

Windflwr

BAtB Fanfiction - The Return (Part 1)

VinCat, three months after Vincent is taken at the end of Season 1. . .

Chapter 1 (Catherine)

Catherine awakened after another disturbing night's sleep. Not really unusual for her these days, but this time was different. A noise, or something, had broken through her drug-induced sleep. She bolted upright, shoving the sweat-dampened coverlet out of the way. Her head felt foggy, as it normally did after the heavy, dreamless sleep she typically got from the prescription sleeping pills, but something was there. She knew it. This time it felt so real, so unbelievably real. But of course, there was no one.

Swiveling around in the near darkness, she searched the room anyway, especially the darkest corners, looking for his eyes. She couldn't be certain, but she may have cried his name out loud. Thankfully, Heather wasn't home. Her normally up-beat little sis had finally had enough. She'd moved out last month after a rather intense argument in which she'd accused Catherine of being "too intense," whatever that meant. Once again, she'd pushed away everyone she loved.

Stiffly, Catherine dragged her unwilling and still heavily sedated body out of bed, made her way to the kitchen, and popped in a packet of instant coffee. She couldn't even bring herself to bother going to the store and getting the real beans anymore (something she once really enjoyed). Why bother? Hair still mussed from sleep, she jolted when the door buzzer rang. Eight-ten, according to the clock. Okay, not so early. A heavy band of rain-dark clouds covered the city, making her think it was earlier than it was.

She rubbed her face once and shrugged. What did it matter how she looked? Uncaring, she headed toward the door in her crumpled, oversized sleep shirt...one of his she'd covertly taken on her last visit to JT at the lair. She hadn't been back since, and couldn't seem to find it in herself to give it back. Other than the red flannel pajamas Vincent had given her last year on her birthday, she had nothing else left of the man who still haunted her dreams. And those had become too warm now that summer had finally arrived. Heading to the door, she drew the sleeve across her nose one last time, hoping some scent of him still remained on the thin fabric. Pathetic, she knew, but there it was.

Three months ago she never would have considered answering the door looking as she did, but times had changed. Thankfully, the face on the other side of the door was familiar, if not overly friendly.

"Really?" was all Tess said as she took Catherine in from head to toe.

"It's early yet."

"Not for me. Some of us actually still work for a living."

Catherine shrugged off the gentle rebuke and waved her in. She'd come in anyway.

"Today is Saturday. And I didn't sleep well."

"Again?"

"Yeah, I know. It shouldn't be happening with the dose of sleeping pills I'm taking, but, I don't know, Tess. Last night . . . last night was different. He just felt . . . so close. Like he was in the room with me."

"Vincent?" Tess immediately pulled Cat down onto the sofa, which was not in its usual pristine, I'm-a-neat-freak Catherine sort of way. She pushed a throw blanket aside and looked at her friend.

"Listen to me. I'm really worried about you."

"Tess, you don't need to be. I'm fine. You know, what I'm going through is just a natural grieving process..."

"Don't give me that. It's been three months. And you're still not sleeping, you look like hell," Tess glanced around the room noting the dirty dishes on the counter, another completely out-of-character thing, "you haven't come back full-time yet to the precinct, and frankly, you're scaring me."

Catherine's lips thinned to a tight white line. Tess meant well, and to be honest, she was the only close friend she still had right now and couldn't afford to lose, but she didn't understand. "I'll be back on Monday, I promise. I already told that new Lieutenant Reynolds, whoever that. It's so strange not to have Joe there."

"Reynolds is all right, if you like the stuffy, older-set type. And don't change the subject...we're not talking about Joe right now. I'm glad not to have to see him everyday anymore, believe me."

"It's got to be hard."

Tess shook her head, not ready to have that conversation. Again. She was there for Catherine. "But I've moved on. And you need to, too. And don't give me that look. It's been three months. I'm not trying to be mean here, but you've got to face the facts. Muirfield has had Vincent for a long time now, if he's even still alive. I'm really sorry, Cat, but you've got to know the odds of that are crazy bad. Vincent may never be coming back."

Catherine felt her chest tighten. "I know that, Tess, and I want to be strong and accept it if it's true, but we don't know anything for sure." She looked around the room, the same room the man she loved beyond all reason had held her hands and walked her through some stretching exercises after her injury, to the doorway to the porch where they'd had so many intimate talks, then to the path through the apartment in which he'd stalked her across the room the very first time he'd attempted to kiss her. Her eyes burned and she shut them tightly. "I can't just give up. Vincent would never give up on me. And Tess, I just feel, down deep in my gut, that's he's still out there. Alive. I'd know it if he wasn't."

"Know? What, like you have some kind of physic connection or something?" Tess looked doubtful. That was a stretch, even for Catherine.

Catherine shook her head. She couldn't explain it. "No. I don't know. Nothing like that, although there have been times, in the past, when I somehow knew he was there before I had any reason to think he was. People...other people...have experienced these kinds of connections before, and you know it. Don't look at me like that."

"I know you and Vincent had a special connection. I'm not saying you didn't, but this super-sense hasn't led you to find him, has it? So maybe, just maybe, it's all in your head. Wishful thinking."

"Or my heart. I'm sorry, Tess, I can't ask you to understand..."

"Why not? Do you think your connection to Vincent is so different from mine to Joe?" She stood up, shaking her head, a little angry now and insulted. "Don't think you're the only one hurting. Just because I decided to start living my life again doesn't mean it doesn't still hurt."

Catherine immediately stood up and went to her friend, placing a careful hand on her sleeve. "I didn't mean to imply that. And I know you miss Joe. I'm so sorry, Tess, I really want to break free of this quagmire I'm in, but I just don't know how."

"That's why I'm here." The hint of tears filled Catherine's eyes and voice but none fell. They never did anymore, and Tess's face softened.

"He was the one, you know?" Catherine slumped back down onto the sofa in a soft heap. "He was the one for me. There isn't going to be another man who understands me the way he did, who needs me as much as I..."

"You don't know that. And you won't ever know for sure unless you let yourself live again and find out. There are other guys out there, Cat, nice guys, good guys. Guys who don't have death certificates, guys who could love you and you could build a life with, but you've got to let go and try. As hard as it is to say, you need to move on. Vincent is gone and he's never coming back."

The stark words hit Catherine like a brick and she stopped breathing.

Tess saw but ignored it. She couldn't afford to be sucked into her friend's depression. It was time to live again and act. And force Catherine to do the same. It was the only way. "Cat. Come with me tonight. We'll go out to a bar, some place small and not crowded. Some place very non-threatening. And we'll just test the waters. We'll get dolled up like we used to. You're going to take a shower and put on your best casual-night-out clothes, and you'll try to smile..."

"Tess, I can't..."

"You can, and you will." This time she was more forceful. "For me. Because I need it."

Put that way, Catherine could hardly refuse. Not after all that Tess had done for her. "Okay. I'll try. I'll TRY. For a few hours. That's all I'm going to agree to."

"Okay."

"Okay." Catherine looked around for a different subject. "Did, did the results come back on the animal killings in the park yet?"

"Small animals mauled by a larger one, that's all it was, Cat. The ME thinks it might have been a wolf. He's still doing tests."

"But the DNA..."

"Was animal. Cat. It wasn't him."

The look Tess gave her dared her to argue even as everything inside her cried out that she was wrong. Vincent was close.

"Okay. Okay. I'll . . . I guess I'll see you tonight. If I'm going to be in any shape to be social, I'm going to need the entire day to prepare."

Tess took that as a polite way of telling her she'd overstayed her welcome. "Go out. Buy something new. I'll pick you up at eight."

Catherine closed the door on her friend and crumpled to the floor, and wondered how on earth she was going to manage. The pressure behind her eyes came again, this time unbelievably strong. Tearlessly sobbing, she whispered the only name that meant anything to her anymore. "Vincent"

Chapter 2 (Vincent)

Vincent couldn't move...his feet were literally rooted to the spot. And locked in cadence with every breath she took, his breathing was no longer his own. Catherine. The only thought sustaining him through the months of grueling, torturous experiments had been finding her again. And now that he was here, he felt frozen. Unable to act.

He'd watched from the fire escape the first two nights . . . relieved to see her safe; terrified of what came next. But before morning's first light, he'd left and wandered the cloying passages of the underground of New York City for the rest of the day. Alone. Afraid. Angry. And feeling worse than he had when he'd been locked in a prison of his own making at the warehouse with JT what seemed like so long ago now. Of course, JT had always been there for him and probably always would, but things had never been the same after Catherine had come into his life.

He thought about JT. He hadn't even gone to the old mansion to see him yet. What was the point? He'd be fine. JT had a job, a life, and he had Sarah, much as his old buddy was uncertain about where they were headed. JT was okay. And better off not knowing. But Catherine

Today, he needed to be closer. So many conflicting images crowded his brain. Being here was the only way to make sense of them. Was she friend? Lover? Or tormentor? "I think she finds it convenient to keep you trapped." He recognized the voice but couldn't quite put a face to it. What did that mean? He remembered Catherine grabbing his hand in a last-ditch effort to anchor him to the ground as the helicopter lifted him, but hadn't it also been Catherine who'd taken away his only chance at a cure and a normal life by stabbing him with what he now knew to be a vaccine on the day he was taken? Was that her way of loving him? Or did she hate him so much? Maybe, like Reynolds said, she'd wanted to be rid of him, once and for all. And it worked. There was zero chance of a normal life now.

He could feel the rage begin again, simmering just below the surface of his skin. But the thoughts and images in his head didn't match up. Catherine. Love. Catherine. Betrayal. Catherine - "I accept all of what you are." But that was a lie, wasn't it?

There'd been something akin to relief at finding her alone at her apartment. Relief and pain. Desire. Torture. Jealousy. How many nights had he wondered if she'd moved on, found someone else, someone who could give her all the things he never could? A stab of pain deep in his chest said that would be a good thing, right? But then his thoughts twisted. No. She was his....his mate. No one else could have her.

Open your eyes. See me.

Vincent clawed at the wainscoting along the wall, needing purchase. Something to hold him back. Then Catherine stirred, made a little moaning sound. His breath caught and held. Following the slim line of her body in the bed made his eyes glow yellow. Much as he tried to control it, he'd lost that ability, too. Muirfield had made certain of that. He wanted her, friend or foe. It made no difference now.

Sensing his time was short, and pulled by some powerful, elementary force, he made his way stealthily to the bed and leaned over her. The shadows and his dark clothing still hid his face, but the eastern horizon was filling slowly with early morning color. He didn't need the light to see, of course. Not anymore.

His nostrils filled his lungs with the mesmerizing scent of her. Memories, images crowded his mind. He knew the curve of that cheek, the line of her brow. He knew the petal soft texture of her lips. Her taste. Or thought he did. Were those memories real? Or had Muirfield manufactured those, as well?

He willed himself to turn away, to leave while he still could. Today was not the day. But as she exhaled softly and turned her face from him, thin gray light from the window dappled her luminescent skin where her dark, luxurious hair had fallen aside and exposed her neck to him. He bent down to within an inch. And then, unable to stop himself, ran his tongue from her nape to cheekbone.

Before her startled eyes could flicker open, he was gone.

Chapter 3 (Vincent)

“At ease, Keller.”

Vincent visibly relaxed, but kept his position.

“Where have you been?”

“Sir?”

“Don’t give me that innocent look. I asked you a direct question. You haven’t been sleeping in your bed the last three nights. Relax, soldier. This isn’t an inquisition. I was worried about you, and mildly curious, I admit. We don’t have a tracking device imbedded in you anywhere. I’m just concerned.”

“I don’t need sleep, sir.”

“Is that right? And it’s Doctor Bradley, remember? Look, you may be a super-soldier, but you’re not a machine, Keller. Of course you need sleep.”

“Not that much. I just feel . . . more comfortable at night.”

“In the dark, you mean? I imagine that’s a tough habit to break, but you’re free now, son. Essentially. Your off-time is your own. As long as it doesn’t impact your job.”

“It won’t, sir.”

“I’d like to believe that.” The white-coated internist smiled at him. “So you roam the streets of the city, huh? Where do you go?”

“The tunnels, old haunts.”

“Checking out the places you used to live and the friends you once knew? They’re all safe, you know. And they’ve moved on with their lives. As I’m sure you could see, Muirfield has no interest in your family or previous acquaintances anymore. That was before. And even then, we were only trying to track you down—a situation you made endlessly difficult, of course you know. But now that you’re back, there’s no need to worry, I assure you.”

Vincent remained stoically silent.

“Well, if you’re ready for the day, I actually have a surprise for you this morning—someone I’d like you to meet. Another soldier—just like you.”

Vincent finally turned his head and looked the man directly in the eyes. “Excuse me, sir?” The only other person ‘just like him’ had been Gabe, whom they’d ruthlessly murdered. What could this possibly mean? For a split second he thought of Catherine’s friend Evan, the medical examiner whom he’d once been jealous of but who, in the end, had sacrificed himself for their freedom. Could they have resurrected him in some fashion? But he forced the thought from his head. That would be the cruelest turn yet, especially for Catherine. Since he’d been captured, the Muirfield agents hadn’t been intentionally cruel - his first surprise. Nevertheless, he wasn’t sure he wanted to know what was behind Door Number 1.

“Yes. You thought you were the only one, didn’t you? You’re partially correct. No one is exactly like you. Cameryn isn’t the same level as you, either, but that is only a matter of time. Come.”

Vincent followed the doctor into an adjacent room, ducking his head through the doorway with a mixture of anxiety and fear. Another white-coated technician was the only other person in the room, but when she turned, his eyes met hers in stunned recognition. His body reacted before his mind did - and so did hers. Before he could stop it, a low guttural sound came out of throat.

“You sense each other, don’t you? Oh, don’t be alarmed. There is no threat here. Calm yourselves, both of you, or do I need to call for an injection? That’s better. Come closer, Cameryn. The good Doctor Keller wants to make your acquaintance. Vincent, this is Cameryn Teague, your new partner.”

Partner? Shock waves continued to roll through his body. She was a souped-up soldier just like he was, only with long, sable hair and bright blue eyes that raked him with a question. She hadn’t had any more preparation for this meeting than he’d had, that was obvious. What did the doctor mean by ‘partner?’

“I know this is somewhat unexpected, for both of you, but I think you’ll soon agree that two is better than one in many situations. We’ve been working with Teague for a little over a year now. She doesn’t have your prior military training, Vincent, but she’s a finely-tuned athlete and perfectly capable of being your backup, especially for some of the upcoming missions we have planned.

You'll find Teague to be . . . useful . . . in many ways. She's very good at moving in and out of all sorts of circles, from high flyers to gutter trash, and getting valuable information, among other things."

The 'other things' implied a lot, Vincent thought, as he continued to appraise her, and she, him.

"She's stunning in uniform and out, as you can see. And terribly lethal."

That he could imagine. Not since spying Catherine in the warehouse that first day had he had such a reaction to a female, and he didn't welcome it. This was such a manipulation on Muirfield's part, for as much as the 'good doctor' put the innocent spin on it. He didn't doubt they knew exactly where he'd been the last few nights and had been busy trying to figure out just how to sidetrack him. Although obviously they'd had Cameryn in their clutches for some time. He wondered what her story was, but he had no intention of asking.

"You see, Keller, we take care of our own. In every way. I'll just leave you two alone to get better acquainted."

The door closed quietly behind the doctor. Vincent was hardly aware of it as the female she-beast in the room walked a slow circle around him.

"So you're him."

He wished those words didn't bring a stab a pain, but it was almost cathartic. Catherine. He growled.

"All that and a bag of chips," she added.

"The chips are extra," he snarled, disliking the perusal and her very insulting insinuation.

"I bet they are."

"I don't need a partner."

