

Windflwr

## **BAtB Fanfiction - If Ever I Would Leave You**

### **Chapter 1**

Completely drained, Vincent finally rolled away from her, turning toward the window. Catherine already faced away from him in the opposite direction. It was always so difficult—that moment when he had to disengage from her. It took him long moments to adjust—for his breathing to slow, his heart to stop pounding, but most of all for the longing to ease. Parting was hard. His body screamed against it, his soul felt torn in two—but he knew it had to be done; if they touched, even in the smallest way, he wouldn't be able to keep his hands off her and would keep her awake the rest of the night. She needed her sleep. But that didn't mean it was easy to do. She was always so sweet about it, about asking to be let go. She would look at him, the drowsiness already heavy on her fine features, those slumberous eyes so full of love. Then she'd run her hand across his cheek, her thumb over his chin, and reach up to gently touch his lips with hers. It was their signal. She didn't want to leave him—she made that clear—but they had to part in order for her to get some rest. They'd gone much longer into the night than usual this time. But God help him, he couldn't resist her. He wanted so much more.

It hadn't been this way before—before she made her choice. No, the time prior to his kidnapping by Muirfield had been a time of discovery between them. It had been joyous, amazing, sometimes frantic, and always surprising. This was different—so much deeper—as if their hearts were as entwined as their limbs. One was an extension of the other. He sighed. They weren't together every night. He knew better than to monopolize her like that. And some mornings he left before dawn because that was the easier thing to do, but oh how he wished he didn't have to.

He didn't need sleep like she did, of course. He was as wide awake in the early hours as he was when they retired.

As he fought the separation, fought the tremendous pull he felt toward her and the unbelievably strong desire to hold her through the night and wake up with her in his arms, he breathed slowly in and out while lying still and listening to the gentle slowing of her heartbeat until it reached that deep, resonating point when she'd drift off into unconsciousness. It amazed him every time. In contrast, his senses were wide awake—tantalized by the fragrance of her hair, the sweet perfume of her skin, the musky warmth of the bedding that still billowed around him. It was agony at the same time as pure pleasure. He'd never fall asleep, himself, until she did, but waiting for it was slow torture.

Through the darkness he could see the snow fall outside the window. To pull his mind into submission, he concentrated on that, listening for the tiny 'pat' as each snowflake fell against the glass, ending its downward spiral there. The past few days the city had endured a devastating and dangerous storm. While he knew that, and the problems it caused, he couldn't help but be awed by the gentle silence it created. The streets were quiet. And then the thought came to him - snow was like grace. It made everything it touched beautiful and calm—even black and ugly things, the filth in the alleyways. It covered it all, just like Catherine's love and acceptance covered him.

*Pat. Pat. Pat.* The wind had died some time during the night and now the flakes fell heavy and wide against the pane, their lazy downward drift easy and peaceful. Catherine's heart still pounded, an odd contrast. After a few minutes, he realized it wasn't slowing down. He looked over at her in the dark. Her shoulders were shaking. What was this? Was she laughing? Teasing him? Oh, God.

"Catherine?"

When she didn't answer, Vincent rolled toward her and leaned up on one elbow and gently pulled her back over toward him. She was crying.

"What is it?" he asked, fearful now. "Did I *hurt* you?"

There were always moments in their coming together when he partially transformed. Despite everything, their melding had such a powerful effect on him he nearly always felt that rush, that elemental surge of power at some point—unable to hold it back. Because of Catherine's total trust and acceptance of every part of him, he allowed some small measure of his beast through—because that part of him loved her, too. But, except for the first days of his return, he'd always been able to remain in control, to keep from hurting her. That he would do it now frightened him to death.

"Sweetheart? What have I done?"

He reached an arm over her to switch on the lamp above the head board. She turned tear-filled eyes to him and reached once more for his cheek, shaking her head when she couldn't speak, assuring him she wasn't hurt. Perhaps she felt his distress, he didn't know, but she finally calmed down enough to speak. She pulled his face to hers, their noses pressed together. "Oh, Vincent, you don't know what you do to me."

He stared, unsure. "You're okay?"

She nodded. "Just overwhelmed. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you. I just couldn't hold it in."

He understood exactly what she meant and felt incredibly humbled by it. "No. Shhh." He soothed her with the gentle spread of his fingers in her hair. "I just didn't understand." At her expression, his own eyes filled. He knew that feeling of being overwhelmed very well. That she would feel the same way made him ache. What a precious gift she was!

He snaked his arms around her once more. The hell with sleeping. He'd find the restraint he needed to hold her all night long if it killed him. Some things were worth any amount of suffering. Snuggling her into the cradle of his chest, he rested his head against the silk of her hair. He'd stay awake all night if that's what it took.

She sighed her contentment then whispered, "Don't leave me."

He knew she meant not separating, but he felt her words much deeper. "Never. And don't you ever leave me, either."

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By morning they were snowed in. The roads, most of them anyway, were impassable despite the continuous drone of snowplows up and down the lanes in front of her apartment. New York City was going to be challenged this day. Jolted awake by her alarm clock, Catherine rose obediently. Vincent got to his feet as well, dressed, and headed to the kitchen to start the coffee.

"You need to check on JT," she told him from the bathroom.

"I'll make sure you get to work, first."

She peered out at the already busy streets clogged with as many pedestrians as cars. "Yeah, so not looking forward to that. Not that I have a choice."

Catherine listened to the weather forecast with a frown. The metropolitan area was slated to get dumped on throughout the day, despite having already received six inches of new snow in the last 24 hours. This was getting ridiculous.

"I'm going down to the garage to get you chained up."

She smiled and handed him the keys. That would give her a few extra minutes before she had to leave. Her police-issued chains would get her through the streets more easily than most, but traffic would still be a nightmare. "Have I told you today how wonderful you are?"

He paused in the hallway and turned toward her. "I think I need reminding. Here." He tapped his lips.

"So greedy," she teased and kissed him again.

"It's your own fault, you know," he shrugged. "You make me crazy."

He left her smiling.

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Catherine headed out not long after and Vincent left for the club. After stopping for coffee, as Tess's request, she took a turn past the club out of habit and found Vincent in the street helping a driver get away from the curb. She pulled in behind them and got out.

He waved to her.

"What are you doing? Playing the Good Samaritan?" she asked, watching his backside. Too bad it wasn't a summer rain. She could envision those muscular arms beneath his jacket straining with the effort--but what a sight to see. She sighed. The car finally got some traction and pulled away.

He shrugged and waved the driver off. "JT just left for class. I thought I'd make myself useful. This corner is turning out to be treacherous. People need help."

She reached up on her tip-toes to kiss him. "And you're the perfect person to do that."

Her warm breath surrounded them and he stayed in close. "Because I have to atone for my sins. And that's the third car stuck here this morning." He lifted her off her feet and onto the sidewalk where it was safer. Cars were shuffling by one after the other.

"No," she answered. "Because you have a good heart and a good, strong back."

He smiled and kissed her again. "You sure you have to go in today? I'm going to worry the entire time. The conditions are only going to get worse."

"Crime doesn't stop just because of the weather," she said. "You know, neither rain nor sleet nor snow—"

"—that's the mailman's creed."

"Same difference. Gotta a job to do, as you very well know."

"I just wish I could be with you. This heavy snowfall is creating havoc all over the city. JT's classes will probably be cancelled, but they hadn't called it before he had to leave. He's going to be ticked."

"And I thought the Christmas Day storm was bad. This is turning out to be ten times worse. Thankfully, my chains are doing the trick, thanks to you. But baby, it's cold outside."

“You know,” he pulled her in close again. “I can help with that.”

“Yes, you can,” she smiled up at him and those entrancing dimples, and spared a little sigh of regret. “And I would totally take you up on that, but I’ve got coffee cooling in my car for Tess, and—”

Another car rolled by, skidding into the curve.

“Uh-oh.”

“Go,” she said to him. “Go help. I just stopped by to say hi. I told Tess I’d pick her up her favorite caramel macchiato on my way in. This was only a little detour.”

He smiled, regretful that he had to leave to go help. “You can stop by anytime.”

“I’ll come by after work.”

“Okay.”

A low rumble started in the distance, quickly turning to a roar and shaking the icy ground they stood on. They both turned to the east.

“What was *that*?”

“An avalanche?” she joked.

Vincent swallowed. “Sounded a lot like a building collapsing.” September eleventh all over again. *Please God, no*. More distant or smaller, but so similar it stopped the breath in his chest.

Catherine didn’t have time to respond, her cell and car radio went off at the same time. She turned to him apologetically. “I have to run!”

“Go. I’ll be fine.”

Not the way he wanted to separate from her. A small, dirty cloud rose in the distance—it had to be a plume of ash from whatever had collapsed. He ignored the next car that slid into the curb and ran for the club.

## Chapter 2

Tori Windsor sat on a metal bench in the narrow passageway between cells and waited. Bob Reynolds was asleep, but by his restless movements, soon to wake up. She'd expressed surprise that he was still abed when the guard had let her in, and prettily told him she'd like to quietly wait rather than disturb him. A new jail; a new guard. This one knew nothing of her last visit, and even though he was under stricter confinement, Daddy Bob had apparently forgotten to bar her from visiting hours. She laid her chin on her knees and waited.

