

In All Shapes And Sizes

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



It had been almost a week since she'd seen him last. The emergency repair works in the lower chambers needed his full, undistracted presence on site. Of course, his wife of eight years understood it perfectly, and went on with her days as usual, doing her work Below and Above and looking after their sons. However, as the days went on, despite feeling his presence constantly in her heart, the longing was starting to take its toll.

"Mum, do you think Dad will make it in time for Christmas?" The nine-year-old Jacob's soft voice reached her ears.

The beloved sound changed Catherine's absent-minded look into a focused one again. The same question had been occupying her mind for days now.

"I'm sure he will do his best to make it," she stated, reassuring herself as well, and fondly stroked his blond head.

The boy nodded, although not entirely convinced.

"Have you finished the gift you've been making for him?" his mother inquired with a smile.

"I'm almost done. Cullen is helping me finish it tomorrow, just in time."

The pride on the child's face warmed Catherine's heart, mirroring her own maternal pride.

"I'm sure he will love it," she remarked, knowing for certain that Vincent would cherish any gift given out of love, no matter how small or simple.

Suddenly, Jacob changed the topic, his eyes coming alight. "Can I show grandpa the book uncle Peter brought me?"

"Of course, you can, darling," his mother replied, amused. "Take Charlie with you; it's dinner time soon. I'll catch up with you as soon as I put away the washed clothes."

"Come on, Charlie; I'll race you," Jacob turned to his younger brother, whose nose was stuck in his own book. The boy immediately put aside his well-loved copy of *Winnie the Pooh* and jumped up, beaming.

"I'll beat you this time," the youngster challenged his sibling.

Before Catherine managed to warn them to be careful, the boys ran out of the chamber. She shook her head and chuckled. Suddenly, she couldn't help but imagine Devin and Vincent many years ago as children. Her husband told her many stories about those times, making her laugh at most of them.

No matter how earnest, composed, and dignified Vincent was as an adult, he had a great, albeit subtle, sense of humour, and at times, Catherine could even spot a hint of mischief, especially when playing with their sons. The leonine man's charm wasn't only in his wisdom, deep intelligence, great empathy and strong charisma but also in his rare, nevertheless present, playful ways - to his wife's great delight.

She closed her eyes and sighed before trying to focus on her task again. *I'll never make it to dinner while daydreaming*, Catherine berated herself and picked up the wicker basket full of clean clothes.

The hours spent in her private legal practice above earlier that day were a welcome distraction, but now that her brain wasn't occupied with family law, her focus was constantly shifting to thoughts about the man deep below their chamber, working tirelessly for their community.

Her hands mechanically opened and closed drawers on a low, pine chest of drawers, putting away the clean garments of her children. Then she moved to the heavy vintage wardrobe, formerly belonging solely to Vincent but now shared with his wife.

Catherine's eyes browsed through pieces of his clothing, each reminding her of the man who had become an inseparable part of herself more than eleven years ago. Suddenly, her look stopped almost at the bottom of the top drawer, spotting the two familiar light-grey, quilted vests.

A flood of memories washed over Catherine all at once as her fingers gently tested the soft surface of the fabric of one of them.

The very first time she saw Vincent's face... How could she ever forget that day? The initial shock, but an almost immediate sense of wonder not long after and that peculiar yet elating feeling of the start of something beautiful... She could still remember Vincent's shaky breath when her hand touched his chest, covered by the vest, for the first time, back then at the threshold. The physical contact sent shivers down his spine, but her own heart was stimulated in an unexpected way, causing a body reaction like she'd never known before. He was still a stranger to her, yet he was already so much more...

A blissful smile appeared on her face when another memory crossed her mind - returning to the Home Tunnels from the 'bowels of the Earth', after Paracelsus kidnapped her. The journey back took them more than two days, and Catherine spent two peaceful nights in Vincent's arms. Nothing more and nothing less, just a peaceful sleep, and yet it was the first time she had the man she loved for herself for more than just a few precious moments.