"And I certainly don't need you. But it looks like we don't have a choice, do we?"

Oh, I have a choice. He thought it, but didn't speak.

She sensed what he didn't say. "But you don't agree, do you? Why, because you're special? Well, now you know. Look," Cameryn visibly relaxed her shoulders, a motion that did a lot to ease his own tension. "We have to work together, Keller, that's a given. Why don't we make the best of it? We probably have a lot in common. We could be friends. That last thing I need right now is another adversary. " "How long have you been...?" Vincent let the question fall flat.

“Like this? Long enough to have accepted it. I’m surprised you don’t embrace it yourself.”

“What? Being made into a monster? What exactly is there to embrace?”

“Power? But I don’t look at it that way, or use that term. I prefer to think of myself as a super-me. And I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t start with the name-calling.”

“Call it what you want.” Vincent walked further into the room and pulled over a chair. Maybe he was more tired than he thought. He rubbed a weary hand across his face.

Cameryn found a chair as well and turned it backward to face him. She held out her hand. “Shall we start over, then? Hi, I’m Cameryn Teague, and I’m very glad to meet you.”

Vincent blew out a breath, hesitated then offered his own hand. “Vincent Ryan Keller.”

What were they thinking? Problem was, he had a good idea. Distract him away from Catherine with a female she-beast who would appeal to his basest animal nature. Offer him a partner of his own species to keep him grounded and in line while he did their dirty work. Smart, but it would never fly.

“A bird may love a fish, but where would they live?” The old saying came back to him in a rush. One foot in both worlds, that’s where. If Catherine would accept the new him, that was.

He was going to have to get it over with sooner rather than later and find out. He wasn’t eager for the confrontation. He couldn’t lie to her; he never could. He’d have to tell her the truth - that he’d been in the city for some time already. Would she feel betrayed that he hadn’t come to her sooner?

Catherine might forgive him. She seemed endlessly supplied that way, but it was more complicated than that. He was more complicated. He wasn’t the same as when he’d left. Was it fair to her?

Now Muirfield had neatly cornered him with an alternative solution - half-beast with half-beast. No explanations, no condemnation, no pull of different worlds. But Cameryn, as beautiful as she was, could never compete with Catherine. She’d never look at him the way Catherine did. Theirs was a linking of heart, mind and soul, not simple chemistry, as good as that had been.

No. Tonight he would make himself known to her. And take his chances. Only if she refused to have him would he ever consider anyone else.

Chapter 4

Catherine pushed wearily through the door to her apartment. It had been a very long day. She'd forgotten how exhausting it could be to work a full shift. Either that, or she was terribly out of shape. The most difficult part had been putting on an eager face for all her co-workers and trying to look interested in their latest case - a suspicious death in the international district with possible ties to the mafia. Normally, such a crime would get her juices going, send her brain into overdrive analyzing evidence, surveillance photos and scraps of evidence, but not today.

Everyone had seemed genuinely glad to have her back, even those with the curious questions in their eyes. But she didn't owe them an explanation. Her cover story about her mother's sister's illness served to satisfy most, but there were still some who made her feel like they didn't quite believe it. Whatever.

She dropped her keys onto the entryway table and the loud clatter in the silent room snapped her out of her reverie. Boy, she was jumpy! But there was no one home to bother anymore. Heather had made it perfectly clear she was happy where she was, rooming with a friend she'd met at her work. The girl was Heather's age, so she was sure her little sister would enjoy having someone to hang around with rather than stuck here with a sister who'd been part mother to her for so long she'd forgotten how to just be a sis. And who likes an extra nanny at that age, anyway? No, it was for the best, although the loneliness was overwhelming at times.

Catherine sighed. Peeling off her light-weight jacket, she peeked into the mirror above the table and looked at her own face. When had thirty turned into forty, she wondered? The lines on her forehead, what few there were, had deepened in the last three months. Too much frowning. Too much coffee and late nights watching television alone begging for the morning - because nights were the worst. Without him. Vincent. When would things ever feel normal again? And how did one's life possibly go on without your mate?

She closed her eyes and dropped her face into one hand hating her weakness. She could see his eyes, hear the deep rumble of his voice in the deepest parts of her, feel the shivery brush of his chin whiskers along her jaw and then down her neck and into her hair. So vivid still. Ah, God, when would it ever get easier? She breathed deeply and even his scent it seemed filled her lungs, her body, invading her every nerve ending. The sensation was so real it was almost shocking in intensity. Why, it was almost like he was actually th...

She sucked in a breath and spun around so quickly she jarred the table into the wall. Vincent Ryan Keller silently filled the space just inside the balcony door through which he'd obviously broken in.

Catherine's eyes widened, and for a strangled moment her breath and heart both failed to function at the same time. She gasped when she'd counted to five and was certain he was no figment of her imagination at all but the living, breathing embodiment of all her dreams and prayers.

Before he could speak, she catapulted across the room to him, oblivious to the fact that tears were streaming down her face for the first time in all the months he'd been gone.

Not knowing when she might return from her shift, Vincent had been pacing just outside the balcony door for two hours and peering into the lonely apartment. The first thing he noticed was how much it had changed. Or been re-arranged. There wasn't much to see in the unlit room, other than a few coffee cups on the counter and a spoon, obviously all in need of washing. He frowned. It wasn't like Catherine to be so untidy. The number of times he'd shown up to her place unexpectedly in the past, her apartment had always been neat as a pin. Something had definitely changed.

That had made him frown until he noticed the dining table. Catherine usually left it bare of anything save a vase of dried flowers, but today there were two place settings, a fresh bouquet of hothouse roses, and two wine glasses, waiting and ready for an elegant meal.

It could only mean one thing. Catherine was expecting a dinner guest. With her father still recovering at home and Evan dead, he knew of no one else it could be. And Heather was an unlikely guest for such a fancy table. The sisters had usually taken their meals at the less formal breakfast bar when they lived together.

He could feel the simmer of rage begin in his blood. Perhaps she'd moved on as his Muirfield doctor had suggested. No! He couldn't be too late. Catherine was his! And he wouldn't give her up without a fight. Maybe she thought him dead. That was an all too strong possibility. But too bad. He was back. And today, he'd show her just how alive he was.

Twisting the lock past the bolt, he'd felt a surge of satisfaction when it gave. The metal had screeched then broke with a pop. He'd slid silently through the door and closed it behind him. Inside, the sights and scents that were so familiar to him from the past had assailed his nostrils. His eyes searched the room, dark now but lit by the twinkling glitter of lights from the buildings nearby. Then he'd leaned back into a shadowed corner and waited. He hadn't been there long when she wearily pressed open the door and began to peel off her leather jacket.

Senses alive and wildly snapping, he had hoped for a moment or two to observe her in silence before she realized he was there, but as usual, Catherine somehow sensed him before she saw him. As such, he was totally unprepared for the violence of her reaction, much less his, as she cried out, "Oh my God. Vincent!" She launched herself at him with such force, he found himself slammed backward into the wall, unexpected from someone barely over a hundred pounds wet.

Vincent felt his body react to the incredible sensations, achingly familiar, shockingly and torturously forbidden. His gut twisted in knots, yet he felt oddly comforted. Home. She felt like home. He thought he'd been prepared for this, but so desperate for the feel of her against him, he was absolutely powerless to stop the gush of adrenalin that shot through his veins at the contact. It pulsed through his body all the way to his fingertips where nails as sharp as razor wire instantly pierced through his nail beds. The sensation was never pleasant, but fear of what he could do to her tender skin had him panicked with the effort of trying to hold it back.

Her heart rate was astonishingly high and her breath too shallow. "Don't. Move," he ground out.

Catherine's eyes flew to his, their dewy lashes still heavy with unshed tears, but she froze obediently. Without needing to be told, she knew he was within a hair's breadth of losing control. The grip of his hands around her waist was painfully strong, but as good as it felt, she knew without being told that his nails had extended and were extremely close to ripping her flesh apart. One flinch in any direction and she was dead meat. The tiniest sting along her lower back told her he'd already accidentally nicked her, but she'd never let him know it. She focused on his face, so close to hers. With the lightest intake of breath she said, "Vincent, just breathe."

His eyes slowly lost their rage haze and that's when she noticed the changes in him. His hair was shorter, for one. He'd returned to the more military style cut he'd worn in the photograph she'd seen of him in the service. She spared a short sigh of regret about that. She had loved weaving her fingers into his long, dark locks. She'd used it to anchor herself to him in their most intense moments on more than one occasion. But that was nothing. Hair could grow again. It was his eyes that were so startlingly different now, and his mouth. This was not the beast she had lost to Muirfield. Even as she felt the faint slice of his nails into her skin as he was transforming, his face hadn't taken on that awkward beastly look he'd had before. No, these eyes held complete knowledge of who he was, like he and his animal nature had finally merged. And his mouth, though his own, looked more menacing.

Before she could contemplate the reason for all that, he flipped her around against the wall with a barely leashed violence so fast her head lightly bounced off it. His hands were no longer on her; his forearms had slammed against the wall next to her head and she could hear the tear of soft plaster as the painted wall board gave way to the grip of his deadly nails. Better, but still terrifying.

But this was Vincent. Vincent! Back in her apartment like a ghost come to life again.

"Who is he?" he ground out, his voice a deadly guttural whisper that demanded an answer.

If the confusion she felt showed on her face, he seemed not to notice. "Who is . . . who?"

"The guest you were expecting for dinner."

She cocked her head slightly to the side, then her brain flooded with relief. She realized what he had seen - the table set for two every night as it had been for three months. It had been a joke with herself, in a way. The only time she'd formally actually asked him over for dinner, just the two of them, he'd never shown. So why expect it now? But even though she'd waited all night for him that evening so long ago, he hadn't intentionally abandoned her, and she knew down deep in her gut he wouldn't this time, either. And she had been right.

Braving his wrathful gaze, she slowly reached a hand up to his face and gave him the look of longing she hoped he understood. "I was waiting for you."

She gave him a moment to process her words and tremulous smile then breathed his name again.

"Oh God, Catherine."

Vincent leaned his forehead against hers and let the rage slowly recede. Her lips were so close, but as much as he was dying to feel them again with his own, to taste her sweetness, he didn't trust himself that much just yet. She graciously let him stand there and almost hold her, though he knew he'd possibly already hurt her and really should turn her around and check. He willed himself to calm down but it came by the slowest of degrees. His senses were still electrified by the feel of her body along his. Finally, he rubbed his nose along hers and allowed himself the barest brush of lips against hers. It was all the encouragement she needed.

Catherine pushed her mouth to his, desperate for the feel of him again. The taste. The knowledge that he was home at last and in her arms. He answered her with some force of his own. As her nails bit into the hair above his ear, her other hand gripped his shirt like a lifeline. As their tongues tangled, she felt a roughness that hadn't been there before. It didn't matter. Delirious joy met aching anguish. She tried to tell him with her mouth and body what words never could. She'd come undone without him. Alone. Terrified. But she loved him with everything she was, and was unbelievably happy that he was back, changed or no.

When both of them were finally forced to separate just to suck in oxygen, she looked up again, breathing heavily. "What? How? You've changed." She frowned, knowing that hadn't come out right, but needing answers anyway.

The beast having finally receded, Vincent snaked his arms about her and pulled her to him. There were so many questions between them, questions she deserved answers for, but right now he couldn't focus. He had his woman in his arms again, and even though she had acknowledged the visible changes, she hadn't run. Again. He favored the heavens above with another prayer of thanks and closed his eyes to the feel of her. When he could finally breathe normally again, he lifted a hand to her face and saw the faintest trace of blood on his fingers.

"It's okay," she assured him, seeing his face and trying to cover her tender skin with her hand.

He immediately turned her around and pushed up the hem of her short blouse to view the damage his own hands had done to her. Her fingers spread aching over the scratch.

"I surprised you, that's all" she assured him.

Shocked by his own actions, the familiar self-loathing rose to the surface. "No, it most certainly isn't all right. I hurt you! Catherine, so much has changed..." More than she knew. More than he ever wanted her to know.

"I don't care." She cut him off. "I don't care, do you hear me, Vincent? We'll figure it out - whatever it is. You and me, together. Loop-de-loops, remember?"

When he started to speak again, she placed two fingers against his lips.

"But not now. Kiss me. You've got three months to make up for, Mister. You'd better darn well get started."

Vincent nodded to the wisdom of that. Answers would come later. In time. But first things first.

Sometime in the morning, she slipped quietly from the bed, careful not to disturb him. But Vincent seemed to be sleeping the sleep of the dead. She looked back at him, covered only with a small portion of the summer-thin sheet. The lines of his face had relaxed and now he had the look of a gentle and peacefully slumbering Greek god. Adonis. The corded strands of muscle covering his body looked tighter, leaner than before. Sexier, but more dangerous. But as much as she'd like to pull back the curtains for a better look, she instead yanked the heavy drapes shut to close off the sliver of bright morning light just weaving its way into the room. No need for him to know the time. Not just yet. If she had her way, he'd never leave her bed. Ever again. She felt sore in places she hadn't known she could, and wonderfully good. Whole again. But they weren't done this morning, not by a long shot.

Catherine tip-toed into the bathroom and expertly cleaned up the tiny scratches along her torso. Dabbing a little cover-up on them, she examined her work. She should be shocked, she supposed, but couldn't find it in herself to feel anything but thrilled at the thought of him wanting her so badly he couldn't completely control himself. If she had her way, he'd never know he'd hurt her again. He hadn't meant to. There had been such devastation on his face when he realized he'd cut her last night. She'd felt some desperation herself. No, he must never find out. The man she loved was home. Where he belonged. And nothing else mattered.

She carefully crawled back under the sheets and wove her arms around the warm bands of his powerful body. There were deep slash marks in the bedding she hadn't noticed before. She cringed to guess what he'd think of that, but she didn't care. Not today.

She hugged him closer. And cried.

Truth Hurts (Part 2)

Catherine was completely aware of how late it was getting to be, but couldn't make herself care. Vincent had started to stir long, languorous moments earlier and his touches were making her body sing. Morning could wait a little while longer. Sadly, that thought coincided with the clock flipping over the hour and an odd refrain of Metric's "Breathing Underwater" suddenly blared through the stillness of the room, jarring them both from their loving reverie. "I'm the blade; you're the knife." She blindly reached out an arm to the nightstand and slammed it off.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, starting to sit up despite every nerve in her body screaming against it.

Vincent twisted his head to the clock and saw the time. "No, it's okay," he said, his deep voice rougher than normal, but surprisingly pleasant. "I surprised you last night."

"In more ways than one," she grinned shyly at him then took a deep breath. "Unfortunately . . . I can't possibly call in today. I texted Tess last night that I might need a few extra hours this morning, but," she looked over at the time and sighed again, "I think my time's just about up." Despite her resolve, she slid down again into the warm cocoon of his arms. "The last thing I want to do right now is leave this bed. I want to hear everything – how you got away, what's been happening since, but . . . I have this new boss..."

When Vincent frowned at that, she added, "...long story. "

"We both have a lot to catch up on in each other's lives." He ran a hand gently through her silky hair and the bangs she'd cut at some point in the last month. He kinda liked them.

"Yes, we do. Will you . . . be here when I get back?" Catherine tried to keep the hopeful note from her voice, but knew she'd failed miserably. "Heather isn't currently living here, so..."

"I guess we both have a lot to share. Uh, no, actually. I've also got to get back."

"To JT? I can't wait to hear what he had to say when you showed up out of the blue," she said, getting out of bed and walking toward the bathroom door.

Vincent's eyes followed the line of her sexy legs and momentarily forgot what he was about to say until she rounded the corner. "Actually, I came to see you first." That was a dodge of immense proportions, but hopefully it sounded close to the truth. "But I'll come back tonight. Maybe we can make it through dinner and a little conversation before getting too distracted again." That was rather doubtful, but they could always try.

