

Windflwr

BAtB Fanfiction – Though Lovers Be Lost (complete)

Continuing on now with my Alternate Universe fake season two episodes - this is AU-S2.06. Things get more complicated between Catherine and her biological father, Michael Reynolds, the head of the re-invented Muirfield now called 'The Company.' And Vincent may have some competition...

An old flame of Catherine's shows up, the victim of a heinous crime. Or is he? As Catherine is temporarily given the care of his two children, Vincent must deal with jealousy and the reality that he and Catherine can never be parents.

Chapter 1

“Vargas. Chandler. You’re up.”

When the partners approached their boss, Michael Reynolds, he handed them a folder and not much else.

“Homicide. South end. Appears the perps were interrupted. Get out there pronto. The uniforms are still on the scene. Possible domestic violence, but I have my doubts. And I’d like this personally overseen by the two of you. Keep everyone else out of the loop until I say so, got it?”

Catherine squinted at her boss. There was something in his eyes she didn’t understand. Was this one of ‘The Company’s’ mishandled operations? And was her oversight necessary because Vincent might possibly be involved? She shuddered to think it. Grabbing her jacket and Tess’s arm, she felt the need for extreme urgency.

The brownstone was quiet. Oddly, the officers on the scene had cut their lights and parked down the street. She wondered if that had been by Reynolds’ order.

As she pulled to the curb, Tess read the single sheet aloud that they’d been given. “Anna Mallory, wife, mother of two, twenty-eight years old. A neighbor heard yelling, then shots, and bravely kicked in the door. He found the victim dead on the floor in a pool of blood and her husband nearby, alive but just barely.” She looked up. “I wonder why this has Reynolds tied in such a knot?”

Catherine put the car in park. “So are they not sure there was an intruder, or what? Sounds like a possible murder-suicide. Any priors on either of them?”

Tess scanned the detail sheet. “No. Uh. Uh-oh.”

“What is it?” Catherine turned to look at her partner in the squad car before pulling the door handle to get out. Instead of answering, Tess handed her the paper.

“*Justin Mallory?*” The name sent her into a tailspin.

“I’m sure it’s just a coincidence, Cat. There could be lots of Justin Mallorys,” Tess said, not very confidently. Catherine was already half way out the door.

"Cat! Wait. He's already at the hospital." Tess hurried to catch up with her. They flashed their badges to the uniformed officer who opened it almost as soon as Catherine got to the top step.

"Detectives." A harried officer greeted them. "Glad you're here. Reynolds said to treat this one gingerly. The victim's in there."

Tess took the lead and hurried in the direction the officer had nodded. The medical examiner was just finishing up. Catherine could see the victim lying just inside the archway to the sunken living room. There were noises coming from the back room. Just as she turned that direction, another officer came out of the hallway, one young child in tow; a baby in his arms. "Which one of you is Chandler?" "That would be me," Catherine spoke up.

"Good. Here. Take them."

###

Before she could even respond, Catherine found her arms filled with a rosy cheeked baby, perhaps eighteen months old, and the hand of a toddler transferred to hers. She balked.

"Don't give me any grief," the officer cut her off. "This is by Reynolds' order. Said not to call Child Protective Services. There's something fishy about this case. He's being very tight-lipped. Ordered us to turn the children over to you -- said you'd know what to do."

"But—!" Sure. She knew what to do as a *detective*, not as a day care worker! She eyed the young boy at her feet. He looked dazed and afraid. She pulled him over to a couch in the family room – as far from the scene in the living room as possible – and up beside her next to his sister. Both children were fair haired and blue-eyed, not their mother's coloring from what little she'd seen of the victim on the floor in the other room.

"Here, sweetheart," she cooed to the boy, snuggling him closer and brushing a lock of blonde hair out of his eyes. "It's going to be okay." Empty words, but all she could think of.

Tess came out of the living room some minutes later looking for her. "Oh, God."

Cat looked up helplessly. "Tess, help me."

"What are you doing?"

"Apparently, I'm to be the babysitter, according to our boss."

"Reynolds assigned the children to you? What are they, witnesses? Why don't we just call Child Protective—"

"I can't. I just got off the phone with him. He said they are not to be contacted—that we're handling this in-house. He wouldn't say why, just that I am assigned this duty, exclusively, until the case is resolved. And you're on your own."

"That's bunk! Just because we're women, men think they can stick us with stuff like this! It's crap. I'm going to call him myself." She pulled out her cell.

"No, Tess." Catherine signaled to her partner to lean closer. "I think this might be one of his 'tidying up' procedures, if you get my meaning. This smells of you-know-who."

"You mean, *M*?" Tess asked carefully, her voice close to a whisper.

Catherine nodded. "For now, I think we need to just do what we're told. I'll try to talk to Reynolds again later, when it's easier. Right now, I need to get these children out of here. Can you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Would you find out how Justin is? Please?"

Tess nodded, understanding. The boy, who looked to be about four or five, was sucking his thumb anxiously. The baby, more oblivious, was playing with Catherine's hair. She didn't envy her partner. "I'll call you as soon as I get a status on him."

"Thanks."

An officer approached. "Here's a baby bag and some clothing. There are a couple of car seats in the back room I think will work."

Other than that, she was on her own. Message received. Catherine leaned down and spoke gently to the little boy whose name she'd learned was Leo. "Come with me, sweetheart. We're going to go for a ride. I'm going to take you to my place for a little while."

"Where's my Mommy and Daddy?" he asked, his shriveled thumb coming only part-way out of his mouth as he spoke.

"Uh, Daddy is . . . sick right now and is at the hospital. That's why I'm taking you to my house until he gets better."

"But my Mommy—"

"She's not here right now." A truth, if indirect. Catherine cringed. Was that what you told a child in this situation? She had no idea. "My name is Catherine, by the way." The baby had latched onto a lock of her hair and was twisting it painfully.

###

"No, I'm trying to fix them something to eat right now. Do toddlers eat salad?" she asked, frowning into her refrigerator. "Wait. I think I have a can of soup in the pantry." She listened to Tess as she rummaged through the shelves. "Sure. I understand. You don't have to apologize." She'd rather be anywhere but there, too. Tess was not exactly a kid person. "No, I'm sure we'll be fine. It will only be for a day or two, anyway, right? I'm sure I can manage. Maybe I'll call JT; have him bring me some supplies. I'm glad to hear Justin will pull through. That means a lot to me. Thank you, Tess. Call me tomorrow. Okay. Bye."

Catherine spun around to find two small pairs of eyes following her every move. “I’m in so much trouble.” She looked down at her phone. It was a long shot, but maybe he’d be available...

“Thanks for coming so quickly.”

Vincent eased open the doorway from the porch and quickly scanned the room. “Yeah, sure. I came as soon as I could get away. You all right? Your message sounded urgent.”

She had just finished cleaning up the dirty plates from the dining table but there were still bowls of food on the counter. “Sit down. Eat something. It’s still warm.”

Vincent frowned. “Catherine—. You’re nervous. Is there a threat?” He could detect faint heartbeats from somewhere nearby, but he assumed they were from an adjacent apartment.

“No. I just—I don’t know how to tell you this. I don’t want to upset you.”

“You’re not late again, are you? Just tell me.”

“No,” she assured him. She shouldn’t have been so vague. The way she’d made it sound, no wonder he was worried. “I’m sorry. It’s nothing like that.” *Nothing like, ‘oops, I might be pregnant with your baby and you have animal DNA.* Considering the alternative, this scenario wasn’t half so alarming. She took a breath. “Uh, do you remember when we first . . . got together and I told you about a-a relationship I had long ago—in the past—where I really liked a guy?” she asked carefully, watching his eyes.

“ ‘Disaster’?”

Oh, right. She *had* described it that way. “You remember.”

“Yeah, well, I had a need to understand my competition.”

She smiled. “You don’t *have* any competition.”

“So then why would it upset me?”

“His name was Justin. Justin Mallory. We were—we were close . . . once.”

“Okay . . .” Vincent tamped down his jealousy. Nothing she said so far was new, other than the guy’s name. But why was she bringing him up, unless—”

“He’s part of a case I’ve been assigned to,” Catherine answered his unasked question.

“A case?”

“Yes. There was an incident today on the West side—”

“Mommy, who’s that?”

Vincent was up and out of his chair so fast it fell backward. A small child, he guessed about four, came out of the bedroom wearing footy pajamas.

“Oh, honey, did we wake you?” Catherine hurried to the little boy and squatted down to his level.

“*Mommy?*” Vincent repeated, ominously.

She gave him a squelching look. “Give me some credit, would you? He’s confused. I guess I look . . . a lot like his mother.” To the boy she said, “It’s Catherine, remember, Leo?”

