

Only One Rose

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



The twinkling light of a sea of candles illuminated the large circular chamber. He was lighting the last white candle when a smile graced his unusual but magnetic face, and without turning around, he said gently:

“Do you like it?”

The one he addressed this question to was standing in awe at the entrance to the rocky chamber. Her hands were pressed to her chest, as if trying to prevent her heart from beating too fast.

“Vincent, it’s... beautiful!”

His smile widened, and he turned around to see her. His heart skipped a beat. She looked truly beautiful tonight - in her long white woollen dress, with sleeves covering her arms right up to half her small hands. The dress was decorated only with delicately-crocheted roses around her low-cut neckline, her fine, sand-coloured hair falling freely over her shoulders. The only piece of jewellery she wore was the crystal Vincent had given her on their first anniversary. It was peacefully resting on the lowest part of her chest.

Even after several years of knowing and loving her, his feelings never diminished in strength; his impression of her remained the same. The pure sight of her, the way her eyes lit up when seeing him, her smile which illuminated everything wherever she went, the warmth radiating from her so strongly... No, it would never change; his love would never change as long as he lived and breathed.

"I'm glad you like it," Vincent said, profound joy colouring his voice. "Mary gave me some extra candles to use."

He held his hand out to her. "Come, Catherine," he added quietly.

A shiver ran down her spine when he spoke her name. The quiet, gravelly velvet of his voice had never ceased to stun and enchant her, ever since she had heard it the first time on that frightening night a long time ago. His face and hands might have been more like the one of a lovely majestic lion, but his voice mirrored his beautiful human soul, his heart filled with deep love and gentle care.

Catherine smiled widely and accepted the offered hand gladly.

He led her to the maroon-coloured, wooden dining table, carved by some very patient and skilled hands a long time ago, ornamented with delicate flowers around its edges. A set of two antique, polished silver candle holders, with lit candles, was set in the middle of it. White China plates with golden rose patterns, medieval-looking copper chalices and the silver cutlery, accompanying them, were all set for two. What made her heart stop for a moment was a single red rose, in a narrow white porcelain vase next to one of the plates.

She remembered the countless nights when she had found a single red rose on the balcony of her former 18th-floor New York apartment, when she still lived there. Roses had always been her favourite flowers, and Vincent knew it, but it always warmed her heart whenever he gave her one. She used to receive dozens of rose bouquets in her previous life, but none of them made her feel so warm inside, so valued, so cherished, so loved. There was something very personal about a single rose, like hearing *There is only one love for me...*

Catherine stroked the rose gently and whispered, smiling. "Thank you, Vincent."

It was almost impossible for her to look away from his gaze, as she always felt nigh on hypnotised by his look; she managed to say four simple yet meaningful words.

"Four years ago, tonight..."

Vincent's eyes were full of warmth and love when he repeated after her.

"Four years ago, tonight..."

He took both of her hands into his and gently pulled her closer.

"Four years ago, the greatest gift of all had been given to me... A dream I had hardly dared to dream, the world of possibilities opened at my doorstep. My life was changed forever..."

Vincent's voice faded with the last words. He didn't want her to see it, but a sudden shudder went through him. Thinking how his dream had almost vanished into eternity, not even a year before, his emotions got the better of him.

Catherine noticed the slight trembling of his hands. "Vincent, are you all right?" she inquired with concern.

He smiled and shook his head lightly. "I am all right. I only remembered how I almost lost you, almost lost it all..."

His face grew serious again and... ashamed. "I will never forgive myself for not being able to save you sooner."

Catherine gently caressed his cheek - it radiated warmth and comfort.

"But you did in the end, and that is all that matters." She smiled at him, and her eyes tried to persuade him that it was indeed all right, that the nightmare they had to endure for almost a year had ended. After overcoming all the past obstacles, they were finally having a happy life - together.

He took her in his arms and hugged her tightly, leaning his face against the top of her head, breathing in the flowery, sweet scent of her hair. Catherine returned his embrace even tighter. She always thought she could get lost in his arms - willingly, though. It felt like the safest place in the world, where no pain and no harm could reach; she felt as if they became one being, with one heartbeat, and felt a slight ache whenever they broke apart. Inhaling deeply his musky scent, with a touch of candles and leather, she couldn't stop smiling.

Vincent was the first one to break the blissful silence.

"I have a feeling William will be quite unhappy if we let him wait any longer."

Catherine chuckled and looked at him, amused. "I believe you are right. He said he was making a special effort with our dinner tonight, saying that *you* have something to do with it, too." She raised her eyebrows teasingly.

Vincent's smile almost resembled a grin - an expression of a rare feeling of pride in himself.

