

The Forgotten Miracle

by Katina Relf

Vincent sat alone in his chamber, his thoughts with Catherine, with her child - their child - at last safe, at last home in the Tunnels where he belonged. Now a semblance of normality had returned to life Below, but life for Vincent, he knew, would never be normal again.

NORMAL was sharing a Bond with Catherine, knowing her happiness, her sadness, her fears. Protecting her, loving her. Spending nights on her balcony, talking reading, sharing their dreams. And nights Below, listening to music, talking with Father, being together... Together ...

No, life would never be NORMAL again.

But at least the searching was over, the killing was over, and now he had time to grieve. For, in truth, not even time could diminish the pain. Still the missing of her was unbearable. If not for their beautiful son, if not for Diana's unselfish help and courage in finding the child, Vincent would long ago have lost himself to the never-ending darkness of either the abyss or his other self. Both alternatives would have eliminated memory, and sometimes memory was unendurable. Yet, not to remember, perhaps, was worse. For the moments that he had shared with Catherine, her strength, the love he could feel in every thought of her, helped to guide him through each day.

But time and again his heart reminded him that there was a memory, a time shared, that seemed lost forever, save for Catherine's dying words, save for the miraculous child that she had left him. He needed to remember he needed that miracle to hold on to, more than he needed anything else in his life. Yet the more he tried, the more he clung to the shadows in his mind, to the images he had seen, the more the memory of what happened in that darkest of times, in that most dreadful of places, eluded him.

There were brief moments when he allowed himself to believe that what he and Catherine had shared had been too beautiful to be of this world, too beautiful to be remembered, except in the far-off world of dreams, only then to be forgotten on waking. But there were those other, more frequent times, when the probable truth took away all peace, as its ugliness haunted him, tortured him - the unspeakable truth of what he was, of what he had been. Of how, in the depths of his madness, he had taken Catherine, violated her - lost as he was to the burning hunger that had been with him throughout that time. By forgetting, was his mind merely sparing him the inevitable pain of knowing the truth? Of acknowledging the fact that, while he was lost to the darkness, he had become the one thing of which he was most afraid. He had hurt Catherine - he had defiled her. The appalling possibility terrified him.

Occasionally there were sudden, brief flashes of hands. Hands clawing at empty mists, hands clawing at himself. And even briefer, but disturbing, remembrances of the ever-present lust for blood, which seemed to be inextricably woven throughout the time of his malady. He couldn't allow himself to dwell upon how such a creature would have used Catherine, would have abused her. He couldn't remember, and he was afraid to remember. Yet only by facing his fears could he ever learn to live with himself again. But what if the truth were too terrible to live with? What then? What then?

He turned his thoughts to the babe. Surely such a beautiful child could only have been born out of love? Tears filled his eyes and began to trail down his cheeks. He had no answers - not here, not now. Maybe what he sought lay in that place - his hell, his tomb - if not for Catherine.... Catherine. Echoes of her words drifted through his mind, almost as though she was there, trying to soothe his doubts.

"*Vincent, we loved.*" Perhaps, after all, there was hope. He must believe that. He must believe.

"Vincent?" A familiar voice recalled him from his reflections - from his solitude.

"Come in, Lena."

She came towards him - the pretty, innocent girl of the streets, now a loving mother, blossoming in her newly-found family. Still Vincent could sense her feelings for him, her wanting of him, even though such feelings had not been alluded to since her return to the tunnels - so long ago now.

She stood, looking down at him. "How are you feeling?"

"Well, thank you, Lena."

"I mean, honestly."

"Honestly." He repeated, looking up into eyes filled with sadness for him. "I feel empty - and alone."

"You know it doesn't have to be that way."

"It does, Lena. I'm sorry - but for me it does."

There had been a time when she could tempt him with her love. But no longer. Now he knew that he could never betray Catherine's memory.

Lena stood watching him, her eyes a curious mixture of innocence and promise.

"Catherine is gone, Vincent. You must accept that. We need to comfort each other."

"There can be no comfort for me, Lena - ever."

"There could be, Vincent, if you would let me love you."

She knelt at his side, taking his hand in hers, and speaking softly, "There is no guilt now, Vincent. Catherine is gone. You don't have to be afraid."

"No, no."

The words were growled, as Vincent leapt to his feet and pushed past Lena. His pain, his anger were barely suppressed, and, for a moment, Lena was afraid. It was too soon. He was still too raw.