The toddler acknowledged her words but his eyes were drawn to Vincent and no doubt to the long jagged scar that covered the right side of his face from eyebrow to mouth.

“This is my friend Vincent. Vincent, Leo.”

When Vincent turned surprised eyes toward her, she shook her head. “It’s okay. He’s just a child. It’s not like he’s going to ID you or anything. Just . . . give me a minute to get him back to bed and then we’ll continue our talk.”

Instead of staying put, Vincent followed her to the bedroom where another child, younger still, already lay sleeping in the middle of the bed surrounded by pillows to keep her from falling off. He’d only intended to watch, but when Catherine tried to coax the boy back onto the bed, Leo turned and reached for *him*.

“I need go potty.”

“Oh. Okay—” Catherine began, but Vincent interrupted.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll help him. C’mon, Buddy.”

“It’s Leo, not Buddy.”

“Right. Like the lion, huh?”

The boy shook his head. “Like *Leonardo*. Ca-Capwio.”

Vincent smiled. “Oh, of course.” Like it was the most natural thing to do, he bent to lift the child and Leo went straight into his arms. He carried him into the adjacent bathroom.

Catherine watched, dumbfounded. After a few minutes of low talking, which she couldn’t understand, she heard a flush, then water running. Vincent was making Leo wash his hands. The two came out, hand-in-hand, moments later.

Together, they settled the boy, who snuggled up to his sister and closed his eyes.

“So, who are they?” Vincent asked, back in the living room.

“They’re Justin’s children. Their mother was killed yesterday. Justin is in the hospital recovering from his wounds.”

“They were attacked?”

“I’m . . . not sure.” She’d actually been left out of the loop and Tess had not called to give her an update for a few hours. Catherine took the seat opposite him on the sofa.

“We thought it might be a case of domestic violence at first, but I have a sneaking suspicion it’s much more complicated than that.”

“How so?”

“Because Reynolds is overseeing this. Personally.”

“Reynolds?”

Catherine could almost see the veins in Vincent’s neck begin to swell at the mention of the man’s name. The head of the re-invented Muirfield organization, now known as ‘The Company,’ was doubling as her precinct captain. Though she’d also recently learned he was her father, this stranger was not well known to her. She didn’t trust him, and neither did Vincent. She spoke quickly. “He’s my boss, remember? My assigned task is to keep them here with me for the time being, I assume until Justin is recovered enough to care of them again. It’s crazy. It’s not like I know the first thing about taking care of babies.”

Vincent stared, recalling a gut-wrenching two minutes not long ago when she thought she might be pregnant. The idea horrified him, not because she wouldn’t be the most wonderful mother, which she would, but because of his own situation and DNA. “Your instincts are good, Catherine. Don’t worry. But are they in danger?”

“Not that I know of.” She shook her head, still trying to figure it out herself. “This is just some quirky idea of Reynolds’. I actually thought you might be involved somehow.” When he shook his head, she frowned. “I just wish I knew what he was up to. In the meantime, I’m stuck playing ‘mommy’ to the poor things.”

“Well, uh, you know, I might be able to help. I mean, they’re just children, right? Like you said, they aren’t going to ID me or anything. I worked in the pediatric wing for a semester before the ER. I know a thing or two about taking care of young children.”

Doctor. Of course. “Would you?” Relief flooded her. “I mean, just give me a few pointers. I’m way out of my comfort zone here.”

“Sure. Do you have food, diapers?”

“Only what was in the baby bag they gave me, plus a handful of clothing items.”

“I can have JT pick up some supplies and deliver them tomorrow morning before his first class. I’ll make a list.”

“Thank you. I’m so sorry. I know this is awkward. Justin is—was—a close friend.”

Vincent scrawled notes on a notepad by the table while she talked. “You don’t think he was responsible for his wife’s death, do you?” he asked carefully. This was a touchy thing. The fact that Reynolds was involving himself spoke volumes. Perhaps old-flame-Justin had a bigger secret than anyone knew.

She sighed. “I don’t know what to believe. Forensics haven’t come back on the gun yet. The Justin I knew could never have done anything like that. There must be another explanation. But the fact that Reynolds is involved worries me. I thought at first it might be because of you.” Her eyes flickered to his.

“I don’t kill innocent women, especially not mothers of young children.”

“No, of course not. I just meant . . . I don’t know what I meant. Forgive me. I feel a little off kilter with all of this.”

And no doubt from her ex-boyfriend suddenly showing back up in her life. Vincent bit down on his tongue. She didn’t need his jealousy; she needed his help.

“That little one was a cutie. And Leo—”

“You should see her with her eyes open. They’re both so sweet and innocent.”

“What will happen to them?”

“I guess that depends on Justin.”

“You really cared about him.”

The way he stated it without asking said volumes for where his head was at. “ ‘Cared’ as in *past tense*, Vincent. I haven’t even thought of him in years.”

“You thought of him the first time I made love to you.”

Catherine’s eyes flew to his. So there *was* some jealousy going on. “Not . . . not because I was thinking about *him*. I was thinking about myself and what a wreck I’d been trying to please some guy I liked.”

“There’s that ‘liked’ again.”

She put a hand to his cheek. “The truth is, I’ve never had a relationship like this before. There is no comparison. What I feel for you . . . it’s different. And a little scary because it’s so strong. That’s all I was trying to say. I mucked it up because . . . I felt light-headed and a little out of control because that’s what you do to me. And if you don’t know by now what you mean to me,” she touched his lips with hers, “then I need to work a lot harder and tell you more often.”

“I might need to hear it a few times.” He agreed, and kissed her back, a little more lingeringly.

She smiled. It didn’t take much to sidetrack him. “Kiss me like that again and I’ll say whatever you want”

###

Catherine wasted no time in confronting Michael Reynolds at work the next morning. She knocked on his office door once then let herself in and shut the door behind her.

“Detective? I thought I assigned you kiddie duty today.”

“Yeah. About that. And they’re fine until I return—they’re with a friend. But I had to talk to you.”

“Make it fast. I’ve got a little under five minutes before I have to be in a meeting.”

“Is Vincent involved?”

“With what?”

“Is he involved in the Mallory case, because this has ‘The Company’ written all over it.”

Reynolds stopped what he was writing and looked up. “No.”

Typical. Getting information out of him was like squeezing water out of bread. And just as fun. “Then why are you involved? You’re obviously covering something up and setting Justin up to take the blame.”

“Number one, I don’t owe you any explanations.” Reynolds ticked off points on the fingers of one hand as if lecturing a child. “Number two, Justin is a big boy who got himself involved in things way over his head. If anyone’s to blame, it’s him. And three, why do you care? He’s nobody.”

“He’s someone from my past that I cared about! But you knew that, didn’t you? Just what is your game?”

“Like I said, he’s a nobody. Why should you care? You’ve obviously moved on with your life.”

Meaning, with Vincent. Their relationship didn’t set well with Reynolds but she couldn’t care less. “That doesn’t mean I don’t care about him. It isn’t right. I certainly wouldn’t want him blamed for Muirfield’s work!”

She’d said the name in a hushed tone, but the fact that she said it aloud didn’t make him happy. He clamped down on his jaw. He stood. “Some things are bigger than you and what you want, Catherine,” he said, his voice low and menacing. “Not everything revolves around you or your beastly-boyfriend.”

Not one to be intimidated, she held his eye contact, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t quaking inside. This man was powerful and he had Vincent in his clutches. “I never said it did. But what will happen to the children? If Justin doesn’t recover?”

“They will be put into foster care. It’s not pretty, but that’s how the world works, and you should know that by now. Why? Did you think they’d make a neat addition to your little non-family?”

Catherine tried to calm herself. *Just breathe.* Reynolds was an ass and he was baiting her. She finally turned toward the wall and the rows of placards declaring all of his awards and recognitions. Who knew how many of them were real? “Why do you hate me so much?”

That brought his head around. “I don’t hate you. You’re my *daughter.*”

“Not by your choice,” she pointed out. He’d been perfectly happy letting her and the rest of the world believe Thomas was her father. Michael Reynolds had never wanted her to know the truth. If it hadn’t been for Vincent, she still wouldn’t.

“I just think you’ve made some lousy decisions in your life.”

She cocked her head. “Not that you have any say in what I do with my life, but are we talking about Justin or Vincent?”

"What do you think?"

She quit his office still completely in the dark and more worried now than when she'd entered it.

Chapter 2

Feeling more confident now that the supplies had arrived from JT, Catherine expected her second day with the children to go smoothly. But she hadn't planned on an ear infection. By mid-day, Evangeline was running a fever and crying constantly. Vincent diagnosed the problem and set off to give JT the prescription for Amoxicillin, but he was long overdue. Catherine paced the front room, baby in her arms, trying to get Evangeline to settle. And she'd been doing that for hours.

