

Windflwr

## **BAtB Fanfiction - The Question**

*How many of you have imagined this scene? Here's my take...*

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Catherine sat curled against Vincent on the sofa in the old club he and JT had found to live in. The movie on the screen had faded to black sometime ago, but neither of them were in a hurry to get up and shut it off. Vincent had picked out the flick. It had been sweet, if a little corny, but she didn't mind. It was the company that was important. She snuggled deeper into his shoulder, feeling contented and more than a little bit drowsy.

"So . . . I've been thinking," he murmured close to her ear. His breath ruffled her hair, tickling her neck and she shivered.

"Uh oh."

He laughed. "Yeah, well."

She pulled his arm more firmly about her middle. "Sounds mysterious, Mr. Keller. Better spill; I'm about ready to fall asleep right here."

He looked down at her and she twisted toward him with such a contented smile, he thought she might start to purr at any moment. He couldn't resist touching his lips to hers.

"Okay, so what's on your mind?"

"I've been thinking that . . . I've never been happier," he said against her lips.

She squinted at him. "Mmmm. Never? Not even . . . before?"

Before meaning with Alex, his ex-fiancé. Before Muirfield. Before Afghanistan. Before the Twin Towers fell, taking his brothers with them.

"Yep. Never."

That gave her pause. She knew he'd had a happy childhood. A slow warmth curled in her belly.

"And do you know why? Because of you."

She touched her hand to his cheek. "Me, too."

Vincent looked into her eyes a long moment then took a big breath. “So, that got me thinking—”

“There’s more?” she teased, that intriguing dimple making an appearance in her cheek.

He answered it with one of his own. “What if . . . what if things were normal for us? I mean, if we were just a regular couple—what would come next?”

They’d had this conversation before. But things weren’t normal and they never would be. “It’s nice to dream but, as much as I want normal, Vincent, I’m *happy*—”

“Would you marry me?”

She stared at him wide-eyed, that curling warmth turning into butterflies. “You know that isn’t possible. And besides, I am okay with the way things are, truly. All I want is to be with you, however that can be.”

“Well, what if it wasn’t so impossible?”

“Vincent, you’re still technically deceased, remember?” She sat up in his arms and faced him more fully. “Besides, a marriage certificate is just a piece of paper. It’s meaningless, really, in a lot of cases, even for ‘normal’ people.”

“It wouldn’t be for me.” When she looked like she wanted to argue again, he jumped in. “And I’m not actually dead. I mean, yeah, the world thinks that, but I *am* alive, and I’m still me, Vincent Ryan Keller. That man can still make vows.”

“Vincent—”

“You know, JT could get a ‘justice of the peace’ license. He could perform the ceremony for us. Tess could witness. Just because it wouldn’t be ‘technically’ legal doesn’t mean it wouldn’t be real in the eyes of God.”

“But is it really necessary?”

“I want to say vows to you.”

Her heart thudded heavily in her chest. “Oh, Vincent . . . .”

“I mean, maybe . . . maybe someday we’ll be free of this mess. Maybe we’ll find a cure; maybe not. If Muirfield one day gets outed and everything comes to light, it’s possible my veteran benefits could be restored. If we were married and something happened to me, even if things didn’t get cleared up until long after I was gone, as my wife, those benefits would go to you. They could provide for you.”

She'd dreamt of it on more than one occasion--being free. "That's a lot of maybe's, and I don't want to even think of something happening to you. Don't even talk like that."

"I'm not really thinking of that, I'm just . . . thinking of us. There are so many things we can't do right now, like go to a real movie theater for a first-run show. But I *could* give you my name."

She emitted a frustrated sigh. "A name I couldn't use."

"Not yet. But it would be yours. *We* would know."

*Catherine Keller.* What a beautiful sound that had to it. But no. "All I want is you. It's enough for me."

He wove his hand through the hair at her nape. "Are you sure? You think that now, but maybe later—"

"You know, we have more pressing issues to worry about right now. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Besides," she smiled, trying to lighten the intense mood. "It isn't like you've actually proposed or anything yet."

His eyes went wide.

When she realized what he was about to do, she stopped him with another caress to his cheek. "I think we should wait. Let's just see how the next few months go; get us to a better place, safer. By that time, you may even be anxious to be rid of me and regret—"

"I'll never regret a single moment with you." She wasn't ready. He understood. And she might never be. This was Catherine, after all. The offer still stood and he'd wait until a better time. He kissed her.

She lifted her head long, sweet moments later. "See, this is all I need . . . ."

# The Answer

## Chapter 1

“So . . . how is it?” Catherine stole a glance at Vincent under her lashes. He’d hardly said a word since coming through the door an hour earlier and sitting down for dinner.