"I was a mere inspiration. All he needed was a few hints from some old cookbooks, which I borrowed from Mary's bookshelves." Suddenly, he got a little shy again. "It's nothing like the fine dinners you were used to in your world, but still, I wanted to make it special... and I hope you'll like it."

Catherine smiled lovingly and replied with no hesitation.

"I am sure I would love it even if it was just that wonderful freshly-baked bread William is such a master at!"

Vincent smiled at her and thought again how incredibly lucky he was to have this woman loving him. After a moment, he reluctantly disengaged himself from her arms and set out to William's kitchen, on the mission to pick up their dinner.

* * *

Catherine watched him walk away, with a wide smile, and realised that she hadn't been able to stop smiling for months. In the past, their love brought not only joy but also pain to both of them and a lot of tears were shed on both sides. But now that they could finally be together, everything seemed to have fallen into place, and to her surprise, it had been easier than she thought.

At first, Vincent was concerned she might miss her work for the D.A.'s Office, helping people, and that she might miss her friends Above. But soon enough, they both realised that she was truly happy down Below - looking after the tunnel people, sharing their life and daily tasks, spending time with them, sharing with them the joys and pains of their past lives. All this gave Catherine a new purpose at the time when her body, and also her heart, needed healing the most. She still regularly met her friends from Above and it took only a few months before she bought a brownstone at Central Park to share with Vincent as their second home. She opened her own legal practice, helping those who were overlooked, helpless or lacked the means to ask for help in higher places.

Where there is a will, there is a way, Catherine thought.

She felt truly happy herself; everything she ever dreamed of finally landed in her lap. Not a day went by when she wouldn't cherish every single moment of happiness in her new life with the love of her life - the man who saved her and changed her in the best possible way anyone could be changed - by making her stronger, bolder, more empathic, and wiser than she ever was before. Catherine loved him before she had even seen him, had only heard his voice, when he was nursing her after the terrible attack and her face was badly cut. Despite being scared when seeing his face for the first time, putting down the hood of his cloak to look at him closer, she realised there was nothing to fear. She looked into his eyes and knew that there was only goodness, kindness, wisdom, and sheer beauty as she had never known it before. Vincent's face reminded her of Aslan, the beautiful lion king from Narnia, with his warmth and knowledge of thousands of years, and the always-sincere eyes that could tell no lie, were always caring and engaging, always deeply filled with love - for her....

Those almost nine months when they were forced to be apart during her kidnapping and then recovery, were the most painful months of their lives. For Vincent, because he temporarily lost the psychic bond with her and was terrified for her life, desperate to find her - he then had to deal with her supposed death.

And for Catherine, because until the night on the rooftop, she was physically and mentally aching for his presence; for her desperate wish to reveal to him the most incredible and beautiful secret she hadn't had the chance to reveal before. A terrible fear held her prisoner - that he would never get the chance to know, if something happened to her...

The only thing that kept her alive in those two months after he found her, was only the, at first, unconscious thought of Vincent, the reality of being able to see and touch his lovely face again, and the hope to find their son and become a true family...

* * *

"My lady, your dinner is served."

Vincent broke the flow of Catherine's thoughts by gliding into the chamber, smiling and carrying a large serving tray carefully.

She walked towards the table. Watching him at work made her face glow and she felt a blush burning her cheeks. Catherine didn't know why exactly, or maybe she did but was too

embarrassed to admit it - he looked very focused and in total command, while he was transferring a few covered bowls and a carafe onto the table. Focused and... attractive.

Yes, most people Above would very probably think her crazy for seeing him like this, but the truth was, Vincent was a man in every sense of the word - tall and strong, yet graceful in his moves. When protecting the ones he loved, or the ones in need, his animal side made him terrifying and unleashed a brutal force. And yet, in reality, he was a gentle, pure-hearted, kind, generous, merciful, and very passionate soul. There was an inexplicable charisma of peace and comfort surrounding him, and he was very charming. Moreover, Catherine truly loved the beautiful shapes of his leonine face. Ever since they had shared their first real kiss, she'd felt an even stronger desire for his nearness whenever they were apart. They were like two magnets - almost impossible to pull apart and always pulling towards each other when separated.

Catherine sensed he must have read her thoughts by her blushing and smiled shyly, her eyes wandering from to table to his eyes and back.

"Well... let's see what is on the menu, my dearest Lancelot."

"Lancelot was fatally flawed, destined never to find the grail."

"Still, he was the greatest knight of all..."

His eyes smiled warmly, remembering their conversation from a long time ago when with a simple metaphor, she expressed what he meant to her, better than a hundred words would. And at the time of his greatest self-doubt, when he needed to hear it the most.