“Wishful thinking, Mr. Keller.” Catherine flashed a quick grin at him around the door before disappearing briefly again. He could hear water running.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” he said. “You go. Do what you have to do. I can clean up around here.”

“You sure?” She peeked at him again then eyed the messy bedclothes dubiously.

“Absolutely.”

“Okay then.” She shrugged. “You don’t have to leave right away, you know. There’s food in the frig...” Wait. Had she remembered to pick up that quart of milk? “Take your time. There’s no hurry.”

The apartment was quiet when she turned off the shower short minutes later, and for a moment she thought he’d left. She dressed quickly, dabbed on the barest of makeup then pulled her hair back into a knot before stepping back into the bedroom where he sat curled up in an easy chair by the window, coffee cup in hand and a newspaper (one he must have picked up outside the door) opened on his lap.

She grinned. What a wonderful, wonderful sight he made. She could hardly believe he was back. She frowned. So many questions, and absolutely no time! He offered her an identical steaming mug but she shook her head. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, really.” He got up and helped her on with her jacket, then turned her to him. “I’m not going to disappear again. I promise.”

She studied his eyes a moment, so beautiful and dark. And full of mystery this time. Then she kissed him lightly on the lips and wished with all her heart she could linger. Impossible. “You’d better not. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Vincent watched the apartment door click shut and let out a long sigh. This wasn’t going to be easy. There was so much to say, but both of them had been so focused on the other that talking had become impossible. Breathing had been difficult enough. He could feel heat building up in his veins again just at the thought. He rubbed his face and willed himself to calm down. He couldn’t afford her learning the truth another way. It would have to come from him, and tonight. He’d have to do whatever it took to keep them away from the bedroom.

It wasn’t until he was certain she’d left the building that he got up and walked back into the bedroom to make the bed - and saw the tears in the fabric. Two distinct sets of jagged rip marks cut through the sheets where his hands must have clawed for purchase on either side of her during the night, some deep enough to have slashed into the mattress below. Shame filled him.

The room was dark, so it was possible she hadn't noticed, but that was ridiculous. Of course she had. What had she thought of him? As he tried to press them flat again, he examined the sheets more closely. Tiny threads of red were spattered here and there. "Oh, no." It was a multi-colored sheet set, but he could smell the faint coppery odor and knew it was blood. Catherine's. The stains were faint, so it was possible they could have been from the day before where she'd nicked herself shaving. He turned around and sat down heavily on the edge of the counter pane. Who was he kidding? He'd watched her get out of bed and had seen no marks on her skin then, but he had to have hurt her. The red haze he'd been in most of the night must have dulled his other senses or else he would have picked up on it sooner. How could he have done that to her?

He knew how, of course. The continued regimen of pills and injections they'd subjected him to in the past three months had fractionally altered his DNA until he was more beast than man now. Catherine could not have not noticed the subtle changes in his body. Maybe the smile she'd put on was for show. After all, who'd want to upset a guy who could rip you to shreds with his bare hands? He hadn't smelled any fear, though.

He tipped back his head and rolled his shoulders. What was, was. There was no going back. Either Catherine accepted him again, all of him, or this was the end of a beautiful dream. At least he'd have his memories - unless Muirfield eventually found a way to suppress those, too. Hands at his side, he pushed off the bed and went about setting things right. It was past time to report in.

"This is your target, Simon Guillaume."

"Who is he?" Cameryn Teague spoke without looking away from the face on the screen.

"International Yemeni operative in country under a false name. He's here for an arms deal, but not just any arms - he wants biological weapons."

"And he thinks he can get them from someone here in New York?"

"Indirectly. This is a first step. He's meeting this man - Demitrius Volostav, an aide to the Russian ambassador." Another image flashed up on the screen. "Volostav thinks his cover is air-tight, but we've been watching him for some time. He's a hatchet man for the Old Guard. The man's ruthlessness knows no bounds. He'd sell his Mother's first-born for the right price."

"He must be a middle child," Cameryn murmured sotto voice to Vincent and grinned.

Hatchet men with no moral compass apparently didn't bother her, he thought to himself, studying Cameryn more than the computer display. She still had that cocky grin.

Reynolds droned on. "Volostov will attempt to provide Guillaume with contact in exchange for information - Volostov is after a spook they lost track of last December in Yemen. He can't afford for that man to be compromised and thinks Guillaume can help locate him. I don't need to tell you - neither man must get what he came for. In fact, it would be better, for us, if Guillaume quietly disappeared. Cameryn, you'll be point on this one. Make contact with Guillaume, find out where the meet will be. Vincent, you'll come in and take him out when she gives the signal."

"What about Volostov? We're just going to let him get away? He's just going to keep trying." Cameryn asked the question of Reynolds, but shot a look at Vincent.

"He isn't to be touched. Too visible. Mr. Volostov is well watched, believe me. Leave Volostov to us."

"Point, already. Wow," he murmured to her as they left the over-bright office.

"I don't know what he's thinking, Keller. I didn't ask for it."

"He sees potential in you. Don't worry. You'll do fine."

"Yes, I will." She stopped walking and grinned over at him. With her heels, their faces were nearly on the same level. Just how she liked it.

"What?"

"You're not . . . typical, are you?"

"What's that supposed to mean? Neither one of us is any kind of definition of 'typical.'"

"I mean, guys have big egos. They don't like handing things over to a newbie, much less a woman."

"You don't know anything about me. I guess I just don't have a strong opinion of how this should be done. I'm good with whatever you plan. And I've known capable women before."

"I bet you have."

Vincent looked away. There was a very capable woman waiting for him tonight. He'd just like to get this over and done with - he didn't care how. They made their plans. It all seemed good. After they suited up and adequately armed themselves, they headed out.

Things didn't quite go as planned. Volostav brought a few henchmen to the party. Cameryn did a good job of distracting them all, but there was quite a mess to clean up when they were done, and more than one dead body - Volostav's among them. Reynolds wasn't pleased. By the time he disgustedly dismissed them, he didn't have time to do anything but hurry over to Catherine's and pray she would forgive him for missing dinner. Again.

"I didn't expect you to come to the door." She quickly looked down the hall to check if anyone else might have seen him. It was empty. "Come in. Hurry."

"Catherine, I'm so sorry. I got hung up. I didn't mean to be late."

"It's okay. You're here now. Are you still hungry? I just put the food away but it would only take a few minutes to heat it back up again."

"No, I'm good."

"Okay."

She looked away and he knew she was feeling unworthy in some way. He understood that feeling only too well. He looked into the apartment, wondering if she was going to invite him in further or have him stand there the rest of the night.

As if realizing her mistake at the same time, she waved toward the living room. "Come on in. Sit down. You look tired."

She ran a hand over his cheek and he felt that intimate connection he always did when she touched him like that. He guessed he could stand there all night breathing in her soft scent and it wouldn't bother him too much. If only he could. Better get the hard part over first. He let himself linger a moment longer, afraid it would be the last time she looked at him that way, then he took her hand in his and pulled her down with him onto the soft cushions of the sofa.

CHAPTER 2

The lamp lit Vincent's face from a different angle and that was when she noticed the slight bruising along his jaw.

"Oh, my God. Did you get in a scrape? What happened?"

He grabbed her hand before she could touch him further. He needed to maintain a little bit of space tonight. "It's nothing."

Catherine eyed him curiously. "Well, it's not nothing, but I gather it has something to do with what you're going to tell me."

“Yeah, kinda.” He looked everywhere but at her.

His nervous movements gave him away. “Vincent. Don’t you know by now that you can trust me? Whatever it is, whatever you’ve been through, we’ll face it together. Just . . . why don’t you start at the beginning.”

He looked up, then set his jaw. “Okay.” He swallowed hard. “When Muirfield grabbed me, they took me to what looked like an abandoned farm house. At first, I wasn’t certain it was them because this place wasn’t the normal pristine, hi-tech laboratory they usually use, you know? The guy in charge, he had only a skeleton crew, too, so it wasn’t their usual modus operandi. I don’t think they’d planned to grab me at all.”

“You think Gabe was the target?”

“Yes. I don’t know, I guess after seeing me at the mansion they realized who I was and decided they could only grab one of us, so they shot Gabe and threw their net over me.”

“That net, you couldn’t tear it?”

“No, they’d definitely had capture in mind. It was made of some kind of material I couldn’t rip through. They knew exactly what they were doing.”

Catherine’s lips thinned to a tight line. Gabe had actually survived, but they would get to that part of the story later. “So it was Muirfield. And they continued their experiments.”

It wasn’t a question. “Yes. They continued their experiments.”

“Vincent, if I had known they were coming...”

“Catherine, you couldn’t have known.”

“But I made the choice to give you that vaccine. If I hadn’t, Muirfield would never have seen you like that, and maybe—”

“You did what you did to save my life.”

He looked away when he said it, and Catherine realized for the first time that that’s the story he’d probably been telling himself, but he wasn’t sure of her motivations. She got up from the couch and paced to the window. “You don’t know how many nights I cried myself to sleep knowing the last memory you’d have of me was that.” When she turned, her eyes were filled with tears. “Our future was an unknown, but I couldn’t live without you in it.”

Vincent breathed in and out slowly, calming himself. The Muirfield doctors had questioned him long and hard about the physical changes he was undergoing. His body was in overdrive when they caught him, still fighting the effects of the rapid modification of the cure followed by the vaccine that cancelled it. They'd planted a lot of questions in his mind - questions he thought he knew the answer to. But over time, he wasn't sure what was certain anymore.

The tears in her eyes were all he needed to know the truth. She'd thought it was his only chance, and Catherine did what Catherine always did - made the difficult choice. He only hoped she didn't live to regret it. Seeing her tears almost had him on his feet, but as much as he wanted to comfort her, he didn't quite trust himself.

"And I'm okay. First thing they did was stabilize me. The doctor treating me wasn't interested in figuring out what made me tick, only of helping me cope. Over time, he and I actually became friends."

Catherine frowned deeply but let him continue.

"In fact..." He regrouped. He'd rehearsed this in his mind a dozen times, but it still didn't feel right. He knew he was mucking it up. "Okay, I don't know how to tell you this except to just say it: Muirfield has changed. It isn't the same organization it was."

"Changed . . . how?"

"Under new management. Well, old management actually. With a new agenda. After we destroyed their server complex and the agent who killed Evan failed, a major overhaul occurred. Catherine, I came to your front door because they are no longer hunting me. I didn't escape. They let me go. And now I'm working with them."

The silence in the room was palpable.

"But they captured you and did more experiments on you."

He nodded. "To help me."

"Really? This is the organization you've been hiding from for ten years. They killed your service buddies, Ray. They killed Evan. Vincent, Muirfield murdered my mother!" She heard herself yelling and made a visible effort to calm down. "Now they're your friends? Don't you think there's the tiniest chance that they're manipulating you? Maybe they drugged you and used some sort of subliminal suggestions..."

"No."

"And so you just thought, why not join up? The benefit package was better than you were getting before?"

“Look. I know how it sounds, but it’s not like that. I’m still technically dead, okay? I still have to fly under the radar - I just don’t have to watch over my shoulder every moment of every day.”

“We’ll find a way to fix this.”

“That’s what I’m saying. There’s nothing to fix.”

“And you’re just going to overlook what they’ve done . . . to you? To others? To my mom?”

“Catherine, I know this doesn’t make any sense.”

“That’s the first thing you’ve said that does. What doesn’t make any sense is that the man I love now works for the organization that killed his friends, my co-worker, and my mother!”

“Try to see this from my perspective. I can never have a normal life. Never. At least this way I have some modicum of freedom. I can be useful...”

“Useful?” She shook her head and backed away. Vincent started to get up but she held up a hand. “I’m sorry, but . . . I don’t know who you are anymore.” She turned away from him with a hand on her mouth.

His mesmerizing voice cut to her heart. “I’m the same guy you made love to last night. Catherine. I’m the guy who thought of nothing but you for the last three months. Wanting to hold you again was the only thought keeping me from going insane.”

“Exactly. Because of what they’d done to you. And this is how you repay that - you go to work for them? What, so you’re on the payroll now? Just how much does a hired killer make these days?”

Her words were like knives and he could feel himself start to transform. He ruthlessly beat it back.

She went to the coat tree and pulled off her jacket, stabbing her arms down the thin leather sleeves.

“What? Where are you going?”

“I think I need some air.”

Before she got to the door he was at her back, a hand curled around her middle. He felt her suck in her breath. “Catherine, please don’t go. I’m sorry. I . . . I haven’t explained this right. You know I’m not good with words. Just...” Even as he felt the splash of tears on his knuckles where his hand cradled her, she froze. Remembering what his hands had done to her, he withdrew them. Everything was falling apart.

“Catherine...”

“I can’t do this right now.”

The moment she grabbed the door handle, the bell rang.

Vincent’s eyes shot to hers.

“Tess?” she mouthed.

He started to shrug, then bolted for the door as recognition flooded him. Too late. Catherine jerked it open.

“Oh, Gawd. My bad. Did I interrupt something?”

Catherine looked up through her tears into curious, bright blue eyes.

Vincent shoved himself bodily in between her and the tall, blue-eyed woman, blocking her view of the stranger. “What are you doing here, Teague?”

“Sorry. I’d followed you to this apartment before. I thought it was your pad. I didn’t realize you had company.”

“Well, now you know.”

The comment was meant to be a threat, but Cameryn ignored it and offered her hand to the petite brunette with a friendly smile. “Hi, I’m Cameryn Teague, Keller’s partner. And you are?”

CHAPTER 3

Vincent physically shoved Cameryn out into the hallway and pulled the door shut behind him before Catherine could reply.

Once they were alone, he saw his new partner’s overbright eyes and his tone softened. “What is it? What’s happened?”

“Nothing. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt anything. Really. I just . . . I know I really screwed up today and I needed to talk to somebody. I wanted to say I’m sorry. You covered my ass with Reynolds, but I’m afraid to go back, you know? I don’t think he bought our explanation.”

“Listen, no one is going to hurt you. But I can’t do this right now. You need to get out of here.”

Her eyes registered the iron will behind his words. Get lost is what he was saying. She knew when she wasn't wanted. Cameryn's shoulders slumped and she turned to go, then she swiveled back towards him. "She's lovely, Keller. Beautiful. I can see why you keep her a secret. She knows? All about you?"

"Yes."

"And she doesn't care?"

He could see in her eyes the questions she wasn't asking. The silence behind the door was screaming at him. He needed to get back inside. "Teague . . . please."

She nodded. "Okay. I'm gone. I hope I didn't . . . muck things up for you, too."

He held the doorknob in a tight fist until she disappeared around the corner. She'd come for comfort, but she had terrible timing. It wasn't in him to be callous like that, but he was already in a heap of trouble. He took a beat before twisting the knob back open and turning to face the music.

Catherine was nowhere to be found.

"Catherine?"

She came out of the bedroom with her jacket on, all business. "I'm going out."

A rush of frustration came out nearly as a growl. "Catherine."

She held up a hand. "I need some time to process all of this."

"This is why it took me so long to make contact," he murmured under his breath.

"What did you say?"

"I knew you wouldn't understand!"

She squinted at him. "Just how long," her voice had gone deadly quiet, "have you been free and running around New York?"

Vincent felt his face turn red. "A couple of weeks, okay..."

"You're telling me that you've been free for weeks but only just came to tell me you were alive?"

"It isn't like that, Catherine. Let me explain."

"You know...what is there to explain? I mean, it's not like we have any . . . 'agreement' between us."

“Catherine, don’t.”