“Mmmm. It’s great.”

“Better than pizza and a beer, I hope,” she quipped, uncertain. He was in a strange mood.

“Much better.” He looked up then and studied her face. “I’m sorry. Ignore me. I’m just beat. It was a very long afternoon. This is the best meal I’ve had in days.”

She frowned to think what he’d been doing and where he’d been eating, but she wouldn’t ask. He’d tell her in his time. He always did, now. “You know, you’re welcome to eat here every night. I’d love to cook for you, and it would be easier on JT’s budge, I’m sure.”

“I’d like that.”

There wasn’t going to be a better time. He’d probably fall asleep after dinner, as weary as he looked. Catherine sucked in a breath and held it. It was now or never.

“So, . . . is this a good or bad time to tell you I’ve been rethinking our conversation of a few nights ago—movie night?”

Vincent stopped mid-chew and looked at her, instantly alert, fork still poised in his hand.

“I—I mean, I’ve been giving some thought to what you said, about . . . about any marriage between us not being legal but still being real, and—what are you doing?”

He swallowed forcefully. The fork clinked to the table and he pushed his chair back and stood. Without preamble, he stepped in front of her and started to go down on one knee.

“No!”

His eyes flew to hers, confused.

“I-I-I mean, oh! I d-didn’t realize you would do this *right now*.”

“I’m sorry. Was there something else you wanted to discuss first?”

She looked about frantically. “But the . . . the dirty dishes! So unromantic.”

Vincent immediately rose to his full height and started clearing the table. “I’ll help you put them away.”

She got to her feet as well and started grabbing items herself. A distraction. She needed a distraction. Finally, when there was nothing left to do, she pitched around for purpose and almost bumped into him.

That she’d run out of excuses was painfully clear. Vincent didn’t say a word—simply took her by the hand and led her over to the living room sofa and started to kneel again at her feet.

“How’s this? Better?”

“Oh my God, Vincent. Should I . . . I should get on my knees, too, right?”

He laughed. “You don’t need to, but . . . whatever you want to do.” He reached for her hand.

“Wait!”

The first time was humorous. Now he was starting to get annoyed. “Now what? You know, I’m beginning to think you don’t really want me to do this.”

“No, it’s just that I—I should do something with my hair, shouldn’t I? I look a mess—”

He grabbed the hand going to her hair and caught it, then ran his fingers through her silky fine hair. “Catherine, this is not the ceremony. Just the question. First things first. And you always look beautiful to me. Besides, there won’t be any pictures.” Probably not even of the wedding, if it ever happened at this rate. “There’s just you and me, okay?”

“Oh my God, oh my God.”

“Are you okay?” He didn’t want to laugh at her, but this was a bit over the top, even for Catherine.

She nodded, putting fingers over her trembling lips, trying to control it. She wasn’t being very successful, but the effect was endearing. Hadn’t *she* started this conversation? Vincent smiled to himself. Lifting her hand to his mouth and his eyes to hers, he kissed each finger and whispered, “Just breathe.”

After a few beats, when he saw she wasn't going to bolt, he tried again. He hadn't expected to do this tonight, although he'd been thinking about what he would say for weeks now. "You know," reaching for some calm himself. "I would do this in the middle of Times Square if I could. I want the whole world to know what I feel for you."

She was starting to make little keening sounds now, but he ignored it. She was in a zone of her own. "Catherine Elizabeth Chandler—" When she let out a surprised gasp, he said, "You're not the only one who knows how to do research." He brought her wrist to his lips. "Catherine, I love you more than life. With everything I am. And I want to spend the rest of my days, however long that may be, making you happy. Will you . . . will you marry me?"

Catherine tried to breathe. She really did. It came in and out in soft little gasps instead. Everything he said was written on his face—his scarred, beautiful face—and in those entrancing eyes which always saw into the deepest parts of her.

"Now would be the appropriate time to give me your answer," he prompted, his cheek dimple deepening.

Even though they would have to keep it a secret, like everything else in their lives, this was the real thing. This man, whom she loved beyond anything, was asking her to be his wife. Till death do they part. Today, tomorrow, or thirty years down the road. She wanted it. More than anything.

Her answer sounded more like a sob but her head was saying yes.

Vincent let out the breath he was holding and dropped his face into her palm. His body was shaking with . . . relief? joy? tears? exhaustion? He didn't know and it didn't matter. She was his. He lifted wet lashes to her and laughed. She catapulted herself into his arms. "Okay, then. See, that wasn't so hard, was it?"

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"You want me to apply for what? A Justice of the Peace license?" When Vincent didn't move, JT's jaw dropped. "Oh my God. You want to *marry* Catherine."

It wasn't a question. And it never had been. "She already said yes."

