

# Help Me Make It Through The Night

by Mary Moulden

The pain had been a roaring flame, consuming her, blinding her to almost everything else. Now, although it did not seem less, it was beginning to localise. She was no longer one overwhelming hurt, but a person with many individual hurts. Thought began to reinstate itself, and a sense of identity. She tried to console herself with the idea that that must show she was better. But 'better' was not a word she would ever have chosen to describe the way she felt now. \

She remembered something a policewoman had said to her once, making conversation while waiting to go into court. "I've had punches, kicks, knives. It goes with the territory. But don't ever get yourself beaten up by someone who knows what they're doing. Because that'll make you re-define your ideas of pain."

Those men had known what they were doing. She'd thought she was dying, but now she knew that no bones were broken, and there wasn't even much blood. No need for a doctor. Fractures and stitches were incontrovertible, nice solid evidence if a case went to trial. But bruises? Laughed out of court ...

Chandler, stop thinking like a lawyer. Better still, stop thinking at all.

Oh ... unbelievable. One physical sensation that was a comfort, not a torment. The cool cloth on her forehead and, more, Vincent's hand stroking her hair, his nearness. How strange it was to see him inside the apartment, where he had never been before. As if he had caught the thought, he straightened; backed away. She started up.

"Vincent! Don't go! I need you close."

He came back to her side. "I'll watch over you. Don't worry. Sleep now." Again he backed away, but only to the corner of the room. She no longer feared that he would go. But there were other fears. Sleep? If only ...

"Vincent? Can you ... go to my front door. Fix the bolt ... chain ... Make sure ... they don't come back."

She shivered at the memory. If they came back with Vincent here ... She had a frightening vision of bloodshed. Frightening, because part of her wanted to see it, wanted revenge ... No. She put away the thought. Due process of law, that was what she stood for. But they'd better not come back ...

She heard Vincent moving about in the other room and, once his great silhouette passed outside on the terrace. As he returned to the bedroom, the chill Autumn wind wafted the drapes and she shivered again. With only the barest hesitation, Vincent closed and fastened the French door. She knew he disliked being enclosed with no escape route, but her need for security took precedence. He came and stood by the bedside.

"The door is fastened and wedged with a chair. So is the other terrace door. I found some twine and I have set trip lines on the terrace. No one can get in and if anyone tries, we'll hear them. Can you rest, now?" He touched her hand. "You're cold ..." Taking off his cloak, he made to cover her, but her gesture stopped him.

"I need to get comfortable ..." She almost laughed at the word, but pain stopped her. "Vincent, please, go to that end closet. Look in the ... in the middle drawer. At the bottom. Pyjamas ... they're a horrible shade of purple ... Nancy sent them to me as a joke, when we had that big freeze ... They're warm."

Vincent followed her directions, opening the drawer and examining the contents, uneasy at touching

her intimate garments this way. But perhaps it was a salutary lesson and might cure him of dreaming impossible dreams. Sometimes he forgot the unbridgeable gulf that divided him from Catherine. The image before his eyes now, of his great, hairy claw-hands sorting through her delicate lace and satin, told him so dearly that she was not for him, that they were of different worlds that could never touch. His throat tightened in pain, but he ruthlessly suppressed it. This was no time for self-pity. Catherine needed him and whatever she needed, he would give. He found the pyjamas and closed the drawer.

Catherine had shifted painfully and was now sitting up on the edge of the bed. Vincent had taken off her jacket when he brought her in here. Her shoes had gone; they must be lying on the floor somewhere. She was plucking feebly at her blouse collar when Vincent came back to her side, but her fingers were too shaky to manage the buttons.

"I'm sorry, Vincent. You'll have to help me." He did not move and she looked up at him. "You did it for me once before. Vincent ... please?"

Unhappy at having made her plead, he knelt quickly before her and started work on the collar, not altogether steady himself. He glanced up once and met her eyes, regarding him with gratitude and trust.

