

Windflwr

BAtB Fanfiction - The Woman in White

Chapter 1

Vincent shifted in the chair uncomfortably. He didn't like doctors, especially in this place, although Dr. Regen had always been pleasant and proficient. It's just . . . they reminded him too much of the weeks of treatments he'd undergone. He could still smell the sickly sweet aroma of the serum they injected him with. Like a flush of saline, it flooded his veins until he could almost taste it. There would be no more injections, but still. A doctor's office was a doctor's office.

Finally, a nurse opened the door and called his name.

"Well, well, soldier. What brings you back here so soon? Nothing serious, I hope?"

Vincent automatically took a seat on the raised bed as the doctor entered. "No, sir. Just a bit of sleeplessness, but I thought I should get checked out."

"Good plan." He picked up his patient's wrist and took his pulse.

"I've been having strange dreams," Vincent explained as the doctor took his vitals.

"Strange dreams?"

"Usually I don't dream, or have no recollection of dreaming, anyway. But the last week or so, I've had the same one over and over again."

"Interesting. Eat any unusual foods lately? Do something out of the ordinary? Are you experiencing any other symptoms?"

"No, sir. Nothing I can put my finger on."

"What is the dream?"

Vincent looked up. It was a little ticklish to admit. "It's . . . it's a woman."

"Ah" One side of the doctor's mouth tipped up.

"A woman in white."

"Hmmm. Like a specter?"

"Not like a ghost, no. Just . . . a woman in white." Vincent met the doctor's eyes over his glasses.

Dr. Regan rubbed his jaw. "Sometimes colors are symbolic in dreams," he said thoughtfully. "Could mean freedom, or purity. I've heard people often dream about their mothers, for some reason—or someone who represents their mother. I understand you lost yours some years ago."

Vincent let out a frustrated sigh. The woman in his dreams had absolutely nothing to do with his mother, or the mother he supposed he had, even though he couldn't really remember her face. No. He'd awakened more than one night drenched in sweat after dreaming of the woman in white, his heart racing, and it had *nothing* to do with motherly feelings.

"No? Well, dreams are also the body's way of relieving tension," the doctor continued. "I, myself, have occasionally dreamt I could fly—that I actually had wings. Imagine that. Surely some symbolism there, huh?" he said, glancing around at his sterile surroundings. "It could also be your subconscious trying to break through—as if your brain is puzzling something out but can't quite nail it down."

Plausible, Vincent supposed. The woman in white was definitely a puzzle. "But how could my subconscious have thoughts about a person I've never seen?"

The doctor shrugged. "Maybe this person is just an ideal. Can you see her face clearly? You know for certain you've never met?"

"No, but—I feel like I know her."

The doctor finished his checks in thoughtful silence. "Physically, you're fine. If you're not having any conscious mental lapses—"

"No."

"—or other disruptions, I would say it's probably nothing, just a product of an over-tired psyche. You've been training very hard for months."

"Yeah. It's probably just the training." He'd been super-focused on his up-coming mission for weeks.

"You might try keeping a notepad by your bed. When you wake up, write down everything you remember about how you felt, thought, what you saw. I've heard that can be beneficial."

"Sure. I'll try that. I'm sorry to have bothered you over such a minor thing, sir."

"Nothing is minor when it comes to you, soldier." He patted Vincent on the back. "But keep me informed. I'm here to help. If they continue to bother you, I can prescribe a sleeping pill that will basically prevent you from dreaming at all."

“Thank you, sir.”

Vincent slipped his jacket back on and headed to his houseboat. He was already feeling tired, no doubt from losing so much sleep. He'd take the doc's advice and get a pad and pencil ready.

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She came to him again that night—the woman in white. Well, in a white blouse. Her hair wasn't white, though. It was dark and flowing as if in a breeze. She stood just at the edge of his vision but again there was the feeling of familiarity. He *knew* her, and she knew him, but he didn't know her name. She looked as though she was waiting for something. Watching. He tried to look directly at her face, but couldn't. It was like trying to wake himself from a dream. Impossible. His eyelids wouldn't obey his commands no matter how hard he tried to move them.

She was smiling at him, that much he could tell—or maybe feel. There was a warmth that emanated from her, but it was faint. She was too far away. Just the idea that she was watching him, smiling at him, though, made him feel all warm and tingly.

Slowly, he reached out a hand. Was it a literal hand? He had no way of knowing. He thought he was reaching for her. Then she began to fade. As she did, she looked like she was calling out to him. What was she saying? His name? Maybe, but he wasn't sure.

She shouted again, this time from farther away and he bolted upright, awake. *That voice*

Vincent slapped off his alarm. He wouldn't need it. It was only 4:30 a.m., but he knew he'd never be able to fall back to sleep now; he may as well get up. As he did, he grabbed the pad and pen from the night stand and wrote down as much as he could recall

Three Days Later

Vincent lay on the bed facing the woman named Catherine, careful not to disturb her, but close enough they were almost touching. He'd promised to stay, at least until she fell asleep. But nothing more, and it was almost light. He'd have to get going very soon, but . . . he was oddly reluctant. *Who was she?* Obviously the woman from his dreams, that much he knew. But what else?

When she called out his name in the warehouse where he'd been stalking Zhao, he'd been startled by the sound. That voice! And a woman in white! Even in that dim setting, her white blouse had shone like a beacon. She knew his name yet he hadn't known hers—not until they'd taken him to the 'gentlemen's club' where he supposedly used to live with that other guy who was not her husband.