It didn't take long. Perhaps sensing her presence or the weak light of morning filtering down through the high, small window, he finally turned. Recognition jerked him upright.

"You! Wh-what are you doing here?"

"You're surprised? Really? I'm waiting. You promised me something—remember? Or did you think I'd just let it go? I'm sorry your attempt to escape failed so miserably. Now it's time to pay the piper."

"Look, Tori, I'm sorry, but I can't produce a list that doesn't exist, okay? You want me to make up names for you? What good would that do? You need to move on. Vincent obviously has."

That got her on her feet. She slammed against the bars, rattling them. As her eyes glowed brighter, Reynolds skittered up from the bed and backed up to the farthest corner of the cell—which is to say not much farther from where he started.

Tori smiled malevolently. "What? You don't like me this way? I'm so offended. It's because of *you* that I am. And I can't just 'move on!' Vincent has his reasons—your precious Catherine, you know—but they aren't mine. He may have decided not to kill you, but the jury's still out with me."

"I can't give you what I don't have! The only people who knew what I was working on are dead. You may not want to hear that, but it's the truth. You could try to beat it out of me—or worse—but you won't get any better answers."

She growled, but low enough for only the two of them to hear. "I'm not giving up. I can bide my time, but sooner or later you're going to give me what I want. I don't like loose ends, and that's what you are. As long as you live, you're a problem." She turned away disgustedly. She didn't have the cleverness of speech to run this guy into the ground. He was too slick. He'd been playing the game longer than she'd been alive.

Tori started to go then suddenly turned back. "Oh, and Catherine's only safe as long as Vincent is around. But I can find lots of distractions for him."

She tossed her red hair and headed for the door. Let him think on that!

The floor shook as she approached the gated door. She nearly lost her balance. Earthquake? She swung back around, but Reynolds looked as startled as she and everyone else. Something was very wrong.

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“Catherine!” Gabe strode to the car as she was getting out. “I’m glad you made it.”

Catherine stepped carefully over the snow covered ground and looked toward the trio of emergency vehicles. Looked like they’d had as much fun getting to the location of the collapsed building as she had. “What have we got?” she asked the ADA.

“Empty office building, from the looks of it. Used to house a used bookstore on the ground floor.”

“Not occupied? Any casualties?”

“No, and none that we’ve found so far. The fire department is doing a walk-thru right now, but it may be hours before they determine the cause of the collapse.”

Catherine eyed the scene. “The building looks in fairly good condition. Do they have any guess as to what brought it down? Shoddy construction? Gas leak? Was it scheduled for demolition?” Like any other city, buildings were occasionally taken down to make room for new projects.

“Not that we know of. So either someone was trying to skirt the rules, or . . . .”

“You think this was intentional?”

Gabe nodded. “Oh, no doubt. A building this size and age doesn’t just fall down of its own accord. Not in such a careful pattern. The major pillars were all blown at the same time. That’s something only an experienced demolition crew could do.” The rubble extended not much further than the building’s actual footprint. He stepped over the mess of brick and ash as they surveyed the outer structure. “Question is, why?”

“Terrorism?”

Gabe laughed at that. “Who were they terrorizing? Stray dogs in the neighborhood? No, something doesn’t jive.”

Ash was still falling in the area and Catherine cupped her scarf over her mouth to keep from breathing it in, thankful for the weather for once. The light snowfall was actually helping clear the air. “I’m glad there were no casualties, but I bet the sound, alone, really shook some people up.”

“There was one heart-attack in the vicinity—an older gentleman. Hard to say if it was related.”

"After everything we went through in 2001, I'd be surprised if it wasn't. I had an awful feeling in my gut on the way over. Didn't enjoy that in the least."

"I know what you mean. Listen, it's going to take them some time to investigate. We're not really needed here yet. Until we know how it came down, we're just speculating. Let's get back to the precinct and wait for the report." He hugged his jacket to himself. "A space heater and a tall cup of java are waiting for both of us in my office."

Catherine smiled into her scarf. He was still trying. "Tempting, but actually I'd like to poke around a little while, if you don't mind. Try to figure out if there's anything we're missing."

Gabe shrugged, sanguinely, and shook the snow off his hair. "Suit yourself. I've had enough of the cold. I'll see you back there."

Catherine nodded and watched him leave before turning toward where the rear of the building used to be. Not too many people had the knowledge and ability to take down an entire building, no matter that this was much smaller than the twin towers had been. In fact, it wasn't much larger than the warehouse Vincent and JT lived in for years before they destroyed it, and even then the bulk of their structure still stood. No, this wasn't the work of a single man, although she'd suspect Reynolds' former partner-in-crime explosives boy genius could possibly have pulled it off if he wasn't dead-dead. Definitely a puzzle, and one she intended to solve.

It should be a small matter to come up with a list of companies and names. That would be her starting point.

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JT burst through the door to the club. "Did you feel that?!" he said excitedly and went to switch on the big screen. "They'd just announced all classes were canceled when the ground started shaking. It was like 9/11 all over again!"

"Kind of hard to miss," Vincent murmured, avoiding the pictures on the screen.

"I couldn't believe it. At first I thought it was an earthquake, then I saw the plume—. Oh." JT caught his friend's somber look and realized how insensitive he was being. "Hey. But it wasn't. It wasn't." He switched the set off and waved at it nonchalantly. "Probably just a demolition crew clearing the site. Happens all the time."

"And they just forgot to notify the city? I don't think so," Vincent replied. "Catherine got called to the scene. It was no planned demolition, that's for sure."

"Well, th-then it could be anything—an accident." He slapped the counter. "An over-worked boiler trying to keep up with this deep freeze."



“JT, it was no accident.”

“Someone’s sick sense of humor, then. Catherine will figure it out. They said there were no casualties or even injuries, for that matter.”

“Yeah.”

JT frowned. He could see that Vincent, as tough as he was, was having a hard time with it. Memories, of the day his fire-fighter brothers lost their lives along with countless others, were weighing heavily on his mind. “You-you should go. Make sure Catherine is okay.”

“She got there after it happened, JT. I’m sure there’s no danger at this point. I’ll be fine. I just . . . I think I’m going to lie down a while. This cold weather has given me a splitting headache.”

More likely a stress migraine. JT watched him go. Vincent’s movements showed the weight of his thoughts. “You need anything?”

“Nope,” he murmured and shut the door firmly behind him.

Once inside his room, Vincent headed straight to the bathroom sink and leaned over it. Nausea wasn’t something he dealt with very often—certainly not from fear. He reached for the faucet with a shaking hand. He splashed cold water on his face, letting the water run, until he felt he had a grip on the contents of his stomach, then he grabbed the towel and rubbed his face dry.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, he reached over and took the pen and pad out of the nightstand drawer. He hadn’t started a new journal yet, but he kept the pad there just in case. He scrawled a short message at the bottom of the first page and tore it off. Then, folding it carefully, placed it inside the black lacquered box that sat atop the window ledge—the promise box. “This morning you promised not to leave me, Catherine,” he whispered. “I’m holding you to that.”

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Tori trudged through the streets and alleyways, heedless of the cold. Her anger could keep her burning for a long time yet. She was spoiling for a fight, if she was honest with herself, but the weather kept even the criminals inside, or so it seemed. With Catherine and Vincent back together and Reynolds safely locked up once again, her life had no purpose, no direction. Sure, anger could motivate her for a little while longer, but it would come to nothing, and then what? Even after all the years her own father kept her isolated and locked up, she felt more lonely now than ever.

After hearing the rumble from the prison facility, she headed out to investigate. She knew which way to head from the fact that everyone else was running the other direction. She ran toward the ash. It dissipated quickly, much different and much smaller than in 2001. Really, what was the big deal? A building came down. Not like that hasn’t happened before.

Construction was a constant in the city. They'd done a fairly decent job of it, too, actually. Only minor damage was done to the building next door, a half a block away. But this obviously wasn't planned, as was plain from the number of emergency vehicles at the site. If she didn't know Muirfield and all of Reynolds' people were gone—at least the ones in-country—she would have suspected them, but no. This was an odd occurrence, but nothing more. It provided entertainment for most of the day, however, and she was glad for that. She hung out in the area and people-watched. Tori laughed scornfully at them, the lookie-loos. Some appeared so afraid. What's scary about a downed building? They didn't know what real fear was—knowing you'd become a monster and there was absolutely nothing you could do about it!

She finally huffed and turned off down an alleyway. It was getting dark and she needed to find something to eat. As she took another short-cut between buildings she suddenly stopped. Three men were harassing a fourth and getting the better of him, by the looks of it. At least it wasn't a woman; she'd have had to intervene. She was about to turn away and leave them to their fun when she heard the victim laugh. Laugh! He seemed to be trying to joke his way out of getting beat to a pulp. Tori stopped and took a step toward them. Yep. Beating him to a pulp. Blond hair and laughing light gray eyes caught hers. Well, she'd been spoiling for a fight. Here it was.

“Hey!”

Three men turned toward her. The poor blond-haired victim seemed turned around but just as startled and stumbled to his knees as soon as he was released.

“You need a toy to have fun with? Come play with me!”