Catherine was a bit more composed now, and his gaze pierced her eyes. It was the same look she saw that day when he kissed her finger, after she pricked it on a rosebush on her balcony. Back then, after a few intense seconds gazing at her eyes and lips, he pulled back as in apologizing for forgetting himself. That fire in those deep blue eyes, the look of wanting, longing... How she wished that night that the knock at the door right after hadn't happened....

Vincent pulled a chair out for her and hinted to her to sit down. She accepted and took a seat next to him. He took the lid off the largest bowl, and the smell of beef broth hit her nose most delightfully. She closed her eyes and breathed in the delicious smell.

"The same one as the first time..."

Vincent smiled and his heart leapt, knowing she remembered. He poured some of the soup onto her plate.

Of course, she remembered. How could she forget her first stay down Below, when he brought her there, saving her life for the very first time? The beef broth was the first meal she had, after waking up, after Father had treated her facial injuries. She had slept for almost a whole day. Vincent fed her then, with the patience and care she only ever received from her mother. Catherine couldn't explain it, but already then, she felt something move in her heart. She knew that this man was someone who could be trusted without a doubt and believed every word he said.

Vincent picked up the carafe and poured some red wine into her chalice. They very rarely drank alcohol, not because it wouldn't be possible to get it from the Helpers up Above, but because it wasn't a habit down Below. Apart from Winterfest, Christmas and Thanksgiving, special food and drink indulgences played very little part among the inhabitants there. They

enjoyed simple, yet hearty meals and drinks much more and felt grateful for it because they had all they needed. And Catherine learned to appreciate the taste of the clear, fresh water from the underground spring near the waterfalls, where she loved sitting with Vincent. The herbal teas he liked so much became a welcome part of her everyday life as well.

“Wine...” Catherine exhaled in surprise. She didn’t crave it, but in the past, she did like to have a glass or two regularly. As a mother of an infant though, alcohol was out of her menu. Now that she wasn’t breastfeeding anymore, it wasn’t such a bad idea.

Of course, he knew...

Vincent poured himself some wine, too and raised his chalice.

“To all the good and beautiful that is still to come, and to all those we love and are grateful to have in our lives,” he said, looking at Catherine warmly.

“To love, in all its beauty, shapes and forms,” she replied and took a sip without breaking eye contact with him.

Usually, they would talk while sharing meals, discuss the latest news from Above and down Below, talk about the books they read and classical music they listened to in the tunnels under the park. And of course, about Jacob. Jacob whose journey started in great pain for them, but who was now the reason for their indescribable joy and blessing. The little boy gave their already extraordinary lives a completely new meaning and value.

Tonight though, they ate in silence, while engrossed in each other’s eyes, feeling absolute peace inside, as words were never necessary to express how they felt about one another. It was always in the eyes and it was getting stronger day by day, month by month, year by year...

When they finished their dinner, Catherine suddenly rose to her feet.

“I almost forgot! Wait here,” she cried with excitement and a huge smile and ran out of the chamber.

* * *

Vincent felt a new wave of warmth spreading around his heart. How beautiful she was in her excitement, how innocent in her thoughts, how brave in her actions... He still couldn’t believe he was worthy of the immense joy given through her and Jacob.

Out of anything else in the world, the last thing Vincent would ever have imagined was becoming a father. He, who was stunned, yet terrified, of being unable to control his emotions when Catherine kissed him for the first time... Although at the same time, he felt he could burst with joy. He was terrified that if they ever become even closer, he might hurt her.

It took an almost tragic occasion when Vincent almost went mad and was on death’s door for Catherine to do the least expected thing and love him back to life, in a truly literal meaning... At first, he couldn’t remember it at all. But with time, as his memory came back, he could recall that moment perfectly: the way she was kissing him, as if she wanted to give him her last breath to keep him alive, or take his last one to die with him. The feel of her gentle touch on his body, their intertwined fingers pulling them closer than ever before. His racing heart,

beating faster with every second, melting under her caressing hands. His growing desire for her and at the same time, growing fear he might do her harm, but tamed by deep feelings of love and joy coming across from her through their bond. And then the waves of indescribable excitement and bliss that followed...

No, he had not hurt her. He fell asleep and into oblivion from exhaustion right after, but he could remember now. Despite forgetting almost everything and everyone around him after it happened, for some time, she was the only person he remembered and had lost no feelings toward her.

"Do you feel like a stranger with me?"

"No, not with you. You are the woman I love," he replied that day and meant it with every single fibre of his being.

Catherine had been the truest constant in his life, ever since the day he found her. For years, he had been reading poems and stories about love, and yet, he could never totally grasp the strength of their meaning until he met his future wife. Then, all lines made perfect sense, and he knew that he was lost to love forever, to *her* love...

* * *

"I'm back!" Catherine cried happily when she appeared at the chamber entrance again.