“Now you just work for the butchers we’ve been hiding from for all this time. Sounds perfectly logical to me. I don’t know why I didn’t think to just look them up in the phone book and call to see if you were well instead of freaking out...”

“There’s a new guy in charge, remember? He has a different plan. He never wanted what happened.”

“You don’t have any idea what I went through knowing they had you. I was terrified! If they killed you, Vincent...” She stopped being able to breathe. She shook her head. “Never mind.”

“Okay, but...”

“So who is she?” So they were back to Teague.

He shrugged. “She’s one of us.”

“ ‘Us’?”

“Like me.” He lifted his eyes to hers to see what kind of reaction that got. Nothing he could easily discern. He took another breath. “In terms of my work for Muirfield, she’s my partner, okay? We are a team.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What does that even mean?”

She held his gaze for one long moment. “It means absolutely nothing, apparently. You show up here, tell me you’ve been set free by the organization that’s been hunting you for years, but now you work for your enemy, and then this, this woman shows up...”

“That woman has a name. Try to have some compassion here, Catherine. Cameryn didn’t have a choice in this, either, you know.”

“Compassion? You’re telling me to have compassion?”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“It’s what you said.”

How quickly the tables had turned.

“I’ll be back later.” Her eyes only flickered to his for the briefest of moments. “Maybe you should find a different place to stay tonight.”

Vincent stood in the entryway staring at the closed door for five long minutes after she left. Well, that certainly went well. Anger bubbled up and he made no attempt to control it. He slammed a fist against the door jam then swept everything off the entryway table onto the floor.

Only after he calmed down did he see what he'd done—carved a streak of rough grooves into the shiny mahogany surface. Immediately contrite, Vincent swore and tried to rub away the splinters, then he picked up the knick-knacks that hadn't broken and tried arranging them over the damaged area to hide it. Who was he kidding? He couldn't erase the marks of his beast any better here than in the bedroom.

Finally, he found paper and pen and scrawled a note of apology: "I will replace this. Please don't fear me. I would NEVER, EVER hurt you. – V." If only her ability to hurt him was so easy to turn off. Disgusted with himself, he shoved his hat on his head and headed out. He should have gone to JT first. Now he needed his best buddy more than ever.

"Vincent is back?! Oh, thank God! I'm so happy for you - I truly am." Tess started to embrace Cat then saw her face. "But . . . you're not smiling. Why are you not smiling? Is he in bad shape? What did they do to him?"

"No, he's fine. He's . . . they did subject him to more experiments, yes, and he's . . . different in some subtle ways - perhaps more than I realize - but he's still basically himself."

"Then what's the problem? He hook up with a Muirfield babe and gave you the 'Dear John' speech? Wow. I was just joking."

"It's worse than that, actually."

"What could be worse than the guy you are madly in love with turning his head another way?"

Personal experience talking, Catherine realized. "Lying? Withholding information? I don't know, Tess. How could he do this to me? I feel like I just want to punch him."

"Ouch. Aside from being extremely ineffective, that doesn't sound like the best way to get back into his heart."

Catherine grimaced. "Maybe not the most practical idea, but it would be immensely satisfying. Of course, it's like he's made of some kind of titanium alloy these days. I'd no doubt break my arm on his face." She wearily dropped down onto the couch in Tess's living room. "Help me. It feels like I'm coming unraveled."

"And you were just getting your groove back."

"I know, right? And now everything has changed."

"Everything?" Tess gave her a grin full of meaning. "You came in late yesterday, all full of smiles. That was because of Vincent, wasn't it?"

Catherine blushed. "Okay not everything, but even that, a little."

"TMI."

"Right." She looked down at her hands. "I just feel like I can't trust him now."

"Okay. Well, trust can be earned. Give Vincent a chance. Talk to him. You've done nothing for three months but try to find him, and now he's back. Cat, Vincent loves you. I mean, I gather. Maybe the skin on his skull isn't so thick. Keep pounding on it. You'll get through. But I kind of understand where he's coming from."

"Really? You're going to take his side? Right now?"

"What? I've always been on your side, remember? I'm just trying to get you to see the bigger picture here."

"Yeah, the bigger picture is that suddenly Muirfield isn't a threat, it's his employer, and oh, there's another tall, gorgeous supermodel-soldier out there and she's living and breathing right under his nose. How do I even compute all that?"

"Did he say or do anything to give you reason to think he has feelings for this Amazon?"

"Her name's Cameryn. And he didn't have to."

"Yeah, because I'm thinking he didn't. You're just assuming that's the case. See, this is just like you. You're back to not believing in yourself again. He may be a lug nut..."

"Hey!"

"Your term, not mine."

"He's my lug nut."

"You see? There it is. That's right, he is. Honestly, I'm not exactly a Vincent fan-girl, but I'm sure he isn't interested in that she-robot. But - and I can't believe I'm saying this - maybe he feels some sort of responsibility for her if they've done to her what they did to him. That's all. The guy's not stupid. He came back to you because he's obviously crazy about you."

"So you think I'm being ridiculous?"

“No. Okay, maybe. A little. I just think you need to give Vincent some slack here. He’s been a hunted man for ten years, now everything has changed. He’s probably still learning to navigate his way through these new circumstances.”

“With a lot of help from Miss Guns and Roses.”

“See, that’s where you’re not getting it. She’s got nothing on you. Okay, maybe a few inches without heels...”

“And a steel right arm.”

“But that’s it. She’s probably as lost as Vincent was before you met him.”

That gave Catherine pause. “You think? They have so much in common. And they would be good together. So strong.”

“Yeah, like army-strong, not like a man and a woman in love strong. Cat, he doesn’t have eyes for her. Even I can figure that out. And it sounds to me like Vincent was at least trying to tell you the truth.”

Tears welled up in Catherine’s eyes but she swiped them away. “Tess, I just wish we could go back to the way things were, before . . . “

“Hey, I hear you. I get that. You can’t - at least, I don’t think so. But believe me, there are times I feel the exact same way.”

“Joe?”

“Yeah. And you and me, before all this started.”

Catherine smiled sadly. “We were quite a team, weren’t we?”

“What’s this ‘were’ business? We’re still a team. And because of that, I’m going to do whatever it takes to keep you on track. I got your back.”

“And I’ve got yours. Thanks, Tess.”

“You’re welcome. And now that we have that all straightened out, I need your help with the mad scientist.”

“JT?”

“Whatever. Yes. Him. Mr. I’m-Too-Brilliant-For-My-Shirt Forbes.”

Cat laughed for the first time all evening. “What kind of help do you need?”

"I want him to start carrying something other than rubber bands, pencils and IEDs. When we're in the field, I'd like to think he's got my back, you know? Even though the chances are pretty slim he'd ever come through in an actual emergency. You can't get out of every scrape with a cell phone and a thumb drive."

Catherine chuckled. She needed this. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks."

FINAL CHAPTER

It was late when Catherine left Tess, but she wasn't quite ready for home. Driving around aimlessly, she suddenly realized she was nearing the intersection where JT, and probably Vincent again now, occupied the abandoned mansion. She turned in the opposite direction. Veering off onto a quiet side street, she pulled into the parking lot of the cemetery where her Mother's empty grave sat. She knew Vanessa's body wasn't in the ground there but, like Vincent had said, it was still a marker – a place to go and talk to her. And she could do with some of that right now.

Finally arriving home in the early hours of the morning and dragging herself up the stairs, she wondered if Vincent was still in the unit. Memories of their night together came as a warm rushing flooding through her senses. "Oh, God, Vincent! What are you thinking? Where are you right now?"

What had he done when she left? He was having trouble controlling his new self, that much she knew. She hated to think he was walking the streets somewhere in a rage of her own making. Not that she could do anything about it right now. She was SO tired.

The lights were off when she entered; a good sign. But as weary as she was, she still wasn't sure she could face a night alone in that bed. Not that getting much sleep at this point was even possible. Catherine opted for Heather's old room instead. It still had the basic furniture. She grabbed a throw off the back of the living room sofa as she passed it.

Her phone buzzed before her head hit the pillow. Two messages - one from Heather; one from Vincent from an hour ago. Well, at least he was alive and now she knew he had another burner. Or maybe it was a Muirfield standard issue? She deleted the message without listening to it. She was going to need a little more time than this.

Running through her other messages, she found another one from Heather from earlier in the evening. It was marked urgent. She looked regretfully at the bed. It wasn't going to happen. She sighed and hit her sister's number.

“Heath, hi, yeah. I’m sorry. I’m up early and just saw your message. What’s so urgent? It’s not Dad, is it?”

She exhaled with relief when Heather confirmed he was well. In fact, he’d been asking for her. Catherine had visited the hospital a few times when he’d been recovering from the hit and run, but when she couldn’t get herself together after losing Vincent, Heather and Brooke had taken over the bulk of the Daddy-sitting. Now that he was out of the coma and home, she’d been to see him exactly twice, although he had yet to recall the actual incident or why he’d wanted to talk to her so urgently that day.

Catherine listened patiently to her sister’s groggy explanation of why she had to see her in person right away, and suggested the coffee shop half way in between their two apartments.

Sans makeup and her normal confident air, Heather was for once stone cold sober. Her sister had ordered for her. Catherine gave her a quick kiss on the head as she approached and took the seat opposite her. “We’ll have to make this quick. I’ve got just over an hour before I need to show my face in the precinct.”

Heather’s eyes looked distressed at that and flickered everywhere but at her. “Okay. Okay, then. Catherine, don’t be upset, but I have something to tell you that I don’t really understand myself, but I didn’t want you to find out from someone else first.”

Catherine resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Just what she needed, more drama. “Heath. Just spill it. Believe me, after the night I’ve just had, I think I can take just about anything.” She took a long sip of her rapidly cooling coffee. It was going to have to get her through the day.

“Catherine, I think Dad is not your biological father.”

Cat choked and nearly spit her coffee across the table. A little bit forced its way into her nose. As she fell into a fit of coughing, Heather jumped up and started wringing her hands before thinking to whack her on the back none too gently. When she got her breathing under control, Catherine waved her away.

“After what happened with Mom, I knew this would upset you,” Heather stammered, sitting again. “That’s why I didn’t tell you in the hospital after the nurse first came and said there were no common identifiers in your blood, or something like that. I didn’t understand what that meant at first. Then she explained that every biological child has these common factors in their blood with their birth parents, and that could mean only one thing.”

Heather was babbling now. “Okay. Slow down. You found this out in the hospital . . . when?”

“Shortly after Dad was brought in, you gave blood for him.”

“Yes.”

“Well, the nurse came back shortly after you left.”

“And you’ve been holding onto this ever since?” Catherine was beginning to feel at any moment she might just beat out herself! Maybe this feeling was what Vincent experienced. No. Don’t go there. When Heather just blinked at her, she said, “You didn’t think it important enough to tell me right away?”

“See. I knew you’d be angry, Cat, like you are right now. And you were having a really hard time dealing with what happened to Dad, so I didn’t know what to do. You weren’t around and Dad was still in a coma at the time, so it’s not like I could ask him about it!”

Catherine took a beat and closed her eyes. “But your blood was a match?”

“Yes.”

“Just not mine.”

“Catherine, I’m sure there is a logical explanation...”

“Of course. Our mother was unfaithful...” she bit out.

“Maybe it wasn’t like that! I mean, you were born not long after they got married.”

She’d always thought it romantic that they’d had to hurry to marry before her birth. Romantic as hell.

“Maybe Dad knew Mom was pregnant but the father of her child, you, had died tragically...”

At that, Catherine stood up. “Okay. I can’t do this right now.” Her head was literally pounding like a rock band. “I’m not . . . I’m not mad at you, Heather. I’m just frustrated. Every time I think I know someone, it turns out I don’t really know them at all. Now I don’t even know who I am anymore!” A tightness in her chest was making it difficult to breathe. Time to go.

In one last desperate attempt at reason, Heather grabbed her sister’s hands. “Cat. Dad raised us both. He raised you since you were a baby. He is your father for all intents and purposes.”

Except for the truth. Nothing was simple anymore! Was that what ‘Thomas’ had wanted to tell her the day he was hit? The thought suddenly struck her with alarm. Her mother had worked for Muirfield. Could it be possible there was a connection to her real father, as well?

She left Heather with some cash for the bill and ran all the way to her car. Too much, too fast.

Plunging herself into their latest case at the precinct with more bravado than interest, she tried to ignore Tess's questioning looks. By the end of the day, Tess had had enough. She dragged Catherine into a conference room.

"Okay, what gives? Because you were like a bull dog on a short leash today, calling Bartelli out on that procedural error, complaining about the coffee cup shortage. Even I'm afraid of you. What's going on? Did you see Vincent again last night?"

"I want to explain, Tess, but I'm not sure I can. After I left your place last night, I drove around for a while. Went to the cemetery." Cat suddenly realized she hadn't told Tess about her Mom not being in the grave. Man, her head ached. Too many Red Bulls were taking their toll. "When I got home, I had a message from Heather. She . . . she said she needed to meet with me right away - there was something important she had to tell me."

"All right, so what did she have to say?"

"Tess, the hospital said my blood didn't match my father's."

When Tess only frowned, she cried, "I'm not his biological daughter!"

This time Tess cringed and sat down heavily across from her. "Oh."

"Just 'oh'? First my mother, now my father. Tess, you realize this makes my entire life a lie!"

Tess let out a breath. "I guess since we're doing confessions, I have something to tell you myself."

"Not you, too? What? Do I have 'too fragile for the truth' written all over my face or something? What's left?"

"Okay, it concerns your dad, too. In a way."

Catherine gritted her teeth together. "My dad, as in Thomas Chandler, or the 'other' guy?"

Tess leaned in. "Okay, remember when you gave me your dad's iPad to see if we could get anything off of it?"

Catherine sat up straighter. "Yes. You said it was broken beyond repair."

“That may have been a teensy bit untruthful on my part.” When Catherine stood up at that, Tess put her hands out. “Okay, you were dealing with a lot of stuff, not the least of which was Vincent’s kidnapping. I didn’t really know what I was looking at, and still don’t, but there was an email open on it with our new boss’s picture.”

Cat frowned. “What was the email about?”

“That’s the sketchy part. It just said ‘arrived back in the country yesterday’ and some photo of our new boss, who is some kind of government operative.”

“Reynolds?” Cat asked, astonished. The poor man didn’t look or act like any kind of international anything.

“Yeah. Next thing I know, he’s taking over the precinct in Joe’s place. None of it made sense to me; that’s why I didn’t tell you. I’m sorry.”

Catherine rubbed her eyes. “My Dad had a picture of our new boss in his email. This just gets stranger and stranger.” She stood. “Okay. I’m going home, hopefully to sleep for the next several days. When I wake up, I’ll think about this some more. Not until then.”

But think about it she did. As she trudged up the stairs again, the tears started falling. They wouldn’t stop. By the time she reached the landing for her floor, she almost didn’t see Vincent waiting at the end of the hall by the window. His hair was ruffled and unkempt. He looked as worn out as she felt.

“I meant to give you some space, but...”

A thought dawned on her and she stopped in her tracks. “Did you know?”

“Did I know . . . what?”

She took one step toward him. “Did you know that Thomas Chandler wasn’t my real father?”

Surprise had him opening his mouth, only to slam it shut again.

Hoist by his own petard. His face said everything.

She charged him.

Before Vincent could react, Catherine landed one hell of a punch to the underside of his right jaw. His head snapped to the side in shock. He could feel his eyes begin to burn. But she wasn’t finished. Next, she pummeled his chest, an easier target with her height. Surprisingly strong for such a tiny mite.

After she got in another few good hits, all deserved by his account, he realized she was as exhausted as he felt. He was going to have to stop her before she hurt herself or had the neighbors calling 911.