Leo got up from in front of the television set. Thankfully, she'd found a local station with children's programming on at that time of night. It had kept him occupied for a little while. The pad of paper and set of colored pens she'd found in her desk drawer had taken up the rest of the time. Now even he was getting restless. She looked down at him when he approached.

"Does Evangeline do this often, Leo? I mean, she's crying non stop."

Leo just shrugged. Catherine rubbed her face. "Oh Vincent, where are you?"

As if on cue, he came through the front door, two bags in hand.

"Vissent!" Leo cried, and ran to him.

"Thank God!"

"How's she doing? Still cranky?" Vincent bent down to hug the boy with his free arm.

"That would be putting it mildly," Catherine said, the relief on her face evident. "She's been wailing since you left. I didn't feel this exhausted after chasing down a gang of teens during a drug bust. What took you so long?"

"I'm sorry. I stopped to pick up a few more items I thought we'd need." He turned to the child at his feet. "And how're you doing, Leo?"

"I'm great! Been watching Miteandmopin Power Rangers!"

"Mighty Morphing Power Rangers," Catherine interpreted. "It was all I could find on TV for him."

Vincent mussed Leo's hair, set the bag on the table and pulled out the medicine. "Here, let me take her."

Catherine lifted the baby to him and she went right into his arms. Unlike many new fathers, he didn't handle her awkwardly at all. Evangeline immediately quieted, although she wasn't exactly smiling. Her little chin trembled from the exhaustion of crying so long. Transfixed by the hair on his chin, she tried to latch onto it.

"Those ears still bothering you, huh, little one?" Vincent spoke sympathetically to the baby whose eyes were glued to his.

Catherine had never heard his rough voice sound so tender.

"Yeah, I know. Ear infections will do that to you." He answered the baby's distressed babbling as if he understood exactly what she was saying. He handed Catherine the medicine. "Put one dose of this into her bottle morning and night. We'll also give her something for the pain. That should settle her down tonight and start to clear this thing up pretty quick."

"You are a God-send. Thank you."

While the medicine worked its magic, the four of them curled together on the couch. Vincent had brought a couple of large picture books with him. Evangeline was more attracted to his voice than the colorful pages, but Catherine didn't blame her—she was, too. She smiled as he paused to answer each of Leo's myriad questions with the patience of a saint. And he never once seemed to mind Evangeline's drooly fingers on his face or his arm.

At least the baby was quiet now and struggling to keep her eyes open.

When both children started to drift off, he closed *The Velveteen Rabbit* and nodded toward the bedroom. He and Catherine each scooped up a child and carried them back.

###

"You're amazing, you know that?" The two sat curled up on the sofa together.

"Why am I amazing?"

"You were so calm and confident back there. You knew just what to do with Vanleen."

"Vanleen'?"

Catherine smiled. "That's what Leo calls his 'sisser,' among other things."

"Ah."

"You know, I think she has a man crush on you."

He laughed. "Oh yeah? A little young for that, don't you think? And how would you know? Did she tell you?" Vincent knew Evangeline spoke only a limited number of words.

"She didn't have to. A woman knows these things. Besides, I know it when I see it because . . . I have a one, too." She snuggled deeper into him. "Oh, you just have no idea how happy I am that you're here. I thought I might go insane today."

The arm he had lying along the top of the sofa slid around her and pulled her close.
"Why don't you tell me all about it?"

"In need of a little affirmation, are we?" She kissed him once, twice, then pulled back.
"You know, I'd be happy to oblige, but right now I feel . . . sticky." She examined her blouse, which had seen numerous food globs, drool and slobbery fingers that day.
"Would you mind terribly if I took a quick shower? Maybe you could find us a movie."

"I don't mind at all, and I can do that, but you don't have to entertain me tonight. If you're tired—"

"I am, but . . . will you stay?"

"I think I can accommodate you there."

###

Catherine awakened to the sound of her cell phone buzzing with a text message. Gray light was filtering into the room. And she was alone. Scanning the text, which was from Tess, brought her sleep-foggy mind to full alert. She immediately got out of bed.

Since it was still quiet, she tiptoed to the hallway bathroom to do her morning ablutions and straighten her hair, then into the kitchen to get a mug of coffee. When she finally dared to peek into her bedroom where the children slept, she found Vincent asleep in the easy chair by the window, Evangeline tucked safely into the crook in his arm, also fast asleep.

Her lips creased with a slow smile. She leaned against the door jam and took in the scene. With his sensitive hearing, he must have heard the baby in the night and gotten up. What a beautiful sight they made, Evangeline's sweat-dampened blonde curls next to his dark good looks. For one moment, she allowed her mind to picture a dark-haired child in his arms. Then she shook her head and banished the thought before it brought up tears. A lovely dream never to be.

She would have been content to stand there all day and just look at him, but Vincent's acute awareness of her presence made him stir and blink open his eyes. They found hers immediately.

"Hi," she whispered, delivering the mug to his free hand and a kiss to his lips. Evangeline lay peacefully in slumber. A wet spot on his shirt marked where her mouth had hung open during the night minus its usual pink pacifier, which Catherine saw had fallen into her lover's lap.

With great care she lifted the baby from his arms and placed her back onto the bed with her brother, then waved to Vincent to follow her out of the room.

"Did you get enough sleep?" she asked him.

"I'm not sure," he teased, following her out into the hall, his smile slow and sexy. "I think I might need some more." Sliding his arms around her, he lifted her to her tiptoes to kiss him.

"Somehow I don't think sleep is what's on your mind," She smiled at him. "And, as much as I want that, too, I have work to do. I just got a text from Tess. She said Justin is going to be released today and wants to visit his kids later."

Vincent frowned. "He's coming here? Have they cleared him of all charges?"

Catherine wanted to rub away the furrow between his brows. "Yes. The prints on the gun weren't his. There was definitely an intruder, although there's so little evidence, we may have a difficult time tracking him down. Sure sounds like you-know-who. I thought Reynolds said Muirfield was dismantled."

"There are still some rogue factions out there. Part of my job is to hunt them down. Looks like I've got my work cut out for me today, too."

"That still doesn't explain Justin's involvement, or his wife's, possibly."

"No, it doesn't. Catherine, I know he's someone from your past, but this man could be dangerous. What time will he be here? I'll come back and stay close, just in case."

"No. No, there's no need for you to do that. I've already dominated you for two whole days. I know you have things to do. And Justin is an old friend."

"An old *boyfriend*."

She cocked her head at him. "Do I detect a note of jealousy in your voice?"

"I just want to make sure you and the children are safe."

"He's their father, Vincent. Of course we'll be safe. If you want, I'll call you after he leaves."

"I don't mind hanging around."

She pressed her lips together. This was more than simple protection duty. He didn't like the idea of another guy, her old boyfriend, coming to see her. But Justin was a known entity. There might have been feelings between them once upon a time, but no more. She didn't need a babysitter. She placed a hand on his chest. "I will do this by myself. The children will be here. You have no reason to be concerned."

"But—"

"Vincent," she said more firmly, "I don't want you to come. I'd feel like . . . like you were spying on me or something. I told you, you have no competition."

As he had when she'd tried to warn him away from Evan, Vincent didn't agree; just remained silent. She sighed. That was all she was going to get. He left after cleaning up, and she fixed breakfast by herself for the children.

"Where's Vissent?" Leo asked sometime later.

Catherine smiled as she wiped milk dribbles from his chin. "'Vissent' had to go to work today, but I have a surprise for you."

"What is it?"

Evangeline's head turned to her, too.

"Well, your Daddy is feeling much better and he wants to come visit you. What do you think of that? You won't be able to go home with him quite yet, but you can visit with him here. He can't wait to see to you again."

That news had them both wiggling through the meal. She channeled that extra energy into helping her straighten up the place. When the kids finally went down for their afternoon nap, she used the time to prepare herself.

Six years. Had it really been that long ago since Justin Mallory had come into her life like a whirlwind? She went to the closet and pulled out a box of old photos. Flipping through a stack she came across a card with a photograph and hand-written note inside.

He'd been a consultant on a case that year. While the precinct had access to plenty of IT people and powerful servers, Justin had a unique expertise—he could crack codes no one else could. It was the last year she'd had a male partner, Dubrowski, and they were on the case of a serial killer whose M.O. it was to leave cryptic clues at every scene. They'd given him the nick-name Code Monster. He was extremely clever, and deadly. Problem was, he was so brilliant, no one had been able to figure out his messages, and two more lives had been lost while they tried. They'd ended up seeking outside help, and that's when she met Justin.

