

# *Let Him Go*

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



*“I’m really sorry...” There was nothing more we could have done...”*

Complete silence. As if the time stopped and the world ceased on spinning. The black screen of the now switched-off monitor. The light, chilly breeze was creeping in through the half-open window and gently swaying the curtains. The semi-darkness in the sterile room perfectly reflected the emotions stirring within her...

Catherine was looking at the lifeless body of her father lying in the hospital bed. He was still connected to the life support that had kept him alive for as long as it could, but that was silent now.

She thought it was probably an appropriate time to cry, but for whatever reason, her eyes remained dry, unable to shed a single tear. The shock from the reality of it hit her like a truck, numbing her reactions. The emptiness she felt inside was chilling her to the bones, though, as she took Charles Chandler’s cold hand into hers and slowly leaned down to kiss his forehead.

“Goodbye, Daddy... I love you...” Catherine whispered, and her emerald eyes regarded the face of her parent with profound sorrow but also deep love.

A long while later, she reluctantly let go of his hand, and with a bittersweet smile and one last look at her father, she left the hospital room.

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*So this is what it feels like to be an orphan...*

Catherine closed the door of her apartment and stared into the darkness of her private space. The city lights penetrating inside through the French doors were subdued and unintrusive. She didn't feel like switching on the lamps.

Absently, she took off her coat and gloves, throwing them on the end of the bed. At the same moment, she felt a light stir at her heart, just the faintest of feeling, but it set her heart almost racing. Immediately, her eyes wandered to the French door and seeing the familiar shadow behind it, Catherine ran to open it.

One look into his eyes was enough - of course, he *knew*... And it was that moment that broke her. Silent tears wetted her cheeks when Vincent took her in his arms; wordlessly at first. He was just holding her to offer a safe shelter, for words were truly just words and could offer no consolation at such a time.

"I'm sorry, Catherine," he spoke softly after a long while, when they were just standing in a tight embrace in the late night.

Her hands tightened their hold on his waist, unwilling, or maybe afraid to lose the physical contact with him, as if releasing him would make her fall.

"I'm here," Vincent whispered into her hair and closed his eyes briefly, absorbing as much of her pain as he could to help her.

He could feel her grief only too well; it hit him at the same time as it had hit her, with crushing power. He felt helpless, though, unable to relieve her burden, knowing Catherine would have to process it all alone. And that would take time.

When she finally very slowly pulled back from him, she exhaled loudly, trying to calm herself down. Then, she looked up to seek comfort in his eyes. Those eyes that had been her anchor in the wildest storms of her life.

"Thank you," Catherine said with a shaky voice and a faint smile. "For being here..."

Feeling a lump in her throat, her eyes wandered down to his chest, and as she leaned her forehead against it, she exhaled again.

"Always..." The word he used so often before was the only answer she needed at that point, making her smile.

Vincent pressed a light kiss into her crown while still holding her.

*What can I say, Catherine; what can I do to make it easier for you?*

As if she heard him, she lifted her head, and her eyes bore into his again. The plea in them almost undid him.

"Stay?" A mere whisper, coming from her lips, but so desperate that he couldn't deny her even if he wanted to.

Vincent smiled and pulled her head closer to press a tender kiss on her temple.

The night was already giving way to the day when the cloaked man gently disengaged himself from the arms of the woman resting on his chest, as they sat on the balcony floor. He lifted her carefully in his arms and carried her slowly inside, laying her on the bed. After covering her with a blanket and lightly caressing her forehead, Vincent took a few steps back.

"I'm with you, Catherine, forever..."

A light breeze picked up all at once and moved the curtains on the French door, carrying his whispered vow to her. Catherine stirred lightly in her sleep and turned her head on the pillow, facing him.

By the time the breeze died, he had vanished into the purple and pink-coloured dawn, welcoming the new day.

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Catherine hadn't had to attend many funerals in her life. Her family was small because Charles Chandler had no siblings, and Caroline Chandler was an only child as well. Her grandparents died before their time - before little Cathy was even born. The last funeral she attended was when she was 10 - the one for her mother...

She was browsing through her wardrobe, looking for something black, appropriate for the service. Finally, she chose a black blouse with a simple black skirt and a semi-long black jacket to go with it.

As Catherine was getting ready, her moves were almost automatic; her mind was on a different planet. She cast a glance at her dressing table, contemplating putting some makeup on for a moment. But as quickly as the idea appeared, she abandoned it again without care. The fashion-law queen was definitely someone Catherine didn't identify with anymore. Life and a change of priorities pushed her from the past for good. And especially on this occasion, it seemed so insignificant and pointless.

As often during the past three days, she'd felt anxiety and confusion rising within her. It was coming and going in waves, trying to wash her away, though she was resisting - yet. Whatever she was doing, her brain would suddenly stop for a moment and switch off, breaking her concentration and leading her to lethargy.

*You've got to keep it together.... Today is no time for a breakdown....*

Catherine had spent most of the previous night lying in her bed, staring into the darkness and thinking about what would she say at the memorial service for Charles Chandler. Memories of him were floating around her like leaves falling off a tree in late autumn, surrounding her with images, sounds and emotions.

And yet, it was suddenly more than difficult to put any of them into words. Words seemed strange to her at once. Superfluous and insubstantial to describe the man who was such an important part of her whole life, filling the role of both parents from very early on.