Thinking about it now, Catherine was astonished that Vincent even allowed them (or mostly *himself*) such close physical contact at that stage of their relationship. However, the events preceding those two nights were too intense to deny them that simple but such meaningful pleasure. His vest was present as well, adding to Catherine's feeling of safety and warmth as she lay in Vincent's arms.

A sudden thought crossed her mind; she wondered if her husband was warm deep down in the lower chambers. Christmas was around the corner, and winter in New York was especially cold that year; its icy breath hit the tunnels with full force. Then again, wasn't it warmer, the lower underground you descended? And she hadn't felt any unusual discomfort coming from Vincent in the days he had been away.

Catherine sighed and tried to focus on finishing her task of putting away the remaining garments into the drawer. However, her eyes kept glancing at the vests, returning her to more memories where they played a prominent role. How strange for a simple object to hold so much significance in one's life...

The air had been a bit chilly on that early morning of her return from Westport, when she had been unable and unwilling to stay away from Vincent any longer. The short separation, that almost broke them both, ended with Catherine's rapturous run through the park, landing in the arms of the man that had set her free, but would have waited for her until the end of time.

Closing her eyes, she remembered the soft feel of his vest as she eagerly buried her face in it, standing at the drainage tunnel for a long time with him until the birds in the trees commenced their early morning songs. How comforting was the warmth, the seemingly inexplicable sensation of shimmering and floating each time she rubbed her face in the quilted fabric! The love pulsing so strongly in her veins left an invisible trace on it every time she let out a breath or a sigh or gently kissed the place where his heart was. That morning, she knew for certain that

what they shared reached far beyond anything she had ever imagined, when thinking about love.

Catherine suddenly laughed. *It's hopeless; I'll never make it to dinner!*

How was it possible to feel like this still after so many years? Maybe her father could have answered this question for her, had he still been alive. Maybe love wasn't just a feeling; maybe it was an expression of a need, as strong and empowering as it was unquenchable. A need that could sometimes be overpowering...

Catherine's resistance finally failed. Her hands carefully reached for Vincent's favourite garment, taking it out of the drawer. She rubbed her cheek in its softness, breathing in the beloved scent still lingering in it, as well as the fresh scent of the lavender washing soap she had used on it recently. Her longing betrayed her once again.

A memory of a different kind resurfaced in her mind's eye - a memory of a frightening, cold and almost fatal night when she only just managed to cheat death, almost drowning in the lake. That night was one of the most terrifying experiences Catherine had ever had, and yet, it ended in a way that let her senses reel every time she remembered it...

How often had she returned to that moment until she finally joined her life with Vincent's? The heat of the moment, the rush of emotions, and long-restrained desire almost carried them over the edge that night on the balcony. With Catherine rescued and alive, and no more danger lurking around every corner, they both let go of their self-control for once. Vincent surrendered for the very first time - the kiss that followed their reunion was initiated by him...

Nothing more happened that night, and yet, it was an enormous leap in their relationship. The wall of restrictions and life-long conviction, raised by Vincent (and supported for years by his adoptive father), fell apart like a house of cards, never to be built again. Every breath, every touch they shared since then, was much more personal, much deeper, much more... sensual...

Catherine remembered that night as if it was yesterday. The distinctive manly fragrance of the man she loved beguiled her senses, and she was barely able to contain her excitement. Clutching the vest desperately, she suddenly found it restraining and wished she could get it off Vincent, get *everything* off him... She was so engrossed in the moment and her own emotions that she was startled when two strong arms suddenly embraced her from behind. Dropping the vest and turning around as fast as she could, there was no way of remaining calm for her.

"Vincent!" Catherine exclaimed, overjoyed, pulling him as close to her as she could.

Indeed, the leonine man himself was holding her as if they hadn't seen each other for years.