Hearing movement in the unit across from her, he suddenly wrapped her in his arms until she was pinned against his chest. The contact electrified him. Shattered and confused by her broken rantings, he then did the only thing his brain could process: he silenced her with his mouth and rammed his shoulder into number 513, breaking the lock and catapulting them inside her apartment.

They banged into the entry table once again scattering the knick-knacks and a small picture fell off the wall. Neither one noticed. Catherine was fighting him at the same time as clawing him closer. He tasted her tears. She was still crying, but her tongue was responding to his. By slow degrees her anger melted into something inherently more dangerous - desire. He was right there with her.

Swinging her up into his arms, he blindly carried her to her bedroom, his mouth still glued to hers.

After making love to her numerous times in the night, Vincent woke while it was still night. Catherine was still and warm and spread languorously across his chest like a beautiful angel. He eased her away but she was so exhausted he doubted she'd awaken before noon. The last time he had loved her, she'd been more asleep than awake, but he hadn't been able to help himself.

He swallowed. She likely wouldn't welcome seeing his face when she roused. Kneeling over her slumbering form, he lightly placed his forehead against hers, breathing her air. Then he kissed her, little soft kisses all over her face—her cute, button nose, her eyelids, her brow - and murmured his love words.

He couldn't continue without climbing back into bed, which he was resolved not to do, so after a few long minutes, he regretfully leaned back, pulled a sheet from her desk-side notepad, scratched a few inadequate words on it, and left.

Catherine awoke to the sticky heat of the sun pouring in the window. She glanced at the time and sat up, scanning the room. No sounds but the constant din of traffic five flights below. Vincent wasn't in the apartment.

She pushed her still sleep-heavy body out of bed and into the bathroom, noting as she did how every muscle seemed to protest. After taking one of the longest showers her eco-friendly conscience had ever let her take, and sparing one tiny regret for washing every trace of him away, she finally emerged and set about getting dressed and finding something to eat.

A small stack of mail called out to her from the end of the counter. There were probably bills to pay. The world didn't stop spinning just because her life was a mess. She thumbed through the pile stopping only at the one personal envelope out of the batch. She smiled. Her college roomie, Phoebe Marsh, faithfully wrote to her regularly, no matter how seldom she took the time to respond.

The letter was full of her typically newsy but quick-witted banter and included a recent photo of her, her handsome but starting-to-gray-around-the-edges-now husband, and her two middle grade children, along with her always pointed reminder that Catherine was welcome to come and visit them anytime.

Catherine bit her lip. Phoebe had been that one friend over time who she felt really understood her. When her husband, Eric's, job had moved them two hours away, she knew they'd always remain friends, but visiting wasn't going to be easy. She glanced at the phone number scrawled under her friend's name. What a surprise Phoebe would get if she actually picked up the phone and dialed her.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she punched the number into her cell.

"Phoebe? It's . . . it's Catherine. Hey, yeah. I just got your note and I decided to call. Umm. I just happen to be heading up to your area this afternoon, and I thought maybe by chance you'd be home, and I..." Catherine cringed a little at the white lie but Phoebe was screaming her excitement so loudly into the receiver that she forgave herself for that.

After hanging up, she found the courage, finally, to open the note Vincent had left on the night stand. His words brought fresh tears. Biting her lip, she then pressed the call-back number for him and asked him to meet her at the bridge in the park along her regular jogging route.

He approached her warily. She could hardly blame him. When he got to within three feet, he stopped, hands still tucked in his pockets.

"I'm leaving town for a day or two, I'm not sure exactly," she got right to the point. "I just . . . thought you should know." So you wouldn't worry about me.

"Because of me?"

The anguish in his rough voice almost brought the tears up again. She looked away from his face, trying to get it under control, then looked back. "No. I need to do this for me, and with you back and all the changes, plus the whole 'dad' issue, I just feel a little . . . lost? I have some things to think through. And . . . I can't seem to think very clearly with you nearby right now." That said, she turned to go, but had an afterthought and swung back around.

"And don't ever do that to me again."

His mouth fell open. "Love you?"

“Try to manipulate me with your body.”

Embarrassment flooded him. He tried tamping it down. He hadn't intended that, but it was true, nevertheless. But Catherine's voice had an edge he thought he knew the real reason for. “If this is about Teague...”

“It's not about her, or even about you. I just need time to get my head straight.”

“Catherine, don't do this. Don't walk away. We need to talk. I need to tell you things – things about me we've never discussed since I came back.”

“I know they continued their experiments on you. You're different in certain ways. It doesn't matter to me, Vincent. It never has.”

“I just don't want you to leave this way - with things between us like they are. You, you turn around and I'm dead. I'm gone. Because . . .” He shook his head. “I can't breathe without you.”

The tiny pin pricks of pain behind her eyes started the flow again. “Oh, Vincent. Don't do this to me.”

“I'm not trying to do anything to you. I'm just . . . trying to survive. And truth is, I don't know who I am anymore. You're the only thing that makes sense in my life. There is no me without you.”

“You're wrong. And if you think I can help you figure out...”

“I'm not asking you to.”

“...who you are, I can't because I don't know who I am anymore, either! Everything is different. No one is who I thought they were.”

“Can't we figure this out together? You called us partners once.”

Yeah, and now you have a new partner. She shook her head. “Two broken pieces don't make a whole.”

At his stricken look, she softened. “I'm not . . . walking away, okay? I'm just taking a breather - to regroup. For a little while. I need space to think. And with you so close, I can't think of anything but you. You muddle my brain. One touch and I forget everything else. I'll let you know as soon as I get back.”

With that, she turned and walked away, refusing to let herself look back. Within the hour, she found herself on the road.

Taking the express way north, she made her way out of the city and into the calm hills of the country. Phoebe greeted her in the drive with open arms.

“She’s been waiting at the end of the drive for the better part of the last hour. Hey, Catherine. Good to see you.” Eric, a familiar and dear face from the past, hugged her in greeting after her friend finally released her. Their two children, Summer and Jack, having just arrived home from school, came out of the house to say hello, as well.

Catherine took it all in stride. Part of what she needed was distraction, and this warm family had plenty of that. Only after dinner did she get a few moments alone in the guest room, but Phoebe was having none of that. She curled up on the end of the bed and waited.

“I hope you’ll be comfortable in here. I haven’t slept on this mattress in years. Not since I was bulbously pregnant with Jack and needed to give Eric some time to sleep.”

Catherine grinned and tried to imagine her petite friend large in any way. She’d missed a lot over the years. “I’m sure it will be fine. Thanks so much for letting me crash here tonight.”

“Are you kidding me? I haven’t had so much ‘grown-up’ conversation in months. I’m so glad you came. You look as beautiful as ever, by the way, but you’re . . . I don’t want to say unhappy, but is something wrong, Cathy?”

Catherine blanched at the nickname. She hadn’t been called Cathy in eons. “You always could read me better than anyone, Phoeb.”

“Something tells me you aren’t here just to visit. What’s going on with you? Is it a guy? It is! Tell me all about him.”

“Yes, that’s part of it. I don’t know, Pheob, when did life stop being simple? I have never been more in love with anyone in my life, but...”

“But?”

“But sometimes I find myself so insanely focused on him, I forget who I am, if that makes any sense.”

“It makes perfect sense.” Phoebe’s eyes softened. “What’s his name? Have I ever met him?”

“His name is Vincent, and no, you’ve never met him,” and probably never will, she thought but didn’t say.

“You’re breaking up? What?”

That gave Catherine pause. She knew Vincent felt insecure about their relationship when she left, but there was never going to be a time, that she could imagine, that she would ever truly leave him. "It's complicated."

"When is it not? Okay, so I have eight straight hours to devote to you tonight. Spill. We won't be interrupted."

The temptation was too great to pass up. "Promise you will just accept what I say and not make any judgments?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

"Just crossing your heart will suffice, I think." She laughed. It felt good.

"Why don't you start with how you two met?"

Easier said than done. As carefully as she could, Catherine gave her friend a sketchy account of their relationship to date.

"He saved your life?"

"On more than one occasion, actually."

"Wow. So he's in the force, like you?"

"No. I wish I could explain, but there are reasons I can't go into specifics."

"I got it. If you told me the truth, you'd have to kill me. Not a problem. Continue on."

Closer to the truth than she knew.

"You two eventually fell in love . . ."

"Oh, my God, Phoebe. I have never been so in love. He's the one, you know? No one knows me like he does. We just have this . . . connection that I'll never have with anyone else."

"So, what's the problem?"

Where to start? There were problems too numerous to count. "It's never been easy for us to be together. I can't say more than that, but we'd been separated for a few months recently. He just . . . disappeared. Now he's back and things aren't the same."

"How so?"

“Well, he lied to me for one. He . . . withheld something from me.” Now that she’d said it, she realized Vincent hadn’t been the only one. Why was she holding him to a higher standard?

“You know, Cath - and I tell you this from experience - sometimes we lie or withhold things to protect the ones we love. There’s often a fine line between what’s best for them and being totally honest. And I can’t tell you which is right. I’ve made my own mistakes in that area. Not on purpose, but out of love, and because I’m human. If Vincent loves you as much as you obviously love him, isn’t there room for forgiveness?”

Forgiveness. That was a concept that might just benefit them all. She studied Phoebe. “It’s more than that. You knew my folks.”

“I adored them. Your mom used to joke that I was her adopted daughter, remember? I loved them both.”

“And you’re close to your folks. How would you feel if you found out that your parents, or one of them, wasn’t your parent at all?”

Phoebe frowned.

“My dad,” Catherine answered the unasked question. “I just learned through a blood sample that he isn’t really by birth father.”

Phoebe absorbed that for a minute. “Does it matter?” she finally asked. “Does it really matter, Cath, because lots of people aren’t raised by the biological parents.”

“It’s just that in the last year I also learned some things I never knew about my mom, too. I guess it just makes me feel that I didn’t know them at all. That I don’t know who I am now.”

The tears in her friend’s eyes brought Phoebe up off the edge of the bed to put her arms around her. “You’re the same beautiful, sensitive girlfriend I’ve always known - a strong, independent woman who deserves a rare and wonderful love. What happened with your parents is done. It can’t be changed. But now you have this amazing love relationship with Vincent that sounds pretty special. I’d hold onto that, if I were you. Forget the small things. Work through the others. If he loves you like it sounds like he does, you can overcome anything together.”

Her own words back to her. The sudden feeling that she’d left something very important undone had panic rising up in her chest. “Oh, Phoebe.”

“He’ll stick with you all the way, if he’s worth his salt.”

“He’s worth everything.”

“Then good.” Phoebe gave her a perfunctory hug and patted her on the back. “Then get yourself a good night’s sleep and get back to him tomorrow. And someday, Catherine, if it all works out, I’d really like to meet the guy who captured the heart of my best friend, because he’s got to be one in a million to deserve you.”

Her dreams weren’t sweet, they were filled with dark and mystery and heart-breaking longing. She left a note on the bed expressing her regret at having to leave without saying good-bye, and left with the first rays of dawn.

Vincent ruthlessly jerked off the mask of the assailant he’d just killed and a wealth of long dark hair spilled out onto the pavement. A woman. And one with hair that reminded him far too much of another woman he’d left just that morning.

Teague had just started to get up and walk over to see what was so fascinating to her partner that he’d hadn’t stood up yet. A flash of gun metal caught her eye in the instant she turned. Another masked figure, this one with an oozie, came around the corner into the building. A fraction of a second before she saw the flash of gun powder from the barrel aimed directly at Vincent, she threw herself in front of him, taking the full brunt of multiple bullets directly to her chest.

The assailant hadn’t moved a foot further into the warehouse before he was cut down by Vincent in a haze of pure rage. If he hadn’t been so distracted, he would have sensed the man’s approach before he’d come in. He should have! Making sure the man was good and dead, he swept the area searching for any other life. Beside those in his own thundering chest, the only faint heartbeats in the warehouse came from Cameryn. He rushed back to her.

“Teague!” She was riddled with gunshot but still conscious and moving. “Lie still. I can take care of this.”

“Bullets . . . hurt.”

Vincent smiled, despite himself. Was there no end to her cockiness? Yes, indeed they did, though most people didn’t live long enough to notice just how badly. Having dug a bullet out of his own gut earlier in the year, he was instantly reminded of just how much. But Teague wasn’t ‘most people,’ and she could survive this, just like he had, if he saw to her quickly enough.

He scrambled to rip away his belt pack with the medical supplies. They’d needed them on more than one occasion. Being a doctor, part of his role was to take care of emergencies when they were in the field. He calmly removed his knife and wound care kit. Cameryn was having none of it. As he attempted to hold her still with his body so his hands could maneuver, she started pushing him away with surprising force.

“Teague, you may be made of special stuff, but I’ve still got to get the metal out!”

“No!” The command was so fierce, he stopped and looked at her.

“Please, Keller, let me die.”

“You don’t have to die! That’s what I’m saying. I know you’re in pain and you probably think that would be better, but you’ll survive this.”

“For what? This isn’t life. I ended my life years ago.”

His eyes flew to her face, a question in them. He knew very little about her story, how she came to be another experiment of Muirfield, and he cringed, ashamed. He should have asked before now. He pressed his palm over her in an effort to stop the bleeding even as she protested with everything she had. “Damn it! Don’t give up. I need your help!”

“I stopped living a long time ago, Vincent. I’m more a machine now than I am a woman. I’m not even real. Let me go. Please. I’m begging you.”

“You’re real to me! Teague,” he held her face with his free hand. “Don’t tell me you’re not real! You’re the only other person in the world like me, and I need you.”

She saw the moisture in his eyes and smiled softly. “I don’t know about that, but, tears, Keller? Really? Don’t you understand? I’m like the rabbit.”

“What?”

“I’m the rabbit; you’re the skin horse. Didn’t you ever read the classics?”

He didn’t know what the classics had to do with anything right now, but he had a vague memory of sitting on his mother’s lap with his two older brothers on the floor beside them and a storybook open about a Velveteen rabbit.

He tucked an arm under his comrade and gently lifted her head as she struggled to speak with the blood starting to pool in her chest.

“Teague…” he urged her to let him help her.

“ ‘Real isn’t how you are made,’ ” she quoted, instead, pain laced in every word. “ ‘It’s a thing that happens to you when you’re loved. By the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, ’” she threaded weak fingers through the hair at his brow, so close to her face. “ . . . ‘your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby.’ ” Incredibly, she giggled at that image of him, so not applicable yet. “ ‘But those things don’t matter, because . . . because once you are Real, you can’t be ugly.’ ” Her knuckles flickered briefly over his scar, then she coughed with the effort it took to breathe. When she got it under control, she looked up into his eyes, his lashes wet now with tears.

“You shouldn’t have thrown yourself in front of me.”

“Of course I should have. Because you’re real. Let me die for something important, will you? Not this,” her eyes skittered around the warehouse, the carnage of greed. “We all have to die some day. And since I do, I want to have died for love, not war.”

“Love?”

“For you, Keller. Because someone out there loves you very much, and that makes you real.” She let out a painful grunt and it terrified him.

“Teague, please...” he begged when her eyes shut.

She rallied herself a moment longer. “You know,” she panted, the life slowly draining from her body. “I always wanted a brother. In my dreams, he would have been just like you.”

With that, she reached up with a last burst of energy and pressed her lips lightly to his, then sagged back to the earth, dead.

Vincent sobbed until he ran dry and then disgorged the entire contents of his stomach to boot.

Catherine returned later the next day and texted him to meet her near the bridge again. Neutral ground.

“Are you okay?” He sincerely doubted he could handle much more. But she was back. And so soon. She didn’t quite smile, but that intriguing cheek dimple winked at him. A good sign.