The three men, all looking to be in their mid-to-late thirties, immediately lost interest in the younger guy and walked her way. She backed up, feigning fear, leading them away from him. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him crouch again, searching for something on the ground. His wallet, no doubt.

Tori smiled at the perpetrators and lured them in close. Then she charged. The entire thing was over in seconds and three scruffy dudes lay on the icy wet pavement.

“Are you all right?” The blond guy approached. Amazingly, he hadn't run and was apparently prepared to come to her defense. She would have laughed if she wasn't so embarrassed by what he'd no doubt seen—her beasting out.

“I'm fine.”

Her eyes probably still glowed—she could feel the heat of them—but he didn't seem concerned. In fact, he kept coming.

“Who are you, some sort-of super-hero wanna-be? Wonderful Woman? Super-Duper Chick? What did you use—kung fu? Jujitsu? I heard fabric tearing. You must carry one awesome knife on you.”

“S-something like that,” she said, and curled her now-normal fingers inside her palms.

“So . . . what? You’re so buff you can roam the streets at night without a qualm, while a big hunky guy like me can get beat up in an alley?”

Okay it was not exactly night yet, just a late winter afternoon, but— “Who says you’re hunky?”

He laughed again. Laughed!

He had a really nice smile. In another life, someone she’d really like to get to know. She suddenly felt ashamed. “I’m—I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“See what? I lost my glasses somewhere in the shuffle.” He patted his shirt.

“Oh. You’re not . . . afraid?”

“Of what—you?” He fished in a pocket and came up the glasses and put them on. But the lenses were dark. “Should I be?”

She wanted to laugh right along with him. “Right. Who should be afraid of a skinny girl? Hey, don’t you think it’s a little late in the day for sunglasses?” How vain.

“Oh, these are my x-ray vision goggles. They help me see in the dark.”

“That would be night-vision goggles, dufus.”

He held out a hand to her. “That would be Blaise, not Dufus, actually.”

She eyed his hand, then searched his face. Seriously? “Blaze. Now that sounds like a super-hero name if I ever heard one.”

“Not blaze. B - l - a - i - s - e. It’s a family name, not to be confused with ‘super hot.’”

“Obviously.” Tori carefully shook his hand. It looked like he could use a shower. Last thing she needed was a dread disease. “Was that just a random robbery or did you make a play for one of their women and it backfired on you?”

Blaise looked surprised. He smiled. “Well, I *am* known around these parts as quite the Casanova, but no, actually. Neither. I lost my home and wandered into their private turf, I guess. They didn’t take too kindly to that.”

She looked around the area. Mostly office and industrial buildings. Not exactly a place one would call home. She wondered how far he'd 'wandered.'

"What do you mean, you lost your home? Can't find your way back?"

"Lost as in 'lost.' Kapluey. Gone. Someone turned it into rubble."

She stared. "The building that came down? They said it was empty."

"Ah, well, you see—shows you how much they know. The bottom floor was an abandoned used bookstore and in one corner there was a tiny room with lots of books. I kind of made it my home."

She looked him over. Tall, broad-shouldered. "You seem pretty able-bodied to me. You're telling me you lived in that empty building."

"Yep. 'Lived' would be the right word. Guess I didn't get the memo it was scheduled for demolition. Luckily for me, I was out foraging for food when it came down."

"It wasn't scheduled for demolition. They think it was terrorism or something. Not accidental."

"Hmmm. I thought I heard some voices the other night. Hey," he changed the conversation with lightning speed. "Do you mind helping me find my stick? Then we better get out of here before those guys come to."

Tori frowned. There'd be no 'coming to' for any of them. Couldn't he see that? Even in the dark of early evening, the snow lent a brightness to the scene and there was enough light from the street corner to see they were all dead. And very bloody. Blond guy was oblivious, but they did need to leave the area in case anyone heard the ruckus and called the cops. "Who cares about your stick? Let's just go."

"Well, it's kind of important to me." He turned away from her and started walking back down the alley when he stumbled over one of the bodies.

What an idiot. A cute idiot, she amended. But dense! "What does it look like? I'll get it." She walked back over to the area she first spotted them and a broken white stick lay on the ground nearby. That had to be it. When she went to pick up one piece, though, they all snapped together. A blind man's walking stick! She swung around. "This?"

She held it out, then realized how stupid a move that was. All the pieces fell into place. She put it in his hand, the hand he was holding out but slightly in the wrong direction.

"Thanks. That's it."

"You're *blind*?"

"Shhh! Sheesh, girl, you don't need to shout it to the whole wide world! I do have some pride. How embarrassing. Had you fooled there for a minute, though, didn't I?"

The magnitude of that revelation had her reeling. He hadn't seen what she did and he did believe she'd only knocked them out! And her glowing eyes were invisible to him. He raked a hand through his wavy blond hair and cracked a smile. A smile that had blood in the corner. She'd nearly forgotten he'd taken quite a beating. She took his other hand. "C'mon. We need to get out of here. I know of a safe place."

Before he could protest, she yanked him along behind her at a fast pace through the darkened streets.

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Vincent had just come out of the bedroom and reluctantly allowed JT to cajole him into a game of chess when the door burst open.

"Hi, guys."

JT jumped to his feet, alarmed. Tori hadn't been to the club in a week. He thought they were finally rid of her. Now she shows up out of the blue and dragging a stranger behind her, no less!

"I'd like you to meet my friend, Blaise—as in B – l – a – i – s – e. Not the other kind."

Vincent stood up more slowly, frowning.

"Since when do you just stop by with friends?" JT asked, sarcastically, not happy at all.

The guy, probably closer to Tori's age of mid-twenties, laughed off his rude question and held out a hand—toward the room in general. "Hey."

JT cautiously took a step forward but it was Vincent who beat him to it. He took his hand.

"Vincent."

JT scowled at him for using his real name, but Vincent just shrugged and studied the young man.

"He's blind," Tori explained.

"Ah, girl! You take all the fun out of it." Blaise scolded her good-naturedly. "I like to see how long I can fool them, first."

“Well, you wouldn’t be successful because Vincent can—”

“Spot a blind dude a mile away, right Vince?” JT interrupted, coughing. “Used to train seeing-eye dogs,” he added.

Vincent gave him a lame look then addressed Blaise. “He’s kidding. Blind, huh? For how long?”

“Accident at birth. Not enough oxygen. I have a small amount of peripheral vision, but it’s mostly shadows and shapes.”

“Ah.” Vincent nodded that Blaise was telling the truth and JT relaxed by slow degrees.

“I’m sorry to crash your party.”

“Blaise was run out of his . . . living quarters unexpectedly,” Tori said. “I thought maybe we could put him up for a day or two, until he can find something else, you know?”

“We? Do you live here again now?” JT asked, a sharp edge to his voice.

“JT,” Vincent soothed. “We could handle a day or two, couldn’t we? It’s pretty cold outside.”

“This isn’t the Union Gospel Mission.”

“I’m quiet as a mouse, I promise.”

“Great. My room’s this way,” Tori said and turned them both in the direction of her room.

Vincent’s eyebrows shot to the top of his forehead. “Uh, Tori. Can I speak to you a moment? In the *kitchen*.”

Her mouth fell open. Vincent wasn’t waiting for her to agree but already headed there. She turned to Blaise. “I’ll be right back.”

“No problem.”

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“What are you doing?” Vincent waited until the door to the kitchen closed behind her.

“What is the problem? You just said it was okay. Besides, I thought you guys were all about taking in strays, especially someone who needs our help.”

“That isn’t the issue.” Vincent sighed. “You two looked pretty friendly there. You’re interested in him? Because you’re different now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“This isn’t like before. Since you’ve gained your abilities, you don’t have the control to be in a close relationship with someone—”

She crossed her arms. “Seriously? What, we’re having the ‘big brother to little sister’ birds and bees conversation right now? Because I am not in high school anymore! What I do or don’t do with him is none of your business.”

“Tori, you weren’t a beast until recently. That’s puts a whole different spin on things. It makes it my business and you my responsibility.”

“Make up your mind, Vincent. You and I can’t be together because we are both beasts, but he and I can’t be together because one of us isn’t?”

“Don’t make this about you and me. I’m just saying it takes an extreme amount of control—which you don’t have yet.”

“I have more than you know.”

“Maybe. But thoughts like that can get someone hurt. I almost killed a woman once.”

Stunned, she stared. “C-Catherine?”

“No. No, before. It took me a long time to be with Catherine because of that. I didn’t know if I could trust myself not to hurt her.”

“That’s you; it’s not me. We aren’t the same. And you know what? You gave up the right to have this talk with me when you refused me—me! The only woman you could have had a completely open relationship with where neither of us would ever have to worry about hurting the other or having to use ‘extreme control.’ In fact, I bet you have no idea what that would be like—to completely relax with someone. Have you even imagined it? I have. I am the only woman on this earth you could totally be yourself with. Don’t you want to know what that could be like? Yet you deny both of us that. You can’t tell me what I can and can’t do!

“So you’ll risk hurting a guy you like because of pride? You could kill him.”

“I know that! But I would never—”

“I thought I would never, but I did. Being in control is the only way we can live.”

“That’s what *you* believe, not me. Does Catherine tell you that? That what you are is somehow wrong?”

"Someone *did* this to me," he growled.