Vincent's eyes traced the line of her body. They lay on top of the bedspread, fully clothed. That's where he'd carried her after she'd cried and practically ordered him to stay. One thing was sure--she spoke to him like they'd been more than friends—lovers. But how was it possible for him not to recall something like that? She was stunning. 'Smokin' hot' was how he'd said it. That had been a little crude, even for him, albeit accurate. JT Forbes, the other guy, had called their relationship 'epic,' and Cat, no *Catherine*—that fit her better—had said they were 'meant to be.' It was all so confusing! But her tears tonight had been real. If they weren't, she was a world-class actress.

Could Zhao or someone else have put her up to such a thing? Distract him from his mission? But then how did that explain the dreams? His brain hurt. It might be the lingering effects of the triplet of tranq darts they'd shot him with, he wasn't sure. He only knew she fascinated him beyond measure.

His gaze slowly slid down the length of her again. She had one arm curled under her head. Catherine was incredibly soft looking, although when she'd slid her arms around him he'd felt nothing but solid woman. He'd seen what she'd done to those two guards, too. She could definitely fight. Was she another one of Zhao minions? But that didn't feel right. No, she wasn't there to fight *him*. In fact, he had a feeling she wanted something altogether different.

His eyes focused on her lips, slightly parted in sleep. Those lips were heaven. When she'd kissed him earlier, he'd been surprised by how sweet. He'd leaned in to kiss her again, deeper, and she got that damn call! In the quiet, now, though, he could hear the air passing over those luscious lips. In, out, in out. If he thought he could get away with it, he'd steel another taste before he left. Ah, the hell with it. He bent over her and gently closed his lips on hers, licking her bottom lip as he did. She responded, still fast asleep. Yes, heaven

Chapter 2

Vincent leaned over the stainless steel basin of his bathroom sink. The muscles in his arms and hands still trembled as he splashed cold tap water onto his face. His gut cramped again but he ignored it; he had nothing left to dispel, having disgorged itself of his last meal already. He cupped his hands, took a drink, and swished the foul taste out of his mouth. He wasn't sick; he was sick to *death*.

He'd come directly to the houseboat from Catherine's rooftop. He shouldn't have left her like that—on the floor where he'd shoved her with enough force to injure! But coward that he was, he couldn't face those accusing eyes a moment longer. And now he didn't know what to do.

He scrubbed the hand towel across his face then studied himself in the mirror. Cold, dead eyes stared back from a face he didn't recognize—not anymore. The hard planes of his jaw were stubbled in shadow, his cheek bones sunken; the deep groove between his brows nothing but a jumble of dark, angry lines. Was he a man . . . or a beast?

The shaking started up again—this time more severe. Months of training had taught him rigid control and absolute stillness. But all that had disappeared. He curled his palms into fists and pressed them to the counter as he continued looking in the glass. “*Who are you?*”

Funny, that was the same question he’d asked Catherine when she and her friends caught and tranqed him at the docks when Zhao got away. She knew who she was, even if he didn’t. But who was *he*?

“I am a soldier on an extremely important mission,” he ground out. It was the mantra he’d been saying to himself for weeks now. He laughed, a hollow sound. Was he trying to convince himself? Because what a joke!

Yes, it had been a mistake to go to the roof—both times. He knew it then; just couldn’t make himself stay away. Yeah, that ‘pull.’ He felt drawn to her like no other. She was more than under his skin; she was in every breath he took, every thought in his head. He could pick her heartbeat out of crowd. And even though he knew it was physically impossible, even for him, he thought he could hear it now—pounding hard as she thought of him. Of what he’d done to her. How she must hate him!

God, he hadn’t even stayed around to see if she’d been injured! Vincent dropped his head into his hands. The scent of her was still in the room—the scent of their lovemaking. He couldn’t escape.

This is what comes of breaking every rule.

If he was a good soldier, he’d report his deficiency to Condor and ask for a reassignment far away from the city. Away from *her*. Condor would not be pleased. In fact, he might demand information about this woman—possibly even order him to harm her for her interference. *Not that he hadn’t already done that himself.* No. He couldn’t do it. He was reluctant to let his commander know anything about her. He had to protect her now as she had been protecting him. But now he’d also have to protect her from *himself*.

The man she said he used to be didn’t line up with anything that made sense. They had picnics on the rooftop? Who does that? He let a woman protect him? And yet, what kind of man was he that he’d hurt an innocent woman? She’d done nothing to deserve it. Sure, she’d been badgering him. She wanted him to remember and he couldn’t! It made him angry, yes, but not at her. She said they were ‘meant to be.’ Could fate be changed? And if so, had he changed everything tonight?

Vincent sagged down onto the lip of the tub in the small, modular bathroom and hung his head. *Catherine*. Oh, God. He’d violated her trust on so many levels—and that not long after she’d given herself to him—body, mind and soul—in complete trust and surrender.

Their physical connection was as strong as their emotional one. He'd never experienced such a thing with another woman, at least not that he could recall. It made him angry that he couldn't remember their former relationship.

At first, he thought it might be a lie. He didn't understand her motivations. But after last night . . . But how could he have forgotten something like that?

He didn't really know if she was friend or enemy, but it didn't matter anymore, did it? Because now he was her adversary. And she's a cop, for pity's sake! She obviously had resources and connections to have tracked him more than once. What will she do now? He wasn't stupid—it's called *assault*.

Her words still rang in his ears, accusing: "I don't remember you ever doing *that*." How would he know? He didn't have any memory!

Vincent stood, restless. Seeing his face in the bathroom mirror, he stopped. "I didn't ask for her interference," he told the man looking back at him. "I tried to warn her away; she didn't listen. She doesn't understand the stakes."

