." Erin pointed.

Catherine turned to look and found herself staring at her balcony doors. She was home.

The evidence of police detectives could be seen everywhere. Everything had been rummaged through and some of her belongings ... things that had been sitting out in the open ... were actually missing. The most disturbing sight was the rough chalk outline of a body on the bed. Catherine knew it was her outline, and that Vincent must have brought her home. *'Bet that has the police in a bind,'* she thought.

She stepped out on the balcony to contemplate the city, as she'd done so often before. Everything looked the same; the tall buildings rising to the sky, the flickering pinpoints of light that were cars moving in the distance, the dark cluster of trees covering the park. And what was in the park, or rather, below it? Vincent. And their son.

Catherine's eyes wandered to the other side of the balcony, catching sight of the rose bush. She smiled, remembering the day she'd brought it home. Now it was dead, neglected on this, her empty balcony. But wait! She moved closer and knelt before the rose bush. Nestled among the wilted foliage was a single green stem, and at the end of that stem ... just opening into beauty ... was a perfect white rose. No, not completely white, she noted upon closer inspection; one petal in the middle was deep crimson. Remembering a poem she had once shared with Vincent, that heralded a rose both red and white in color, Catherine knew she had found her last gift to her beloved. She reached out to touch it. *'If* she could touch it and somehow break it off, after all, it was part of a world she was no longer akin to....

With some surprise, she found the rose in her hand, the stem cut in a neat diagonal. She looked at the fresh green stem left behind in the brown, curled leaves. The plant was on its way to ruin, and Catherine felt a stab of regret. However, she had been given its last blooming bud by an unseen hand. Murmuring her thanks to Erin ... she was almost certain that Erin had given her the rose ... she got up and walked through the balcony doors, preparing to go Below.

And she was *'there.'* Bewildered, Catherine looked around, feeling rock under her hands where her balcony doors had been only a moment ago. Come to think of it, she had never *'opened'* the doors to go onto the balcony. Had she simply walked through them? Or was this something she was able to do because she was ... well, not *'material'* anymore?

'I'll go crazy if I think about this,' she thought. Brushing the concept aside for the time being, she began to walk toward the Great Falls, for she knew in her heart that he was there.

He was. And he wasn't alone; a tiny bundle moved in his arms. *'The child.'* Catherine felt her eyes burn as she saw them together for the first time.... father and son. Oh, how she ached to complete the scene!

Calm reasoning invaded her mind. She was here to heal, not to yearn. She walked in front of Vincent, watching the play between the two. Vincent was tracing the baby's cheek with a thumbnail, and the

child ... who was almost asleep ... gripped a few strands of his father's long golden hair in one hand, while the other curled against his rosebud mouth, the tiny thumb tucked inside. Catherine moved in a little closer to get a better look at the little face when Vincent sighed quietly. Her eyes left her son's features to look up into her beloved's face, so close to hers.

She was struck by the sadness in the blue depths of his eyes. Once, she could see magic in those eyes, the two of them, together, in a land of castles and unicorns and stardust. Now they were almost devoid of that magic.

'Almost.' There was still a trace of it, for Vincent's deep love for the baby - *'their'* baby - kept it alive. But the loss of so much of that magic, along with the deep lines and dark circles etched into his beautiful face made Catherine aware of just how much he was suffering, how much the missing link - herself - was taking a toll on his life.

He was still looking at the little one, who appeared to be sleeping in his lap. "Oh, Jacob," he whispered, "I see so much of... your mother... in your face."

Catherine's heart ached at the pain in his voice. Whatever she was going to do next was cut short as the baby opened his little mouth in a yawn. This simple gesture touched Catherine enough to make her try to touch the red-gold fuzz on her son's head. Vincent had named him....

"Jacob," she whispered.

Suddenly, Catherine found herself staring straight into a pair of big blue eyes. She caught her breath, there was absolutely no doubt who his father was. She moved away and was a little surprised to find little Jacob's eyes following her.

Vincent's eyes became alert as he saw Jacob's eyes open and follow something. Knowing Vincent's empathic powers, Catherine guessed that he had formed a connection with the child. And now that she thought about it, there was something that surrounded them both, an aura of sorts, but more than that. It was true, then. They were connected. So if the baby could see her (*she remembered reading that children and animals could 'perceive' better than adults*) and Vincent could sense his son through their bond, he had to know something was up. The time had come.