JT peered at him over his glasses. "So-so-so, what? Next you're going to go house hunting with her?"

"JT—"

"I'm going to perform the ceremony, then send it to the state to hold, just in case?"

“No. We’ll put it in the safety deposit box. Just in case.” Vincent paced in front of him. “If things ever turn around and I become a free man again, I want it to be legal. A death certificate can be un-done.”

“You’re serious about this? About marriage . . . because—”

“JT. She already gave me her answer.”

JT sat down on the corner of the pool table. His friend meant business. About time. He hid his smile behind a frown. “This is going to cost me a fortune, isn’t it?”

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“Where will we have the ceremony? We can’t use a church, obviously, or a judge’s chambers. I suppose we could do it at my apartment, or yours, or anywhere really—”

She was nervously babbling again. Cute, but babbling. It hadn’t stopped since the night before when he’d left his *fiancé* at the door with a promise to return the next evening. Vincent smiled to himself.

“Catherine, it doesn’t matter. It’s just . . . I want it to be somewhere meaningful to us.” JT had suggested they didn’t even really need an actual ceremony—they could just sign the papers. But he would have none of it. It was the only marriage ceremony either of them were likely to have. He wouldn’t cut corners.

Catherine had calmed down some now that the question and her answer were out of the way, but he could hear the hint of excitement in her voice. That was all right with him. He’d always known she wanted normal. Thinking about a wedding, even as small and secretive as theirs would have to be, had given her new purpose.

“You know,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. “If I were feeling brave, you just might be able to talk me into having it on the fire escape.”

“Oh, really? The fire escape, huh?” He laughed. Appropriate, but not very practical, and a little too public. His face turned serious, because he’d already thought this through. “I was actually thinking about the rooftop?”

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JT met him on the stairs. “Did you get it? The license?” Vincent had seen the very official looking envelope come in the mail and suspected what it was.

“I got it. I can now officially pronounce you manimal and wife,” JT said with a giggle.

Vincent didn’t laugh. “Good.”

"I'm still not clear on how I'm supposed to be the official and the best man at the same time, though."

"JT, it will be fine. We'll figure it out."

The medical researcher pushed open the door at the top and dropped down onto an old bench nearby. "I still don't see why we can't just sit around a table and sign the forms. Seems like a lot less work—and money."

Vincent sighed. They'd been over this already. "JT, this is the only wedding Catherine may ever have. I want it to be special for her. Her mom is gone; she's confused about her father. It's difficult enough that she can't have Heather here. She only has one sister."

"A half-sister."

"A sister is a sister. She can't have any of her friends except for Tess, so I have to find creative ways to make it special. And I think," he said, looking around the space, "this just might work." He'd had fun decorating it for their anniversary a few months back. They could do the same and more.

"Okay, but Dude, you seriously need to find gainful employment sometime in the near future. You're begging me. Do you have any idea how much it costs to rent those tuxes?" At Vincent's look, he threw up his hands. "Hey, don't take your beast out on me. I didn't design the world. But someone needs to be the voice of reason here."

When Vincent continued to frown, JT said, "What is it?"

"You know, I talked Catherine into this." He sat down, as well. "I'm not sure she was ready. What if I pushed too hard?"

"Hey, as much as Catherine tries to play the tough guy all the time, she is so into you. Madly in love. Accept it. Despite what she says, she *wants* this as much as you do."

"You really think so?"

"I know so. And besides, I don't think you can make that woman do anything she doesn't want to do. I'm just saying. At least, I wouldn't try."

Vincent laughed. "I guess you're right. It's just . . . it didn't start out to be some fancy thing like this. It just grew. But I can't give her everything she deserves, so this needs to be amazing--for her."

"And for you."

"Yeah."



At the look on Vincent's face, JT acquiesced. Money was nothing when compared to the hopeful look on his long-time friend's face. The guy was deliriously happy for the first time in ten long years. "Well, then, let's go make it amazing. Do you have your vows written out?"

Vincent fished into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. He handed it to JT, who glanced down at what he'd written.

"Catherine is one lucky lady," he said, all kidding aside.

"No, *I'm* the lucky one."

To have found love in the midst of their tragedy was pretty amazing. JT pulled his best friend into a bear hug. "Then let's get to work."

"What is this?"

"Open it." They sat on the fire escape enjoying the cool evening breeze and the sights and sounds of the city below. At least one part of the scenario could play out in this setting. Vincent smiled and held out the small, black leather box.

"I'm afraid to. It looks suspiciously like a ring box."

He smiled. "Does it? You know, there's only one way to find out."

She held his eyes a moment before reaching for the box. Sliding a nail underneath the catch, she opened the lid. An elegant square-cut solitaire set in a gold band lay sparkling against a black velvet swatch. "Oh, Vincent."