Vincent's heart skipped a beat again - she looked like an angel in the candlelight. He let out a quiet sigh, and his eyes were drinking her in, trying to imprint a picture of every trace, every line, every bit of her into his memory. He had thousands of pictures of his wife stored there already, but there seemed to be ever more space there for her.

She approached him and handed him a small tin box. Her eyes were bright in sudden expectation.

"Open it," she prompted him.

Vincent took the box and lifted the lid carefully.

"I was planning to give you this as a starter, but I got so caught up in your charm that I forgot," she teased him.

Amazement lit up his face. "Caviar??"

Catherine smiled gently. "I remembered you telling me you were offered it at that Halloween party with Bridget O'Donnell, but that you were so stunned that you didn't try any. I wanted to treat you to something special at least once. For everything you've done for and been to me... For all that you deserve... For all the courage, strength, poetry, music... For Jacob... For your love which, along with our son, keeps bringing me more happiness than anything I've ever known or could ever have imagined..."

The last words came out as a whisper, and her eyes turned misty. She wanted to tell Vincent so much to express how important and irreplaceable he had been to her, but still felt her words

were not strong enough. They could not capture the intense and deepest love she felt for him, and Catherine was worried that whatever she might say, it would not do it any justice.

Vincent was deeply moved, profoundly shaken to the core that she remembered such a small detail. But then again, he remembered every single detail she had ever told him, too. All those details created a big beautiful stained glass window in his heart, that was the woman he loved with such passion and depth.

He embraced her tightly, stroking her hair and pressing a gentle but long kiss on the top of her head. As he pulled slightly back and looked into her big green eyes, Catherine saw a tear running down his cheek. She smiled, wiped it away, then kissed him gently on the same spot. She could feel a shiver running through him, a shiver of joy.

He smiled and his moved voice was barely audible.

"It is you who deserves everything... so much more than I can ever give you..." His voice broke in the middle of the sentence.

His wife shook her head strongly.

"There is nothing, *nothing* in the world I want more than you and our son. The two of us sharing our love with him, raising him to be a good and honest man like his father is, making him happy... Vincent, I can't imagine anyone else more perfect for teaching a child love, respect, honour, honesty, generosity and kindness than *you*..."

Catherine smiled and saw that Vincent's eyes were full of tears again. She hugged him and gently stroked his long mane-like golden hair. He had suffered and endured so much for most of his life because of what he was, and it still wasn't easy for him to accept that he *did* deserve all the good and beautiful that had come to him.

After a while, she pulled slightly back from him, gently wiped the tears from his face, cupped it with both her hands and kissed him. Coming out of his reverie, Vincent returned her kiss. The sensation of how his lips felt tingled her spine.

Catherine had kissed men before in her life Above, but none of them stirred this reaction in her. It was the lightest touch of his lips that landed on hers and only then it deepened, but it was truly meaningful and intense, spread a wave of warmth around her heart, and she *felt* how much it meant to him. As their lips parted, his blue eyes gazed deeply into hers for a moment and then, with a blessed smile, Vincent embraced her again tightly, as if he was afraid that her petite frame might vanish any moment like a dream. He pressed his cheek to the top of her head.

Suddenly he raised his head and listened.

"What is it, Vincent?" Catherine asked, slightly concerned. But when she saw the corners of his mouth turning upwards, she relaxed.

"I think someone is missing you," he said with mild amusement.

Catherine laughed.

"Well, like father, like son," she said in a flirty manner, then added. "But I think he is missing *us*."

Vincent smiled gratefully at her. The fact that he could feel not only Catherine's feelings, but also Jacob's still amazed him. When he temporarily lost his bond with Catherine, he felt as if the world had crashed down on him. But later, with Jacob, it all made sense. Luckily, his bond with Catherine returned not long after they were reunited, and he found peace with himself again. It continued to fill him with immense joy and warmth.

"Catherine, you know I do love our son tremendously, but tonight, he will have to bear with Father's hopeless attempts to teach him chess prematurely and Mary's to spoil him with baby cookies. Tonight..." he paused and enjoyed the amused look on Catherine's beautiful face. "Tonight, is ours, ours only..."

He pulled her closer again so that she could feel the warmth radiating from his stubbly face and his soft breath on her skin.

The look she gave him was full of love and longing... She got lost in his arms again, willingly and passionately, as if leaving his embrace would snap a cord in her binding her to this magnificent being that bore no equal. She closed her eyes and breathed in that lovely familiar scent, with a sigh.

"How do you feel?" she asked dreamily.

"There are no words," he replied quietly.

"Try one," she smiled, with her eyes still closed, remembering the same conversation from the past.

"Blessed..." Vincent replied with a smile and closed his eyes, knowing no truer words were ever spoken.





"There may be many flowers in one's life... but only one rose."

Unknown