“I’m okay.”

“Catherine, I didn’t mean to manipulate you.”

“I know.” She took a deep breath. “But you withheld something from me you thought would hurt me. That isn’t lying. Your first instinct is always to protect me. I get it. And I love you for it, as misguided as it was. Vincent, no matter what happens, no matter what they’ve done to you or what will happen in the future, or how much we disagree and fight - I’m not going to stop loving you.” You are my life, too.

Her words went a long way toward mending his heart, but she wasn’t finished. “And I . . . ask your forgiveness. I promise to never walk away from you again.”

“I promise never to violate your trust again. I’ll tell you everything I’m doing for Muirfield. I won’t cut you out of the loop ever again, I swear.”

“And I’m okay with Cameryn being your partner. In fact, I was going to suggest that you invite her for dinner sometime soon. I think I’d like to get to know her. And I’m sure she could use another friend.”

Pain like a fist to his gut had him reeling. If she only could have, maybe Teague would still be alive today. He swallowed painfully. “God, I love you. More than my life.”

“And I love you. But in order to love someone properly, I have to love myself. And I have to know myself. With all that’s happened, I just needed time to figure out who I really am.”

“I . . . think I can help with that.”

She frowned, doubtfully.

“I have someplace I’d like to take you.”

“Some place romantic?”

“Not exactly. You’ll just have to trust me. It’s important.” Pulling his right hand from the pocket he usually hid it in, he held it out to her.

Catherine was stunned when they approached a freshly dug gravesite. It wasn’t in a cemetery, but just off the road at a small overlook. He hadn’t said a word in explanation about where he was taking her, but this certainly wasn’t anything she would have guessed. He walked her over to it.

“Cameryn Teague,” he said, seeing her question. “It happened yesterday, while you were gone.”

“Oh, Vincent! I am so sorry.”

He nodded. “You would have liked her.”

“How did she die?”

“It was a drug bust - you’ll probably hear about it when you return to work in the morning. She . . . saved my life.”

“Oh, my God!”

He pulled her to him, both of them knowing what that felt like. “It’s okay. I’m fine. And now she’s at peace.”

“Thank you for bringing me here. Next time we’ll bring flowers.”

He nodded and started to lead her away. She looked up at him, asking with her eyes why he was ready to leave so soon.

“We have one more stop.”

Another hour north, and nearly in the direction she'd just come from that morning, he surprised her again by turning into a lane of neatly manicured grounds. A green lawn edged a long gravel drive to what appeared to be a rambling farm house. She twisted to look at him. His face was sober.

Pulling up in front of the house, he helped her out and led her up to the door. He knocked with one hand and pressed her slightly behind him with the other.

An older man opened the door, she could tell by his voice. It sounded vaguely familiar, but Vincent blocked the view of him with his body.

“Keller? What the hell do you think you're doing? You were told never to come here. If this is about Teague...”

“Sometimes rules have to be broken,” he eyed the man dangerously, daring him to argue. “Invite us in, Michael.”

“ ‘Us?’ ”

Vincent drew Catherine out of the shadow behind him.

“Boss?” she gasped, clearly astonished.

Reynolds backed into the house, letting them pass. “I never wanted this,” he murmured coldly to Vincent, as he did.

“Thing is, truth hurts. But sometimes,” he cupped Catherine's cheek with his palm and looked into her eyes, “it's the first step toward healing.”

Sliding an arm around her for support, “Catherine,” he said, “I'd like you to meet your real father.”

A World Apart from Mine (Conclusion)

Chapter 1

The meeting between Catherine and her biological father had been awkward at best, but Vincent tried to put a positive spin on it. He'd introduced them. It was up to them, now, to decide what each would come to mean to the other. He'd kept his word to Catherine, and that was all that really mattered. They wouldn't be torn apart by lies and omissions anymore.

As they turned to leave the farm house, Reynolds put a hand on Vincent's shoulder, holding him back as Catherine passed through the door. "Don't think this is over, Keller. You and I have a serious problem now."

It was said so low that Catherine could not have heard, but Vincent did, loud and clear. Message received. He growled his response. He didn't really care that Michael Reynolds, the undercover boss of the new Muirfield remix had forbidden him to do anything. Catherine was all that mattered. He jogged down the stairs and caught up with her half-way to the car.

She slipped a hand into his. "Okay, that didn't really go very well, did it?"

"Catherine, you just met the man and you're both in shock. These things take time."

"Yeah, and learning that not only did my mom work for Muirfield but my biological father started it—kind of puts the whole 'daddy's little girl' adage in a whole new light."

"Catherine—"

"And I didn't just meet him, remember? I've been working with that man for weeks now! Vincent, why is Michael Reynolds," she couldn't bring herself to call him 'dad' or 'father' yet, if ever, "running my precinct?"

He held the passenger side door open for her. "It's partly for your protection . . . and for mine."

Her eyes flew to his.

"With the work The Company is doing, and my involvement," meaning his work as their assassin, "we have to fly under the radar. Reynolds is just making sure there are no slip-ups, like the last time."

"You mean, with Evan."

He nodded grimly to her, knowing that she still blamed herself for the death of her co-worker and friend. He leaned over her in the doorway. "I mean Evan, yes, and Joe and anyone else who might start to suspect there's still a cross-species being out there committing crimes."

"So he's covering up the evidence."

"He's swapping DNA samples in the ME's lab, changing reports, 'losing' evidence, yes."

She put a hand on his chest. "Is that what we're calling it these days, 'The Company'? You were always on the side of good before—helping people."

"This is not Muirfield as we knew it. Look, the people I take down now are not good people, Catherine. I'm not . . . hurting innocents, okay—I'm protecting them, like I always have."

"In more of a 'hired killer' sort of way."

He shrugged and she looked away. This was a conversation for another day. At least he was being honest with her now.

"I don't think 'daddy dearest' was very happy with you introducing us. Vincent, what if he takes it out on you in some way?"

Vincent laughed at the thought. "What is he going to do to me that he hasn't already done, yeah? You let me worry about Reynolds. He has no idea how dangerous I can be when pushed into a corner."

"It's only that I just got you back. I don't want to put you in more danger."

Vincent weaved his fingers through her silky hair. The summer sun had highlighted the midnight color, softening and warming it like her skin, which he wanted very badly to touch and taste again, but they were still in view of the house, and no doubt his new task master had a dozen eyes, and guns, trained on them at that very moment. "I'm going to be okay. You don't have to worry about me anymore. Hey," he tipped her chin up. "I made a promise that I wouldn't hold anything back from you anymore. This is me keeping that promise." He touched her lips lightly with his own, wishing he could linger, but he sensed the raised tension in the man from the house and knew it was time to go. "Let's just go home."

"Okay."

Vincent left her at her apartment early the next morning with another promise that he would see her later that night.

It never happened.

“What’s wrong? You have that Vincent’s-been-kidnapped-again kind of look on your face.” Tess waved a hand in front of her partner’s face. “Cat?”

Instead of answering, Catherine pulled Tess into the closest interrogation room. As soon as the door closed, Tess rounded on her.

“Okay, just put it out there. What’s happened? Let me help.”

“Tess, he said he would come home to me last night and he never showed.”

Tess twisted her lip. “Maybe he got hung up? Cat, I hate to say it, but guys are notoriously bad about getting busy with a project and forgetting their commitments. I’m sure Vincent’s no different.”

“But he promised.”

“Okay, well, there was a big commotion in one of the barrios last night. Maybe Vincent was involved, out all night, and is just sleeping it off.”

“But he’s not with JT, he won’t answer his cell. In fact, it goes right to voice mail like it’s been turned off. Tess, I’m worried.”

“You spoke with JT? What did he think?”

“He said Vincent’s been sporadic in his visits lately, keeping a weird schedule, so he doesn’t really know what to expect anymore. He . . . he wasn’t as ruffled as I am,” she finally admitted.

“See? It’s probably nothing. If Brainiac isn’t concerned, you probably don’t need to be, either. Vincent’s a big boy, Cat. He can take care of himself, even in a scrape. I shot him in the gut, remember? And he still managed to catch me in the tunnels before you got there. I wouldn’t worry so much. He probably just needs his rest.”

Catherine swallowed, considering. JT was not aware of all the reasons for Vincent’s new schedule. He hadn’t explained everything to his best friend yet—that it was better, for the time being, if he didn’t know. And he had been keeping some very long nights lately—with her—time he should have spent sleeping. But their months of separation made that difficult. What time they had together now generally wasn’t spent snoozing. She knew he didn’t need as much sleep as a normal guy, but he couldn’t go on forever, so perhaps what Tess was saying made sense. Vincent was exhausted and sleeping it off somewhere. Unless— “How many bodies were picked up last night?”

Tess frowned at her. “None that were tall, dark and handsome with an obvious scar on the cheek. Cat—”

“You’re right. You’re right. I’m sure I’m just overreacting. Hard not to do after the last three months, you know?”

“Understandable. But I’m sure he’s fine. Now, pull yourself together. We’ve got our ‘daily’ in fifteen minutes. And look sharp. We don’t want the new boss to think we’re slouches.”

Tess was through the door before Catherine could stop her. She hadn’t been able to find a way to tell her, yet, about their ‘new boss’ and felt a teensy bit guilty. Not that it would change anything. After yesterday’s meeting, ‘awkward’ was a totally inadequate word for how she felt about working with Reynolds at the precinct now. She studied her reflection in the reverse glass of the mirror and tidied a stray lock of hair. She could do this. A thought suddenly occurred to her. She could ask him about Vincent. Nope. Not ready to go there. At this point, all Reynolds knew was that she and Vincent were acquainted, nothing more. It might be best to keep playing that hand.

“Get Bradley in here.”

“Yes, sir.”

The young clerk left Michael Reynolds's night-time office and ran to do his bidding. He liked it that the kid ran. Showed loyalty. He didn’t have to wait long before the good doctor was pushing the door open.

“Status.”

Doctor Kenneth Bradley tightened his lips. This was an unpleasant business. He knew exactly what Reynolds was asking. “He’s stable, if not exactly healthy.” ‘Stable’ was not the word one would use for a normal man in his condition, but this was Keller, after all. There was no ‘normal.’ “Naturally, he’s highly agitated, but we’re monitoring it.”

“Make sure the shackles are good and tight, doctor. I’d hate to have to pick scraps of you up off the floor.”

The doctor blanched. He’d picked up his fair share of ‘scraps’ that Vincent and the other beasts had left and it wasn’t a pretty way to die. He held onto the hope that his camaraderie with the younger doctor would save him in the event—no, not even that. After swearing he’d never be locked up and experimented on again, chaining him in a cage and subjecting him to more tests this morning was not sitting him in good favor with the super-soldier right now. Vincent had yet to make eye contact with him since he’d been brought in yesterday, tranquilized, and locked in his holding cell.

He’d done what he’d been ordered to do, but he didn’t have to like it. Bradley shuddered at where this all was heading—a showdown of apocalyptic proportions, providing everyone survived, that is, which was doubtful at this point.

“Were you aware of his relationship with Catherine Chandler?”

The doctor hesitated. Best to tell as much truth as possible. “As you know, Teague had been set to following him. She reported that he was haunting a few places in the city on a regular basis, but that he’d had no interaction with his former acquaintances.”

Reynolds gave him a sideways look. “Well, that was clearly a lie, now, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.” Bradley could feel his face bloom. Getting on the wrong side of this man could be very dangerous to one’s health. He changed subjects. “Any word on Teague?”

“That’s another problem he’s caused. No. He’s hidden her well. Are we past the point of finding anything recoverable?”

Meaning, was it still possible to find her body and harvest parts of it for research? The doctor hid a smug smile of satisfaction. Well played, Vincent. You kept her from becoming more of a victim than she already was. His jutted his chin out. “Probably.”

Reynolds swore. “Prepare him then. It’s time for me to have a little chat with our lone remaining asset.”

Bradley sucked in a breath. He had hoped to have more time. “Sir, he’s not reacting well to the latest serum. It would be better to wait a little while longer.”

“How so? I thought you said he was stable.”

“He is, but not in a condition to converse. He’s having a difficult time coming down from the meds. I’ve taken the necessary precautions, but he needs more time.”

“Well make him ready, doctor. I haven’t got all night.”

“Yes, sir. As soon as he’s awake and calm, I’ll send word.”

Michael nodded then dismissed him with a flick of his head.

Bradley quit the room as quickly as he could without looking like he was rushing. He breathed a sigh of relief when the door clicked shut behind him. He wouldn’t want to be in Vincent’s shoes right now. But neither would he want to be Reynolds. When Keller had been picked up at the location where they shot Gabe Lowen, there’d been a lot of surprise and speculation after discovering Detective Catherine Chandler, Reynolds’s own offspring, also at the site. That she was acquainted with Keller was clearly apparent, but no one knew why or to what extent. He had a feeling they were about to find out. And it wouldn’t be good.

One of the reasons they had Teague follow him was to learn just that. Apparently, Teague, in a rare show of loyalty to her new-found partner, decided to be cagey about it. Bradley rubbed his brow. Teague was a monumental loss, and not just for her 'parts.' The newest cross-species soldier in The Company had been highly anticipated to be the pattern for the new generations of assets yet to come.

When she hadn't returned that night with Keller, they accepted her loss and his explanation as an inevitable risk. After all, she was still a little green and had proved that on more than one occasion, but they'd held out high hopes for her. With Keller beside her, they could have been an unbeatable team. Vincent had confessed privately to him that after she went down she hadn't wanted to survive. That was his first surprise. Cameryn Teague had been full of life. But apparently, her bravado masked a deep insecurity.

He sighed. He'd tried to do right by them, he really had. He was a compassionate man, after all, not a monster maker. But the entire affair took a toll and not just on the body. Mentally and physically, his patients were extremely fit, but emotionally

He roused himself. There was still one alive, and if he could save him, he would. He hoofed it back to his office and the cell where Vincent was caged.

He could hear the gravelly howls from the outer hallway.

Bradley approached the cell with more courage than he felt. "Vincent, try to calm yourself. This anger does no one any good." He could hear the ping of the monitors in the room which were capturing every nuance of the soldier's bodily functions. A plethora of alarms were going off.

"Why am I back in here, Bradley?" Vincent growled.

The doctor stepped as close to the cage door as he felt comfortable doing, which was to say, not very. "I'm just following orders, Keller. You'll have to ask those kinds of questions of Reynolds. He's headed here shortly." He hesitated, then shrugged. "Facing him calmly is the only advice I can give you."

"Don't tell me to calm down. Get me out of here."

"I can't—"

"And he won't." Reynolds slipped in the door and jumped into the conversation.

"Thank you, doctor. That will be all."

Bradley glanced at Vincent and threw him an apologetic look, then obediently quit the room.

Reynolds, Vincent noticed, wasn't so intimidated. He came right up to the bars.

"There's something you don't know about me, Keller."

“What’s that?” Vincent forced the words through his teeth. It was an effort to keep still and speak. They’d caught him off guard when he’d reported in the morning, first tranquilizing him, then dosing him with adrenalin in an effort to bring him back up. The combination had his body on fire. All he wanted to do was howl. It had given them the excuse to chain and lock him up, which, in his red-haze of lucid thought, was exactly what they’d been after. Problem was, it had been hours and the adrenalin wasn’t wearing off. He slammed his hands against the bars and watched with satisfaction as Reynolds flinched.

“I don’t like threats.”

“I didn’t threaten you,” Vincent answered.

“You brought Catherine here, to meet me. If that wasn’t a threat, I don’t know what would be.”

“She’s your daughter. She deserved to know.”

Reynolds moved back in. “I should have made that choice. Look, I don’t know what your relationship is with her, or how you met, but this ends here.”