But perhaps neither did he.

Last night she seduced him and he took what she offered. Why not? There was an attraction between them he couldn't deny. Should he have resisted? Was there any man alive who would have? *Apparently, yes—the man I used to be.*

"Who are you?" he asked again. "A soldier," he repeated. The face in the mirror mocked him.

"No, you're not. You're a weak, cowardly fool!" With a jerk of his powerful arm, he slammed his fist into the glass, shattering the mirror and his image into a spray of silver shards.

Chapter 3

"You were right. He's too dangerous."

Gabe shot to his feet at the look on Catherine's face. "What happened?" he asked, alarmed, as she gingerly moved to the table to sit down. "Catherine—"

"I'm all right. Just . . . sore. He—he pushed me away and it was a little harder than I was expecting—"

"He *hurt* you?" Gabe came around his desk and stood over her.

“Can you not hover?” She shushed him away. “I don’t really need any lectures right now. I thought—I just thought we were making progress. Then I pushed too hard.”

“Catherine, there is *no* excuse—”

She held up a hand to cut him off. “I know that. I’m not . . . pushing it under the rug, believe me. I have a plan and I need your help, but you need to promise me that you won’t tell Tess about this.”

“You think she won’t figure it out for herself? You’re limping, for God’s sake!”

“Right now. I’m just a little stiff. Nothing a long, hot soak in my tub won’t cure. After that I’ll feel a lot better. This isn’t the first work-related injury I’ve received and you know it.”

“This isn’t a normal work-related injury.” She heard the undercurrents of anger in his voice but he at least made an attempt to moderate it for her sake. Thank God Gabe’s eyes no longer went yellow or he’d certainly beast out over this.

“Gabe, please? I need your help.” She was taking advantage of not only the debt he felt he owed her but of his growing feelings for her, which were possibly more apparent to her than to him at that point.

“Okay. My lips are sealed. But no more going it alone.”

“No.”

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Vincent left the boathouse and headed back uptown. He walked, needing the time to calm himself. He wanted to be reasonable by the time he got to her place because he had to see her, talk to her, try to explain even though there was truly no good explanation for what he had done. It took him only minutes to get to the street where she lived. The lights weren’t on in the apartment. Perhaps she had already gone to bed. He climbed the stairs, but as soon as he got to the top floor he knew she wasn’t there—he couldn’t hear her heartbeat. Where could she have gone?

To see a friend? She had a partner, though he had yet to meet her. Make that re-meet her. He growled. This whole memory wipe thing was confusing as hell! No, the logical place Catherine would go would be JT’s. She was close to him, or so it appeared. If she needed a shoulder to cry on, who better than her boyfriend’s best bud? Not that he felt any closeness with the professor, himself, yet. He found JT working out and alone.

“Hey.”

He must have startled the guy because as soon as he spoke, JT stopped what he was doing and took a step back. No, that was fear. He could read the signs. So Catherine had been there and given him an earful. Except, when he started talking to him, it was obvious JT knew nothing about him hurting her. Okay, now what? He listened with half an ear as JT nervously babbled on about he and Catherine's previous relationship, trying to give him more clues to a memory that was null and void. It didn't help his disposition. He asked JT to find her, but he really needed to do that himself. The phone call from Tucker was a distraction he didn't need, but he couldn't do anything about that yet.

He left the club as fast as he could get out of there and soon found himself once again on the street beneath her apartment. Only this time there were lights.

He quietly let himself in the porch door. He knew she was a cop and could protect herself, but she really should get that latch fixed. It was extremely easy to manipulate. The living room was in shadow but light shined from underneath her bedroom door, which was slightly ajar. He tapped gently, but got no answer. He pushed it open further and realized she was in the bathroom. The faucet wasn't on, but the humidity level of the air indicated she'd been running it for some time. She was preparing for bed. He shrugged. Better than finding her already asleep.

Catherine stood in front of her bathroom mirror—a full-length one on the side of the vanity—dressed only in her bra and panties. Her legs were long and bare, and she was twisting around to view what he realized with shame was a large, purple bruise that wrapped from her stomach to her back. He gasped when he saw it. She jerked at the sound and stumbled backward into a sharp corner of the vanity, yelping as she bumped the tender area.

"Did I do that? And . . . that?"

Catherine grabbed up her robe and held it in front of her. Her eyes darted around the tiny room looking for something—a weapon, he guessed—but there was nothing within reach. He was so focused on her injury he didn't really register her fright or the wary stance she had taken.

"It's nothing," she said, trying to sound blasé, but her heart rate was very elevated. "Just a bruise where I fell."

"That's not *nothing*. Catherine—"

"How did you get in here?"

His eyes lifted to hers. "Uh. You left the porch door unlocked." It was a small lie, but necessary. "I, um, I came to see if you were okay—which you're clearly not—"

"Well, you need to leave."

She had backed up a step and he suddenly realized how frightened she was, despite her bravado. He held up his hands.

“Catherine, please. I’m not going to hurt you. I came to apologize.”

“For this?” She looked down at the long dark mark. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve received worse in the line of duty.”

“Not from me.”

Catherine regarded him in silence. “Nope. Never before from you.”

There was another bruise on her neck on the left side, and he clamped his eyes shut at the sight. “I am so sorry. . . . I don’t know what came over me.”

Catherine slid her arms into her robe and tied it tightly around her waist, crossing her arms over her chest when she was finished. “I don’t either. Because I don’t know who you are anymore.”