"Do you recognize it?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Is this the one we looked at—"

"In Milltown, yes."

"How on earth did you get it?"

"I have my ways." He tilted his head. "Okay, JT ordered it on line," he admitted. "They have a website."

"It's so beautiful," she said, carefully lifting it out. Then her eyes met his. "But you know I can never wear it."

"Not every day. But maybe when we're alone?"

That hopeful note was back in his voice again. She hated to squash it but this just wasn't very practical. "An awful lot of money for something I can't wear very often."

He took it from her and pulled a cloth bag from his pocket. "You can, with this." A small gold chain slid down from his fingers. He threaded the chain through the ring and held it out to her. "You and I are the only ones who need to know."

## Chapter 2

"Okay, so how did we get from 'I don't think we need a ceremony' to shopping for a wedding gown?" Tess looked sideways at Cat as they maneuvered their way through pedestrian traffic in the upscale shopping district.

"Dress. Wedding dress. 'Gown' sounds way over the top."

"I thought this was over the top. Whatever. 'Dress,' then."

"I don't know, Tess. Vincent wants this to be as much like a real wedding as possible."

"Real, just secret. I get it. Either way, it's an excuse to buy a new dress and get all dolled up. Hey, here's the place I was thinking of." She drew open the door to a small but elegant boutique and they stepped inside. As the motion detector tinkled, announcing their arrival, the noises from the street seemed to disappear.

Tess started forward as two saleswomen eyed them, but Catherine held back. "Maybe this is a bad idea. You know, I can just wear something from my closet."

Tess grabbed Cat's arm before she escaped and pulled her forward. "Nope. Not gonna fly. You want a real wedding, you need a real dress."

"What if," Catherine said, looking anxiously around, "someone recognizes us? How will we explain it?"

"You're seriously worried that someone you know is going to walk into this shop, right now, miles from your apartment and the precinct, and call you out on it? That isn't going to happen. And if it does, you don't owe them an explanation. Now go. You check out that rack; I'll look on this one. Hide yourself among the frothy folds if you must, but look for a dress."

"It's just a dress."

"A very special dress."

It took an hour, but eventually Catherine found a few she was willing to try on, but her frown in the mirror wasn't encouraging.

"That one looks beautiful on you."

Cat sighed. "It's all right, I guess. It's just—"

"What?"

"Nothing I see says 'me' or 'us.' I'm thirty years old, Tess. These dresses were made with younger women in mind."

"Wedding dresses are only made for younger women? Wrong. And Cat, you deserve a beautiful wedding dress, even if it is for a fake wedding."

"It's not fake."

"Just not legal," Tess argued.

"There's a difference. And it could be legal if things change."

Tess lifted an eyebrow and walked to the wrack where they'd hung a few possibles. "All right. How about this one?"

"Too austere."

" 'Austere?' " She laughed and shook her head. "Okay. This one?"

"Too Princess Diana."

Tess held up one more.

"Too . . . Madonna."

"Okay, you do want to find a dress, right?"

"Yes, of course. I'm just not seeing anything I like."

"Well, there are plenty of other bridal stores, but we'll need to get a move on if we're going to get this done today."

They re-hung the gowns and exited the front door.

"Wait." Catherine stopped mid-step. "What about that shop across the street?"

"The vintage place? It isn't a wedding boutique."

"No, but—"

"That dress." Tess saw what had caught Cat's eye.

“Yes. Let’s check it out.”

Hanging in the display window among a plethora of trinkets, colored glassware, and books was a dress covered in elliptical bands of ice-white lace. It was tea length in front, but longer in back, the bell shaped train falling almost to the floor. The bodice sported a fitted, sweetheart neckline with shimmery sheer sleeves covered in mini pearl triplets. The shopkeeper, a middle-aged woman with a healthy smile, offered to take it in for a better fit and did so while they waited. The same store owner also produced a pair of white leather short-cut boots to match.

“It isn’t traditional,” Cat said, as the two women studied her reflection in the mirror.

“But it’s the one.”

“It’s the one.”

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“Heather. Hi, it’s Catherine. Oh, not much really. Hey, I was just wondering,” Catherine looked up at Tess for moral support. “Do you still have that pin of Grandma Chandler’s—you know, the one with the tiny seed pearls? Yeah? Do you think I could borrow it? Oh, no, nothing important.”

Tess rolled her eyes at that.

“I just got this new dress—for a function at work—that I thought would go nicely with, but if it’s a problem—oh, great. I appreciate it. No, I’ll just swing by your apartment and pick it up from you later tonight, if that’s okay? All right. See you soon. Bye.”

