

# The Awakening

by Katrina Relf

Vincent decided to go Above. Normally, after a hard day working with Mouse and Winslow, he was quite content to spend the evening reading, or beating Father at chess. Tonight, however, was different. Somehow he needed to feel the cool night air, to see the damp grass shimmering in the moonlight, to watch the stars.

He trod the familiar path leading from the tunnels into the park, breathing in the cool April air, but, suddenly, he stopped abruptly. There was something, or someone, lying on the grass ahead of him. He could neither see nor hear any movement, so slowly and silently he walked towards it. As he came nearer he could make out the figure of a woman, and closer still, he could see that she was badly injured – her face covered in blood and deep gashes. He knelt down beside her, and realising that she was barely alive, he picked her up and gently placed her over his shoulder. Although he knew that he was breaking every one of their rules, he hurried back to the safety of the tunnels and the long journey to Father's chamber.

There, Father's disapproval was vocal and immediate, but then his doctor's soul took over and together they tended the woman's injuries as best as they were able, considering their limited resources. But she was alive, and Vincent carried her back to his chamber where she would be safe and warm, and, as her face and eyes were bandaged she would have no reason to fear him.

For hours Vincent sat at the foot of the bed, watching patiently and silently, knowing how frightened she would be when she awoke to pain and darkness, and ensuring that she would not be alone when that time came. Once or twice Father appeared to check on her progress, installing in Vincent the need to relate absolutely nothing to her about her whereabouts when she awoke.

After what seemed an eternity the woman stirred and moaned quietly.

As gently as he could Vincent said, "You're safe – you're safe now."

She asked "Where am I?"

"Where no one will hurt you. You're safe here."

"Hospital?"

"No. But you're going to be all right."

"Why aren't I in a hospital?"

"There was no time – you were bleeding."

She suddenly panicked. "What did they do? My eyes?"

"Your eyes were not hurt. We made sure. Rest now" he added gently.

"Who's here? Who are you?"

"Vincent."

"Vincent," she repeated, and it was as though he was hearing his name for the first time, but he continued.

"My father and I treated your injuries. You have broken ribs – you need to be still."

"Where am I?" she asked again.

“Where no one can hurt you.”

“My face hurts.”

He needed to take her mind off the pain. “Tell me your name”.

“Catherine.”

“Catherine, try to rest. If you need anything, I’ll be close by.”

Sensing her fear and her aloneness in a strange, dark world, he added, “Don’t be afraid. Please don’t be afraid.”

“I’ll try.”

Vincent left her then, hoping that she would sleep, and made his way to Father’s chamber.

“She’s very frightened,” he told Father, but the older man was still adamant that she must leave as soon as possible. “And don’t tell her anything,” he warned Vincent.

During the following days, Vincent sat with Catherine whenever he could, reading her *Great Expectations* and, ultimately, telling her a little about life in the tunnels. He knew this was against Father’s wishes, but somehow he knew, deep within his soul, that he could trust Catherine, that she would never betray him.

A week had passed and Vincent was feeding her some of William’s specially-made soup, when suddenly she lifted her hand to help guide the spoon to her mouth. Before Vincent could stop her, she had touched his hand and pulled back in panic. Vincent held his breath – his throat suddenly dry. What would she do? What would she say? But she said nothing. Was she too afraid to ask? He knew then that she must never see his face.

The following day, he found her sitting on the bed and he could sense her fear and frustration. Unsure of what to do, he offered to read to her. When this was rejected he left to get her some tea, knowing how futile this was, but hoping it would give him time to think – to somehow be able to help her.

He spoke with Father, hoping the older man had some advice, but Father’s reply, “She’s strong enough now to return to her world”, somehow sent Vincent’s world crashing down around him.

He returned to his chamber to find Catherine standing, the bandages from her face lying around her shoulders, looking at herself in what appeared to be a wheel hub. He could sense her utter shock and dismay, and, without thinking of the consequences, he called her name.

She turned, and in that moment, he saw such terror on her face that he hardly felt the pain as the hub hit his forehead. He stood for a second as the impact of what had happened shuddered through him, and then he fled in a maze of shame and sadness.

Vincent knew now, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Catherine had to leave today. He couldn’t bear to see fear of him in her eyes, and he couldn’t subject her to that any longer.

He waited until he hoped her initial shock had subsided, until she realised that, despite his appearance, he was still the same Vincent who had read to her, who had fed her, who had gained her trust. He pulled his cloak around him, making sure the hood covered as much of his face as possible, then, gathering up the clothes that Mary had given him to replace Catherine’s torn and bloodied ones, he made his way back to the chamber.

She was sitting on the bed and he could see she had been crying. He stood at the entrance, afraid of moving too close to her.

"I have never regretted what I am until now," he said in complete honesty.

"How did this happen to you?" she asked.