"But it's who you are now, Vincent. Get over it. We should be embracing it rather than constantly fighting it. I saved Blaise's life tonight. That was a *good* thing. This—this power can be used for good. But I guess you don't believe that. I mean, she shot you—

"Tori, don't go there. Catherine and I have forgiven each other and we've worked things out between us."

She shook her head and turned away. "...all so unnecessary."

"Let's just deal with where we are now. Does he know?"

"What?"

"Does he know what you are?"

She pressed her lips together. "I'm not ready to spring that on him yet. We only just met. But I will."

"If you really like him and want to be with him, honesty has to come first—sooner rather than later."

"Fine!"

"Fine."

She cut off the conversation and stormed back out into the living area.

Blaise got up from his seat on the couch in front of the TV. "Are we good? Because I can find somewhere else to stay, no problem."

"No," she assured him with a hand to his arm. "We're fine. Let's just get you cleaned up, then we'll go for a walk."

"But JT was going to put the game on."

*Really?*

He sensed her look. "I may be blind, but I'm not dead. I like a good football game like the next guy. I used to play."

"You used to play."



“Hey. Don’t limit people. You need to get over this penchant you have for putting people into boxes.”

“It *is* the playoffs,” JT added, a mocking grin on his face.

Tori wanted to scream, but she didn’t bother to point out that Blaise wouldn’t actually be able to see the game. She just threw her hands in the air and headed into the room she had claimed as her own to make room for him.

### Chapter 3

Impatient for the day to pass and more than a little anxious, after Catherine had left Vincent spent the day walking through the city, avoiding the area where the building collapsed. Instead, he threaded his way through Central Park. Because of the frigid temperature, there were few people around and the lake and woods were covered in a fresh layer of snow. At a bench near the water he sat for hours watching birds peck the grounds for seeds or anything to keep them alive through the winter freeze. It had helped calm his mind and heart of too *many* memories this time. And all of them awful. It wasn’t until he was on his way home that he’d spotted the sign.

\*

Back at the Gentlemen’s Club, Tori and Blaise sat on the couch facing the big screen while Vincent paced the floor behind them.

Oblivious of the game, he suddenly stopped and looked toward the door. “Oh, thank God.”

“What happened—what did I miss?” JT asked, returning from the kitchen with another beer.

Vincent yanked open the door just as Catherine was about to knock, and pulled her into his arms.

She giggled at his amorous greeting. “If I’d known I was going to get that kind of reception, I would definitely have raced across town. Sorry I’m so late. Hi, you.” She squinted at him, winding her arms around his neck. “You okay?”

“Just missed you,” he said, and kissed her long and deep.

“He’s been digging furrows in the floor with his pacing for the last two hours. Glad you’re here. But if you’re not interested in the game,” JT coughed, “get a room.”

Catherine started to pull away, embarrassed. “Sorry.”

Vincent kept an arm around her. "He's only kidding." To JT he said, "My place, my woman."

"Uh, *my* place, unless you've recently gotten a job. And we *do* have a guest." JT tilted his head toward the newcomer on the couch.

Catherine spun around.

"Catherine, meet Blaise," Vincent said, as a young man in his late twenties got awkwardly to his feet. "Blaise, this is Catherine, my—"

"—woman. Got it. Awesome. Nice to meet you, lovely Catherine. You're not related to Cat Woman, by any chance, are you?"

Cat in the Hat was the last nick-name she'd received, and that hadn't gone over very well. She stumbled for a response.

"Just figured, since Super Woman, here, was a friend of yours—" Blaise laughed, indicating Tori, who had sunk deeper into the sofa.

"Blaise met Tori in an alley earlier this evening," Vincent started to explain, "and—"

"—she beat the crap out of three guys, saving my hide!" Blaise announced proudly. "*Awesome Angel*, that's a better one."

Tori rolled her eyes.

"Oh. Well. It's very nice to meet you," Catherine said. "Is that Blaze as in B-l-a—"

"No!" three people answered her at once.

"Family name," Vincent supplied, ignoring them. "Hey, you hungry? We could go out."

"Starved, actually."

"There's plenty of pizza left-over in the kitchen," JT offered without looking up from the game. Then he yelled at the screen.

Catherine wrinkled her nose and looked to Vincent. "It doesn't really matter to me."

"There's a sandwich shop two blocks away with some great soup choices," he told her, "and booths with *very tall sides*."

*Privacy*. Catherine smiled. "Sounds wonderful."

He grabbed his heavy wool coat and led her right back out into the frosty air. They ran the two blocks. As soon as they got to the diner, Catherine let him lead her to a booth in the back and she slid in. He hadn't let go of her hand. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Vincent looked down at their entwined fingers and lifted her wrist to his lips. "Today was tough," he admitted.

"Because of the building collapse?"

"Yeah. And you were there. I know—you weren't in danger. It just . . . brought back too many bad memories. I didn't like being separated from you. Not for a second."

She smiled sadly, understanding. "At least you *have* those memories now. I'm thankful for that."

He didn't know about that. Sometimes memories hurt. He took a deep breath and made an effort to shake off his mood. "True. But you're here now and everything's good."

"Yes." She pushed a stray lock behind his ear. His hair was finally growing out again. "Why don't we order and then you can tell me all about Blaise? I'm dying to hear this story."

Vincent laughed. "Right. Did you catch on that there was something different about him?"

"You mean the fact that he's an extrovert? Yeah, so weird. Oh. Or did you mean because he's blind?"

"Smart Alec. Yes, he's blind, but don't let on that you figured it out too quickly. He likes to try to fool people." Vincent told her about what happened and the talk he had with Tori.

"Sounds like a match made in heaven, if you ask me."

The dimples deepened. "Yeah. Maybe so. Maybe so. A good distraction for her. But hey, enough about them. How did your day go? Any word on what caused the building to come down?"

She took a sip of her hot cocoa and sighed her contentment before replying. "My day was long and uneventful after this morning. It was definitely sabotage. But no leads, nothing. There has to be a witness somewhere. Other than that, we're stumped. But I'm working on it."

"According to what Tori said, Blaise may have been from somewhere around there. Maybe he can help."

"Hmmm. Not sure what a blind person could tell me, but that's actually the first good lead I've had all day."

"Is this case going to tie you up all weekend?"

"Why? Did you have other ideas?"

He grinned. "Maybe."

"I like the sound of that. Well, other than Gabe—don't give me that look; he's perfectly tame."

Vincent looked like he wanted to argue that point but he clamped his jaw together instead. "Yes, ma'am. What about *Gabe*?"

"He wants Tess and me to look over some security detail plans. A delegation from India is in town and there is a fund-raiser for one of their political candidates. Gabe's been invited. He's a little uneasy about it. With tensions between India and Pakistan, he expects some protests and they could get nasty."

"Why is Gabe involved, and are you expected to work this security detail?"

"I guess they feel his position and heritage will add some local support. Some connection with his folks."

"--who *weren't* Indian."

"No, but Gabe's adopted father was from old money and even older connections. The candidate specifically requested his presence. I think they're hoping he can bring in some much-needed funds. He isn't happy about it. Was even willing to ask me to come as his date to keep an eye on things. I said no, so don't get your hackles up—"

"Gabe is not my favorite person right now."

"I know. But he *has* helped us—a lot—in the last few months. He knows where we stand, now, so try to be understanding. He's still my boss, and this is just work. I told you, you have no competition."

"You don't owe him anything, Catherine. If anyone does, it's me, and I'll deal with that."

She smiled. "That's what I'm afraid of. As long as your 'dealing' with him is done with kindness and a smile, I'm good."

He shook his head. "Only for you."

She kissed him. "Thank you. Now, tell me what you have planned."

"Uh-uh. It's a surprise."

“Okay, but what time? What do I wear? You have to tell me something!”

“Let’s say six thirty Saturday night. I’ll bring dinner and you’ll need to bundle up.”

“Guess that means no cozy fireplace in a lodge somewhere.”

“Not this time, but I’ll keep that in mind for another day.”

“Definitely.”

\*

“I’m glad you told me to bundle up and wear my boots. Where on earth are you leading me?”

“We’re almost there.” Rather than keeping to the paths through the park, Vincent led Catherine straight through the woods. “I found this spot – it’s off the beaten track.”

That was for sure. He had to lift her over a few fallen logs to get there. Good thing he had an excellent sense of direction and night vision or she’d be afraid they’d become lost and unable to find their way back. They skirted one end of the lake. The water still flowed, but its frozen banks and trees laden with snow lent an almost other-worldly look to the scene. They paused by the bank.

“I came here the other day—during daylight hours—just to clear my head,” he told her.

“It’s so peaceful. Frozen, but beautiful.” The rising moon shining off the snow made for a false daylight and produced long shadows across the path. After a few moments, they entered the woods again and she grumbled.

“You’ll thank me later,” he told her with a grin. “The walk around would be three times as long if we kept to the main trail. Then again, I could always carry you.”

Something made her think he’d rather enjoy that, but pride kept her trudging on. “I may be small, but I’m strong. I just expected something a little less rigorous for our date.”

He swung around, a glint in his eyes.

“I did *not* just say that.”

“But you *did*.” He laughed.