She stood up, turning to face him. "I'm sorry, Vincent."

He took a moment to compose himself, and then replied - his voice once more soft and even.

"No, Lena, it is I who should apologise. You have offered me a gift - all that you are - your love - your comfort - but I cannot accept that gift. My heart is bound to Catherine."

"I know."

Seemingly, as though he hadn't heard her, he continued, "I feel as though a part of me has died with her, and I will never be complete again."

Lena wanted desperately to hold him, to take away his pain, but now she feared his reaction. So, instead, almost timidly she took his hand once more in hers, and without looking up, she whispered, "Catherine would want you to be happy."

His heart longed to cry out, "*There can be no happiness for me without Catherine.*" But Vincent silenced his heart. Returning to his chair, he sat down, Lena's hand still clasped in his, and she resumed her former place, kneeling at his side.

He began to speak, almost to himself, staring straight ahead, "I should find happiness with Jacob. He is my life now, but even he..."

"What is it, Vincent?"

He looked straight at her, his eyes bright with unshed tears. "Lena, I have no memory of Jacob's conception."

"But how can that be?"

"I was lost, completely lost to the darkness, to the madness, Catherine came to me. She saved my life, she saved my.... sanity. She brought me back from wherever my mind - my being - had travelled. But at what cost to herself? The question was spoken quietly, almost to himself.

"I remember nothing of that time, but I know that Catherine and I were alone in that place... long enough... Lena, I fear... I fear that in my madness... in my need... I... I..."

"You're afraid that you raped her?"

Vincent bowed his head until his hair was a curtain, hiding his shame. "Yes," he whispered, his voice barely audible.

"Didn't you ever ask Catherine?"

"I knew nothing of the child until I found Catherine... at the end. She told me that we had loved, and that our son was beautiful."

The tears that had shone in his eyes so short a time before now ran down his cheeks, his body shaking with stifled sobs.

Lena touched his arm. "What can I do, Vincent? Let me help you."

He looked down at her, his eyes so gentle that Lena almost let herself believe that she could see love in them.

"There is no help, Lena, except in me. I must return to the place Catherine and I shared. Return and face whatever happened there. It is the only way."

"And that is the answer?"

"There is no other answer. Without that memory I have lost a part of Catherine, a part of Jacob and a part of myself."

Lena stood up. "Can I go with you?"

"No, Lena. I must do this myself - alone."

"When will you be going?"

Vincent rose to stand beside her. "Soon. Directly I have prepared. There is no point in delaying."

His gaze was still soft as he looked down at her, but in the depths of those blue eyes, Lena saw more pain than she had ever imagined.

"I shall never forget your kindness, Lena. Your friendship, your understanding, mean so much to me."

"I wish I could do more."

"There is no more."

Lena longed to cry out, "*There is so much more that I could give you. Why don't you let me love your sadness away?*" But she knew that now was not the right time, and so instead she bid him, "Goodnight, Vincent. Have a safe journey," and left.

Alone again, Vincent's mind turned to the more domestic aspects of his imminent departure. He knew that, much against his better judgement, he would have to tell Father of his plans. At least in part. He was reluctant to disclose his destination, and loathe to give any reason for his journey. But he must tell him

something. He couldn't be absent for a day or more without any explanation. Taking his cloak from the chair and pulling it around his shoulders, he left for Father's chamber, trying to think of the right words, and wondering how to keep the truth from Father without actually lying.

He soon arrived and entered the chamber to find that, for once, luck was on his side. Father was seated at his chessboard opposite Cullen, deeply immersed in his game, and obviously not likely to welcome any distraction.

Vincent went to his side, putting his arm around the older man's shoulders. "I am just leaving, Father. I don't expect to be gone for more than a day. I will explain more when I return."

Father nodded, a trifle impatiently, "Yes, Vincent, have a safe journey."

Vincent had the distinct impression that Father wasn't winning the game - so he bent to kiss his head, and left before Father had time to think.

Once more in the tunnels, Vincent breathed a sigh of relief. Now he should go and see Mary and Jacob - in truth a much easier task. Mary was seated in the Nursery Chamber, knitting what appeared to Vincent to be a child's sweater.

"More clothes for the little ones, Mary?"

"Oh, they can never have too many, Vincent. They grow so quickly."

"Yes...." For a moment he seemed lost in his thoughts. "If only Catherine could have seen Jacob grow."