She looked up at Tess after disconnecting the call. “That didn’t sound too suspicious, did it?”

“No, but I’m betting now she’ll want to see that ‘new dress.’ Okay,” she waved off Cat’s panicked look. “That was the ‘something old.’ The dress and boots are new. I have a hair pin you can borrow, but what about ‘something blue?’ ”

Catherine thought a moment, then got up and headed for the bookshelves. “Wait. I think I have an idea.” She pulled a thick volume off the shelf and brought it over.

“A book?” Tess looked doubtful then tilted her head to read the title on the binding. ‘The Poetry of Dylan Thomas?’” Tess frowned. “A little heavy, don’t you think? And it’s not blue.”

Catherine ignored her and thumbed through the pages. “No. Here. Look.” Finding the right spot, she carefully lifted out a fragile petal from the pages of her favorite poem, ‘Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night,’ and held it up. “Kind of a bluish-purple, but what do you think? This is from a flower Vincent gave me in Milltown.”

"To put in your hair or bouquet?"

"Nope." Catherine tucked it into her blouse. "Here."

"Sweet."

"Sweetheart."

Tess laughed. "Okay, that works. What's left?"

"I picked out a ring yesterday. It's just a simple gold band, but I wanted him to have one, too. Other than that, I think we're set. The dress was the last thing on my list. Well, except—"

"Uh-oh. You have that look. What?"

"I want to visit Dad. I mean, Thomas. Before 'The Day.' "

"Cat—"

"Not to tell him anything, just to be with him. Vincent said I should bring pictures of my family to the wedding so they can be there with us 'in spirit.' I thought I'd use the excuse of wanting to scan some old family photos for an album. He won't . . . he won't be there to walk me down the aisle, so—"

"I think that's a really great idea, Cat. Go see him. Spend time with him."

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"Catherine, come in sweetheart."

"Hi, Dad."

Thomas Chandler greeted her at the door. When she looked at the cane with surprise, he shrugged. "Brooke insists I use it. I told her I didn't need it but she's being over-protective—"

"Am not!" Brooke called from the kitchen, the laughter in her voice tempered with steel.

"It's just for stability. They don't want me taking another spill anytime soon."

"Well, good for Brooke, then. I approve. I don't want you to, either." She leaned in to hug him. "It's so good to see you."

"You, too. We've missed you in the last couple of months. Heather said work is keeping you really busy?"

Sweet of Heather to have given her an excuse, lie though it was. She just smiled and he waved her in.

"I've got the pictures boxes in here," he motioned to the living room and she took a seat. "There are a lot. Brooke had started to go through them. She wanted each of you girls to have a set, but since you're scanning them in, maybe you could make a copy for your sister."

Catherine cringed, realizing she was going to have to actually make said CD. "Sure."

He opened the first box and they went through them together. After passing several photos to her, he stopped on one. "Ah. Look at this one. You looked so much like your mother, all dark eyes and dark hair—you had a lot of hair when you were born." He laughed and the crinkles around his eyes deepened. "The most beautiful baby I'd ever seen. I instantly fell in love."

At his words, Catherine felt her throat constrict. He may not be her biological father, but he'd been there at her birth, and ever since. That counted for something. As much as she wanted to ask him about Michael Reynolds, now was not the time. She finally picked out a selection of photographs and tucked them into a briefcase.

As they stood at the door, she suddenly reached for him. "I love you, Daddy." Her voice broke on the last.

"Hey. What's this about? You almost sound as if you're saying good-bye. You're not going away somewhere, are you?"

"No. I guess I just miss these moments. After seeing you in the hospital—"

"Hey. I may have been an invalid for a little while, but I've got a clean bill of health now. I'm going to be around for a good, long time." He sent a smile toward his young wife, who had joined them at the door. "I've got a lot to live for."

She didn't need to worry about him. "Good. Then it's just 'bye' for now. And I'll be back soon, I promise," Catherine assured him after a deep focusing breath. But the next time you see me, I'll belong to another man. She sniffed back the tears that had started to fall in the back of her throat. "Very soon."

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"You sure you two don't want to fly to Vegas and let Elvis do this?"

Vincent ignored his friend's sarcasm. "Everything is in place. I just wish Catherine's father could be there to walk her down the aisle."

JT raised his hands in protest. "I can't do it. I'm already doing double-duty during the ceremony as it is."

“I know. It’s a pretty exclusive group who knows about me. I just feel bad.”

“What about Catherine’s real father, you know, that guy—”

“Absolutely not.

“Then I’ve got it. Gabe.”

“Gabe?”

“I know you had issues with him at first—the whole jealousy thing, but—”

“JT, it wasn’t jealousy.”

“Whatever. But now that he’s ‘recovered,’ well, he already knows about both of you and keeps your secret.”