"Vincent?" she said quietly. "Can you hear me?"

His head came up slowly, but his eyes went right through her. He couldn't see her, then. So much the better. *Oh, his eyes were so sad.*

"Vincent," she continued. "If you can hear me, take out the rose. Let me know I'm with you."

Slowly, as if it were an afterthought, Vincent's hand closed around the small suede pouch hanging around his neck. He pulled open the drawstrings and took out the rose. His movements measured and precise, as if it was his own idea. With sudden clarity, Catherine realized that was exactly how it worked.

Vincent traced the carved petals before closing his hand around the small sculpture, and tears started down his cheeks without warning.

"No," Catherine said. "Oh, no. Don't, Vincent, please." She watched how his eyes suddenly became unfocused, how his lips tightened together, and she knew he was gaining control. He was beginning to think, and she knew he was listening.

"I'm here," she whispered. "I'm here right beside you, and I'm looking at you with our son. Little Jacob. He's so *'beautiful'*." She smiled as he looked down at the baby and touched the little cheek again.

"You found him. And as long as you have each other, you'll never be alone. Even though I can't be there physically, I'm here spiritually, and I'm within our son. He's yours and mine, Vincent. Nothing will ever change that."

Catherine felt tears of her own welling up. "I can't believe how much I miss you, how much I want to

be with you. But I can't. I'm here now, and I can't bridge that gap. But remember what you've always said! That we'll endure the pain and savor every moment of the joy! *'Believe'* that, Vincent. We've both endured so much. And we will endure this - you will endure this. Don't let it destroy you. As for savoring joy ... well, here's our joy. Our son. Rejoice in him, Vincent. Watch him grow. Teach him your truth. And, when he's old enough to understand, tell him about us. Never let him forget our love. It will last for always."

Catherine reached into the pocket of her dress, realizing for the first time that she wasn't wearing a hospital gown anymore, and pulled out the rose. She laid it gently on the ground next to Vincent's thigh. As she released it, she noticed that it looked different. It had faded slightly; the crimson wasn't as brilliant, nor the white as pure. She remembered the meadow and the wildflowers and understood; the rose was now a part of the material world.

"Vincent, look down. Look at the rose."

Vincent was looking at little Jacob again, then his eyes shifted toward the ground. His lips parted as he picked up the rose, turning it in his fingers to study it. He stopped when he saw the red petal.

"Remember the poem?" Catherine asked. "The one by John O'Riley?" She began to quote softly. "So I send you a milk-white rosebud...."

"With a flush on its petal tips," Vincent murmured, touching the red petal.

"Yes!" Catherine said, smiling. "I know it's not flushed on the ends, but the petal reminded me of you and...." Her words trailed off when Vincent suddenly looked at her.... *'looked'* at her - and his lips moved to form her name.

He understood. He couldn't see her. but he knew she was near. Catherine looked deep into his eyes and saw the murkiness within them begin to clear. There were the castles she loved so dearly, and the stardust, right there behind the fog.

"Let me go, Vincent," she whispered. "Release your hold. Release your pain. You know I'll never leave you, but in order to heal, you have to bind the wounds." She got to her feet. "Remember that our love exists, Vincent, at the cost of everything. It will never die. You're free now. Please.... live again."

With those words, Catherine saw the fog lift - not only from his eyes, but from his heart. It hovered above his head, writhing and curling, before dissipating into the mists of the cavern. Her work was done. Already she felt the inexorable pull back to her other life. She watched as her beloved got to his feet and began to leave the cavern, his grace finally unhampered by the slump of sorrow.

"Though lovers be lost ... *'Thank you, Vincent; for your comfort, your strength and most of all, for loving me....'* Love shall not ... *'There is no darkness, Vincent, as long as we share the light, and that light is our love, and our child'* ... And death shall have no dominion."

A tunnel of light opened in front of Catherine. Within it she saw Erin smiling lovingly. Behind her, just visible through the brightness, were Ellie and Winslow and Kristopher.... and further down, her mother and father, both with arms outstretched. She looked over her shoulder and caught a final glimpse of the man she loved, holding their son and one last rose.

'You're free, Vincent. Be well; now and always. I love you.'

END