Mary put down her knitting and walked over to Vincent. "She can, Vincent, she can. You must believe that."

"I try to, Mary, but sometimes she seems so far away."

"Don't you see her every time you look at Jacob?"

"Yes, but there are times when even that is painful."

"Vincent, time will heal. It will, I promise you."

He closed his eyes, putting his head back, and slowly, almost painfully, he let out his breath.

"I'm sorry, Mary, I didn't mean to burden you with my..."

"It's all right, Vincent. We all loved Catherine. We all miss her."

"Mary, I have to be away a short time, and I would be grateful if Jacob could stay here tonight, and most probably, tomorrow."

"Of course he can. That will be fine."

"I will come for him as soon as I return."

"Don't worry, Vincent. He can stay here as long as he needs. I love having him around. He's such a contented child."

Vincent walked over to his sleeping son, bent over and gently kissed him on the brow. Then he turned back to Mary, trying to hide the ever-present tears that were threatening to overflow.

"Thank you, Mary - for everything. I will see you both tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Vincent. Take care."

There was no point in returning to his chamber, it would only waste time. Instead, he left the Nursery Chamber and, turning into a tunnel to his right, began his journey - the way ever downward - towards the catacombs. He knew that the place he sought was beyond them, below even their level, deep within the earth. A hell barely remembered, yet never forgotten. He retraced his steps, trod endless paths, with only

instinct to guide him, all the while aware of something insubstantial, yet almost tangible - a presence, all around him - taking him in its hand and holding him tightly, as though it had been waiting for him for so long...

He reached Narcissa's dwelling place, but there was no sign of her. Perhaps for the best. Sometimes Narcissa understood too much. Vincent took a burning torch from the nearest wall, for he knew that once beyond these chambers, the way would be strange to him and the tunnels dark. Skirting the catacombs to his left, he passed into the narrow damp passages that would eventually lead him to the cave.

Ghosts were in those passages, ghosts of memories he could not remember. Shadows moving on the walls. Some were thrown into sharp relief by the torchlight, others - being of no substance - disappeared in its light.

Suddenly he stopped, the chill air making him shiver. He needed to listen, to search the shadows around him. But, away from the immediate brightness of the torch, there was only the darkness and the silence. Yet, for a moment, he thought that he felt another's presence, heard a breath being drawn. Did ghosts breathe? Was the torment of the past still here, still waiting, or was it only in his mind? He turned, and with uneasy steps, resumed his journey.

The tunnel was becoming narrower, the walls jagged, and Vincent knew that he must be nearing the lowest levels. Soon the passage veered sharply to the left and widened slightly, and, as he turned the corner, there - just a few feet before him - was the dark mouth of the cave. The tunnel ended here, his journey ended here. He had reached the place.

Staring into the darkness he tried to see what he had seen then, but he saw nothing. Perhaps that is all it had been to him - a hole in the ground where he could hide, where he could die. He felt an unexpected sadness for the creature that had made this journey before him. To protect those that loved him, he had come here, so far away from his world, to die alone in the darkness - destroyed by his own madness, by his own wanting. He had been afraid - Vincent could remember that, he could remember the pain, the aloneness - and his heart cried for him - for what he had been. The healing had begun.

He moved closer. By the light of the torch he could see the stark desolation of the cave. Walls cruel with jagged rocks, mist rising sporadically from the ground, and a cold dampness permeating everything. How could Catherine have come to him - given herself to him - in the hostile reality of this place? How could she have touched him, been touched by him - a soul lost beyond reasoning, beyond knowing? And how could such a perfect child have been born out of a union with that tormented being? He must know, he must remember - before the pain of not knowing drove him back to the madness.

He moved away from the entrance, deeper into the cave, fixing his torch into the first crevice he could find that was deep enough to hold it. He was drawn to the farthest wall, sensing that this was where he would have stayed - a safe place, a place where he could face the demons that had haunted him. Demons that were haunting him now. Ghosts of memories - remembered and yet not remembered.

Again there was the image of hands - hands that clawed at his body, that clawed at the rocks. Fingers, nails, torn and bleeding. His body had bled too - bled where ragged claws had lacerated the skin as he had tried to tear the clothing from himself. Clothes had become an encumbrance, clinging to his bruised and burning flesh. Clothing - damp and dirty with sweat - from days and nights of fever.