Vincent mulled that over. The man was practically falling all over himself trying to make it up to them for saving his life—not an easy feat with 16 bullets in his chest. He did owe them, especially Catherine. “I’ll go see him.”

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The next thing they knew, an entire truck load of plants was being delivered to their back doorstep.

Gabe greeted Vincent at the door.

“What is this?”

“Well, you said there was going to be a wedding on the roof.”

“A wedding, not a botanical garden!” Vincent said, astounded.

“I thought you could use a little ambiance.”

‘Ambiance’ included hundreds of strands of white, twinkling lights, fragrant barrels of flowers and yards and yards of tulle.

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“So, Tess said you got a dress.” Vincent’s breath fluttered the hair at her nape as he punctuated that statement with a toe curling, open-mouthed kiss to her neck.

Catherine halted mid-breath then realized what he’d said. She turned and looked at him. “Since when do you talk to Tess?”

“She’s my new bff,” he rumbled, this time against her ear.

She wasn’t having it. Catherine laughed. “That is so not what I picture.”

“So . . . .”

“So, nothing. And stop trying to distract me. You do not get to see it—not until tomorrow morning; which, if we’re going to be getting up long before dawn, is going to come sooner than we know. We’d better think about getting some shut-eye. I am not going to have bags under my eyes for the most important day of my life.” She tried to twist away from him, but he grabbed her and started doing things to her neck that she seriously could not pull away from.

“The most important, huh?”

“Yes,” she said on a sigh. She was having difficulty concentrating. “One of them. The first was when I met you. But everything is going to change now.”

He lifted his head. “How so?”

“I don’t know. We’ll be different.”

“Not really. You were my partner before this. Tomorrow it will just become official.” He leaned back into her musky warmth.

Catherine gave in. She lifted her arms around his neck and offered herself up to his loving touches. “By the way, have I told you lately that I am ‘officially’ madly, desperately, fiercely and passionately in love with you?”

“Oh? Define passionately . . . .”

### **Chapter 3**

“Catherine, you are truly a vision.” Gabe spoke from the top of the staircase leading to the roof. “Vincent is a lucky man.”

Catherine blushed and joined him on the landing. It was twenty minutes before dawn—time to make her appearance. Vincent had been adamant she not see the roof before the ceremony. She guessed it was his way of getting back at her for not letting him see the dress last night, although he’d tried every form of persuasion before giving up.

She smoothed a hand down the front of her lace skirt. “Thank you for doing this, Gabe. It means a lot to me.”



"It's my pleasure. Every pretty lady deserves to be escorted down the aisle, and I owe this one big time," he looked pointedly at her. "And to see you both so happy, well . . . You ready?"

"Is that even possible?"

"Catherine, you've faced hardened criminals and a room full of reporters. This should be a piece of cake."

She didn't know about that, but took a big centering breath. "Then I guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

"Wait. You just need one more thing." He reached behind him to a bag hidden in the corner of the stairwell and pulled out a large bouquet of cut flowers.

She gasped. "I thought I smelled roses! Are those for me? Oh, Gabe."

"Along with an escort, a bouquet is a must-have."

She and Vincent had talked about flowers. As far as she was concerned, it was an unnecessary extravagance. It was one of the few arguments he'd conceded on. Apparently, he'd forgotten to tell Gabe. Now she realized how much of a difference they made. Last night Vincent had admitted that the wealthy D.A. had insisted on covering much of the cost of the wedding. For this kindness alone, she owed him a lot.

He offered his arm and she took it, but as he reached for the door handle, she hesitated.

"This is the right thing to do, isn't it?"

Gabe smiled down at her. "If you could have seen his face a little while ago, you wouldn't be asking that question." He opened the door.

Still under the cover of darkness right before the dawn, the rooftop glowed with the shimmer of a thousand twinkling lights. Directly in front of them lay a long straight path across the roof, lined on both sides by fragrant greenery set in large, clay pots. Strung overhead and throughout the pathway were more lights, some caught in the tulle netting woven above their heads. Tiny white ribbons, seemingly from everywhere, danced in the early morning breeze, waving them forward. The air was filled with the fragrance of hot house roses and gardenias.

She clutched his arm. "Am I dreaming? You sure we're on the roof and not transported to a fairytale wonderland?" she asked, amazed at the sight before her.

Gabe grinned, happy that it pleased her. "That smile was definitely worth it."

"Who did all this?"

“Oh, I think everyone played a part. Come, Catherine. Your groom awaits, and it looks like he just might pass out at any moment, so we’d better hurry.”

Tess, off to one side, pressed the button on the music player and the mellow sounds of St. Leonards’ *Best Part of Me* filled the space.