"The pain of parting is nothing to the joy of meeting again,⁽¹⁾" he whispered hoarsely into her hair and closed his eyes, smiling blissfully.

It took only a few seconds until the mutual longing resulted in a long and deep kiss. Only then were they able to relax and finally look at each other.

"I was beginning to worry if you'd make it for Christmas," Catherine spoke first, still in his arms. Her fingers ran gently through his golden hair that bore traces of dust and sweat. The emergency repair in the lower chambers obviously required hard labour.

"It looked doubtful at one point," Vincent replied, who could not get enough of the sight of her glowing face, "but Mouse was relentless. He said there was no way he was to miss William's Christmas cake." His soft laugh was music to Catherine's ears as she shared his amusement.

"I wonder what motivated him more - his sweet tooth or the thought of Jamie and their baby girl," she remarked, smiling.

Vincent tilted his head. "I think it might have been both."

They laughed, and Catherine buried her face in his chest again, not minding the sweat and dirt he hadn't had time to get rid of yet. She liked his 'working-man' scent.

"The boys will be over the moon to see you," she stated, "and Father... and everyone," she laughed.

"We are all grateful that we could have returned in time to spend Christmas with those we love," Vincent replied and pulled her even closer, kissing her temple.

"But I think I should have a little... clean-up before I meet other fellow human beings."

He chuckled, and Catherine pulled back to look into his eyes again.

"Can I be of any assistance?" she inquired with a cheeky smile, raising her eyebrows.

His smile widened, and a mischievous sparkle brightened his deep-set eyes.

"Always," he replied and waited until Catherine's lips almost met his again. "You could bring me some dinner..."

Another Christmas Day came Above, just as in the tunnels Below. People in both worlds shared a table with their loved ones or offered company to those who had none, expressing their gratitude for the blessings they received in the year just passed.

William's culinary mastery was praised once more; the faces of children were alight again with excitement and joy, while the adults smiled, revelling in their glee and appreciating the company of their near and dear. The lost ones were

remembered with fondness and love; the newborn ones were gratefully welcomed once more. The world seemed at peace - at least for a few days.

"Is anything wrong, Jake?" Catherine asked her older son, observing the earnest expression on his face. The boy's sudden change of mood didn't go unnoticed by his father either.

"What's troubling you, son?" Vincent inquired as well, while putting away the volume of *The Nutcracker* he had been reading to the boys just a moment ago.

Jacob knitted his brows, absently pulling the thick quilted blanket up almost to his face.

"Is everyone happy at Christmas?" he asked the question that had bothered him for a while.

Catherine exchanged looks with Vincent before looking back at her offspring. "I wish I could answer you with a yes, but that is unfortunately not always the case, darling," she replied truthfully. "There are many people for whom this time is sad because they would love to share it with someone else, but they can't."

"Why?" Jacob asked.

"Because they either lost all their loved ones by some sad occasion, or they lost their way in life and ended up alone. Some lost their work and home, some lost everything, not always by their own fault, and it's hard for them to find the right path again."

The boy's sapphire-blue eyes reflected deep thought.

"Like some people who came down here," he remarked.

"Yes," Catherine agreed with a sad smile and looked at Vincent again.

"That's why Mary and Olivia make new quilts, and William cooks extra meals to give to the people who need it Above each Christmas," the boy stated.

"And Daddy, Mouse and Cullen help to carry it all up top," Charlie added eagerly.

"Yes," Vincent replied softly. "We receive so much from good people Above throughout the year that it's only right to give something back to those in need even more than we are." He glanced at the colourful quilt his sons snuggled in.

"This blanket was made by people who care for you deeply, including your mother."

He glanced at Catherine, meeting her loving smile. "It makes you feel warm, safe and loved. It will always remind you that there is someone thinking of you and wanting you to be well. Those people Above feel the same way when they receive our gifts, at least for a little while. What we share with them is like a warm blanket that covers them and says that we think of them, and they are not alone. No one is ever alone as long as at least one person thinks about them," he concluded with a serene smile.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Jacob?"