Tall, dark and handsome with a mesmerizing gaze, she'd fallen for him right along with every other female in the precinct. But he had eyes for her. After the case was closed, he asked her out for the first time. Catherine rubbed her thumb over the raised text of the card, remembering. She'd been a nervous wreck. Reaching out to the only other single female detective in the division, she'd begged Tess Vargas for help. It was the first time they'd bonded.

Unlike her usual taste in men, Justin exuded a confidence that wasn't based on his looks or his charm but on reality. He was safe, stable and brilliant. Their conversations weren't simple or shallow. Intense was a better word. He wanted to know her opinion about everything, and then he analyzed every nuance of her thoughts to such a degree, she'd feel exhausted by evening's end.

He took her to nice restaurants, but not overly pricey ones. He had eclectic tastes and was just as comfortable chucking peanut shells on the floor as he was ordering wines in French from the menu. He appealed to her on many levels. Their physical relationship had been good, too. Nothing like the intensity she experienced with Vincent, but nice.

And then it was over. One day she expected to start talking about commitments and the next, he was giving her excuses, breaking dates, texting her instead of calling. The devastation she felt had been overwhelming. It had been Tess who pulled her out of it and made her see things the way they truly were; Justin was a player. Just like Evan.

Catherine closed the card and tucked it back into the box. Yeah. *Didn't mean it hadn't hurt.* She twisted a strand of hair. Six years was a long time in a life. A person changed. She certainly had. Hopefully not enough to become a killer, though. She was very happy to learn he was just another victim in the case. Vincent's concerns were valid if Muirfield was involved, but if there was still danger, she doubted Reynolds would let Justin walk around free, let alone visit her and the children.

She went into the hall bathroom and took a last critical look at her hair and makeup. The doorbell rang. She counted to three before walking to the door and opening it.

"Oh, my God. You're as radiantly beautiful now as you were then. Hi, Cath."

Catherine's dimples appeared and she leaned in to embrace him. "Hello, Justin. Long time, no see."

"Too long. Ow. Sorry. The arm's still sore."

She immediately pulled back, but he only let her go so far, grabbing for her hand. "I'm fine. They say I was very lucky. It's just a little tender yet. And you know me; I'm such a baby when it comes to pain."

She didn't remember that at all about him. "Come in. Come in."

He stepped into the front hall and took a cursory glance around before meeting her eyes again. "When they told me you were the detective handling the case and taking care of my children, I couldn't believe it. Wow. Let me look at you." He held her at arm's length. "Catherine still-Chandler. Why on earth hasn't some lucky guy snapped you up by now? You haven't changed a bit."

Catherine self-consciously pulled a stray hair away from her face. "You haven't changed much, either. Still the charmer." The thought cut a little deep, but she tamped it down.

When he continued to study her, she broke eye contact, embarrassed. "The children can't wait to see you. I put a movie on for them in the other room. I wanted to be able to greet you privately first. I'm so sorry about Anna, Justin. When I saw your names.."

"Yes. Tragic, isn't it?"

The off-handed way he said it seemed odd, but then again, people dealt with tragedy in many ways, she knew very well. Some people took a long time to digest it. Deciding enough was said on that for now, she moved on. "Let me just go get them. I have dinner nearly ready. I thought they'd enjoy a meal together with you."

"Sounds wonderful. That hospital food had me begging for a home cooked meal. I think it's part of their rehabilitation plan - motivate the patients to get well by providing inadequate and unappetizing food until they're screaming to be let out. It's very effective." He took a look around the apartment as she went to the back room, but within seconds the two screaming children came racing out to greet him. He squatted down so that he could embrace them both without lifting them, carefully maneuvering his injured arm away from their tiny, flailing hands.

Catherine watched, a sad smile blooming on her face. They obviously adored him and were thrilled to see their daddy again, but this was bitter sweet. She gave them a few private moments and went into the kitchen to check on the roast. As she did, she heard Leo ask about his mother. Justin gave the evasive answer that she was gone and he wasn't sure when she was coming back.

"Wow. Stunningly beautiful, and she can cook, too. I don't remember you being able to do this when we dated." He took another sip of wine, then placed the glass back onto the table.

Catherine flushed at the back-handed compliment. "I've learned a few things over the years, but I seem to recall you wanting to go out every night. You didn't like to eat in."

"That's because I wanted to show you off. But had I known what I could get, I wouldn't have been so hasty."

He held her gaze a little too long and she again had to look away. "Tell me—tell me about your life, Justin. What have you been doing? Are you still with that cyber-security firm—Branson, Burns—?"

He nodded. "—And Mallory, now. Yep, still there, although I run a special research section by myself these days."

"Wow. That's wonderful."

"They let me play with computers; I solve their mysteries," he added with a laugh. "You know me. I'm never satisfied with surface answers. I need to dig, dig, dig."

It had made him the brilliant code breaker that he was. "Special projects, hmmm. I bet you've got the ear of all the covert operations leaders in the country."

"A few," he said, and leaned back in his chair, full and satisfied.

The children had left the table to finish the end of their movie.

"Look at us. What a cozy, domestic scene we make."

That was an odd comment from a man who'd just lost his wife. Catherine squinted at him. He'd changed, as much as he tried to deny it. Perhaps only in little ways, but it was there.

"Whatever happened to us?" he asked, continuing to look at her with those dark, piercing eyes.

The question put her off kilter. "I think we outgrew each other, remember?" That wasn't exactly her recollection, but it was a safer tact than the truth.

"You know, I never got over you."

"What?"

"I mean, your 'mystery.'"

Catherine didn't consider herself terribly mysterious, especially in relationships. At least at that time in her life. She was so 'out there' with her feelings that some of her boyfriends were put off by it. And one of the reasons she'd assumed Justin had lost interest.

"Your little episode with 'the beast' in the woods, remember?"

Chapter 3

Catherine stared at Justin. She forgot that she'd told him about her mother's murder and the beast that had saved her so long ago. Her heart leapt to her throat. Was that what had put him on Muirfield's radar?

"You know how I love a good riddle, Cath. And that was one of the biggest I'd ever heard. It still intrigues me."

She shuddered inwardly but put on what she hoped was a bored expression. "Oh, that. You know, I probably never should have mentioned it. So embarrassing. After five years of therapy," she said, "I realized the bump on my head was responsible for most of what I thought I saw that night. I don't even think about it anymore."

"*Seriously?* That event had a major impact on your life, Cath. I mean, you changed directions in your career as a result. Personally," he leaned toward her over the table, "I think those psychologists were wrong to make you think it wasn't real. I always believed you. In fact, I took it on as a little pet project—did some digging of my own. You'd be surprised at what I've discovered."

Catherine's heart rate increased exponentially. She was extremely thankful Vincent wasn't there to notice. "Yes, well. You know, I've moved on from that." She waved away his concern and prayed she sounded casually indifferent. "I'm not really interested in churning it all up again." *Especially now that Muirfield might be involved.* Things were becoming much clearer. She hated to think where all his research had led—obviously to his wife's murder. "In fact, I don't think it's such a good idea to look into it anymore. I mean, I'm an NYPD cop. You're a high profile analyst. It doesn't exactly look good on a resume, you know? Kind of right up there with UFOs and chasing Bigfoot. Believe me, I had my fill of those types of jokes."

"I guess I can understand that, but . . . so you just let it go?" His eyes revealed his bafflement. "Intriguing."

She hoped it wasn't. She fished around for a safer subject before he asked any more probing questions on that front. "Hey, did I tell you my father re-married last year?"

Justin hesitated, reluctant to let the subject drop. "Thomas? But that's wonderful. Your dad was a really great guy."

"Yeah. Except my new step-mom, you see, is only a few years older than me. Isn't that crazy?" She laughed, but it sounded hollow. After initially uncomfortable with Brooke, she was happy to say they'd bonded and were now good friends.

"That *is* crazy, yeah," he agreed. "But kind of awesome. Good for your dad. And didn't you have a younger sister or something? What was her name?"

Heather would *not* be pleased that Justin had forgotten her name. She'd practically swooned over him and made a fool of herself the whole time they dated.

"Heather. Yeah. She's doing well. All grown up now. She has a roommate and lives uptown. She lived here for a while with me, but . . . things didn't work out." It might make things easier for Vincent to come over, but she missed her sister's company.

He looked around the spacious apartment. "Kind of lonely here all by yourself, now, huh?"

What did *that* mean? Of course, she wasn't as lonely as she might appear. She spared a thought for Vincent and was very glad she had convinced him not to hang around. She'd have no doubt found scratch marks on the brick exterior after this evening's cozy little visit.

"Well."

"Well. So, if it's not too difficult to talk about, tell me how you and your wife met. I mean, if you don't mind my asking." Much safer subject.

"Oh, Anna?"