Finally, the woods opened to a small lawn covered in a thick layer of pristine snow. A few bird and other small animal trails were the only signs that living creatures had passed that way anytime recently. Amazingly, a small bench occupied one corner. Vincent brushed it off and lowered the backpack he'd been carrying to the ground.

Beside their picnic supplies, which he declined to get out, was an odd assortment of tools and accessories.

"What's all this for?"

He grinned at her, such a boyish look it sent flutters through her belly. "What else? We're going to make snowmen. Here." He passed her a set of water-proof gloves.

"Seriously?" she looked at the open pack. "Wow. You really came prepared."

"Yes, indeed."

She laughed. "You said 'snowmen' not 'snowman.' Does that mean we're making more than one?"

"Even snowmen get lonely. You make one and I'll make one."

Intrigued and definitely up to the challenge, Catherine just grinned and dove in. He smiled. She secretly loved a little healthy competition.

"I brought a variety of accessories, as you can see: rocks, twigs, buttons, hats and scarves. So feel free to make use of whatever is here."

Catherine started by rolling a lump of snow outward from the bench until it was the right size for the base. Vincent rolled his the same direction, stopping right next to hers.

"Hey! I need some creative space here, you know. No need to crowd. You have the entire area!"

"What's the fun in that? Besides, my snowman wants to be near his snow woman."

Catherine smiled and ignored him, patting and massaging her snowballs to a near perfect shape while Vincent went about working his larger statue like a kid with his first set of Legos. Finally, they stood back and studied each other's creation.

"That is *not* a snowman!"

"What? Sure it is."

Catherine pointed. "Snowmen are sweet and happy. Yours looks menacing. And look at those dark eyebrows. Do you see the way he's looking at her?"

"How is he looking at her?"

"Like he wants to gobble her up. He's leering. In fact, I think he's looking down her dress!"

"What dress? She's obviously naked. They both are. But then again, maybe to snow people it's more like fur."

Catherine sputtered. "Of course she has a dress! Do you see any boots? No, because they are *underneath* her skirt." She flared out the bottom of the bottom snowball just to make it more obvious then added a ruffle where the shoulders might be. "There."

"Well, it is just the two of them, after all," he said, adding a hump to the back of his. "No need for embarrassment."

"Now what have you done? That is not a snowman. It's a snowbeast!"

"The Hunchbeast of Notre Dame," he declared with pride.

"Mixing your fairy-tales, now, aren't you?"

"Aren't they all the same?"

They laughed and left their snow couple (his now with golden button eyes) to make snow angels nearby. Catherine, once again, took careful steps then fell straight back to make a perfect angel on the unadulterated snow. Vincent fell beside her, but his didn't have quite the same effect.

"Mine is a devil," he grinned when she raised her eyebrows at him. Then he rolled over toward her as she lay on the snow, arms outstretched. He unbuttoned his coat to open over them, then did the same to hers before fitting his length on top of her. Surprisingly warm hands sought out the soft skin of her belly underneath the layers. "You know, we're all alone out here," he murmured, hot breaths seeking her neck.

Catherine gasped then nodded at the snow couple. "Tell *them* that."

He looked over at their creations. "They only have eyes for each other, but I'll make them turn away."

Before she could argue, he bounded up and moved the arms and faces of the snow people so they faced each other. Suddenly the snowman's hump was where his side should be. She laughed, missing his warmth. "Come back here and kiss me properly before I become part of the landscape."

"You cold?" he asked. "I can warm you up."

"I don't doubt that for a moment."

Vincent dropped down beside her again, but before he could kiss her as thoroughly as he'd like, his cell phone pinged.

"What was that? JT texting you?"

"My alarm." He sighed, sitting up. "We have to get going."

"What? We haven't even eaten our picnic yet!"

"That comes later. On to the next part of our evening."

"Which is?"

"We're going to a concert."

"A concert! Vincent, I'm not dressed for that! Wait a minute—there are no concerts in the park this time of year."

"That's how much you know," he told her, helping her up. "Do you trust me?"

She frowned, wary. "Of course, but—"

He took a black scarf out of his pack. "You have to put this on. I don't want you to know where I'm taking you."

"Because it's a surprise?"

"Because you might consider it just a teensy bit illegal."

"Vincent!"

He ignored her protests and took her hand firmly in his.

"But what about our snow people?"

He looked back. "Trust me. They won't even know we've left."



Once more taking a jaunt through the woods, he led her to the backside of a brick building. At the base of it, he found his footing on a ledge and hoisted her up and over a small balcony with a door recessed deep into the wall. The door opened to his touch. At her gasp of surprise, he murmured, "The lock was already broken, and no, I didn't break it."

Once inside, they entered an empty room which echoed with their hushed voices. Finding the right spot, he turned her toward an alcove in front of a window overlooking a private, snow-covered garden, pulled off his backpack and laid a blanket on the floor for them.

"Okay. You can take that off now. Have a seat."

She cautiously removed the scarf and looked around the darkened room.

"It's okay. We're not going to turn on any lights. No one will even know we're here. My lady," he said, offering her a tray of cheese and crackers, fruit wedges and a glass of wine. "Your dinner."

"I thought you said we were attending a—"

He held a finger to his lips as the first notes of a grand orchestral piece floated up to them through a vent in the floorboard next to where they sat. It was loud enough to fill the room. She gasped.

"Your own private concert. The actual concert is tomorrow but I knew they'd be rehearsing in the hall below tonight." He sat down facing the window and snuggled her between his outstretched legs, letting the long overcoat curl around them.

They ate in hushed silence. The wine warmed her belly as his lips warmed her ear. Catherine leaned into his strength. After all the walking and activity, she felt wonderfully drained and lulled by the music. "So beautiful," she whispered as one piece came to an end and another began; this one a waltz.

"Will you . . . dance with me?" he murmured into her nape.

Memories of their Christmas dance floated back to her. She turned her face to his, accepting his kiss. "Mmmm."

It took him a few moments to acknowledge her answer as their tongues danced with each other in that time-honored prelude. Finally, he set her away and offered her a hand up.

As he started to take up the proper position, she weaved her arms around his neck. "Just hold me."

They swayed rather than danced, but it was better than good. After a long moment, her breath tickled his ear. “Now that no one’s looking for you, we could attend an *actual* concert, you know.”

“Yes. But then I’d have to share you with all those other people.” He kissed her neck. “And I couldn’t do this.”

She sucked in a breath. “Definitely not.”

“Or this.”

She gasped again. “Okay, maybe we need to head back home. I think you’ve made your point.”

The music finally died and they packed their things to go, taking a more leisurely pace back to the area with the snowmen. Removing the scarves and hats, they folded them into the backpack and started off toward home.

Before leaving the garden, Catherine turned back to look. “I’m glad they have each other.”

“Yes,” he said, squeezing her hand as the woods once more enveloped them in darkness. “It’s a good thing.”

## Chapter 4

“It’s not illegal to be homeless or anything, is it? Because my friend—”

“This isn’t an inquisition, Blaise, so don’t be nervous. I just want to ask you some questions.” Catherine sat across from him at the kitchen table at the club.

“Catherine isn’t going to arrest you. Right?” Tori made it clear by her expression that she wouldn’t stand for that. “Is this really even necessary?” she asked, hovering in the background.

“Hey. I’ve never been interrogated before, woman. Let me enjoy the moment, will you? I’m sorry, Detective Chandler. Go on. I don’t know what help I can be, but I’ll do my best.”

“Actually, after running down all our other leads and finding nothing, you may be the only person who was in the vicinity when that building came down. Whatever you remember may be helpful. So, you’d been living there?”

“Just borrowing a room, really.”

“It’s extremely cold outside right now—” Tori interjected. Vincent gave her a quelling look.

“Not a problem. Truly. As I was saying,” Catherine continued, “we have no other leads. I want you to think back to the night before it happened. Tori said you heard people moving around in the building. How many voices do you think you heard—two? Three? Were they male? Female? Both? Young? Old?”

“Give him a minute,” Tori blurted again, annoyed.

“It’s okay, Babe,” Blaise soothed her. “I got this.”

Vincent raised his eyebrows at Tori. She avoided his gaze.

“Okay, so I’d just settled down for the night. I remember because I was thankful I hadn’t been making any noises before I heard them come in, so I don’t think they knew I was there. I don’t mind a stranger now and then trying to get in out of the cold, but they don’t usually come in groups. I held my breath wondering if they were coming my way, but they spread out.”

“They must have been setting the charges.”

“I suppose so. I didn’t have any idea at the time.”

“So there was more than two,” Catherine wondered aloud.

“My guess would be three or four.” He didn’t close his eyes, which was disconcerting, but she could tell his focus had turned inward.

“That’s right, Blaise. Center your focus on the voices,” Vincent murmured, gently coaching him. His work with Tori over the last few weeks had really helped her hone her senses. He hoped he could have the same success with Blaise.

“Now that I think of it,” Blaise murmured, “I remember trying to understand their words but I couldn’t. That’s because they weren’t speaking English! I didn’t realize that until now.”

“So they were speaking in a foreign language. Could you tell which one? Did it sound . . . guttural? Staccato? Or maybe had a musical quality to it—anything that would narrow it down to a people group?”

Blaise went still again. “I can’t be sure, but my guess would be an Arab dialect. Yes. Middle Eastern.”