Desperation started creeping in because Catherine had no clue what was she supposed to say at the service. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Suddenly a very early memory found its way into her mind - barely eleven years old, she was snuggled up to her father, who held one of his favourite books in his hand, reading to his daughter before bedtime.

*"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"*

*"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."*

*"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.*

*"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."*

*"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"*

*"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand... Once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always..." (1)*

Catherine opened her eyes, and she was sure what words she would use during the service later that day. Words suddenly became meaningful and valuable again, holding a truth that neither changing times nor conventions could change...

As her hands picked up the worn-out, much loved souvenir from her childhood that day, just before leaving to the church, her fingers lovingly stroked the cover. Pulling the book close to her face, she inhaled deeply while closing her eyes. It was still there, the scent of the days gone by - her father's soft cologne, her mother's floral handsoap, and her own childhood innocence hidden in a few pages of paper. Maybe she just imagined it, but still, a sad smile appeared on her pale face.

*It's time; you must go...*

Glancing at her watch, Catherine quickly put the book into her handbag and was just about to leave when she stopped in her tracks and reached for something on her nightstand. Only once the crystal was resting safely on her chest underneath the blouse, she felt ready, and a small wave of peace washed over her.

*"I'm with you, Catherine, forever..."*

Was it just a dream, or did she really hear him say those words? It didn't really matter. They were *real* just like he was, always there by her side, filling her within, giving her strength and courage to face anything...

Suddenly back in the present and fully conscious, Catherine left the safety of her apartment and set out to face the second hardest moment of her life.

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Vincent was sitting at the Waterfalls; his eyes focused on the majestic streams, glittering in the sunset, but his mind was somewhere else. He knew the funeral must have been over by then, leaving Catherine to spend some time with people who knew her father and had come to pay their last respects.

He could feel the waves of her unrest, changing with sudden moments of calm. They were washing over him almost as if he was suffering with her.

*Just breathe, Catherine... Hold on to the memories; they will never die...*

His hand reached for the pouch with the rose hanging around his neck and caressed it, as if wishing to send strength to the one who had gifted it to him.

*Keep the memories, but let him find his peace to leave so you can find your own.... Let him go, Catherine...*

The last orange and golden sun rays coloured the liquid of the Waterfalls when Vincent stood up and decided it was time to head back. There was a place he needed to go.

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It was almost dark when Catherine returned home. After the funeral, she spent a couple of hours with the guests at the wake, seeing a sea of familiar, but mostly unfamiliar, faces from her father's life. The stress from the past days and the pressing urge to escape the crowds caught up with her quickly. And so, with a very polite apology, she left to get a cab home.

Once inside her private quarters, a deep sigh of relief escaped from her throat when she briefly covered her face.

*Finally, it's over...*

All she wanted to do was sleep and forget. Forget that from now on, she would be an orphan, that there would be no more occasional dinners or classical concerts with her father. No more casual phone calls, catching up with the events in their lives, because time and circumstances would rarely allow more regular contact. Forget that he wouldn't be there to comfort her on any of the following death anniversaries of her mother. From now on, she would have to process both...

Her legs felt suddenly weak, her whole body fatigued, and her head was spinning. With the last bits of physical and mental strength, Catherine got changed and crawled into bed, covering herself right up to her face, wishing to hide from the world.

The city just got covered in a veil of thousands of streetlights when she fell into the much-desired sleep.

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He didn't tap on the French window as he usually did. Seeing the darkness inside, though feeling her close, Vincent knew Catherine was asleep. Through the window, he studied the outline of her figure in bed; her face was turned in his direction. The grief and exhaustion were written all over it, even in her sleep.

He knew she needed rest; only time could help ease the pain and heal the wound that would leave a scar forever.

Reaching inside his cloak, he carefully revealed what he brought with him, laying it gently on the ground at the doorstep.

He stood up again, and a gentle smile settled on his face.

*Sleep well, Catherine... May you find courage and peace to overcome your loss... And if you can't, I will share mine with you....*

With one last look at the sleeping form of the woman he loved, Vincent turned on his heel and silently blended into the night.

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When Catherine opened her eyes to the new morning, her head felt heavy; her sleep was restless and didn't bring her the so much desired peace. She dragged herself out of the bed, walking over to the French door. Suddenly desperate for fresh air, she opened the door and was about to step out onto the balcony when she stopped, her eyes lingering on the ground beneath her feet.

A broad smile, full of gratitude, but above all love, appeared on her still weary face when she knelt to the ground, reaching gently for what warmed her heart. After she picked up the single red rose and protectively and delicately pressed it to her chest, she looked up to the morning sky.

The air was crisp and refreshing; the city was just waking up; smudges of pink coloured the still dark blue of the sky. Inhaling deeply, Catherine was still smiling.

She could still feel the weight of the world on her shoulders, but she could also see something in her mind's eye that filled her with the strength to try and face the world without her father in it - it was the smiling face of a man with long golden hair and piercing blue eyes looking right into her soul...

*"Grief, I've learned, is really just love. It's all the love you want to give, but cannot. All that unspent love gathers up in the corners of your eyes, the lump in your throat, and in that hollow part of your chest. Grief is just love with no place to go."*

*- Jamie Anderson*