He couldn't believe that Catherine could ever have brought herself to look upon him, even less touch him. But always her heart had been filled with compassion.

She had come to him before, when he had been lost to himself, but never had he been as lost as he was then. His mind, his body, consumed by the hunger, obsessed by the thoughts of blood, and ravaged by his lust for Catherine. He was remembering... and what he remembered terrified him. The softness of her touch, the fire rising within him. He closed his eyes tightly, trying to blot out the images. But the storm still raged within him.

He had wanted - needed - Catherine so badly for so long. Sometimes her closeness had been physically painful to him. But he had denied that need - to Catherine, to himself - ashamed that such thoughts could debase their love. But part of him knew those thoughts - knew... and wanted. Wanted so much more than he could admit, even to himself. So much more than he could ever ask. Did that wanting become the killing? Was its denial the basis of his madness - its cause and its effect?

He remembered that he had tried to go Above to Catherine, in the depths of that madness, when the blood-red dreams had overflowed into reality. They had stopped him then, they had protected Catherine. But who could have protected her when she came to him here? No-one. His need had been too great.

Suddenly, a silent wind quenched the torch's flame. The darkness was complete - but not still. Cries began to echo through its pervading gloom, reverberating from the rocks. Cries from long ago, torn from that wretched creature - lost, desolate and afraid. Perhaps he too was remembering...

Vincent could remember his pain so clearly, knew that, in his fevered mind, he had felt forsaken by those he had protected. He knew and he understood. Whatever had happened in this dark and fearful place, WHATEVER had been the consequence of Catherine coming to him, that other self was not to blame. Vincent knew that truth. He knew and he pitied - but he could not forgive.

A movement at the mouth of the cave caused a growl to start from deep within his chest.

"Vincent."

The voice was soft and heartbreakingly familiar, a small figure moving towards him, barely visible in the dense blackness.

Vincent stood, rooted to the spot, unable to move, afraid to move. Afraid, that with any movement on his part, this miracle would disappear. He watched her as she came toward him, knowing that what he was seeing couldn't be real, and yet hoping against hope that it was. He had imagined her so many times in the Tunnels, heard her call his name, seen her smile, only to disappear and break his heart again. Always it was an illusion. How could this be any more?

She was close to him now, her face clearly visible, smiling up at him. He shook his head, trying to clear it, although in truth he wanted this dream to last forever. He opened his eyes - she was still there.

"Catherine?" He spoke her name in no more than a whisper. It was almost an invocation. "Catherine?"

He yearned with all his heart, with all his being, to reach out and take her in his arms, but he was beyond movement, almost beyond breathing. Unable to touch... afraid that if he tried... He could speak no more. He could do nothing but look upon her. She was more beautiful than ever.

Unbelievably, as though knowing his thoughts, her arms reached up, pulling him close, pressing her face into his chest, as she had done so many times - so long ago. She was warm, she was real. He had to touch her - he had to believe...

Hesitantly, as though for the first time, his arms closed around her and he buried his face in her hair - and wept. Perhaps he was dreaming, perhaps once more he was losing his mind.

But it was of no consequence - as long as she was here, as long as they were together. He held her tightly, the scent of her hair enveloping him.

"Catherine - how can this be?"

He was crying - tears of joy or tears of sadness - he didn't know. She was here in his arms and that was all that mattered.

She looked into his eyes. "Because it's what you wanted - more than anything."

There was so much that he wanted to say, but words seemed unimportant now. Her eyes were clear and beautiful. Could he but drown in their depths, could she but take him home. He couldn't let her go again - not now - not without him. He held her even closer.

"Vincent, I can feel your sadness, your pain, and it hurts me to know that I am the cause of that pain."

"Forgive me, Catherine. I try. But without you... there is nothing...."

"I know, Vincent. Without love the world is a cold and empty place. But love never dies - you must believe that. My love is within you, around you. I once promised you forever, and, for us, forever is all there is. Nothing can part us now. I am living in Jacob. I am part of him - we both are - and there will be a time when you will see me - in his smile, in his laughter, in his tears - and you will be glad."

He held her away for a moment, "You know?"

"I know how much you love Jacob, how you risked everything to find him - just as you did for me. But I know too how he brings back memories, and pain - and not just the pain of loss. Tell me, Vincent, tell me what is troubling you?"

"There are ghosts that haunt me, Catherine. Things I can't remember. Things that happened here - between us."

"I wanted you to ask me that, Vincent, for so long."