At intervals along the petal covered path were the photos, beautifully framed, of her sister, Thomas, and her mom. Gabe let her pause at each as they passed.

*Can you see me, Mom?*

Incredibly handsome and attired in a suit of black with gray and white accents, Vincent waited at the end of the path, JT just behind him in another tux, beneath a big bowed arch of white pine which, amazingly, had long strands of climbing ivy mixed with vine roses woven up both sides of the trellis and hanging down from above. Another of Gabe’s gifts, no doubt.

As the D.A. brought her to stand before the men, she couldn’t take her eyes away from her groom. Vincent wasn’t smiling but had an expression closer to the way she felt—nervous and a little bit anxious. But as the first rays of dawn broke over the cityscape, it backlit her groom and spread a golden glow over the entire scene, and she smiled.

“Um, okay,” JT said as the music drifted off. He nervously looked down at his notes.

“Who gives this woman to be married to this man? *Like we don’t already know,*” he added, sotto voice.

The consummate professional, Gabe ignored him and spoke up loudly and clearly. “On behalf of her family, I do.” Leaning in, he kissed Catherine on the cheek and murmured, “They would all be very proud.” As Catherine absorbed that, she handed Tess her bouquet and was led forward to Vincent, her hand placed firmly in his. Gabe winked at her then and went to stand opposite Tess as the other witness.

Vincent cupped her hands in his larger ones. Her fingers were cold. Searching her eyes and suspecting it was nerves more than the mild morning temperatures, he chaffed them gently with his own and turned them both toward JT.

“We are gathered here today,” he read, “to unite this man and this woman in holy matrimony. Vincent, do you take Catherine to be your wife? Do you promise to love, honor, cherish and protect her, forsaking all others and holding only unto her as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.”

"And Catherine, do you take Vincent to be your husband? Do you promise to love, honor, cherish and protect him, forsaking all others and holding only unto him for as long as you both shall live?"

"I do."

"Okay then, Big Guy, I guess you're up first. Your vows?" JT prompted.

"Oh, yeah." Vincent had to tear his eyes away from his bride. Some of her silky hair had been swept up in a wistful knot at the top of her head, the rest left to spill over her bare shoulders. The dress was stunning on her, fitting her figure like a glove, and the intriguing glimpses he got of those little white boots peeking out beneath the lace were driving him to distraction. Digging nervously into one pocket and then the other, he finally produced a folded sheet of paper. Catherine bit her lip.

Keeping hold of one of her hands, he held her gaze a long moment, then began.

"Catherine, when you found me last year, I was a dead man walking. I had no life, no purpose other than trying to survive. And, even though I'd watched over you for years, I'd stopped dreaming of a future until I met you. Through your honesty, your courage, and your compassion, you brought me back to life. You stole my breath, and then you stole my heart.

"You saw me when I didn't want anyone else to see me. And you didn't run. But not only that – you always saw *me*. I can't promise our life will be easy, and I know I can't give you everything I want or everything you deserve, but as you have been my sanctuary, I will be yours. And I, Vincent Ryan Keller, promise to love you, Catherine Elizabeth Chandler, with all of my being, to protect you, and to walk with you down each path our lives take, the rough and the smooth, hand in hand, for as long as I have breath."

JT then nodded to her.

"Okay." She blew out a shaky breath, already incredibly moved by his words.

"From the moment we met, my life has never been the same. You found a cynical, insecure, hard-nosed cop and turned my world upside down. You saved my life, more than once, but more importantly, you saved *me* with your love, your protection, and your friendship. You know, from the start, you had me with your eyes. And despite the ups and down we've faced, I wouldn't change a moment of it. Love isn't about being safe, but taking risks. And I would risk everything for one more moment with you.

"And that's why I, Catherine Elizabeth Chandler, take you, Vincent Ryan Keller, to be my husband, not because I can't breathe without you, but because we breathe better together. I don't need normal—I just need you. And though the future may bring more challenges, I promise to be there with you through it all because what we have . . . it's worth fighting for.

"We are stronger together than apart; and frankly, I don't ever want to be separated from you again. I promise to be your partner through the good times and the bad, the happy and the sorrowful, and I will love you till the end of time."

Catherine's voice cracked on the last word and no one spoke. She was thankful Tess was behind her because she could hear her snuffle and knew she'd totally lose it if she had to look at her best friend's face just then. Finally, JT cleared his throat and had them exchange rings. There was a moment of surprise when she brought out a ring for Vincent, also, which he wasn't expecting. Then they walked to the side where a set of three candles had been placed on a small table, took the burning tapers on either side and lit the center one together.

"And now, I guess . . . by the power vested in me by the State of New York, *even though they don't know anything about this*," he added, "I pronounce you," JT caught Vincent's glare and smiled, "*man* and wife. Go for it, Dude!"