"I don't know. I have ideas, but I will never know. I was born and I survived."

He could sense that she was calmer now, so he moved towards her.

"It's time for you to go back," he said, although, in reality, he knew how empty his life would seem when she had gone.

"Tell me it's a nightmare," she almost begged him, "and that it never happened."

He knelt down in front of her. "It's not a nightmare. It really happened and you're alive, and what you endured will make you stronger."

"I don't have your strength," she replied.

"You have the strength, Catherine, you do. I know you."

Suddenly, she bent forward and, taking his hood in both hands, she slowly pushed it back, looking directly at him. At first he was apprehensive, unable to meet her eyes, afraid of what he would see. But then he realised that she was looking at him with fondness, not fear; and, on reflection later, he realised it was at that moment that he fell in love with her.

Slowly, he rose to his feet and dropped the bundle of clothes on to the bed beside her.

"It's time," he said simply, before leaving her to get ready for her long journey ahead.

When Vincent returned, Catherine was again sitting on the bed, dressed in a very different style of clothes than those she had arrived in.

She stood and looked around her and Vincent felt in her an uneasiness at leaving this safe place for the world above that had hurt her so. She walked over to where he stood at the entrance, then silently and sadly he began to lead her back, through countless tunnels lit by burning torches on the rocky walls, up steep iron staircases and, when they came to a narrow but deep chasm in the rocks, he offered her his hand, which to his surprise, she took without hesitation. Eventually, they reached a passageway that seemed to be lit from above.

Vincent stopped, and leaning against one of the walls he said "This is where you go out."

Catherine stared at him. "Where are we?"

"The basement of your apartment building." He smiled at her surprise.

"We are?"

Vincent could sense her relief, but also, he thought, a little sadness. She took a few steps towards the light, then stopped.

"Vincent," she said. "Your secret is safe with me. I would never betray your trust."

"I know," he said. "I knew that from the beginning, when you trusted me."

She walked back to him, stood closer than she ever had before, and put her head on his shoulder.

"What can I say to you?" she said.

His heart was pounding so loudly he was sure that she could hear it. Tentatively, he put his arm around her waist, hardly daring to touch her.

Suddenly, there were voices echoing from above and Catherine moved from Vincent to check the upper door was still closed. Vincent's inborn fear of detection made him flee to the nearest darkest tunnel.

Once it was quiet again, he returned to the passageway to find Catherine walking towards the stairway that would lead her back to her world. He let her go. He couldn't bear to say goodbye. Instead, he began the long journey home, with a cold emptiness within that he had never known before. He knew it was futile. Catherine could never care for him, so he must learn to forget her. But would he? Could he? He arrived back at his chamber to find the bed freshly-made and every sign of Catherine gone. It was almost as if she had never existed.

But she did exist and although life went on normally for those Below, as far as Vincent was concerned she was always there – in his heart and in his mind. He could feel what she was feeling when she felt it. He couldn't understand it, he couldn't explain it, but the connection was there.

The months passed. Above, spring turned to summer, summer to fall, and still Vincent could sense this closeness, this bond with Catherine. At times it was so strong he felt almost as though they were one. He imagined, by now, her time in the tunnels was a distant memory, perhaps best forgotten. But he wanted to give her something – something to remind her that if she ever needed him, he would be there for her. *Great Expectations* sprung to mind – the book he had read to her, had shared with her. If he could only reach her balcony, unseen, and leave it there, she would remember.

He made his way to Father's chamber to tell him of his plan, but was dismayed by Father's reaction.

"She can only bring you unhappiness."

"Then I'll be unhappy," he replied. "But I can't forget her."

He knew in his heart that Father was only trying to protect him, trying to stop him being hurt by a woman from a world that Vincent knew so little of. But still he was determined to go Above, to leave her the book, to let her know he hadn't forgotten her.

Shortly before midnight he left the tunnels, crossed the park and, by way of deserted back streets that he knew from years of walking the city at night, he found himself at Catherine's apartment building. Using the fire escape, he was soon climbing over her balcony. There was a light in one room that he thought must be her bedroom, so, as quietly as he could, so as not to disturb her, he laid the book on a nearby table. He was about to climb back over the wall when his foot caught something on the ground. He knew that she had heard him, he could sense her fear, so he hid himself at the far end of the balcony, and prayed that she wouldn't see him. The door opened and she came out. She was wearing her nightclothes and he wondered if anyone had ever looked so beautiful. But she was also carrying a gun. She looked around, then suddenly caught sight of the book on the table. She picked it up, he held his breath, then she saw him.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said. "I'm sorry."

"No. I'm so glad to see you," she said.

He looked at her and couldn't believe what he was seeing. Her face was perfect. Where were the scars? The only words he could manage were, "Your face?"