Catherine looked at Vincent. “Arab terrorists?”

“Al-Qaida again? It still doesn’t make any sense. Why bring down an empty building?” Vincent frowned.

“Blaise, how long were they in the building—do you remember that much?”

“For a while.” He frowned. “Maybe an hour, but it could have been longer. I didn’t feel comfortable being there with them, so I left by my escape route. There was a narrow corridor that ran the length of the building—on the east side—an entrance to which was in my room. I don’t know what it was originally used for, perhaps a maintenance access? Anyway, I got out through that and headed into a more populated area to spend the night. The next morning, after the roar, I tried to go back, but there was nothing left. I ended up staying in an alley—which is where Tori Tornado found me the next day.” He sighed. “I’m sorry. That’s really all I know.”

“No, it’s good. You’ve actually helped a lot. I really appreciate it.”

“Are we done here yet?” Tori asked, impatient. “Because we have plans.” Everyone turned to look at her. She shrugged. “Blaise and I are going to a movie, and if we don’t leave soon, we’ll miss the first act.”

Catherine’s jaw opened then shut again. “Yep. All done,” she said. “Wouldn’t want you to miss the opening scenes.” Vincent bit his lip and they exchanged curious glances.

Tori immediately went over to Blaise and grabbed his hand. “Let’s go.”

Catherine watched Tori help him on with his jacket before heading out. After they left, she turned to Vincent. “What was *that* all about?”

He shrugged. “I guess she doesn’t like sharing him. I’m not sure, but I get the feeling Blaise has become her new pet.”

Catherine laughed. “Every child needs a pet. He seems willing enough. But a *movie*?”

“Well, as Blaise would say, don’t put him in a box.”

“I guess not. My bad. You know, I kind of like him.” She stepped into his welcoming arms.

“Yeah. I do, too. I just hope she’s careful,” he added, a frown furrowing his brows as his eyes tracked to the closed door through which the young couple had left.

“He doesn’t know about her?”

“Nope. Not yet.”

“Well then, I sincerely hope everyone in the theater remembers to turn off their cell phone.” She said it teasingly, but the idea that Tori could go postal at any moment and hurt not only Blaise but innocent people still made her shudder.

Vincent must have had similar concerns by the frown on his face. He finally looked down at her. "Was any of that really helpful at all? Does knowing that they were Middle Eastern help tie anything together?"

"It's one more piece of the puzzle."

"Now that the investigators are gone, I thought I'd go see what I could pick up at the site. You want to come?"

"Actually, I've got to get back to the office. Let me know if you pick up a trail. I'll take back what I've got here," she said, indicating her notebook. "Maybe Tess has found something else to piece together with it. By the way, that event is tonight—the fundraiser. I'm not actually attending but I promised Gabe I'd check out the security before I leave, so I may be late. You sure you want to wait dinner on me?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay. I'll see you later, then." She leaned up on her tiptoes for a kiss. They never parted any other way. Not anymore. His lips were warm and sweet. It reminded her of the days before he'd been kidnapped—before they knew how much they could lose. She wished she could linger. They'd lost so much time together already. She was determined to make up for it.

\*

He called her later at the office.

"Were you able to track anyone from there?" she asked him.

"There's nothing to track. It's just a pile of debris now. I picked up Blaise's trail a little ways away, but I can't get a peg on anyone else, unfortunately."

\*

The fund-raiser was being held at the Park-Tulane building across town. Catherine studied the itinerary and looked up just as Tess hobbled through the precinct door on crutches.

"Oh, my gosh, what happened?! I wondered what was taking you so long." Catherine rushed to her best friend's side.

Tess looked embarrassed. "It's nothing. Just a sprain. You know that covered walkway between the alley and the parking garage? It's now a skating rink." She sighed. "I would have called but I dropped my cell phone when I fell and now it doesn't work. I just came from medical. The doctor said I can't put any weight on it for a few days. According to Gabe, I'm stuck on desk duty until further notice. I'm sorry. I guess this means you'll have to check out the event by yourself."

Catherine smiled. Tess was not one to enjoy desk duty. “Not a problem. It’s not like I’m actually going to attend—I won’t need to dress up or anything. I just want to check things out one last time. An extra pair of eyes for Gabe, you know. He’s uneasy. Says he’s got this gut feeling.”

“Yeah, well I’d like to kick his ‘gut’ for originally asking you to go as his date when he knows where you and Vincent stand. That was just wrong.”

“Well, I think that had more to do with his ‘gut feeling’ than anything else, really, Tess. I told him no, and I told Vincent all about it. Everything is above board.”

“Good. Ow.” Tess lowered herself gingerly to her desk.

“You sure you’re all right?”

“Only thing really hurting is my pride. I bruised my toosh going down. And to add insult to injury, I took that dive in full view of rush hour traffic and a group of uniforms. They aren’t likely to let me live it down for a very long time to come.”

Catherine smiled. “At least you entertained them. I’m sure they appreciated it. Okay, well, I guess this means it’s going to take me twice as long by myself, so I better plan to get there good and early. Maybe you could shoot me over the building blueprints on my way. I want to put our ADA’s uneasiness to rest.”

Once in her car, she pressed the number on her cell. “Vincent? I’m sorry. I’m not going to be able to make it to dinner, after all. I’m heading to that event right now. Long story. I’ll call you when I get off, okay?”

\*

She had just pulled into a parking spot when her cell phone buzzed.

“I just sent you the building blueprints,” Tess told her.

Catherine checked her in-box. “Got it. Thanks. I’ll take a look.” She studied them under her car’s interior lights for a few minutes before getting out. Then she noticed something strange. She picked up her cell again. “Tess, you sent me the wrong plans. These are for the building that collapsed the other day.”

“What? How could I mix that up?” Tess said something under her breath. “Let me see what I did. I’ll call you right back.”

Catherine pulled her flashlight out to view the details better. Her cell buzzed again.

"Nope," Tess said. "You're wrong. Maybe they were designed by the same company, I don't know, but one is an empty warehouse and the other an office building. You're looking at the right plan. That's the layout for the Park-Tulane."

"Yes, there are more offices on the upper floors, but the basic structure is identical." Catherine studied it again, squinting. Strange . . . . Then she spotted a narrow passage-way running the length of one side—in the same exact same position as the building Blaise had been in. She swallowed.

"Well, all buildings look alike to me," Tess said encouragingly.

"No, Tess, I mean EXACTLY the same. I even recognize the room where Blaise stayed. What could this mean, unless—"

"—unless the other building was just a test run? Oh, my God."

"Tess, what are the chances that the Park-Tulane is an exact match to the one that was brought down? How long have they known and advertised the location of this fund-raiser?"

"Weeks. Cat, it's been in the paper and on Gabe's schedule at least that long."

"Long enough for someone to have devised a plan to ruin the day. He was right. There is something afoot. What if the plan is to bring the building down to stop this candidate? I have to check it out. I just parked, but it looks like everyone's still arriving."

"Should I call Gabe?"

"And tell him what? At this point it's only a theory. We don't know anything for sure. No, wait until I call you. I'm going to get into that basement and see if there's anything suspicious."

"Cat!"

\*

Catherine went around the back and entered by the through-way door Blaise had described. It was a narrow, reinforced hallway and completely dark. She was glad she'd thought to take the flashlight with her.

From the faint music that floated down to her from an upper floor, it was obvious the evening's festivities were already well underway.

She moved along as carefully and silently as she could. Eventually she came to a stairway leading to the basement floor. That was when she heard the voices. Startled, she shut off her light.

She had expected that the terrorists, or whoever they were, would have been long gone by now, having set their charges to detonate remotely, if that's what they planned. She stopped to listen. One was calling to another, their voices anxious and angry. Lights in the room ahead made her hesitate. She carefully peaked around.

Spread across an open, empty floor space, four men worked near the main pillars of the room. Two of them looked to be packing up, their work done, while the other two seemed to be struggling. In a foreign tongue she heard a whispered shout and guessed its meaning: hurry up!

Suddenly, the voice closest to her shouted an exclamation and dropped something. It clanked to the floor in a loud commotion and all four men went stock still.

That ended a moment later when the two men across the room suddenly turned toward the exit at the far end.

She crept back up the stairs and out of earshot before pulling out her cell.

"Tess! Call Gabe," she whispered. "Tell him to get everyone out. They're setting the charges. I don't know what the plan is, but this building's set to blow!"

"I'm on it. But, Cat! Where are you? Get out of there NOW!"

"I don't think they've finished their work. I'm going to try to stop them. It may buy us some time."

She cut off the call and stuffed the cell phone back in her pocket before Tess could argue. There wasn't time.

Catherine returned to the doorway and watched the two men's retreating backs and waited to the count of ten. It was now or never. Once they left the building, anything could happen.

When the third turned away, she made her move. She crept up behind him. He was concentrating so hard, he never heard her approach. The man was sweating like a pig and mumbling to himself looking up frequently to the other man not too far away. He obviously didn't want to be there any longer.

Suddenly, he sensed her and turned. She slammed the barrel of her gun into his head, knocking him over. Unfortunately, the man got out a grunt before he fell, and both sounds made terrorist number four look up, startled.