Vincent blew out a giant sigh of relief. "Yes," he said with feeling, and wrapped one hand around Catherine's face and the other around her back and pressed his mouth to hers, telling her in all the ways his words couldn't just how much she meant to him.

"All right, you two," Gabe laughed after several long moments and broke them apart.

The guys hugged, slapped each other on the back and shook hands all around.

As Catherine stood to one side, grinning, Tess came up alongside her, wiping a tear away. "Okay, I take back everything I've ever said about Vincent," she said with a sniff.

"*Everything?*" Cat teased, eyes on her groom—correct that—her *husband* just a few feet away.

"Well, the bad things." Tess got serious. "I didn't understand at first, you know, about your connection. And it *is* special. He loves you, Cat. And I can only hope I meet a guy someday who will love me half as much as Vincent loves you. You're very fortunate, you know. But after all you two have been through, you totally deserve it."

"Thank you, Tess. I'm not sure about the 'deserving' part, but I want to make him as happy as he's made me."

Tess looked back over her shoulder at the trio of men. "Oh, I think you made Vincent a very happy man this morning." She hugged her tight.

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After photographs were taken with Gabe's grand old Polaroid camera and the marriage certificate signed and sealed, the bride and groom were finally able to slip back into the apartment, alone at last. Vincent nervously twisted the ring on his finger, the unfamiliar feel of it giving him something to do as he waited for Catherine.

Nothing had truly altered between them, but he felt different. Full. *Home*.

Having changed into more appropriate attire for their short getaway together, she came out of the bathroom. “How do I look? Ready for the back woods?”

Vincent snaked his arms around her, filling his lungs with the scent of her. “I’m sorry we can’t go some place more special. A camping honeymoon isn’t exactly the height of romance. And you’re absolutely beautiful, by the way, Mrs. Keller. As always.”

She flushed. “I love the sound of that.”

“ ‘Beautiful’?”

“No. The other part—‘Mrs. Keller.’”

“Oh, get used to it,” he whispered, touching his lips to hers once, twice. The tide of desire started rising up again as he opened his mouth over hers. “Mmmm, I can never get enough of you.”

She started to respond, then through sheer force of will pulled her head back. His eyes were already unfocused. She loved that she could do that to him. She ran her fingers up through his hair. “I’m happy wherever we go as long as I have you all to myself. But you know, *Mr. Keller*, unless you want to do our camping right here in the apartment, we have to get going.”

Catherine had a feeling they weren’t actually going to get to much of the ‘camping’ part of their quick, two-day trip to a secluded woods. They’d already lost an hour upon returning to the apartment when she made the mistake of asking for his help unbuttoning her dress. He’d taken on the task with relish, taking his sweet time with the long line of pearl buttons, deciding to inspect every new inch of revealed skin as he carefully opened each one. When he discovered the blue petal, however, things got somewhat out of hand. His determination to ensure there weren’t other hidden treasures elsewhere led to a long, leisurely open-mouthed exploration of every part of her, and a dozen poor pearl buttons on the floor. She spared a small regret for the dress, which ended up torn in several places when all was said and done. She’d have to produce another dress for sure, now, for Heather.

What was left of the wedding cake never made it to the freezer as Vincent then made very creative use of it and the ice cream . . . .

After a quick shared shower in which very little actual showering had been accomplished, they weren’t any closer to leaving.

Pausing a moment to think over her admonition, he finally sighed. “*God*. Yes, dear,” and regretfully set her away from him.

As she grabbed her purse and jacket, Vincent reached beyond her to pick up their two bags, neatly stacked by the door, but bumped into her as he twisted around. "I'm sorry."

"*What?*"

"I'm sorry. My arm fell asleep. I didn't mean to wake you."

Catherine blinked. The room, which had begun to fill with bright morning light, was suddenly very dim.

"Are you still comfortable here, or do you want me to take you to bed?" Vincent's voice was slightly groggy and came from close behind her. He had one long arm looped around her middle.

Confused, she lifted her head and searched the shadows for his eyes.

"What is it?" he asked, concerned by the look on her face. "Bad dream?"

*Dream?* She scanned the room and stopped breathing. They weren't in her apartment at all, but the old club on the couch in front of the big screen. Catherine shook her head, unable to put voice to her incredible disappointment. "No," she finally got out. "No. It was . . . quite beautiful, actually."

Apparently satisfied with that, he shifted her on top of him and brought the throw blanket up around her as gray light slowly filled the room.

Catherine hid her devastation in the soft fabric of his shirt. As she turned her face away and closed her eyes again, a single tear rolled down her cheek . . . .

**\*\*The End\*\***

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