She smiled at him. "They fixed it." Then, to his surprise she said, "Come inside."

"No. I have to go now."

“Not yet.”

“I should never have come.” He felt so inadequate, so lost, next to this beautiful woman.

“I’m so glad you did. I wanted to see you. There are so many things I wanted to tell you.”

She put the gun on to the table and, holding his hands, sat him down beside her.

“I have so many things to tell you,” he said.

“I’m learning to be strong,” she stated with pride.

“I know, Catherine. I feel the things you’re feeling when you do.”

“How do you mean?”

“Just know that it’s true and that your pain is my pain. Sometimes, almost as if we were one. I came here – because I wanted to see if you were well, and because I wanted to see you, one last time.”

“I’ll never see you again?”

“I have seen your world. There is no place in it for me. I know what I am. Your world is filled with frightened people, and I remind them of what they are most afraid of.”

“Their differences.”

“Their aloneness. Now I must begin to forget.”

“Forget me?”

“No, I will never forget you. But I must forget the dream of being part of you. Find someone to be part of, Catherine. Be happy. Goodbye.”

He stood. Leaving her was tearing him apart. Father was right. He should never have come. He suddenly realised she was speaking ...

“No, not yet. It’s still dark. Don’t go.”

He could hardly believe what she was saying. She was pulling him down to sit beside her, and, taking up the book he had brought her, she read to him the last chapter of *Great Expectations*.

Once she had finished, he once again rose to his feet. It was very late – he had to let her sleep.

“Goodbye,” he said, knowing this time it was final.

“Goodbye,” she answered. “I will never forget you.”

He left the way he had come and very soon was back in his chamber. He couldn’t believe how beautiful she was. How could a woman like that even bear to look at him? And yet he knew her heart and he knew she meant it when she said she would never forget him. He could never be with her, but at least he could be a memory.

He slept fitfully, dreams of Catherine weaving through his mind. When he awoke, in a strange inexplicable way, he felt more at peace than he had since the night that he found her.

During the next few days his teaching duties and tunnel work kept him occupied, and the evenings were spent reading Byron and Shelley. They suited his mood so well.

One evening, when Father began to see more of the old Vincent emerging, he invited him to a game of chess, knowing that Vincent would beat him outright, but determined to give him a good game. Vincent accepted, and they began their game in earnest.

Suddenly, a violent thud hit Vincent's psyche. Catherine was in danger!

"Sorry, Father," was all he could say, before he sped away through the tunnels, afraid he wouldn't reach her in time.

But luck was on his side. He heard the rumble of a subway train not far away and as it pulled out of the underground station he was able to leap down onto its roof. He clung on as it sped through the darkness until his instincts told him that he was nearing Catherine. As it neared the next station and began to slow down, Vincent slid to the ground. Once he had regained his balance, he paused to get a sense of Catherine. She was nearby – and she was terrified.

His instincts told him she was in a nearby brownstone. He followed the tunnel until he came to the basement where she was trapped, but there was one more obstacle, an ancient brick wall separated them. Vincent hurled himself against it and the wall crumbled and collapsed, as if in fear of him.

Growling, he emerged through the dust and debris to come face-to-face with her attackers. There were three of them and one was pointing a gun straight at her head as she lay on the ground.

With one stroke of Vincent's hand, the gun fell to the ground, and, very soon, as his claws ripped through their bodies. One by one those who would harm her lay dead at his feet. He had never killed before and, as the beast was glorying in its release, Vincent was lost to himself and, momentarily, to Catherine.

Slowly, as the Other began to release his grip, Vincent shook his head, trying to clear it, and turned to Catherine. The look of horror and fear that he saw on her face brought him back to himself with a jolt. He felt drained, weak and nauseous as he looked upon the carnage he had just wrought. He sat down, not daring to look at her again, afraid of what he would see.

He knew that she had seen death – she had explained to him her work with the District Attorney's office and the dangers it entailed, but never death like this. He sat still, ashamed beyond words that she should have seen him like this, had seen what the Other could do. The beast's rage, terrified *him* – what must it have done to her?

Suddenly, unbelievably, she was standing in front of him, clasping his hands.

"We can't stay here," she said, pulling him up.

The shock of her acceptance woke him, as if from a dream. He led her through the basement of the building back to the tunnels – away from the horror and the realisation that part of him could kill – so easily – so viciously.

As they neared the pathway leading to the basement, she turned to face him. Her eyes no longer held fear.

"I owe you everything – everything," she said.

"You owe me nothing. I'm part of you, Catherine, just as you are part of me. Wherever you go – wherever I am – I'm with you."

He lowered his head sadly, wondering if he would ever see her again.

"Goodbye," he said.

"For now," she said, smiling at him.

They turned and slowly began to walk away from one another, but then as one – they turned again for one final, tender look.

It was not the end – it was only the beginning ...