"In the tunnels," he said softly, "All the adults take turns at helping to put the little ones to bed. Some of the children say they like the way my hands tickle."

"The ones with good taste." Her bruised lips curved into a smile, and as he undid the last button, she twisted around slightly to let him lift the blouse from her shoulders and slide it off. When she remained turned away from him, he took the hint and unhooked her bra. Not wanting to ask too much of him, Catherine eased the garment off, not attempting to hide her body from him. Two deep scratches scored across one breast, where a kick had driven buttons through to her flesh.

A growl rumbled in Vincent's chest when he saw the injury. Forcing himself to calmness, he picked up the antiseptic that he had used on her facial cuts and, with a fresh cotton pad he very gently cleaned the scratches, making sure they were dry and no longer bleeding before he pulled the pyjama top over her head. After that, it was surprisingly easy to finish undressing her, to help her into the pyjama bottoms, to settle her in bed and cover her.

"Thank you ... Thank you, Vincent."

He stroked her hair, wanting to kiss her forehead, but he refrained - telling himself it would hurt her bruises. As a more prosaic comfort, he rummaged the bathroom until he found some aspirin for her. She had refused a doctor; it was the best he could do for her pain.

Catherine closed her eyes. She needed sleep. It seemed unlikely that she would get any, but in fairness to Vincent, she had to try. She knew how it hurt him to see her in pain and he had done so much for her. Everything, except - no. It would be unfair to ask him ...

Vincent had been standing by the bedside, looking down at her. Now suddenly he turned away, back to the closet he had opened earlier. Pulling down a big plaid travel rug from a top shelf, he spread it over her. Catherine appreciated the gesture, although the chill that gripped her was as much emotional as physical ...

But Vincent knew that too. Quickly, as though not allowing himself time to think, he climbed on to the other side of the bed and stretched himself close to her. He lay on top of the bedclothes, but pulled the edge of the rug over him so that it would reflect his own warmth back to her. To Catherine, the feel of his body against hers, even with the thickness of the duvet between them, was so incredibly comforting that she cried out with sheer relief.

"Oh, Vincent ... that's wonderful. Stay close ..."

He was on his side, facing her. He softly laid his arm across her body and, after a moment, drew his leg over hers, unable to deny to himself that this contact was the balm she needed. Catherine turned her head to look into his face, so close beside her.

"Vincent ... you always know ... how can I thank you?"

"Just rest, Catherine. Know that you are safe, now." He reached out to the switch and turned out the light, leaving the room lit only by the dim city-glow from the windows. "I'll be here for you."

Catherine couldn't rest, not quite yet. "Vincent ... you'll have to leave before it gets light. If I'm asleep, wake me before you go." He did not answer. Catherine thought he looked troubled, but it was too dark to be sure. "Please, Vincent. I don't want to just wake up and find you gone."

He sighed. "Very well, Catherine."

And only then could she relax and give her battered body the rest it craved.

It was not to be expected that she would sleep well. She might doze for half an hour, to be woken by fearful dreams, or by pain as she tried to shift position. Vincent would soothe her and she would drift uneasily away again. Once, she had to go to the bathroom and he guided her shaky steps to the door, but left her to go in alone, as she wished, then steered her back to bed and covered her carefully. He hardly seemed to sleep at all. Just once, when her own awakening had been gradual and not abrupt, she felt that the arm across her lay with more weight than before, heard his breathing slower and deeper. It was worth something, even with that beating, to feel the tenderness that she felt then, as he slept at her side. Whatever evil there might be in the world, a world that held Vincent was a good place. As though his sleep entered her soul, she slipped away at last into peaceful rest.

"Catherine." His voice, so gentle. "Catherine." But this was not a dream ...

She opened her eyes. He knelt at the bedside, his head level with her own, a soft light gleaming on his hair.