“I’d suggest you not give me any ultimatums in my present condition--sir. I agreed to do your work in exchange for you not hunting me and leaving my friends alone. But that’s where it ends. I haven’t agreed to anything else.”

“We’ll see.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re in the cage and I’m not. I hold all the cards.”

Meaning he could hold Catherine as a threat over his head if he didn’t cooperate. The beast was starting to roar again. He was exhausted with holding it back. He flung himself at the bars instead of responding. Reynolds merely laughed and left the room. Vincent sagged to the floor, exhausted.

“Still no word?” Tess fell into step beside Catherine as she entered the precinct floor.

“Nothing. It’s time to take action, Tess. Something has happened, and I know just the person who can help.” She eyed the door to her new boss’s office down the hall. She’d broken down and given Tess the low-down on Reynolds just that morning knowing she might need her help.

“Reynolds? Are you crazy?”

"He may be my boss and my father, but he doesn't have any idea how difficult I can make his life."

Tess put an arm out to stop her. "Okay, this sounds like a monumental mistake."

"I'm out of options, Tess. I need to find out what's happened to Vincent. You have any better ideas?"

"Then I'll back you up."

"No. I'm going in there alone. Depending on what he says, then we'll make plans."

She left Tess standing in the hallway and approached the door. Tapping lightly pushed it open.

"Got a minute?"

Reynolds looked up, surprise evident on his face. "Detective. What can I do for you?"

Catherine shut the door and some of the blinds for good measure before turning. "I think we can skip the formalities, don't you?"

"You've obviously got something on your mind. What is it? I have a precinct to run."

"I haven't heard from Vincent. He's off the grid. Do you know where he is?"

"Keller? I haven't seen him."

She grimaced and tried again. "Well, is he on a job for you? Don't you have your . . . operatives check in on a daily basis, or something?"

Reynolds put down his pen. "I don't have a dog collar on him, as you well know, much as I'd like to. It wasn't part of the deal." When she refused to budge, he decided to throw her a bone. "I just saw him last night, if that helps. He seemed perfectly fine to me."

That gave her pause. She stared at him.

"Was there something else you needed, Detective? Because I have a lot of work to do."

She slammed her jaw shut. Guess the games never ended. "Nope. That was it."

"Good. I suggest you get back to your desk and spend your time making this city a safer place—for everyone."

That sounded like a veiled threat but she ignored it, spun around and quit the room. She made a beeline around the corner to Tess. "Okay, that didn't go well."

“What did he say? Does he know where Vincent is?”

“Oh, yeah. According to him, Vincent is fine—he saw him last night. Look, Tess, I know you think I’m being paranoid, but I don’t trust him. Not at all. I need to get out to that farm again.”

“Well, I’m in. We’ve got paperwork to do on yesterday’s case, but that can be done later.”

“Actually, I think I’d like you to stay here.”

“But you might need backup.”

“I’ll take JT.”

“I told you, the Mad Professor isn’t any good as backup. He’s a wimp. You can’t trust him.”

“Reynolds doesn’t know you know anything about Vincent. I think we should keep it that way. I want you to stay here and keep an eye on him. If he starts to leave, distract him.”

“With what?”

“I don’t know. You’re creative—come up with something to stall him. Then call me when he leaves. I want to get into that facility. I have a bad feeling that Vincent isn’t ‘free’ right now. Or worse.”

Tess huffed, frustrated to be left there instead of where the real action would be.

An hour after Catherine left, she watched Reynolds come out of his office, his jacket on. She ran up to him. “Hey, Lieutenant. Do you have a minute?”

“I’m on my way out, Vargas. What is it?”

“It’s just the Dresden case. I, um, I think we’ve run into a dead end, and I was wondering if I could get you to sign off on an order to pull some stuff out of the evidence locker—”

“Who’s ‘we’? Where’s Chandler?”

Tess looked around, shrugged. “Ladies room.”

“I’ll do it when I get back. If you’ll excuse me—”

Tess started to argue, but he pushed past her. “Crap! Crap, crap, crap.”

"This doesn't look like Muirfield. Are you sure it's the right place?" JT nervously peered through his glasses at the neatly hedged grounds. They'd been watching the place for a while, scoping it out, but time was running short.

There was no time for that conversation. "It's not. Exactly. Long story," Catherine evaded. "You'll just have to trust me on this one. I'm fairly certain this is where Vincent is being held."

"Your 'fairly certain's' and 'pretty sure's' are not exactly giving me warm fuzzies right now."

"I don't have any warm fuzzies, either. That's why we're here. Vincent must be in trouble. JT, I just need you to create a diversion out front, something that will bring them all out of the building. Then while they come out, I'll slip in."

"I'm on it, but I don't want them all coming after me."

"Can you do a timed explosion or detonate remotely?"

"Sure. Just give me a few minutes to lay the charge, then call me with the signal and I'll set it off. Do you—do you want me to come in after you after so many minutes? Because there might be a lot of people with guns—"

Catherine smiled. "No. Once I'm in, you need to get as far away from here as possible. Depending on what shape I find him in," assuming Vincent was actually there and not holed up somewhere else, "it could take a while. I'm not coming out without him. If there are any problems, call Tess."

"Oh, sure, and she'll just drive down here from an hour away," he murmured under his breath. He could really use the big guy about now. Surveillance was more his thing.

"Okay. I'll call you with the signal." She slid out of the passenger side of the vehicle and melted into the heavy overgrowth that bordered the farm.

At her signal, JT set off his improvised explosive device near one of the vehicles, causing it to burst into flames and set off the one next to it. Then everything worked like magic. Catherine counted to ten after the last person exited, then stole silently in the door. It wasn't a large building, so there weren't many rooms to check, but he had to be there.

At the end of a hallway was a door. Opening it, she found a staircase going down. The shouting continued outside as another gas tank exploded. JT had done his job well, as usual, no matter the complaints he made.

She heard the howling from the corridor. It sounded like Vincent only worse. He had to be in pain or enraged. Her phone buzzed against her leg. Pulling it out, she saw a text from Tess: "He's on his way. Get out of there now."

“Not without Vincent, Tess,” Catherine murmured and headed toward the sound. She was surprised when she got to the last door and it opened freely. A lone man in a white robe turned in surprise.

“Who are you?”

Vincent roared behind him. Catherine held her gun up. The man appeared to be alone. “Open the cage.”

“Now, young lady, that wouldn’t be wise right now. He isn’t safe to be around in this condition.”

She spared a quick look at Vincent who was rattling against the bars. His eyes were pure gold and darker than she’d ever seen them. He certainly wasn’t in a good place, but she had no choice. “I don’t care. Open the cage.”

“Be reasonable,” the white coated doctor murmured nervously. “He’ll kill us all.”

“I’ll kill you if you don’t do as I ask.” The shouting was getting closer. The men were returning to the house. “Now!” When he didn’t immediately obey and footsteps pounded down the stairway she’d just come from, she took the only other tack she could. She grabbed him around the neck from the back and held the gun to his head and faced the doorway. The doctor whimpered.

“That’s right. Now you know how desperate I am. I’m willing to die to set him free.” As the first man burst through the door, she held the gun barrel closer to the doctor’s head. “This is simple. The nice doctor here is going to open the door and then we’re going to leave.” As she said it, she sidled him closer to the locked cage door. “He isn’t safe,” the man whispered to her one last time. Catherine looked in Vincent’s eyes and nodded for the man to continue. “He is to me.”

Doctor Bradley punched in the code with such shaking fingers he had to do it twice. He hesitated on the last button. As soon as he hit it, all hell broke loose. Vincent yanked the door open, Bradley shoved her inside and a single shot was fired before the doctor could shout for them to hold.

Catherine dropped to the floor as the door swung shut of its own weight, locking her inside with Vincent. The tranq had hit her in the right shoulder close to where she’d taken the bullet what seemed like so long ago now. Vincent watched her begin to fall as if in slow motion, then adrenalin kicked in and he caught her up before she hit the cement. Everyone froze.

“Hold! Put your guns down!” This came from Reynolds, who just entered the chamber. “Who fired that shot?”

A nervous young man stepped forth. “I did, sir. I had a sight on him until the girl fell in front. I should have waited.”

"Next time I guess you'll know better," Reynolds told him in a generous tone, then leveled a gun at the man and shot him. The rest of the men backed up a step.

"Sir, let me do it," another brave soul spoke into the silence. "I've got bead on him," he murmured, his gun aimed and lethal.

"Absolutely not! Everyone put your weapons down and clear out. Now!" As they did, he turned to the doctor. "Will he hurt her?"

Bradley had known Vincent for some time now. While he was certainly in a state that would plainly be called out of control, there was something in his eyes. He didn't think so, but best not to make predictions. This could get tricky. "It's entirely possible. That tranq was meant for Keller," he whispered as both men kept their eyes trained on Vincent.

Understanding the implications, Reynolds nodded. "He's twice her size and weight."

"It could kill her."

"If he doesn't, first."

They watched as Vincent carefully plucked the dart out of her shoulder with a low growl. Then he stood with Catherine in his arms and faced the two men.

Reynolds held his gaze for a moment then turned to the doctor. "Don't unlock the door for any reason. Let me know when it's over." He shot the man a cold look. "And as soon as she's dead, kill him."

Bradley blanched. Too frightened to move, he watched as the door slid shut and he was alone again, except for the two trapped in the cage and the dead guard at his feet. As the man-beast carried the petite young woman over to the cot in one corner of the stall and laid her gently upon it, cold tendrils of fear licked up his spine.

"Vincent, you need to stay in control. You must remain in control."

Getting no response, Bradley settled in to wait.

Chapter 2

Vincent's head was pounding with the rush of fear and whatever concoction of steroids and adrenalin the good doctor had tricked him into taking that morning. He should never have trusted the man. Catherine lay still and white as a sheet upon the small bed, completely quiet. Since she'd collapsed, no amount of yelling or, in his case, roaring, had awakened her. A bad sign.

He watched as the doctor checked the vitals of the fallen guard then dragged the man's lifeless body into an adjacent room and returned to clean up the mess. Though he could still feel the buzz of meds pulsing through his veins, Catherine's presence lent him extra strength to tamp it down. It wasn't easy, but he was holding on. For now. The monitors continued their pinging, spiking past normal levels, but they meant nothing to him.

He checked her pulse again. "She should be coming out of this by now. Doc?"

"I'm here," Bradley said coming back into the room with the holding cell. "That tranquilizer was meant for you, Vincent, a suped up soldier on steroids, not a woman her size and weight. What are her vitals?" Perhaps appealing to the younger man's medical background was a good tack to take.

"Her breathing is shallow and heart rate elevated."

"I imagine she's quite dehydrated as well. Vincent, I can help her, but you've got to release her to me. Let me get an IV going—"

"No!" It was more roar than shout. "If she comes out, we both come out."

"You know I can't do that."

Vincent looked up and studied Bradley. Probably not far from his own father's age; a man who'd spent his entire life in the medical field. But what about his Hippocratic Oath? "Can't, or won't, doctor?"

Bradley took a step forward and spoke urgently. "Listen to me, Vincent. You're in need of assistance, too. You can't maintain control like this for much longer. I can see the toll it is taking on you. I have another serum that will counteract the effect—"

Vincent laughed, a harsh sound. "I fell for that trick this morning, remember? That's what put me into this state. It won't happen again." He didn't trust the 'good doctor' not to have another lethal cocktail up his syringe.

"I'm sorry. I was under orders."

"Too little, too late, doctor."

"You can't outlast Reynolds."

"That's what he thinks."

Bradley sighed then looked at the girl, her still form so pale and lifeless, and had compassion. "Do you think you can get her to drink?" he asked finally. Going to the small, compartmented refrigerator in the room where the medicines were kept, he pulled out an unopened plastic bottle. He held it up so that Vincent could see it was a normal water bottle, then rolled it through the bars to where he sat with the girl.

“I’ll try.”

The doctor watched as Vincent picked up the bottle, unscrewed the lid with barely shaking hands and touched her lips with the refreshing liquid. “Open, sweetheart. Please.” He tried several angles, but each time the liquid dribbled off to the side and went everywhere but into her mouth. He wiped it off and looked imploringly up at the other man.

“Would a straw help? I’ll get one.” The doctor returned quickly with a plastic straw that was bent over at the top. He passed that through the bars as well. Vincent tried it with discouraging results.

“I can get it into her mouth, but she won’t suck!”

“Keep trying. The drugs in that tranq were set to full strength. If we don’t get her hydrated soon, I fear for her, son.”

Vincent made a guttural sound that adequately summed up both his frustration and his anger. Leaning over her, he touched his forehead to hers, then his lips. “Please, Catherine. For me.” Her lips were warm and soft and parted automatically at the gentle coaxing of his, almost as if she were kissing him back. He lifted his head and looked at her, then kissed her again to the same result. On some level she was responding to him. That gave him an idea.

As Bradley looked on, Vincent carefully lifted her head again using his shoulder for support. Then, taking a sip from the bottle himself, he pinched her nose gently with one hand and put pressure on her chin with the other. Then he slowly dragged his closed lips once across her own. As soon as she opened, he sealed his mouth over hers.

Catherine choked as the water flooded her mouth forcing her throat to open convulsively. She sputtered, bucked up against him, then finally swallowed, still deeply unconscious. Encouraged by that, he tried it again, then again, each time getting a little more liquid into her until she eventually stopped fighting and just started reflexively drinking from him.

Finally, he crushed the empty bottle and tossed it away, cradling her against his chest.

Bradley had watched in silence, fascinated. He knew he should have looked away—the intimacy of what he’d just observed was shocking—but he couldn’t help himself. It had him flushing red beneath his white collar. Whatever relationship Keller had with this woman was far from simple. Of course, being she was Reynolds’ daughter made it a hundred times worse. And that made him fear for them both.

“My God, if I hadn’t just seen that, I would never have believed it. You’re brilliant.”

Vincent’s golden eyes glowed his direction, but not in a friendly way.

“We’ll repeat it again in half an hour. The more we can flush through her system, the better.” He got up to pace away.

“Turn the lights off, Doc.”

Bradley turned in surprise. Surely this wasn’t a time for more intimacy—

“They hurt my eyes.”

And added to his tension, no doubt. Bradley hurried to do as requested. Keller was strained to the end of his tether, that much was certain. Yet the girl seemed to have an odd, calming effect on him. Vincent had curled up in one corner of the cot with her on his lap. Every once in a while, he brushed his lips against her head, but kept his eyes trained forward—those glowing, yellow, predator eyes.

Bradley made as if to leave the room, but moved to the darkest corner and sat down, himself. To wait.

“I know you’re still there. We don’t need a chaperone, Kenneth.”

Nor lights to see. “Nevertheless, I won’t leave you. I want to be here if you need anything.”

“What I need is for you to unlock the door and let me take her out of here.” Getting no response to that, Vincent shifted against the wall and closed his eyes. “Then talk to me. I need a distraction.” The closeness of her warm body was setting off little coils of fire up and down his torso which, in his current state, was not helping things in the least.

Bradley searched the darkness, but the glowing eyes had disappeared. “You have unbelievable control, Keller. Not one of the other subjects I’ve worked on has ever been able to do, even for a few minutes, what you’ve been keeping up for hours now. And to hold a fragile woman in your arms in that state—well, let’s just say it’s incredible. Your vitals are still sky high—off the charts. The adrenalin rush hasn’t even begun to come down, or has it?”

Vincent would liked to have told him just how un-fragile Catherine really was, but it didn’t serve to do that. “By slow degrees.” It was more the effect she had on him than the meds fading, but Bradley didn’t need to know that. He wrapped her tighter in his arms. He’d hurt her once, on his return. Never again. “Talk about something else.”