"When you help carry the things Above next year, can I go with you and help too?"

Vincent's eyes brightened with pride and affection. "I would love nothing more," he answered with a heartfelt smile.

"Me too?" Charlie didn't want to be left behind.

"You too," his father agreed and playfully ruffled his younger son's nest of hair. "But now it's time to rest. It has been an eventful day for all of us."

Both parents got up, tucking in their treasures and kissing them good night. Then they walked out of the bedchamber of their children, neighbouring their main private quarters, where Vincent had spent most of his life. The man of the chamber was about to get changed for the night when he noticed the expression on Catherine's face - she seemed miles away.

"Are you all right, Catherine?" he asked, touching her arm gently.

"Yes...", she answered with a smile, returning to the present. "I was just thinking... about what you said about the blanket."

She turned to face him, and her eyes briefly examined the familiar quilted garment he was wearing.

"It reminds me of this vest," she said with a shy smile, and her fingers tenderly ran along the fabric covering his broad chest. "I was thinking about how many moments of comfort, warmth and... love... are connected with it in my memory..." She chuckled, shaking her head. "When you returned the other day and, well... caught me---"

"In the act with it?" Vincent asked, smiling.

"Yes." She laughed, but then the look in her emerald eyes softened. "I was remembering all those moments. Every moment when I knew that you were thinking of me, looking after me, loving me... unconditionally..."

His hand reached for her cheek. "With or without it, *always*," he said reassuringly, the blue in his eyes melting her like butter. His words earned him a tender kiss.

Then Vincent's eyes wandered to the table by his side and the object proudly displayed on it.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Catherine asked, with an incredulous smile, admiring the new addition to her husband's most cherished possessions. "I had no idea Jake had an interest in this craft. He's still so young..."

"He's got the patience, perseverance and that special touch in his hands needed for it. And most of all, he has a strong will - once he sets his mind onto something, he follows it through until the end, no matter what." He turned to Catherine, tilting his head with an amused smile. "That reminds me of someone."

Catherine laughed and leaned her head against his chest, observing Jacob's Christmas gift to his father. Her eyes suddenly glistened.

"It's like going full circle," she said quietly. "Do you remember how he never wanted to leave that rocking horse you made him for his first birthday?"

"How could I ever forget? I gave it to him the day I heard him say it for the first time..."

Vincent felt a burning sensation in his eyes when he remembered the day he heard his firstborn speak for the first time.

"Daddy!"

Such a simple word, and yet, it was the most beautiful word Vincent could have ever have imagined at that moment. It meant hope, a new purpose in his life, reaching something he never even dreamed of could be his; it meant *everything*...

"Cullen might not get rid of Jake for some time." Catherine chuckled. "He was so excited talking about how they worked on it. I think he found his new hobby."

Vincent smiled and leaned his head against her crown. "And I think Cullen might have one more pupil on his hands soon."

Indeed, little Charles would follow his older brother everywhere, sharing their boyish adventures, joys and upsets, learning along as they went through life side by side, to their parents' delight.

As the clock on the mantelpiece struck ten, and the shadows on the walls cast by the candles danced in the tender breeze once more, Vincent's hand touched the smoothed surface of the wooden keepsake box, sitting on the table. His fingers glided along the edges until they reached the small figure of a horse, attached to the centre of the lid. It was carved and hand-painted a bit roughly and uneven, but that didn't matter to him at all.

All Vincent could see was the love that created this special Christmas gift, and he cherished it more than all the treasures in the world.

Who being loved is poor? ⁽²⁾

When he thought of the two children sleeping contentedly in the other chamber and then looked into the shining eyes of the woman by his side, he knew the answer once again.



(1) Charles Dickens: *Nicholas Nickleby*

(2) Oscar Wilde