"You told me to wake you," he said apologetically. "I should leave now." Her face must have shown more than she intended, for he bowed his head, then looked at her again. "I'll stay, if you want me to."

Above ... in the day? No, that was too much a trap for him. That he should even suggest it was astonishing.

"No, Vincent. You have to be back Below, and I have to go to work today. If someone wants so much to warn me off, then I must be finding my way close to the truth. I want you to talk to Laura again. Make sure she understands what she may be getting into, if she testifies."

"She knows. Remember that she saw the murder and was pursued by the killer. But Laura has courage and a desire for justice. As you do, Catherine." Bending his head, he sighed, then slowly rose to his feet.

Stiffly, Catherine swung herself out of bed. Vincent did not attempt to dissuade her, knowing that she would want to lock the terrace door behind him. He backed away slightly and Catherine gave him a puzzled glance. She knew Vincent's tendency to be shy of physical nearness to her, but surely, after what had passed between them, he had overcome that? And yet there had been that moment, last night, when she thought he would kiss her, when she wanted him to, but something held him back. Perhaps he was simply upset that she was hurt.

Trying to lighten his mood, she smiled at him. "Don't forget those trip wires when you go out. I'd hate to see you disappear over the parapet."

He did not smile. "I have already removed them. You should be able to get another hour's sleep before you have to get ready for work." Again, the feeling that he was backing away from her. His eyes were bent on the floor.

Catherine went to him, more quickly than was wise in her present state and put her arms around him. He had to hold her then, for she might have fallen if he had not.

"Vincent, what's wrong? I ... I'm so grateful for all you've done for me. I want to thank you. Why are you putting walls between us - now?"

He raised his head, eyes closed; his breath quickening. "The ... the walls are not of my building, Catherine." She was so slender, so fragile in his arms, tiny against his massive ruggedness. Her smooth cheek pressed to the rough fabric of his tunic, fabric less rough than the hairy hide it concealed ... No, all the dreams were impossible. They were too different, in ways that went deeper than the surface. They could never be together, not really. Even as she clung to him, she was running counter to her true nature. Sooner or later she would feel the call of her own kind. He knew it in his heart and yet if he tried to explain it to her, words would fail. She would not understand, for she was not ready to understand that. She would be hurt ... already she was troubled, sensing his pain, wanting to know the reason. Well, one reason he could tell her. True enough in itself, although it was only part of his present turmoil.

"I ... do not deserve thanks from you. I failed you, Catherine."

"Failed me! Vincent, you couldn't have done more for me!"

Releasing the embrace, he gripped her chin and turned her face to the light, quickly and almost roughly. Various swellings puffed her cheek and jaw, while a scab was forming on the cut lip.

"You should not have had to endure this. The one thing I can do for you is use my strength to safeguard you. And yet, I allowed this to happen."

"There was no warning ... there was no way you could have stopped it. Vincent, nothing would please me more than to go through life with you at my side every moment. But the world we live in won't allow that. Why must you judge yourself so much more harshly than you would ever judge anyone else?"

"If you ... could see inside me ... the dark places ... you would know the answer to that."

And then he was gone, before she could comfort him, before she could tell him that she too, knew the meaning of inner darkness. Catherine, sighing, fastened the door, but stayed looking through the glass at the city. A hint of grey was washing the sky, not lessening the shadows beneath, seeming to make them stronger by weakening the city lights. The day belonged to Catherine and the night to Vincent, but this pre-dawn coldness was hostile to both.

"Day and night - that's us," she muttered to the empty room. "Is that what's tormenting you, Vincent? But somewhere there's a twilight that both of us can share. You'll see that too, some day." She lightly stroked her chin, where his fingers had rested. "Hear my heart on your homeward journey. Feel how grateful, how glad I am that you were here for me when I needed you. Vincent, perhaps a time will come when you'll face a long, dark night. Perhaps you'll need help to get through and find the dawn. If that day comes, Vincent, think of me. Because I will be there for you. Always."

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