Catherine frowned. *Was there another?*

"Uh, well, she was an analyst in the firm. We met on a project. She was this stunning blonde, and you know me—"

"Blonde?"

"That's right. I forgot you saw the body."

Ouch. Very odd way of talking about his deceased wife!

"I made her dye it. I've always had an affinity for brunettes, as you well know." The look he leveled at her made her stand right up.

"Wow. Look at the time. It's getting late and I really should put the kids—your kids—to bed. Why don't you go say good-bye to them?"

The odd look he gave her said he got the clue. "Sure. I'll . . . be right back."

Catherine paced until he returned.

"They're all yours. I, uh, I'll come by again tomorrow, if that's okay? I'm having some clean-up work done on the house the day after, but then I should be able to pick them up and take them home. I can't thank you enough, Catherine, for taking such good care of them."

"It was my pleasure, Justin." As soon as she said it, she realized how true it was. The children were precious and she'd miss them terribly when they left.

"Until tomorrow night, then."

"Until tomorrow."

Catherine had no sooner tucked the children into bed and turned off the light than she heard a soft rapping on the porch door. Vincent.

"Hey. All clear?"

"Hi." She gave him an answering smile. "Did you just get here or what, because your timing is almost perfect."

"Uh, I've been here a while, actually."

Her eyes narrowed. "What does 'a while' mean? Because I thought we agreed you'd let me handle this. Alone. Vincent, you don't have any reason to spy."

"I wasn't spying, Catherine. I just didn't feel comfortable with him hanging around you and the children."

"*His* children." She led him further into the room. Trying not to let her defenses go up, she reminded herself that his intuitions were usually spot-on. "What is it? What are you sensing?"

"Something isn't right with him."

"Yes, well, he did just endure a horrific nightmare in which his wife was murdered before his very eyes and he was attacked. That tends to unbalance a person just a little."

"It's more than that."

"Vincent, you don't even know Justin. *I* do. There was nothing suspicious about him in the least." Despite her own misgivings, she had to believe that. "In fact, I think you're way out of line to even suggest it."

Vincent's eyebrows went up. "'Way out of line'? You're entertaining an old boyfriend for dinner—"

That struck a bad chord with her. "I wasn't *entertaining* him—"

"—someone we know nothing about. Even you agreed there are reasons to think Muirfield may be involved in this. And Reynolds. It's my job to protect you—and the children. Don't tell me I'm out of line."

Catherine clamped down on her jaw. "You know, you're right. I can't tell you anything." She walked to the kitchen and he followed her.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means," she placed her hands firmly on the counter and turned to face him, "no matter what I say, you always end up doing what you want. I specifically asked you not to spy on my dinner with Justin tonight and here you are. You did it anyway. You couldn't trust me for one evening!"

"Catherine, it isn't a matter of trust—"

"You know, it's been a really long day." She didn't want to hear his excuses. "I think I'm going to call it a night. The kids are already in bed and I think I'll head there, too."

"So, . . . you're telling me to go?"

Instead of answering, Catherine just leveled her gaze at him.

Clear enough. Vincent clamped his jaw together, turned around and left the same way he came.

Catherine dropped her face into her hands. She was too tired for this.

###

"Whoa. Why are you back so soon?" JT looked up from the table and his chemistry notes as Vincent came through the back door. "I thought you'd be spending the night at Catherine's again—your 'home away from home.'"

"Yeah, well, tonight she told me to get lost."

JT's head sprung up. "What? You had another fight? Again?"

That was a bit redundant, even for JT. Vincent dropped his jacket onto the back of a chair. "She isn't an easy woman to protect."

"Oh. She had that other guy over tonight, didn't she? What happened? You know she's crazy about you, Dude. I don't think you have anything to worry about."

If only he could believe that. "I don't know, JT. I tried to be honest with her. I don't trust him. I know he's been through a lot, but . . . there are too many unanswered questions, and I just didn't feel comfortable leaving her alone with him."

"And I'm guessing Catherine didn't take too well to your babysitting her with an old flame."

"I wasn't babysitting."

JT shrugged. "Call it what you want, but Catherine's a big girl. If she says she can handle things, then she probably can. I mean, it's not like he made a pass at her or anything . . . is it?"

"Normally, I would agree. And no, he didn't make a pass. Yet. I wasn't thrilled with the looks he was giving her, but . . . I don't know. There's just something not right about him."

"He just experienced a horrific ordeal. It takes time to adjust after that."

"That's what Catherine said."

JT spread his arms. "Then there you have it. Problem solved. I'd give her some space on this one, Big Guy. The last thing you need is to come off like the jealous lover. Women don't like it."

Vincent shook his head. Sometimes his best buddy sounded as if he totally understood women, even though most of JT's 'first-hand knowledge' came from the internet. Truth was, he didn't really care if Catherine didn't like it. He wasn't going to allow her to be hurt just because of pride.

###

The next evening, Catherine checked the porch for the third time before the clock struck seven and Justin was due to arrive. The fire escape, too. No sign of Vincent. Good. He'd have to learn to trust her if he wanted them to move forward in their relationship. Partnerships were all about trust.

She made a final sweep of the living room, ensuring everything was in place. The children sat quietly on the floor, coloring together. Leo was doing a good job staying within the lines, but Evangeline's page resembled more of a modern art piece, all scribbly lines and splashes of color, but it was sweet. She liked the bright colors. When the door finally buzzed, Catherine jumped.

Justin greeted her with a bottle of wine. The label was one she recognized from the past. "Still your favorite, right?"

Catherine laughed. "You did not have to do that."

"Of course I did," he said, stepping inside the apartment. "Hey, kiddos." Leo rushed to him and Justin once more squatted down to his level to embrace him.

"How's the arm feeling?" Catherine asked.

"Better now that I'm on stronger meds. They make me a little groggy, though. I may just fall asleep on you after dinner."

Another totally awkward thing for him to say. "Okay. Well. Dinner is ready. Why don't you have a seat at the table? I think the children are starving. I'll just get a couple of glasses for the wine." She picked up Evangeline and used a soft cloth belt to tie her into a chair piled with pillows. Leo sat on a big boy chair next to his father.

Justin watched her. "You know, kids are extremely perceptive, Cath. They know when they can trust someone." He nodded toward the baby. "She accepts you as if you were her mother. That's incredible."

Catherine looked up, surprised. "I imagine she would feel the same way toward anyone caring for her right now. All it takes is a little love and attention."

"No. It's more than that."

She didn't have any idea what to say to that. Thankfully, he let it drop and she breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps Vincent was right; something was different. Or perhaps it was just his pain meds.

Dinner was eaten in relative quiet. That was fine with her. Justin sighed when he was finished and leveled his gaze on her. "They tell me you're a real powerhouse around the precinct."

"Oh? I don't know about that."

"It's a tough job. I'm glad you're so successful at it."

"Yes, well, I have some help in that department." When he raised his eyebrows she added, "I have a pretty good partner." She could mean Tess or Vincent, of course, but let him draw his own conclusions.

"Ah. I think I met said partner. Tall, thin, gorgeous? Tess was her name, right? What a pair you two make. Kind of makes a man wish he was a criminal." He laughed, but when she didn't laugh with him he added, "I'm joking."

"As I recall, years ago you weren't real keen on the idea of me being a cop."

"Now, that's not true, Cath. I just didn't think you were strong enough, emotionally, for the job. I guess you proved me wrong."

Catherine frowned. Had he thought her so weak back then? She was about to ask him just what he meant when he suddenly turned toward the porch. "What was that?"

"Did—did you hear something?"

"A noise. Sounded like it was coming from the porch." He started to get up but she put out a hand. "No. I'll get it. Cop, remember? I'm sure it's nothing. Noise travels up from the street all the time. And I have some very noisy neighbors," she added, getting up and moving toward the door. "I'll check it out." She waited until he sat back down, then pulled her gun out of the harness she'd left on the back of the sofa with her jacket.

She found Vincent around the corner, just coming over the railing. "I thought we agreed you were going to give me some space tonight," she whispered furiously.

"I'm not here to listen in, Catherine, just to make sure you're safe."

Didn't mean he couldn't hear every single word.

He looked pointedly at the gun trained on him. She lowered it to her side.

"Catherine?" Justin called from inside the apartment.

"Everything's fine, Justin," she called back. "I'll be right there. Just a . . . a loose piece of drain pipe rattling in the wind." She cringed. That sounded really lame. And false. Vincent reached up and loosened it just for effect.

"Thank you, but—" She leveled her gaze at him.

He pressed his lips together and let out a frustrated breath. "But you want me to leave. Fine."

"Fine."

Almost as soon as he said it, Justin turned the knob on the porch door and pushed it open. Vincent heard him approach and jumped over the side before he came around the corner.