"Hands up! Police!" she shouted, pointing her gun at him. She didn't want to risk shooting it for fear the spark could set off the explosives they were using. He must have realized her empty threat, because he shouted for the other men and charged her.



She could hear other shouts, as well, from people filing out of the building. At least Tess had reached Gabe. Catherine only had time for that fleeting thought before she had to round-house kick the second man. He wasn't fast, but he was sturdy and strong and gave as good as he got. It was all she could do to stay on her feet.

He got hold of her hair and slammed her against a wall before she was able to flip around and kick him away. He got up too easily. The two more distant men were shouting at them but remaining at the far end of the room. At least she didn't have to fight them all at the same time. As good as she was, that would be tough. They seemed more anxious to get out rather than stay and fight. She didn't have time to give that much thought until she heard the ticking. At least one timer had already been set. The man she was fighting must have heard it as well. He suddenly swung around. His friends were gone.

The next few moments seemed to pass in slow motion. First there was a snap and sizzle, then a very loud 'crack!' Even from clear on the other side of the floor, chunks of concrete flew past her as the entire building shuddered. A particularly large piece of debris grazed past the side of her head, and that's the last she remembered . . . .

## Chapter 5

"CAT!" Tess shouted into her cell phone. Everyone in the precinct turned to look at her. She didn't care. Her best friend and partner was in serious trouble. Then the floor shook. It wasn't strong like the first time, but she knew instantly what it was. "*Oh no.*"

Muted confusion turned to shouting in the room, then someone turned the TV screens to a local news channel. "Breaking news: We're just getting word that there's been an explosion in Midtown," a frazzled anchorwoman said, one hand pressed to her earpiece and the other to the desk behind which she sat. It was clear she'd felt the tremor herself and would rather be anywhere else than there.

Tess didn't wait to hear more. She punched Gabe's number again. "What's the situation?"

"We were able to get most everyone out before the west side of the building buckled," Gabe answered, his voice not as calm and smooth as it usually was. "They're still doing a head-count now, but it could take a while. The area is a mess."

"Where's Cat?" Tess practically yelled. Gabe had gone into a coughing fit after answering and she wasn't sure he felt the full impact of her question. "Gabe! Catherine—*did she get out?*"

"What? Where was she? I haven't seen her."

Another large crash could be heard through the phone, followed by more screams.

“Did you try her cell? She may be on the other side of the building. I can’t see everyone from here.”

The wail of more emergency vehicles racing to the site could be heard outside the precinct walls. “She was in the basement just before the explosion, and now she’s not answering! That’s it. I’m headed there right now!”

“Tess, wait. You’re injured. This is not the place for you. Catherine probably dropped her phone in her hurry to get out. I’m sure she’s fine. I’ll look around for her, but you should call Vincent.”

Vincent. Oh, God. Of course. That was the logical thing to do. And if he’d learned what happened, he may already be on his way, but she needed to be certain. She hung up her call without a good-bye and immediately dialed his cell. No answer. She tried again. No answer again. Frustrated, she dialed JT. He might be in class, but she didn’t care. He answered on the second ring.

“JT!”

“I heard it.”

“I can’t reach Vincent and we think Catherine may have been in the building when it started to come down! Can you find him? I’m scared. I’m really, really scared.”

“I’m already on my way to the club right now. I’ll find him.”

\*

JT burst through the front door of the club, phone to his ear, only to find Vincent sitting on the couch next to his buzzing cell, completely still.

“Why aren’t you answering your phone?!”

At that, Vincent slowly turned his head. “It’s happening again, JT. Nine eleven.”

JT felt a chill at the odd way his friend spoke, almost trance-like. “No, it’s not! This—this is *completely* different!” He usually refrained from physically touching Vincent, just because it wasn’t wise to surprise a beast, even when dormant, but this time he had no choice. He grabbed his shoulder. “You need to wake up – find Cat! She could be trapped in that building! Vincent? Did you hear me? Cat’s in danger!”

That seemed to shake him out of whatever faraway place he had gone to. He stood up. “*What?*”

“Tess thinks Cat might still be inside. She called in the warning, but the first explosion happened right after that.”

Before JT could even sneeze, Vincent sped to the coat rack and flew out the door. "Wait!" he shouted to the now-empty room. "At least take your *phone* . . . ."

\*

"Keep everyone back! The building is unstable."

"What about rescue operations? There may still be people trapped inside! Not everyone has been accounted for."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lowan, sir, but we just can't risk more lives. Not yet. Not until the building's stabilized."

Gabe turned away from the man in frustration. He was only doing his job, but Catherine's life was in danger. He thought for a moment he would beast out—he could feel the rush of fear and adrenalin, but then nothing. The beast was dead, and with him all of his strength. He was as useless as anyone else. He swore and slammed a palm into the side of a waiting fire engine while pacing back and forth. Checking his cell didn't help. There were no incoming calls, just as there hadn't been two minutes ago.

Suddenly someone grabbed his arm and twisted him around. Vincent!

"*Where is she?*"

"Oh, thank God, Vincent! We're not certain. We can't reach her phone. It isn't working. Tess said she entered the basement, we think from here." He flattened his copy of the building blueprints over the hood of a nearby police cruiser and pointed to the end of the building with the access door. "The explosion happened here." He indicated the side opposite of Cat's entrance. "This building is the same layout as the one that came down the other day."

"It is?"

"Yes. Exactly. Now we know why—that incident was a test run in preparation for this. From what Tess said, we believe it's possible Cat foiled the terrorists from setting off the explosions on this end—that's why the building only buckled, not fell, so she could be trapped by debris in that first sector. But the building is too unstable—NYFD won't let anyone near it." The two men looked into each other's eyes for a moment. They both understood the situation. "I can't ask you to risk your life—"

"You're not," Vincent said flatly. "*Catherine* is in there."

"We *think*. No one's seen her come out."

"That's all I need to know. She's still alive. I'd know it if she wasn't. I'm going to find her."

"Wait!" Gabe said, as Vincent started to turn away. "Put this on." He handed him a heavy emergency responder's jacket and hat pulled from the nearby engine. "You won't be able to get within a hundred feet of the building without it."

Vincent put it on quickly, making sure no one was looking their way. "Thanks."

Gabe stopped him one more time. "Just find her."

"I will."

Another low rumble was heard, followed by a crash and another cloud of dust. Vincent jerked around. "Catherine!" he yelled, and ran off into the cloud of ash and debris.

\*

The darkness made his entrance into the building invisible. Not that anyone was expecting someone to try to get *into* it at that moment. Moving through the wreckage was another thing entirely. The doorway on the far corner was actually fairly accessible, bolstered by the closely placed double walls of the through-way. Getting passed the inner doorway was a bigger challenge. He stopped a moment. Was this what his brother's experienced every time they went on a rescue—the claustrophobic darkness and pockets of debris to move around and through? He silenced the thought before it began. There was no time or room for those worries. Every second counted. He sized up the situation. Since one side of the building had buckled and partially caved in on itself, it skewed the rest of the framework. The door was pinched on one end.

He grabbed the handle and allowed his fear to push the adrenalin through his veins—the same fear that had enabled him to rip Heather's car door off its hinges the night Catherine had been shot after the wedding. In seconds his strength tripled and he jerked the metal door out of the way and into what was left of the hall.

"Catherine!" he shouted again, moving carefully through the decimated rooms. Chunks of plaster, concrete and wiring hung at odd angles from the walls and ceiling. Amazingly, some of the emergency lighting still functioned in places. He didn't need the light, himself, but it would be better for her.

Vincent stopped to get his bearings and focus. The sirens were still far too loud, but he knew if he concentrated he could isolate that heartbeat he loved so much. *Where was it?*

To be honest, he'd lied to Lowan. His connection to Catherine was strong but it wasn't psychic; just a gut feeling. But now his own heart was thundering so loudly, he didn't know if he could do it—if he could separate the two. He'd never felt so scared.

“Please, Catherine. I’m coming. Wait for me.” It was the same prayer he’d written in his journal what seemed like ages ago now: *wait for me*. Then, he’d just wanted her to see him as her future, her soul mate. It never occurred to him that in such a short time he’d be praying for her to live long enough for him to find her.

The building shuddered again, then *BOOM!* The west side settled again, pulling the rest of the building its direction. The doorway he’d just come through was now a twisted wall of plaster and steel. He was now as trapped as she.

For a moment the floor moved as if he were on water. Vincent stood stock still and waited for the shaking to stop and he could determine the best way forward. A thick cloud of dust and insulation fibers settled on floor around him, and as he concentrated on the sound each particle made as it landed, he heard it—a very faint heart beat—and one he knew intimately well.  
*Catherine!*

Wanting to hurry but aware that any and every movement he made could affect the precarious balance of the structure, he painstakingly moved aside debris as he worked his way deeper into the belly of the beast. Eventually, he found his way to the mostly buried basement floor, or what was left of it. “Catherine! I’m coming for you! Don’t give up on me!”

Climbing down into a hole, he entered a larger opening, one end of which was truncated abnormally. Two large pillars still stood, wires and plastic explosive packs once wrapped around their centers left abandoned, unfinished. A body at the base of one of them made his breath catch. He ran over to the dust-covered person and almost cried in relief that it was male. And had been dead for a while. No, the heartbeat he heard was definitely Catherine’s. She had to be close.