He opened his eyes and held her gaze. She had every right to the contempt he heard in her voice. Her eyes, though, they held—what? Regret? Despair? He leaned heavily against the door frame. She obviously wanted to escape him, but if he let her go, now, he’d lose the opportunity to make things right. Or to try.

“That guy you knew—I don’t know him, either. But I know tonight I made a very big mistake.”

She shook her head. “No. I think the mistake was all mine.”

In trusting him. “Catherine—” He took a step forward.

She held her stance but leaned farther back from him. There was nowhere else to go.

“You’re afraid of me.”

Her gaze darted to his with a sharp intake of breath. “What?”

Her eyes lowered again. “Nothing. What? You think I shouldn’t be?”

He swallowed, ashamed, and looked away. “I can only promise you it will never happen again. Ever.”

Catherine shrugged. Her heart rate was still elevated, but not as much. “Or until your next memory wipe. I believed you before, and look where it got me. You know, if you weren’t who you are, you’d be in jail on assault charges right now.”

"I know that, okay? And I know I'm not because . . . you are protecting me."

"Kinda foolish, isn't it? Because who needs protecting now?"

The question fell flat in the silent room. There was nothing he could say to that, was there? As justified as he'd thought he was in getting frustrated with her relentless questions, she hadn't deserved his brutality. She shifted uncomfortably and he realized she was in pain.

"You should ice that."

"Thanks for the advice, but I've got it."

Before she could blink, he disappeared and returned with ice cubes wrapped in a hand towel from the kitchen. "Come here." He took a seat on the toilet lid and beckoned her to him.

"I don't—what are you doing?"

With a careful hand, Vincent gently tugged her toward him, just like in the boathouse. And just like in the boathouse, Catherine was powerless to resist the 'pull.'

He parted the robe with his free hand and let the drawstring fall slack to her side. When she started to protest, he shushed her. "Doctor, remember?" he said. "Let me see."

His hand was warm on her skin. As he measured the size of the bruise she realized it was the length and size of his hand. He noticed, too, and his head dropped as he caressed her there a moment with the lightest touch.

The gesture was so gentle, she forgot her anger for a brief instance. She wasn't used to reading this Vincent's face, but she thought she saw true regret in his eyes as he examined her. He pressed his forehead into her rib cage just above the bruise and she felt her own eyes start to sting and closed them. No. She wouldn't be swayed by this. She needed to hang onto her distrust. Straightening, she said, "That Hippocratic Oath went out of the window long ago, didn't it?"

A muscle clenched in his jaw, but he didn't respond to her baiting. Instead, he carefully pressed the cold cloth against her angry, purpling side. She gasped and he snaked an arm around her inside the robe and held her to him.

She didn't need this right now. She really didn't. Was he really here to make amends, or just because he didn't want her to expose him? Because she did still have some power here. He wasn't forthcoming with any answers. Oh, but what he was doing felt so good.

His head moved inside her robe and he kissed her side now, his touch light and gentle but so hot on her tender skin.

She tried to maintain her focus. “I thought you were a soldier.”

“That, too,” he answered, and she felt his breath pass over her now chilled skin.

He pushed the robe off her left shoulder. Reaching up to brush her hair out of the way, he placed his lips there, too, while his other hand caressed her unbruised side just beneath her breast. Breathing suddenly became difficult.

Catherine fought to stand still. Her knees wanted to buckle. It hadn’t been that long since he’d made love to her in the boathouse, but that seemed like a thousand years ago. His touch was magic and it was playing with her mind. She tried to focus.

“What is this? Some kind of new age healing remedy?”

She felt him smile against her skin. “No. It’s me trying to tell you how sorry I am,” he whispered, fluttering the fine hairs at her neck. She shivered. His deep voice rumbled through her body in such an achingly familiar way. She wasn’t certain what he’d said, but the tiny hairs of his chin stubble were giving her goose bumps all over.

“If you think you can just kiss away—”

“I don’t. I don’t.”

“Then stop.” How she found the strength to say that, she didn’t know, but he pulled his face back to look into her eyes. What he saw must have convinced him because he leaned away and released her.

“You should be lying down.”

Catherine shook herself. This wasn’t the man she’d fallen in love with. Not yet. But lie down right now? No! Absolutely not. The last thing she needed was to let him carry her to *bed*. She rallied herself. “If you think you’re going to seduce me right now, you’re out of luck, and out of your mind. I’ve become immune.”

He gave her that assessing gaze again. He could tell if she was lying. Truth be told, she wasn’t sure, herself, if she believed her own words, but she could be as determined as he. Whatever he saw, he decided to let it go.

“I wasn’t intending to. I don’t deserve to even look you in the eye.”

Catherine took over holding the ice pack to her side and looked away from his mesmerizing eyes. “Good. Because—unlike you—I have a real job to do.”

“What?” He stood up. “Like this?”

“I’m tougher than I look.”

“It’s nearly midnight.”

She shrugged. Cops didn’t have nine-to-five jobs.

He lifted his eyes to hers. “You’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever met.”

She tied the robe back around herself. “Funny. I didn’t feel very strong earlier tonight. The way you . . .” her voice trailed off and she seemed to change direction. “Look. Thanks for the—” she held out the ice pack—“but I can’t . . . I can’t do this . . . with you. I think it would be best if you just leave.”

Vincent looked up into her determined face. The wall had gone back up. He didn’t blame her. And she was damn tough. But was she implying that she’d rather seek help elsewhere? And if so, with whom? Another thing he didn’t remember

He left the same way he came.