Catherine belatedly realized she still had her gun out. She tucked it inside her belt.

"Everything all right? You said something about the wind—?"

She pointed to the loose drain pipe. "Yeah, must have been a freak gust or something. Or an animal." The night was perfectly calm. She sneaked a quick look over the railing to the sidewalk below. No sign of Vincent.

"Hmmm. Strange."

"Very. Let's go back inside." She locked the door behind them and pulled the shade down on the window just in case.

"That's kind of hot, you know?" Justin said as she put the gun back into the holster.

"Excuse me?"

"You, with your gun out and all tough-guy like."

"I . . . thought you didn't like guns."

"I don't, but I think I could get used to it."

She frowned. "Why would you *want* to?"

Justin just looked at her like she should know. Unfortunately, she did. "You know, it's been another really long day and I'm kind of beat."

"Ah." He got the message. "Well, I'm still feeling the effects of this pain killer, so I guess I should be getting on my way. Uh, thanks for the dinner. Again."

"And thank you for bringing the wine."

"No problem. I'll . . . call you tomorrow to let you know when I'll be coming by for the kids."

"Sounds good." She followed him to the door after he said good-night to the children, and latched it after he left.

Catherine fixed Evangeline her bottle with the medicine in it and put the kids to bed. She jumped as she caught Vincent's reflection in the hallway mirror. She turned around and faced him.

"How long is this going to go on, Catherine? I mean, his children are living with you, calling you Mommy, and now he's coming by for dinner each night."

"This isn't about a social call and you know it. I am just doing my job—"

"As his replacement wife."

She frowned. "I'm not doing anything as his *wife*."

Silence greeted that pronouncement. Finally, he looked around the room. "Do you want me to stay?"

"Of course you can stay."

That wasn't exactly an invitation, but he'd take what he could get.

"But only if it's safe for you. I don't want you anywhere near Muirfield's radar again, and Reynolds seems to think there's some connection."

"You let me worry about that."

He stayed, but he wasn't happy with her, nor she with him.

Long after he fell asleep, Catherine lay facing him in the bed, not touching. It was the first time they'd slept together that he hadn't made love to her. Exhausted, she finally fell asleep a few hours before dawn. By morning's light Vincent was gone.

Chapter 4

The next day was easier, thankfully. Evangeline was feeling better and back to her normal, giggly self. Catherine took the children to the roof for a while to give them some time in the sun, but she didn't dare take them out into the public with so many unanswered questions and a killer still on the loose.

Justin called to say he couldn't make dinner and to tell the kids he was sorry. Hopefully, it would be the last day and night for her with this duty. She felt relieved that she wouldn't have to do dinner with him again, but saddened she wouldn't have the children's company for very much longer. They were really growing on her. But while she would miss them, she was anxious to get back to her normal routine, the precinct, and grown-up conversations.

Vincent kept his word and stayed away. She knew he wasn't happy with her, but she wasn't happy with him either. They'd have to work it out later when all of this was over. Hopefully, they could.

Numerous times during the day, Leo asked where 'Vissent' was. She could only imagine. He didn't come that evening.

Close to midnight, she was awakened by a pounding at the door. Not Vincent's normal method of getting her attention, but he was probably still angry. She quickly threw a robe on over the silk teddy she wore to bed 'just in case' and met him at the door.

Justin pushed right in.

"Justin? What are you doing here?"

He held up an open bottle and looked around the apartment. "The kids are asleep, right?"

"Of course they are. It's," she checked her watch, "it's almost midnight. I wasn't expecting you."

"I know. I'm sorry. I wanted to catch you alone."

Okay, now he was starting to scare her. "Justin, are you still taking those pain meds?" Maybe they were responsible for his erratic behavior. "Because you shouldn't be here right now. This is not an appropriate time for a visit."

"Oh, come on, Cath. I just wanted to have one drink with you, okay? It's . . . it's Anna's birthday and the house is like a tomb, all right? I couldn't stay there another second. I fell asleep on the couch and dreamt of her."

His words were slightly slurred. "Oh, Justin." Catherine frowned in sympathy. What a wretched set of events this was. And to have remembered his wife's birthday, of all things—it was too much. She wasn't sure drinking was such a wise idea, but she relented. "Come on in, then. *One drink*. Then you need to go home and sleep this off."

"I'll get the glasses," he offered. While he fiddled in the kitchen, she secured her robe more tightly around her waist and sat down to wait at the kitchen table, her own head still fuzzy from sleep. She spared a thought for Vincent—so thankful he had decided not to stay or there would have been hell to pay for this little visit. And there wouldn't be much she could do to placate him about it.

Justin placed a half-full glass of the red wine in front of her and sat down on the opposite side of the table. "I just . . . I want to thank you—for all you've done. You don't know how it's helped to have someone who really knows me—"

"You don't need to thank me, Justin. I'm just doing my job."

"It may have started out that way, but . . . if I'd had to deal with the children with everything else going on, I'd be going insane right about now. So. A toast. To a fresh start and a brighter future."

She thought this was about Anna. Nevertheless, she clinked her glass against his. "For all of us."

They both sipped the wine. As soon as she did, she knew something was wrong. It had a slightly bitter taste, different from the previous night. Almost instantly her eyes felt heavy. "What have you—" She pushed up from the table, her arms waving at thin air. Too late.

Justin came around the table and caught her before she slid to the floor. Her eyes were wide open but she couldn't blink.

"I know you can hear me," he whispered. "I used this once on Anna and it's quite effective. But you'll be fine, honey. It numbs the motor skills for a brief time, but not the brain. That's the girl. Just breathe. You're fine, see? It's just . . . I knew you wouldn't cooperate even if I asked you nicely. And you with your crazy ninja skills, well . . ."

He could see a reaction in her eyes. They were speaking volumes, but her mouth remained mute. He brushed a lock of hair away from her face. Then, with his good arm, he scooped her up and held her against him. "See? You're okay. No, don't look at me that way, Cath. You and I had something special once. Let's just remember that tonight."

As he dragged her along to the smaller bedroom, he continued his monologue. "Anna and I, we never had the same spark, you know? In fact, we hadn't been close for years. I married her because it was the right thing to do. She was the boss's daughter, you see. It made good career sense. But I didn't trust her. Oh, she tried to please me. And the children were an unexpected blessing. But she and I . . . well, I told you I thought she was trying to poison me, didn't I? I couldn't let her do that. She was after my research. They told me to be careful, but she wouldn't stay away. She wouldn't *obey* me."

So he *had* gone to Muirfield. Catherine inwardly cringed at the idea of his wife poisoning him. Could that be true? At this point, it hardly mattered.

"But this is our chance to make everything right again. You and I—we can start over. You would never have treated me that way. And, well, the children already love you, and I . . . I never got over you." As he laid her gently on the bed covers, he smoothed the hair away from her face. "So beautiful."

He kissed her cheek, her chin, her forehead. Finally, he touched his lips to hers. "Not the same, I know. But I needed to get this out of the way first. I needed to claim you. Once you're mine, it will be better, you'll see."

He slid a hand inside her robe and discovered the soft, sleek texture of the purple, jewel-toned teddy she wore. He looked up at her in surprise. "You're everyday nightwear, Cath? Delightful, but—wait . . ." he frowned. "Were you expecting someone? Because Leo mentioned some guy had been here. You're not involved with anyone, are you, because that would be bad. I mean, it doesn't fit in with my plan."

###

Vincent paced in his room. He'd been unable to fall asleep. He'd left Catherine yesterday morning on a bad note. He hadn't even said good-bye. What if she'd needed him again today? The torturous night in her bed, the two of them not touching, had been so wrong. He felt ashamed of his anger. Torn between wanting to be with her and smooth over their hard feelings and trying to do what she asked and stay away was driving him out of his mind.

Finally, he grabbed his jacket off the hook. They were going to resolve this tonight, whatever it took. Nothing was worth this.

###

Catherine was terrifyingly aware of what was happening but powerless to stop it. Her arms and legs, even her tongue, were completely useless. She thought of the children in the other bedroom. What if Leo got up to go potty in the night and, hearing a noise, went looking for her and "Vissent?" He wouldn't understand what was going on.

She tried to fight the effects of the drug, but wasn't making much headway. Justin was kissing her. Her body wasn't numb, just unresponsive. She could feel everything he was doing to her. And right now he was sliding off her night clothes and exposing her body to his over-stimulated gaze.

She tried to close her eyes, but couldn't. *Vincent*. Not only was she afraid he wouldn't come and save her, now she was terrified he would. This couldn't be happening. How could she have been so stupid? She was a cop! And she was responsible for those children. She had to do something to stop this before it went any further. Reaching inside herself, she pushed through the drug-induced paralysis and managed to move her arm the slightest bit. Justin didn't notice, he was so consumed with kissing her.