Bradley leaned back in the swivel chair and rubbed a weary arm over his face, wondering what on earth he had to chat about. Finally, he thought of the past. “This wasn’t my first choice of profession; did I ever tell you that?” When Vincent didn’t respond, he continued in a soft mantra, the clicking of the wall clock and pinging of the monitors the only other sounds in the now darkened room. “I was in training to be a pilot in the Air Force. Had the brains for it; just couldn’t take the g-forces and all that flipping around. Weak stomach, you know.”

Vincent thought of JT, who also complained of frequent stomach ailments, usually after he'd done something to cause him stress, though he thought his best friend's complaints were more for show than reality.

"Had to withdraw from the program. I kind of just fell into medicine then, but I found I really liked it."

"You're a good doctor, Kenneth. You just chose the wrong company to work for."

"Yes, well, I was feeling a little bit desperate at the time. My wife had left me, there were bills to pay, and when they came calling, I had no reason to say no."

Vincent wondered about that. He felt a little sorry about the wife, but he could think of a dozen reasons for saying no to Muirfield or its predecessor, even so.

Bradley's eyes were adjusting to the dark finally. He looked to the corner of the barred cell and watched the way the soldier was holding the girl. Even in the dim light of the room, it spoke volumes. And took him back to another place and time. "I was in love once, too, you know."

Vincent didn't respond to the 'too' but heard it loud and clear. Were his feelings so obvious? He closed his throbbing eyes again and concentrated on breathing and the doctor's mellow drone.

"Not my wife, mind you. This was before her. She had hair the color of sand—the white kind you find in the tropics, not here—and the brightest blue-bell eyes. I fell hopelessly in love."

Not really wanting to know, Vincent couldn't stop himself from asking, "what happened?"

"Oh, she was young, not interested in being tied down. I learned much later she'd had a child, a daughter. Unfortunately, I found out too late. It was one of those things, you know. I discovered the girl many years later. Poor child. She hadn't set out to live like that but, as many young people without direction and strong father figures do, she fell in with the wrong crowd, got hooked on drugs. It's funny, but when they brought her to me, she still had that spark in her eyes . . ."

"Teague?" Vincent asked, appalled. They had the same blue eyes. He should have noticed the resemblance before now, although Bradley's rapidly graying hair and slightly overweight frame weren't very conducive to making him think of Cameryn. He was certain she never knew—there hadn't been the least bit of familiarity or closeness between the two. Just professional regard.

Vincent growled low. First Reynolds and now Bradley. What could possibly make a man not want to get to know his own daughter? He thought of the day Catherine had come to him with the very scary possibility she was pregnant. He smoothed a hand across her abdomen just under the lip of her blouse. The muscles of her stomach, even in such a relaxed state, were still strong and firm, but covered in petal soft skin like she was everywhere. There wasn't anything he'd love more than to give her a child—a normal child—but it wasn't in the cards for them. Certainly not anymore.

How he would love to grow old with her, dote on their children and grandchildren, the whole nine yards. A beautiful dream never to be.

“Cameryn didn't want to live. Now I understand why you do.”

Vincent looked up and saw the doctor watching them. So he knew. She was his world. “Anything happens to her, you won't want to live either.” Said softly, it was no idle threat. He held the doctor as responsible as the order Reynolds no doubt had given to put him in there after their little ‘conversation’ the other day.

Bradley swallowed. “I understand. Release her to me, Vincent, if you care for her. I can get her out of danger.”

“Not on your life.”

“I suppose, right now she's the only bargaining chip you have.”

He supposed right. Once Catherine was safe, they'd kill him, mega-research down the tubes or not.

Catherine began to stir.

“Hey.”

“Hey, yourself,” he answered.

She reached a hand up to his face, her gaze slightly unfocused and no doubt drawn to his glowing eyes. “Are you okay?” She could see the effort it was taking him to remain calm.

“I'm maintaining.”

“You look exhausted.”

“I can last as long as I need to. How do you feel?”

She started to try to get up, but was immediately hit by a warm wave of nausea.

Vincent eased her back down. “Take it slowly.”

“What can I do?” she asked, her focus still on him and not her own weakness. So Catherine.

“Just your being here helps.” He leaned his forehead against hers, their noses rubbing. “I can breathe easier now that you’re awake.”

Catherine looked around the room then. “Some rescue, huh? What are we going to do?”

“Well,” Vincent said, shifting her a little more upright in his arms. “As soon as you can stand, the good doctor over there is going to release us.” He knew Bradley heard him; the doctor’s heart rate had increased exponentially.

“You know I can’t do that, even if I wanted to.”

“You can and you will, just as soon as Catherine is strong enough to walk out of here—because I don’t have any other options. Look deep, doc, because we walk or we die. Think about Cameryn. Think they won’t do the same to Catherine, or worse? Can you live with yourself if that happens?”

Whatever was coming, it wasn’t going to happen soon. After the detective roused herself, she fell back into a fitful slumber that could last for hours yet. Bradley went to the supply shelves and pulled out a service blanket. It wasn’t much, but he tossed it through the bars.

Vincent, who had been keeping Catherine between him and the rest of the room until then, effectively shielding himself from another tranq, grabbed it up. The blanket would serve two purposes. He slid down into the bed and pulled her and the blanket over him. Not even Reynolds would try to hit him under those conditions, risking her life.

As the couple slept, Kenneth Bradley thought of Vincent’s words and the daughter who was never really his.

Chapter 3

Kenneth Bradley dozed in and out of sleep, the tranquilizer gun on his lap just in case. As his head slumped forward, he startled and looked up. His two captives were still wrapped up in each other but beginning to stir as well. Thinking of his daughter had kept him awake most of the long night. That Cameryn hadn’t wanted to live in the end was an excruciating reality check. He had been wrong. So wrong. About everything. And now this man and this woman were going to be the next victim of his crimes.

Getting up slowly, he walked to the electronic panel and stared. It was what Teague would have wanted, he was sure.

Vincent sat up, suddenly alert, and watched him approach. Seeing what the doctor was about to do, he quietly spoke. "Thank you."

"You can thank me by burying me next to my daughter, wherever you've hidden her. Because as soon as I release this latch, I'm a dead man."

Vincent acknowledged his words with a nod but said, "Not if I can help it." He gently roused Catherine, whose eyes were finally clear of the groggy effects of the drugs. As soon as the lock clicked open, releasing the door, Vincent had Catherine at the opening and swung it wide. At the same moment, the door leading to the hallway burst open and Reynolds walked in.

"What's this, Doctor? A fit of conscience? A little too late for that, isn't it?"

Vincent moved protectively in front of Catherine placing himself in the open doorway of the cell in case either of the two men decided to maneuver them back inside. He hadn't liked using her as a shield last night, but the only way to truly protect her was if he was still alive.

Reynolds calmly watched Vincent, who appeared less beastly than the night before, then he looked over at Catherine. The proprietary hand Keller had on her gave him pause. "I see they're both still very much alive. What did you give him? Looks like he's come down from it."

"Nothing. He brought himself down."

Reynolds turned. "How is that even possible?" Then he looked back at the couple.

"Step away from him, please, daughter, and I'll try not to make this fatal."

Vincent growled.

"No!" she shouted.

"Sir-"

"What is it, Doctor Bradley? Having misgivings already?"

"We miscalculated with Teague. It never would have worked out."

"How so? She was just like him. You said yourself how they reacted to one another." He looked at Vincent. "What's the matter, Keller? She wasn't woman enough for your appetites? Get the hell away from my daughter!"

"Teague was never an option for our soldier, I'm afraid, Michael."

"Why not? He prefers petite, green-eyed women, instead?"

“No.” Bradley glanced behind him at the couple. “Because it appears our Mr. Keller already has a mate.”

Silence. As Reynolds looked between Catherine and Vincent, he made the connection. Then all hell broke loose.

Vincent, now standing apart from Catherine, was directly in his sights as Reynolds began to reach into his jacket for his service revolver, shouting simultaneously to Catherine to move away.

Bradley jumped, swung his head toward Vincent as Catherine screamed, then realized he still held the tranq gun in his hand. “Not this time,” he murmured. As Vincent charged forward, he moved into the space between him and Reynolds, releasing the tranq just as Reynolds fired.

Both men stood a moment in shock, then fell to the floor.

Catherine rushed to the doctor’s side, but Reynolds’ aim had been true. A gaping chest wound the size of a fist was pooling blood onto the floor beneath him.

“Vincent!”

Vincent hunched over him after checking Reynolds and relieving him of his gun.

“He’s still alive, but barely.”

Bradley was trying to say something. “Remember . . .” was all he got out before his eyes closed.

Catherine looked helplessly at Vincent. “We can’t leave him here.”

Nodding, but not holding out much hope for the man’s survival, Vincent bent to lift him. “There’s a back way out of here. Let’s get going before the rest of the troops arrive.” Hoisting him over his shoulder, Vincent carried the man through the rear exit tunnel he and Teague had used on numerous occasions when they had come and gone from the facility in the wee hours of the night. Bradley was mostly dead weight by now-probably already deceased.

At the far end of the tunnel, a doorway exited the back side of the property and a trail which dumped out onto the main road.

“Someone had to have heard that shot,” Catherine said, back in cop mode. She texted as she ran and was about to press the send button to Tess when they rounded a corner and spotted the little blue car.

“JT!”

JT Forbes was startled out of his daydreaming by the sounds of shouting and rapid footfalls approaching.

"You're still here. Thank God! You don't know how glad we are to see you!" Catherine cried.

He straightened in the driver's seat. "Well, I thought it best to stay close-just in case."

"Start the car!" Vincent roared, breathless, opening the hatchback to lay an elderly and very bloody gentleman into the back.

"He's veiny," JT observed Vincent, his heart rate increasing. "Why is he so veiny? And why are we stuffing a body into the back of the car?"

"I'll explain on the way," Catherine told him, sliding into the back seat with Vincent.

"Just drive."

"Get us out of here, now!" Vincent added.

JT kicked it into gear. As he drove them back into the city, the lull of the car's vibration helped calm Catherine. She looked at Vincent. His veins still stood out, but not as distinct. She put her hands on his face.

"It's getting better, every minute."

"Why did they do that to you, again?" she asked, frowning.

"It was just so they'd have an excuse to lock me up. It was Reynolds' way of throwing his weight around after our little father-daughter tea the other day. He doesn't like surprises. Bradley told me the injection was just a supplement booster. Can't believe I fell for that again."

She smoothed back his hair. "You weren't expecting trouble this time."

"I should have been."

She leaned into his warmth. His yellow eyes were indeed starting to fade, thankfully. The effort it took to control the beast was exhausting him beyond all reason, yet he still found the gentleness to cuddle her to him as they rode. By the time they arrived at the old mansion, he had fallen asleep. She very gently woke him and saw that his eyes were back to their normal dark brown. She got JT to help get him inside their lair and onto a sofa, then they carried Bradley's body in and left him on the laundry room floor.

"He'll be okay until tomorrow; then we better figure out what we're going to do with him or he'll start to stink." JT turned up his nose at the idea. "The chest freezer isn't exactly XXL."

Catherine sighed, exhausted as well and still feeling the fading effects of the tranquilizer gun herself. "Okay. We'll work that out tomorrow. If you'll help me get Vincent to his room, I'm going to stay with him tonight. I want to make sure he's all right. Can you wake me by seven so that I can get cleaned up before I have to report to work?"

"Sure," JT said, remembering the wild look on his friend's face, "but you're positive he's okay-you'll be safe?"

"Yeah," she smiled softly. "He's almost himself now. I'll be fine."

As she entered the room, Vincent was sprawled across the bed. JT had helpfully stripped him of his shirt and shoes. She could do the rest. Only the lower part of his powerful torso was covered by a thin sheet, but he was fast asleep.

She took a moment to study him. God, he was beautiful. She gently touched his shoulder smoothing her hand down the corded muscles of his arm, then she reached up and ruffled his hair. He didn't stir. Stripping off her outer clothes, she drew the curtains a little tighter, turned off the light, slid in and lay down facing him. No matter what they did to him, he was still beautiful to her. "Sweet dreams, Vincent," she whispered, and finally closed her eyes as well.

He met her the next day in the alley way behind the precinct.

"Everything okay at the office?" he asked, meaning with Reynolds.

"Yep. We're good," Catherine replied. "Michael is keeping his word. He watches you; you watch me; I watch him. And the world will go on as we know it. As long as he can't find the bodies, we've got our bargaining chip. That, and my threat to take everything I know to the authorities will keep him in line for the time being."

"Plus, I have his gun," Vincent added. "Bradley and Teague are the aces up our sleeve. Reynolds gets out of line, we take the evidence to your M.E. and the whole thing will blow up. That's the last thing Reynolds wants."

She frowned and shook her head. "I wonder how he lives with himself."

"Catherine, don't take it personally. He might be your biological father, but that's all. It's no reflection on who you are. Reynolds exists in a parallel universe. He operates in a different world."

"Yeah. A world far apart from mine."

"Well, you and I are essentially from different worlds, too, you know."

"Except," she looked up at him, his long, dark lashes framing his beautiful eyes, "you are my world."

He leaned in and kissed her.

"I'm just glad it's over and now we can move on. So, you buried Kenneth?"

"Right next to his daughter. I was thinking we could go out to the gravesite later today, if you're feeling up to it. I'd like to take some flowers."

"I'd like that. I'm truly sorry for them." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "I'm glad they are finally together. That's the way it should be."

Vincent nodded. He understood her feelings, but his were a mixed bag. "In the end, he did the right thing." He slid an arm around her. "I'm sorry I slept so hard last night. JT, uh, said you stayed the night?"

She quirked her lips at him. "You needed the sleep. Besides," she teased, "with you out so hard, I could finally have my wicked way with you."

"Oh, really?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Well, do you think later tonight we could get together and you could have your wicked way with me again, this time with my eyes wide open?"

"Feeling like you missed out on something, huh?"

"Totally."

The dimple appeared in her cheek. "I think I might be able to fit you into my schedule, Mr. Keller. In fact," she pursed her lips. "I've been meaning to ask you about something."

He bit his lip, hiding a smile. "What's that?"

"I have this vague memory of when I was out, or perhaps it's some kind of weird hallucination, I don't know. It just felt so real. I was burning up, but I was drowning at the same time. And you were there."

"Was I? Sounds like an interesting dream."

"You don't happen to know what it's about, do you?"

"I might," he grinned.

After an elegant meal at the table prepared months before, they retreated to the sofa.

"I'm sorry I slept so long last night. In the cage . . . that took a lot out of me. I didn't know how much longer I could hold on."

"I know," she smiled softly.

"I didn't want to hurt you again. I'm so sorry."

“Vincent, you will never hurt me on purpose. I know that.”

He reached for her. “You are one in a million.” After kissing her once, he leaned back. This could quickly spiral out of control, but he had plans for a long, leisurely love-making time tonight. He reached past her to pick up her untouched glass of wine.

She looked at him in surprise. “What? You can drink alcohol now?”

“This is not for me,” he said mysteriously. When she reached for the glass, he held it away. “Well, it’s partly for me.” He laid her back on the cushions and leaned over her. “Now, close your eyes.”

She looked at him with a question but obeyed.

He touched his lips to hers, coaxing them open. Then again. She responded, chasing after his tongue when he teased her with it. Then he turned away, took a tiny sip of the sweet golden liquid, and covered her mouth with his.

Catherine opened her eyes and gave a little cry of surprise as the fruity nectar trickled down her tongue and into her throat directly from his mouth. She swallowed then followed his tongue with hers, chasing the last drops everywhere, man and fine wine having mysteriously become one. He lifted his head and looked at her, seeing if she remembered.

“Oh,” was all she said.

“Yeah, oh.”

****The End****

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