Chapter 4

The woman in white had returned to his dreams. Only this time in a red dress. And she wasn’t smiling. Those luminous eyes made accusations. She didn’t like the lies, the omissions. Then suddenly she was in red flannel and shutting the window on him. A week ago it wouldn’t have mattered, wouldn’t have hurt. But now it did—because he remembered. There were just little flashes, glimpses into the past—their shared past—the past he’d suddenly remembered when he grabbed her hand in the elevator shaft to keep her from plunging to her death. She was there, in every memory, just like she’d said she was. So now he had to believe her.

Vincent had wanted to believe her before. I mean, she was gorgeous and telling him they were ‘meant to be’ and other mushy stuff he hadn’t really cared about until now. Then the window was closed on him right after he finally had the proof! His timing sucked and beautiful Catherine had had too much. Bad enough he’d been rough with her, then he’d lied for his own purposes only to have it all backfire on him.

He growled and shifted on the bed. Nothing felt right. Now he was desperate for her to believe and forgive him. He couldn’t blame her if she didn’t, but their connection was something he hadn’t anticipated, and he didn’t want it to end.

Vincent twisted again, slowly waking from his fitful sleep. He smoothed a hand across the empty side of the bed. The sheets were cold. She was in his head. Now, if only he could get her back into his bed!

He needed to call Condor, figure this whole thing out. Condor wouldn't approve, that was certain, but there wasn't anyone else he could talk to about it. And maybe he knew something that would help. He sat up and rubbed a weary hand over his face. Perhaps he could exercise her out of his mind. Yeah, like that was going to happen! Still, it was worth a try. He dragged himself down to the kitchen, anyway, where his work-out bar hung suspended from the ceiling. Until he got another assignment, she was going to be all he could think about, whether Condor like it or not. And he didn't. The call came through while he was doing his pull-ups. He ended up slamming down the case when it was through. There would be no help from that end. Condor's only order was to leave Catherine alone.

Vincent understood how having his focus split made him vulnerable, although Condor's specific command to stay away from her seemed a bit odd. Yes, he had a sworn duty to carry out his very important missions, but how could regaining a little of his past and some of his humanity possibly hurt anything? Unless there was something Condor didn't want him to know. He sighed. No answers would be forthcoming from that sector. Condor was not family, nor was he necessarily on his side. Was he friend or foe? There was a time when he wondered that about Catherine. No more. Vincent shook his head to clear it. Too many secrets. He just wanted to get all these missions over so he could pursue this woman.

He kept seeing that window being closed against him. He was on one side; she was on the other. They'd both proved they could play the game. Now they were both hurting from it. What had she expected him to do? She'd lied, too! He hadn't known what her true motivations were. Nothing had prepared him for that! He shouldn't have tricked her; he knew that now. But how could he explain it if she wouldn't listen? Did she really need space, or was this just another female game of cat and mouse? No, Catherine wasn't one to do that. Something inside him knew the truth.

He closed his eyes and reviewed those flashbacks in his head—what he saw, smelled, heard, felt. Then he grabbed his pad and pen and started to write.

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As he had lain in the hospital bed, the oxygen mask to his face, he'd realized the folly of his idea to go after a beast alone. It was the first time he'd been vulnerable. And it was embarrassing as hell. Catherine had stood over him, a look of concern on her face. And Gabe Lowen, the one-time-beast-but-no-longer-a-beast ADA, stood to her other side. Even though he didn't trust the guy, he'd jumped at the chance to go after another target. And then he was lying in a public hospital, of all places, sucking in oxygen! Catherine had said he used to be able to heal himself. Wouldn't that be nice now?

Even though she'd just told him to stay away, there she'd been standing guard and ready to protect him. She was still hurting over his lies, yes, but she couldn't stay away either. The kid who he now understood to be his nephew brought out even more flashbacks. He'd panicked. It wasn't one of his best days. But it had solidified who his true allies were. And it had brought him and Catherine back together again.

When she showed up at his place after he'd jumped out the hospital window and he asked her why she'd come, she said, "Are you kidding me?" There had never been a question. She was so sweet. And the concern she showed when he went back into the fire, this time after Aaron, said it all. He couldn't help leaning in for a kiss. Those luscious lips drew him in every time. As set as she was to keep her distance now, she cared. It was in everything she did, including the lies and evasions. Maybe they truly *were* 'meant to be.' She wasn't just in his head; she was slowly weaving her way into his heart. If he had one. Now that he thought about it, it ached, so he was beginning to suspect that he did.

She was afraid for him. Perhaps she didn't understand how strong he was—that would come in time. She would learn to trust him. He could handle almost every situation. But now he had an even greater motivation than his mission to accomplish—he needed to make it back to *her*.

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Catherine stood next to him before the massive memorial of water where the Twin Towers once stood. His past was becoming clearer, and so was his future. He held out a hand, and as she willingly wove her fingers through his, he knew now where his future lay.

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Back in the houseboat, he took out pad and pen. She liked the 'roof' note; perhaps that was how he'd communicated with her in the past—with letters. Maybe it would help get his thoughts in order. He wrote:

Catherine,

I know you are not sure about me right now, but I have things to tell you. Not everything you want to know—yet. That will come in time. But about what's going on in my head—you. I have memories of us. Just scraps, but they are there and they are real. Please don't turn away from me. To be honest, I have no one else I can talk to. I tried to tell myself there was nothing between us but a physical attraction, but I was lying to myself and I know it. I told you about the 'pull.' It's still there, stronger than ever. So much so that I can't walk away from you, even if I tried—even if you try. But I don't want to scare you away. I will never hurt you again, physically, but now I worry that just my being in your life hurts you. Not that it will change anything.