"I was afraid - am still afraid - to remember what happened."

"I wanted to tell you - I longed to tell you - but you were still so fragile. I wanted you to remember the miracle."

"Miracle?" Vincent looked down at Catherine, a look of puzzlement on his face.

"We loved, Vincent. That was the miracle."

Apprehension filled Vincent's eyes. "But WHO did you love, Catherine?"

Now it was her turn to look puzzled.

Vincent continued. "Which side of me? Vincent - or the other?"

"I loved both sides, Vincent. All of you." She smiled up at him. "He loves me too, you know. Perhaps in a different way than you - but he loves me."

"Did I hurt you?"

"Vincent, how many times must I tell you? You could never hurt me. It is time for you to remember, time for us to talk - before it is too late."

Those last words struck his heart like ice. She was leaving him again - leaving, soon.

"Catherine?"

"Vincent, come sit with me." She took his hand and led him nearer to the entrance, nearer to the shelter of the wall. "This is the place where we lay - where we loved."

He began to unfasten his cloak.

"No, Vincent, it's all right - the floor is very sandy here."

He sat down beside her, suddenly knowing that she had come to tell him this, to bring him peace - and once it was told she would be gone, and he would nevermore see her - not in this life. Tears filled his eyes again and he quickly lowered his head, trying to hide them from Catherine.

She took his face in her hand. "Please don't be sad, Vincent."

"How can I not be?"

"I pray the healing will begin here." She paused for a moment - and then began...

"Vincent, when I came to you, you were sick with fever and you didn't know me. I frightened you... and you would have struck out..."

Vincent turned away, unwilling to hear the words...

"But I called your name," Catherine continued, "and something within you remembered. Something within you that would rather die than hurt me. You fell to the floor, and I thought that I'd lost you. You were so still and quiet. I was afraid - I didn't know what to do. I couldn't let you go - I couldn't let you leave me."

Her face was close to his, her voice soft. "I kissed you. I tried breathing my life into your body. I don't know for how long, Vincent - time was meaningless - without you everything was meaningless. I held you - you were so cold. I tried to warm you with my body. And then, suddenly, I was somewhere far away and you were there with me, and in that beautiful moment - I found you. Our spirits embraced and we were one - you came back to me.

You couldn't speak - you had no words - so I made you show me all that you felt. Perhaps it was selfish of me - for I knew you could offer no resistance - but we had been afraid for far too long. We had to express our love, we had to end the frustration that was destroying you. We felt, we touched, and your touch said more than any words could say - it was more beautiful than any poem. We loved, Vincent, and our love was a benediction. Jacob was conceived in that love."

She was in his arms now, kissing him, touching him. He felt the warmth of her body against his, and he was lost to the feeling, lost in a place, a time, real and yet unreal.

Drowning in Catherine's touch, drowning in her warmth, her softness, and in the wanting of her. Their bodies fused, melted into one, in a moment so beautiful it was beyond tears, beyond even life and death. It was everything...

Suddenly, Vincent was aware of Catherine's voice, as though from a great distance - and yet he could still feel the warmth of her breath upon his cheek.

"Vincent, remember, always remember, death shall have no dominion."

He opened his eyes. He was alone. Somehow it didn't surprise him, and yet he felt cold, bereft, even though his body still throbbed from Catherine's nearness, his lips still burned from her kisses.

The torch was burning again, everything was as it had been, except for the stillness.

There were no cries and no ghosts - only peace. Dare he believe what his heart told him to be true, yet what his mind knew only to be a dream? He sat up, turning to the place beside him where Catherine had lain. Almost reverently, he rubbed his hand over the sandy floor. It was still warm. He felt something in the sand, saw it glistening in the light of the torch. He picked it up and, as it lay in the palm of his hand, he could feel the crystal's warmth, infused as it had lain between Catherine's breasts. His tears cleansed it of sand and it lay sparkling as clearly as on the night that he had given it to her.

"Catherine," he whispered, knowing that she would hear him. He opened his suede pouch and gently placed the crystal inside, next to his rose. The crystal and the rose - the symbols of their love. He sat, gazing in wonder around the cave. A place so hated, so feared, only a short time ago, now a place blessed - a shrine to their love.

A soft breeze made the torchlight flicker, softly brushed his hair like gentle fingers, and in that breeze echoed Catherine's voice.

"Forever, Vincent, forever."

END