A small, battery operated alarm clock was the only thing within reach. It would have to do. With a grunt of exertion, she grabbed and awkwardly slammed it into his injured arm. He howled with pain. His shocked expression then turned to rage. She could see it coming but couldn't even turn away. He back-handed her so hard she would have gone off the side of the bed if it weren't for the fact that he'd trapped her beneath him with his weight on her open robe.

Catherine heard the growl only a split second before Vincent burst into the spare bedroom, amber eyes glowing bright in the darkened room. Justin was grabbed and tossed away from her like a rag doll and in the next second pinned up against the wall, a veined and razor sharp claw at this throat.

Catherine found her voice, then, out of sheer necessity. "Vincent! The children!" She could hear the kids stirring, even noises coming from the adjacent apartment, no doubt because of all the racket they were making.

"Whoa." Despite the choke hold on his throat, Justin found his own voice, although he seemed more fascinated than afraid. The morphine, or whatever it was he'd taken, had completely removed any instinct of self-preservation. "Where did *you* come from? My God, Catherine, what have you gotten yourself into, a relationship with The Hulk? Wait. You're *him*."

Catherine could see Vincent trembling with the effort it took to hold back his rage. Her voice sounded strange to herself, but she forced the words passed her lips. "Now is not a good time to open your mouth, Justin. Believe me."

"Wow," he said, still fascinated by the creature. "Look at those eyes." Then he turned to her. "*Look at his eyes!*"

If only he realized the deadly threat behind those eyes and how close he was to losing his life! Clearly, she had been wrong. Justin knew much more than he'd let on. And Reynolds had been right.

She staggered to her feet and pulled her extra sidearm out of the drawer by the bed. She lifted it up with shaking hands. Her aim would be off, but at such close range, it hardly mattered. "Justin, don't move. And don't speak."

Instead of being afraid, Justin laughed against the clawed hand encircling his throat. "I see it but I don't believe it. You're a cop, for God's sake!"

"A cop with a gun pointed at your head right now." Her arm wasn't steady, but she could do what she had to. Unfortunately, Justin wasn't affected. Instead, he studied the veined face in front of him.

"Oh, you're *amazing*."

When Vincent growled low, she knew she only had seconds. "Justin, you're high on meds. You need to calm down and not make any fast moves." She turned to Vincent. "Vincent, *please*. He isn't worth it. Listen to me. The children. Think of the children. Leo. Evangeline. Please don't do this. I'm okay. This—this is what Reynolds wanted all along, don't you see? For you to kill Justin. Don't give him the satisfaction."

It all made a horrible kind of sense now. Vincent would take Justin out and that would give Reynolds more power over him because he'd be able to blackmail him with the evidence. Two birds with one stone.

There was pounding at the door. The neighbor, a blue collar worker in his fifties, was shouting that he'd called 9-1-1 and the police were on their way. Great. She had only seconds to talk Vincent down and then who knew how she'd explain it all.

Just as he had with Ray Sheckman, Vincent managed to control his rage, and slowly pulled himself back from the edge. Catherine was right. He couldn't do this to the children—kill their father in front of their eyes, or even the next room. He sensed Leo's strengthening awareness and knew the child was on the verge of coming to investigate. Taking one step back, he backhanded Mallory and let him fall to the floor.

He hesitated, afraid to turn and look at her. Afraid of what he'd see. When he'd first come into the room and realized what was happening, he knew she wasn't a willing participant, and the murderous frenzy all but consumed him. But had he been too late? He didn't smell blood; that was a good thing.

"I'm okay," Catherine said again, shakily trying to tie the robe closed around her naked body. "I'm okay. Thank you. Now go—before they get here."

It went against everything he was to turn and run, but she was right. For her sake, and the children's, he left the way he came.

###

Catherine heard Tess's voice in the hallway just before someone forcibly kicked in her apartment door. She trained her gun on Justin just as they rushed the room. Tess ran over to her.

"I couldn't believe it when I heard your building and apartment number over the com! I came as fast as I could."

"I'm fine, Tess."

"What happened?" Tess shot a look at Justin. He was coming to and starting to mumble about 'him' and 'the beast.'

"Shut him up, please," Catherine begged.

"Gladly." Tess walked over to where Mallory sat crumpled on the floor and knocked him out again.

Catherine heard Leo's high-pitched call just then. She tried to go to him, but her legs wouldn't cooperate. Tess glanced around the room, saw the torn nightwear on the floor and put things together. "I'm calling an ambulance." She pulled out her cell.

"No, Tess. I'll be okay. I need to go to the children."

Tess put a hand on her shoulder. "Stay put. I'll see to them. And you're *not* okay. Did he *drug* you?" Needing no confirmation of that with the evidence before her eyes, she whispered, "*Where the hell was Vincent?*"

"Tess, this isn't his fault. He can't be everywhere at once. We had a fight. I—I pushed him away. Bad timing, I know. He came, anyway, and saved me. Again. I don't know how he knew, but he came. I sent him away right before you got here."

"I guess we should be thankful Justin isn't in tiny little pieces?"

"Very." Catherine sighed and sagged back to the bed, exhausted with the effort of doing anything at all. "Please—the children. I don't want them to see me like this."

"I got it." Tess started in the direction of the master bedroom. "And you're *going* to the hospital."

In the end, Catherine didn't have the strength to argue. As a unit of uniformed officers came in and took care of Justin, Tess directed one to see to the children, then hovered by Catherine's side.

Almost simultaneously, they both noticed the bruise marks on Justin's neck where Vincent had started to choke him. Thankfully, there were no scratches, but there would be DNA. The women turned their gazes to one another. "And tell Reynolds to fix this," Catherine said angrily. "Tell him, if he doesn't, I'm digging up Cameryn Teague. He'll know exactly what I'm talking about."

The med unit arrived. Two technicians took her vitals then lifted her to the gurney. "And call him for me please? Tess. Tell him I'm *fine*. We're all fine." The *him* being Vincent, of course. Tess understood.

###

Catherine glanced around the sterile hospital room. In the darkened space, the muted colors ran together and matched her mood. As tired as she was, sleep evaded her. After giving her a thorough checkup, the emergency staff had hooked her up to an IV to flush the drug out of her system faster, then moved her to a private room. Now the first rays of morning light were working their way into the room through the slatted blinds of the window overlooking the parking lot.

When the door opened, she glanced up, each time expecting Vincent but hoping he wouldn't be foolhardy enough to show up in such a public place again. This time she was unpleasantly surprised. *Reynolds*.

"Detective. I'm glad to see you're all right."

Catherine eyed him and turned her head away, uncomfortable with the private visit but unable to mask her disgust. "No thanks to *you*."

Michael Reynolds pulled off his hat with a sigh and approached the bed. "Mallory was becoming unpredictable, but we didn't realize just how far off the cliff he had flown."

She slowly turned her head back toward him. "Is that the royal 'we'?"

"I have a lot of influence, daughter, but I'm sure you realize I don't work alone."

She ground her teeth together. She'd had plenty of time, now, to consider all the ramifications of what had just occurred, and why. She chafed at being reminded of their biological connection, and certainly didn't want to know any more about his 'operation' than she had to. "You used me as *bait*."

"It was a calculated risk," he said, acknowledging that. "Sometimes brilliant minds crack. Considering the influence he had in high places, action had to be taken. The situation was getting dangerous."

"Especially for his *wife*," Catherine ground out. "Or was she a Muirfield plant like he suspected?"

Reynolds shook his head. "She was an innocent. I'm not sure why she was targeted, but I suspect Mallory had a hand in that. He was suspicious of her."

"And then they tried to off him, too? Just for being curious?" It killed the cat and a whole lot more.

He didn't answer, and she didn't need him to. It was Muirfield's way. Cover all the tracks.

Catherine felt a sharp pang of anguish over Anna Mallory. The children lost their mother for no reason at all. "Doesn't explain why you felt the need to involve me—and Vincent."

"I knew you had a history. Mallory had become obsessed and you played a role in that. This wasn't a ploy to trap Keller, Catherine," he said without inflection.

She scooted up to more of a sitting position. How much he knew about her life didn't bear thinking about. "Tell me something I'll believe."

"I guess you'll believe what you want, but that's the truth." He pulled over a chair and sank down heavily into it. "You don't approve of my methods and I don't expect you to, but I'm not the monster you think I am."

"No. You just tried to kill Vincent after he revealed you to me."

He frowned. The incident at the farm had not gone well, to say the least; a gross miscalculation on his part. "I can't have operatives who don't respect me and are not willing to obey my orders. Their lives—and yours—may one day depend on it."