I ache for you. If the President, himself, were to order me to stand down and walk away, I doubt I could do it. You are my new reality. In the beginning it was too much, too fast—that's my only excuse. But now that I keep getting more and more glimpses of my life before—of you—I realize everything you've told me is true. And that's good because I want it more than anything. I want us.

That heartbeat. You called it annoying. I said distracting, but it's more than that. It's a connection to you that is as physical as it is emotional. I don't walk around the streets of the city aware of everyone's heartbeat. Only yours. I feel it pounding deep inside me—so much that sometimes I feel my own heart change its rhythm to match yours. Crazy, but real. And just as real as the memories I'm getting back.

Please wait for me. Give me time. When my missions are done, I'll be free. And then we'll dance again...

Chapter 5

Vincent swept the last of the debris in the houseboat kitchen into a dust bin and dumped it into the trash. Zach had left a mess. As he surveyed his place, he took stock of his situation. The memories were coming more frequently now—at least for some things. He didn't know why his memories of Catherine—other than those quick flashes he had in the elevator shaft—were taking so long. His 'boss' didn't understand his urgent need to get them back, but he no longer felt as strong a loyalty to that man as he had before, and Catherine was the reason. His loyalty to *her* was definitely growing. Even JT was beginning to feel 'comfortable.' Funny, he wasn't the type of person he imagined his 'best buddy' to be, and yet he kind of liked the guy. He seemed genuine, and he definitely cared about Catherine.

Catherine, of course, was a whole 'nother ballgame. She was becoming the air he needed to breathe. He hadn't liked her pushing him away in favor of her girl's night get-together, but he understood it on a certain level. The more he realized how much she sacrificed for him, the more he found he owed her, and not just one night out with friends—so much more. All the more reason for him to get his own life together so he could be 'whole' too.

Feeling the need to communicate even though he couldn't see her, he picked up his notepad again. This was becoming a habit. Maybe one day he'd share them with her and they would make a nice log of their journey back together. For the time being, it just helped him sort everything out in his own head. He started to write

Catherine,

When I showed up at your place earlier, I just . . . needed to see you. I thought we had a really great moment together at the 9/11 memorial and I'm anxious to find that connection again to make it complete. Because I need you. Maybe I haven't showed you that in recent weeks, but I do. I need to see you, talk to you, kiss you, touch you, love you. When we're together, even just walking and talking, I feel like I'm regaining a part of myself, of who I am. I know you want to figure out who are now, as well, and you need space. I don't mean to crowd you, but I feel the need to make up for lost time with you. Every day our lives contain some form of danger—to you and to me. And I can't lose you again.

The houseboat no longer feels like home. Home is where you are. So I was hurt when you pushed me away. It wasn't as bad as you closing the window on me that other time—after the lies—and I'm very thankful we're not still at that place. I can't tell you how hard that was for me. It still hurts because you are the woman from my dreams, the woman in white.

When your friend Gabe turned up at JT's (or I should say our old place), he didn't know I was there. He came to tell JT that you were attacked by another beast. I guess he didn't want me to know, but why would he think I shouldn't? It filled me with terror at what might have happened to you, although he assured us you were okay. I had to see for myself. Had he hurt you like I hurt you? Or Worse? My head was filled with so much rage and anguish, I almost couldn't see straight. Did he touch you? The thought of another guy, another beast, putting his hands on you . . . Catherine, you should have called me right away! I wish I had been there for you, protecting you. I should have been, and it's eating me up that you were so vulnerable. I felt so helpless. I don't ever want to feel that way again.

By the way, I don't like that Gabe guy. There's just something about him that rubs me the wrong way, although I'm glad you have friends helping you. I don't know our history together, but I'm not comfortable with the way he looks at you—like he wants to take care of you. That is my job! I may have been out of the picture for a few months, but I'm back, and there's no room for another.

Catherine, I don't know how Zach found you, but I'm sick that he did. It makes me want to stick to you like glue. (Not that that would be a bad thing!) He came after you because of me—because of what you mean to me. You know, today I made a big mistake. Because of that, I'm not sure I can trust my own judgment any longer. When I realized Zach was an old friend who'd survived what they did to us in Afghanistan, like me, I changed my mind about killing him. I didn't want to hurt him. I thought we were the same. But it put you in danger. I'd never have forgiven myself if something terrible had happened as a result.

I didn't realize what those ten years had done to him. See, I had you to keep me sane. Zach had no one but bitterness and a desire for revenge as his companions. I know that, even if I don't remember it all. What can I ever do to repay you?

My boss, whom I can't explain to you yet, might be playing games with me. I used to trust him implicitly, but now I don't think I can, because he kept the knowledge about Zach from me.

By the way, when I was with Zach I had flashbacks—memories. Not long or very detailed, but they are coming more and more often now. I'm embarrassed to admit to you, though, that these were of another woman. Our relationship was brief and long before I met you. But oh, Catherine, you don't understand how badly I want to remember you. Us. It's killing me that I'm getting bits and pieces of the past and other people in my life, but I've only had the briefest flashbacks of you. I know you're there, in the deepest part of me, but when will it all come back? How can I remember another woman from just a smile and not recall our most intimate moments together?! It hurts you, I know. It's starting to hurt me, too.

I want to believe the reason is that you are so important to me. Maybe remembering you will reveal things I don't want to know about myself. That's always a possibility. I've found, in recent weeks, that I don't like the me I am today very much. I hope I was a better person before. I have to believe someone as strong and beautiful inside as you are would not have fallen for a guy like me if I was a real jerk, so I hope it's true. By the way, why did you fall in love with me? I can't tell you how much I wish I knew the answer to that.

Perhaps what they did to me to make me forget specifically targeted my memories of you? That's actually something that makes sense. You were a link that someone was afraid of me discovering. If I couldn't remember you, then I could keep being their machine, their assassin—and go on their missions. But if I remembered us, there was a chance they'd lose me, and they're right. I stopped caring about the missions when I started understanding our connection.

Catherine, I know you want to know who 'they' are. I want to tell you so badly, unlike I felt at first. But I have to ask you to be patient a little while longer and I'm so sorry for that. I'm sorry for a lot of things, actually, but I don't want that to be the only thing I say to you every time we are together, even if it's true. I'll sound like a pathetic, broken record.

So please wait for me. A few more missions, that's all, I promise. Until then, I have to keep my focus for your sake as well as mine. I can't afford mistakes (or any more of them). And I'll wait for you, as long as it takes, as you try to get yourself on solid ground again. God knows I've thrown enough rocks into your path. It won't be easy, for either of us, but I'll be here. You're all I think about anymore, especially at night. You know, not being able to be with you, it makes me feel like I'm locked out of heaven

Chapter 6

Catherine,

*I had dreams last night. At least, that's what I thought they were, but they were so clear, so vivid, so filled with emotion they had to be more than my subconscious mind tripping through the day—they had to be **real**. And you were in every one, Catherine. I realize, now, they were memories . . . of us.*

First there was a subway car or train. It was like I was there, living it all over again. I felt out of breath, having searched the entire city for you. When I entered that last car and saw you sitting there, I was so relieved to find you alone and safe, you can't even know. As I write this letter, I still feel that emotion like it was yesterday. I hid my relief, though, embarrassed by the strength of my feelings. I didn't want to overwhelm you—you had a big enough burden to bear. You wondered how I'd found you, but you had no idea how desperately I'd searched. It wasn't like now, where I can hear your heartbeat whenever you are near. I must not have had that ability then.

I know you were upset about something—someone. I don't remember all the details yet, but I had this odd mixture of jealousy and guilt. Someone you cared about had died and I knew it was all my fault. I didn't want to feel that way. I hate that I may have been the reason you ran away to be alone with your thoughts. All I knew was I had to tell you how I felt, what you meant to me, and how it didn't really matter what happened or who I was—I couldn't live without you. For good or for bad, we were in this together.

When I pulled you to my side and you willingly leaned into me, that's when I knew everything was going to be all right. Somehow. Someday. I no longer had to be afraid. I kissed your head and immediately felt the bone-numbing cold.

In fact, cold was all around us. And darkness. The dream/vision changed and suddenly we weren't in a subway car at all but the middle of an empty country road. I had you in my arms. Catherine, you were so cold! But you weren't shivering, even dressed as you were in your beautiful, but very thin dress. We shouldn't be there, either of us. I don't know what had occurred—hopefully those memories will come later—but as I was holding you I felt fear like I can't recall ever feeling before. Car headlights on the foggy road were all that illuminated the night and separated us from the encroaching fog and darkness. My beautiful woman in white was in crimson, and blood—the color of the gown you wore—dripped onto the shard-covered pavement below. You were bleeding to death in my arms and I was powerless to stop it!

I wanted to run away with you but I knew, if I did, you would die right then and there. Catherine, I never want to feel like that again. Was this after your Dad's wedding? JT told me I'd crashed it but he said it so nonchalantly I never would have guessed something so devastating happened that night. If it had, why hadn't JT told me? I was so filled with emotion, I tried to wake myself from the dreams. The feelings were too intense. But I also wanted to stay and understand.

*But the dream changed again and this time you were in another wine-colored dress—one longer and fancier—and you were vibrantly alive! Thank God. In fact, you had turned into a fairytale princess with a long, fluffy train. Your hair was up and your throat adorned with a stunning necklace. There was a small, thin scar above your right breast that I recognized as the wound you'd gotten on that cold night, but now it was faint and covered with a fine, silky powder. You wore a fragrance that intoxicated me, and your eyes, so exotic and mesmerizing, drew me like no other. Cinderella going to the ball. So beautiful. And you were mine! You belonged to **me**. I could feel a pull from both directions—afraid to believe it yet certain it was true. You were the flame; I, a helpless moth. I knew in that moment such a flood of relief and thankfulness to you, I just wanted to take you in my arms and tell you with my body and soul how grateful I was to have you in my life. You turned to go, but I couldn't let you walk away without telling you that I was so in love with you. The words didn't come, not then, but the sounds of the ballroom filled with people below us slowly faded into nothingness as I put my lips on yours.*

If I could have stopped time, I would have remained in that memory forever. A perfect moment in time. But then you were in my arms again, only this time as we sat together on a bench on a rooftop—your rooftop. I recognize it now, but it looked so different then—filled with tiny lights and flowers. An elegant table spread with food and wine sat nearby. I remembered our picnic, Catherine! Did we have many? I hope so. We both seemed so happy, content. I never wanted to leave. You were my anchor and my strength. I feel embarrassed, now, to have forgotten it all. How could I? I hope you understand.

Perhaps I was anxious for that moment to be real. All of those moments. I opened my eyes right then and bolted out of sleep. My initial shock and disappointment that it was all just a dream quickly faded into relief and joy. My memories of you were coming back! I welcomed the flood of emotions they brought. My contact is wrong. He thinks I'm weaker with my memories of you. I agree I can't afford distractions, but you give me a reason to survive—to make it home alive each time. I feel stronger than ever with you by my side. Even though I am a beast just like the ones I'm hunting, I like to believe you make me different from them. I rushed to dress, eager to tell you....