"So all of that was . . . what? An *object lesson*?"

"One I'll admit did not go well." He shrugged. "That's the way it happens. Some you win, some you lose."

"Vincent's life is not a game! Not to him, and certainly not to me."

"A position you've made abundantly clear. Listen," he leaned in close and she suddenly realized he had green eyes just like hers. "I don't want to see you hurt, and believe it or not that includes your heart. I can't say your involvement with Keller pleases me. It doesn't. But I'm learning to accept it. How I operate won't always meet with your approval, but I'd never intentionally hurt you or another innocent person, especially children. I hope you understand that."

"Vincent was innocent before Muirfield got their hands on him," she acidly pointed out.

"A fact I cannot change. And a lot has happened since. But I see this is an argument I'm not going to win, and frankly, I don't want to fight with you anymore."

"Good. That makes two of us."

He stood. "They should be releasing you in a little while. I'll have Child Custody Services pick up the children tomorrow morning, if that's okay. After that, I'd like you to consider taking a few days off—paid vacation—on me. I'll even . . . arrange for Keller to be available, too, if that's what you want."

Catherine stared. That was a concession she certainly hadn't expected. "That would be great."

"Fine."

"Fine."

###

Waiting to go to Catherine was the hardest thing he'd ever done. Vincent had paced his bedroom, cell phone in hand. He didn't know how far the situation had gone before he'd arrived and pulled Mallory off her. He couldn't even think about it. He only knew he'd never felt such fear and rage at one time. It took an effort, even now, to recall how she looked and keep from tearing his room apart. Besides the rather negative reaction JT would have to him doing such a thing, he needed control right now, above all. He rubbed his face with his hands and considered doing another round of pushups. Anything to keep from going insane.

Tess had called not long after he'd left the apartment to tell him Catherine was okay and headed for the hospital to be checked out—just to be safe. From what he'd seen, she'd been drugged, so that was a good thing. He was glad to know they'd taken every precaution. But now he needed to see for himself that she was well.

When the phone buzzed, he jumped. It was Tess asking him to come.

"I'm on my way."

Little Leo met him at the door. "Hi, Vissent!"

Vincent scooped him up. "Hey, Leo."

"You mean, 'Buddy!'" The child laughed at his own joke, and it was an incredible relief to hear it. Whatever had occurred at the apartment after he left, they'd been able to keep the children isolated from it. "Where's Tess?"

"Putting Vanleen to bed."

"What about you? She letting you stay up?" Vincent rubbed a smudge off the child's rosy cheek.

"She said I could stay up 'till you came."

"Ah. I'm glad. I was hoping to see you, too."

"Where were you last night? Cathwin got sick and had to go to the hospital."

Vincent's eyes met Tess's over Leo's head as she returned from the back bedroom.

"Vincent was working, remember, Leo? That's why officer Bailey had to come for a little while." To Vincent Tess said, "Okay, I got the baby back down, but I don't know if she'll stay there. She had this little puckery look on her face. *God*. I am so not cut out for this. I seriously don't know how Cat did it for four whole days."

"I'll see to Evangeline."

"Good. And this one," indicating Leo, "is all yours. He wanted to stay up until you got here and wouldn't take no for an answer. Once he started giving me those puppy-dog eyes, I couldn't say no."

"It's okay, Tess. I've got it covered."

"They should be releasing Cat tomorrow sometime. Soon as I get the call, I'll pick her up and bring her back here."

###

After putting Leo down a little while later, Vincent went to the spare bedroom and grabbed a few hours of sleep himself. In the morning, he fixed the children breakfast. When the door softly clicked open in the early afternoon, he was sitting cross-legged on the floor, Evangeline on his shoulders, her bottle dangling down over one of his eyes, and Leo in front of him carefully drawing another tic-tac-toe game onto a pad of paper. A large picture book lay on the floor next to the boy.

The children squealed when they saw Catherine and ran to greet her. Vincent hung back, watchful. She looked the same. Hale. It was all he could ask for.

Catherine squatted down and greeted each child independently. Then she picked Evangeline up and took Leo by the hand.

"They wouldn't go down until you got here," Vincent explained, his eyes saying he didn't blame them, and traveling the length of her more than once, a dozen questions in his glance. Then he let her lead them back to the bedroom by herself for their nap time and reassure them she was well. When she didn't come out after a long time, he peeked in. Catherine sat on the edge of the bed holding Leo's hand. His eyes were closed. She put a finger to her lips then carefully extracted her hand. Leo must have insisted she hold his hand until he fell asleep. The look Catherine turned on Vincent said it all.

When she finally made it outside the door, she went right into his arms. He closed his eyes to the feel of her. Ah, God, he needed this! Moments later he leaned away and cradled her face in his palm. There was a darkening bruise on her left cheek she'd made a good effort to cover up, but he could still see it. He kissed her there once, then on her lips, her jaw, her neck. That she accepted his touch was a very good sign. Then in one swift movement, he looped his arm under her legs and lifted her.

Carrying her back to the sofa where he and the kids had been, he cradled her in his lap.

"So Reynolds wanted me to kill Justin?" he asked, a little while later.

"I don't know. It's possible. That's my working theory, anyway. Knowing Reynolds, we may never learn the whole story. But I think it was obvious he was using Justin as a wedge between us."

"He did a pretty good job."

"No," she disagreed, putting a hand to his face. "We just had a bump. Besides, if he only knew how futile his efforts were, he'd have given up long ago."

"Perhaps I need to persuade him."

She shifted in his arms in order to face him fully. "I wish you wouldn't. We all know how that turned out the last time," meaning his imprisonment and the drug-induced adrenalin high from hell. "I don't want you confronting him again. Besides, he said he's starting to accept 'us' finally."

That was news to him.

When he started to speak, she ran a thumb across his lip then slid her fingers into his hair. They needed to discuss the other part. "You were right. Justin wasn't the same man I once knew. I was wrong. I should have listened to you instead of shutting you out. I'm so sorry."

Vincent rubbed the back of her other hand with his thumb. "Catherine, you didn't know. People change. And I know you can take care of yourself; it's just that . . . I don't want you to *have* to. You're my life. I couldn't live if something happened to you. I couldn't." He shuddered inwardly. "When I . . . saw him on top of you, I never felt so much rage and pain. I couldn't look at you. I was so ashamed for not getting there sooner, for letting my stupid pride . . . If he hurt you—"

"But he didn't! He didn't. Because you got there in time." She smoothed a hand down his beautiful scar. "And how were you to blame? I practically shoved you away."

There weren't answers, only questions. He gently guided her head to his shoulder, so grateful she was safe and in his arms again. "What will happen to the children now?"

Catherine closed her eyes in pain. "Child Protective Services is going to pick them up in the morning." She sighed, knowing there was nothing she could do to stop it. "They will be put into foster care, hopefully together."

It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. But life had stopped being fair a long time ago, for both of them.

While the children napped, he touched his lips to hers. When she didn't balk, he then carefully picked her up and took her to bed, loving her as gently as his body would allow, telling her in every way possible how much he loved her, and wiping away every trace of the attack the night before . . .

###

The following morning, the door buzzed shortly after they'd finished breakfast. Vincent went into the bedroom to get the children ready and say his good-byes. He could hear a somber Catherine speaking to the social worker. She came in moments later and escorted the children and their packed bags out.

"Who is 'Vissent?'" the woman asked, smiling, after passing Leo and Evangeline through the door to another person. "Leo seems quite taken with him." Leo had been babbling up a blue streak to the woman ever since she arrived. Catherine suspected it was his nerves coming out. She'd tried to reassure him with her eyes in every way possible that all would be well. If only she could be certain of that, herself.

Catherine's head jerked up. "Oh, just . . . an imaginary friend," she hedged. "He's been through a lot. I think it helped him cope."

The answer seemed to satisfy the woman who thanked her, nodded and finally left.

And just like that, they were gone.

Catherine stared at the closed door for a long moment, composing herself. When she turned, Vincent stepped out of the bedroom, the devastation on his face mirroring her own. "He called me Daddy—" His voice broke on the word and Catherine ran to him.

He pressed his face to hers just trying to breathe. "I want it," he whispered.

It was the closest she'd ever seen him come to crying and to acknowledging how deeply it cut to know they would never be parents. Catherine's tears started to flow, knowing how much it cost him to admit that.

"I know. Me, too." She placed her hands on either side of his face. "*Someday*," she said fiercely. It was a promise she had no way of keeping, but one she wouldn't allow them to give up on. Not after this. "I love you. I love you so much"

****The End****

© Windflwr

Disclaimer: I do not own *Beauty and the Beast*, its characters or images. They belong to the CW Network. This is a work of fan fiction.

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/wired4romance>