*Now I wish I could sleep again and dream; never wake up. As I sit alone in the houseboat, I realize some dreams are just that—dreams. You and I, and whatever memories we have of our love and hopefulness, will never be able to go back to that place before. I've changed—in ways you don't even yet know—and ways you don't ever want to know. I could see it in your face after I killed Tori's father: Murderer. Killer. Assassin. **Animal**. You were shocked, confused, fearful that I'm getting worse not better, even though I know you want to believe the best. That guy—that guy I used to be is gone, Catherine. I wish you could know how thankful I am to be getting his memories back, but it's achingly bitter. You've stuck with me, even through the last few weeks, through the lies and me hurting you, but how far can you go? How long will it last? How much longer can you continue to turn a blind eye to the beast I have become? Your Vincent is gone. I told Tori that I wouldn't be okay today without your love and support, but as strong as you are (and you are incredibly strong, Catherine, not just physically but in every way), I doubt you can continue to stand by the monster I have become.*

You know, when I started this letter, I was so happy and hopeful. Now I just want to die. I crossed a line. I wish I could explain. I can't. And it happened. Two steps forward, one step back. That doesn't sound very promising. You seem willing, but am I still worth saving? I saw the doubt on your face, the conflict. Will you truly be able to stay by my side if things get worse? I don't honestly know, but I hope to God you can. Please, please wait.

Wait for me, Catherine....

Chapter 7

Vincent's Journal, Thanksgiving Day

Catherine,

As I lie here watching you sleep, I think I finally understand the true meaning of thankfulness. Here we are, at Daddy Bob's house, in an upstairs bedroom. After the long drive and initial introductions, we got some time to ourselves. And, despite everything we've been through, you let me love you again. After what happened at your house earlier, in your bedroom, I was not only surprised but delighted and humbled by your steadfast faith in me. I know I don't deserve it. When you told me you couldn't get the image of what I had done to Windsor out of your head, I felt my world cave in just a little bit more. I can't express how much that hurt, not only that you felt that way, but that I had done such a thing. Because I want so badly to be whole for you, to be in control.

Strangely, I thought I was. Actually, I still do. What is happening to me lately feels like something different. I wish I could explain it. I can't. All I can do is fervently pray that your faith in me, in who I was at one time, will last until we find the answer.

I don't FEEL like I'm losing my humanity. In fact, with you in my life now, I feel more alive and – human- than I can ever remember feeling. You are my humanity.

After everything I've done to you, you have every right to feel afraid and uneasy with me; yet just now you let me touch you, kiss you, love you . . . intimately. I'm twice your size, I have the strength of three men, and I have a dark side. And yet you trusted me with your sweet body knowing I could lose control and hurt you immeasurably. And that's why I won't. Your faith in me is amazing. And I am madly in love with you.

When we are together and you allow me that tiniest moment of release, of total freedom, I can hardly comprehend it. You keep your eyes on mine. And when mine go yellow, instead of turning away in fear or disgust, your pupils widen just a fraction as though you enjoy seeing and knowing what you do to me. How incredible you make me feel. And oh, I do. I do. I wish I could explain to you just how much.

You are the woman of my dreams. Literally. I know that is because you were there in the past with me, but right now is the only reality I have. And as fractured and twisted as my life has become, I feel blessed. I mean, how many people get to experience their dreams coming true? While at first you were just this blurry image, now you are flesh and blood, warm and willing, and as real as life will ever get.

I love watching you sleep. Maybe I did that before; I'm not sure. Right now you have this soft smile on your lips—a satisfied smile. It makes me hope that I caused that—that I DID satisfy you in every way, as you satisfy me—as you fill me with hope and longing for a future with you, our very own happily ever after. Weeks ago I could not have imagined this. But you've brought me to life. I only hope I can be enough to you . . . because you deserve so much.

I know how much you want this new father-daughter relationship to work. I want it for you, too. You deserve some happiness after everything that has happened. Perhaps that's why I'm so nervous. I want him to accept me as good enough for his daughter. More than anything. The possibility of that is slim, I know, but so very important to me—because YOU are important to me, Catherine. I'm going to do my best. I just pray it is enough.

Later in the day—

As I write this now, I know that 'happily ever after' is just a dream. It isn't going to happen for us. You'll never read this letter because it's better if things end here. I lost control again and this time it can't be fixed or covered up. I can't explain why I attacked your father or what affect Tori has on me. I'm as confused as I'm sure you feel. Bewildered. Heartbroken. Sick to death at what I've done. When you said, 'maybe you belong together,' meaning Tori and I, the bottom fell out of my world.

You can't keep making excuses for me; I know that. There is no excuse. Your father's words just confirmed what I always suspected but didn't want to face – that I will NEVER be good enough for you. I'm not fine. I'm not all right. And if we truly love someone, we sacrifice our needs for theirs. And oh, how I love you, Catherine. So I need to walk away. Those words sound familiar to me—have I said them before? Have I tried to do it in the past and failed? Because I can only wonder why I didn't do it sooner.

I can only tell you I'll carry the memory of being with you wherever I go. How you remember me, though, I hope, will be very different. I want you to hate me. Despise me. Loathe the idea of ever seeing me again. And live your life. Please do this for me because the thought of you crying over me, over what we've lost, would literally kill me. If it comes to that, I will push you away. I'll make you abhor me. I'll do what I have to do to set you free. Maybe in some alternate universe we will find each other again and it will be different. That will be my new dream....

****The End****

A/N – I continue this story in my next story, "Hold Fast to Dreams"

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