He scanned the area again, this time looking for heat signatures. *There*. Nearly invisible to the naked eye, a small body covered in plaster and fragments of wood and concrete lay at one end of the room, almost completely still. No. Her chest still rose and fell, though weakly. “Catherine!”

Vincent dropped to the floor beside her gently brushing the ash and other debris from her body. “Hey! It’s me! I’m here! I’m here, now. I’m here, love.”

“Vincent?”

“Yes. I’m here. No, don’t try to move. Shhh. Everything’s going to be all right. I’m going to get you out.”

“I hear your voice. Am I dreaming? I can’t see you.”

“It’s dark. Just rest your eyes. I’m here now and everything’s going to be fine.”

She coughed. “The building . . . is unstable,” she breathed. “It isn’t safe.”

“It’ll be fine. I’m not leaving you, not now that I finally found you.”

As he spoke, he surreptitiously examined her. A warm, sticky spot on one side of her head told him she’d been hit by something large. It was a wonder she was still conscious. Head wounds always bled a lot. He reminded himself of that and tried not to panic as he calculated how much blood had seeped onto the floor. At least she seemed alert, albeit weak.

Running a hand along each limb, he checked for fractures. One ankle disappeared behind the wall she lay next to. He couldn’t tell if it was crushed or worse, and that worried him.

“My leg . . . I think it’s trapped.”

Vincent eyed the situation. It wasn’t good, but he didn’t let it show on his face. “Are you in pain? Does your foot hurt?”

She frowned in the darkness. “No. Not really. Just can’t move it.”

“Don’t worry about that now.” He felt her hands—ice cold. He pulled off the emergency jacket and carefully covered her with it, tucking the edges underneath her where he could. The building creaked loudly again, reminding him of just how precarious a situation they were in.

“I’m going to step away from you for just a minute.”

“Don’t leave me.”

“I’m not. I’m not. I’m just going to move some debris, see if I can stabilize the area around us. I won’t go far.”

“Okay.”

He started moving heavy chunks of metal and concrete—anything he could budge—bracing the ceiling and piling it around them to create a shelter of sorts over her should any other portion of the walls decide to collapse in on them. The barricade should buy them precious time, anyway.

Once that was done, he laid down next to her.

“Did everyone get out?” she asked, her voice very faint.

“Everyone else. Well, except for the guy in the corner there, but I think that was your doing.” He smiled.

“There were four. I tried to stop them from setting off the charges, but I was too late.”

“No. You did fine. And you saved hundreds of people.”

“Good. That’s all that matters.”

“No. What matters is getting *you* out now.” He brushed the dust off her dry bottom lip. “Why did you have to be so brave?”

“What?”

He’d asked it with more anger in his voice that he’d intended and she picked up on that. He moderated his tone. “You could have sent someone else in. You didn’t have to do this yourself.”

“No time. I was the only one nearby.”

And she wouldn’t hesitate to do what was necessary. That was just who she was. He tightened an arm around her.

“There was no reason for me to ask someone else—” She went into a coughing fit again, and he heard her heartbeat jump erratically as she did.

“I know. And you wouldn’t. But now, you see, we have this.”

Her eyelids fluttered open. “Vincent. I can see the situation.” Enough light from a battery-powered emergency light at the far side of the room gave the wall she was next to an eerie white glow. “If you can just move that pillar—”

“I can’t move it. The whole ceiling will collapse.”

“Oh.” She lapsed back into silence.

“It’s okay. We’re just going to have to wait for help, that’s all. It may take some time. They have to remove some of the structure above us first.”

“I see. Why do I feel so weak?”

“You’re hurt, and trapped. I think you hit your head.”

“Or *something* hit my head. I think I can feel all of my bones.”

“That’s probably a good sign.”

“I don’t know about that. I may have a broken rib or two. It hurts to breathe.”

As long as you *can* breathe.

“I’m . . . broken.”

“Just like one of your Christmas ornaments. We’ll just have to glue you back together when we get out.”

“All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Catherine back to—”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“You don’t need to sugarcoat this for me. If I’m getting out of here, it’s going to be without my leg.”

“You *are* going to get out of here. And I’m not going to let that happen. Catherine, trust me.”

“Oh, Vincent. I do trust you. With all my heart. But even *you* can’t turn water into wine. Not this time.”

“I can and I will.” He kissed her fingers. “I lost my brothers this way. I’m not about to lose you, too.”

“I’m glad you’re here.”

He searched her face in the darkness. “I’m not leaving you.”

Another shudder and crash. In the depths of the building, it sounded horrendously loud. Vincent automatically rolled to cover her until the shaking stopped. His bolstered walls still stood. That was good, but how long they would be trapped didn’t bear thinking about.

\*

“Where’s Vincent?”

Gabe swung around at the question, the irritation in the voice so familiar. “Tori. When did you get here?”

“Is everyone all right?” Blaise asked by her side, a look of concern on his face.

The couple stood at the edge of the roped off area a little ways away from the bustle of emergency workers and police. Gabe abandoned the makeshift shelter, which was the center of the rescue operations, and headed over to where a dozen by-standers waited anxiously in the falling snow. He ducked under the tape and pulled them aside.

“He’s in there, isn’t he?”

“He went in after Catherine.”



"How long ago?"

Gabe looked at his watch. "It's been a couple of hours."

"And he hasn't called anyone? I just heard another crash. What if he's hurt?!"

Blaise rubbed her arm, soothing her. "They'll be okay," he said, subtly adding Catherine to her concern.

Tori ignored him, her eyes hard on Gabe's.

"I tried his cell," Gabe told them. "JT said he left it at the club. Catherine's isn't working."

"Then let's go. Why are you just standing there?"

"Tori, I can't let anyone else go in. It isn't safe. The last thing we need is another body to have to search for."

It was a bad choice of words and he cringed. "If Catherine is in there," he spoke more quickly, "Vincent will find her; you know he will."

"Then why hasn't he come out?"

"He probably got trapped by that last implosion. But I'm sure he's fine. We have to trust him. They're bringing in some heavier equipment to remove the debris, but it's going to take a while; these operations are delicate. Everything needs to be done very carefully. Not doing so could cause another collapse."

His words weren't having the desired effect. A yellow glow was starting behind her eyes. Without being able to see it, Blaise seemed to instinctively know. He put a hand to her cheek. "Hey. Hey, it will be okay, Babe. They'll get out. Let's walk. They're doing everything they can here. We just need to be patient."

She calmed, fractionally. Gabe sighed in relief. "I'm going to get Tess. Why don't you two come with me? We'll pick up JT and find a place to wait this out."

He could see Tori was still conflicted, but Blaise's soft words of encouragement helped move her toward the car.

\*

“Catherine?”

“ . . . so . . . cold . . . ”

Her voice sounded weaker than before. Other than the periodic crashes, which jerked her awake in fear, the last hour she'd been falling in and out of consciousness, a bad sign. He had to keep her talking. “Catherine, they're almost here. I can hear them above. It won't be long. Please. You need to stay with me.”

“I'm trying, but I feel so . . . tired.”

“I know, sweetheart. But you have to fight it. You're doing really, really well.”

Her heartbeat was weaker, too. He snuggled closer as fear for her kept him talking. “Do you remember when you showed up at the warehouse that second time?”

A glimmer of interest had her eyelashes fluttering open again. “When you . . . yelled at me?”

He laughed. “Yeah. Some good that did, huh? You weren't afraid. I was so amazed.”

“I was . . . afraid. Just . . . tried not to show it.”

He smoothed a lock of hair away from her face. “You're the bravest person I know.”

She said nothing for a long moment and he thought she might have fallen back asleep. “When we're together . . . I feel . . . strong.”

Tears formed in his eyes. He remembered the first time she'd said that to him. It was just after they'd declared their feelings for each other and decided, despite everything, they wanted to be together. Not that things had gone smoothly after that, but it was true: stronger together. And right now, he had to be her strength.

His throat grew tight. “Then be strong for me right now. Because I need it.”

She fell silent again for a long moment. Then, “Vin . . . cent?” Her voice was just a whisper.

He leaned over her, their faces very close. “Yes, sweetheart? I'm here.”

Suddenly, her lips touched his. The effort that had taken make her heartbeat fluctuate dangerously once again.

“Let me . . . go.”

For a moment he was speechless. It was how they always ended their lovemaking, when she wanted to drift off to sleep. She would sweetly ask permission. *As if he would ever deny her.* She was so selfless in their physical relationship. But this wasn't sleep she was asking for. "Catherine. I can't. *Not tonight.*"

"So . . . tired."

"Just a little while longer, I promise. Please don't leave me here alone. Don't leave me."

Through the night, he'd kept up the conversation, rubbing her limbs at intervals, trying to keep the blood pumping through them, but she'd grown weaker as the hours passed. He honestly didn't know how much longer either of them could keep it up.

Now, she whispered, "I . . . love you," and finally drifted off. This time, he was unable to rouse her, even for a moment. That heartbeat. It was floundering. Fading.

"No. *Catherine!*" He shook her as hard as he dared. "Catherine, please!" What else could he do? He searched the darkness, looking for answers. She needed medical help *now*, not hours from now when the rescue workers finally reached them.

Frantic, he pushed the jacket aside and searched for the buttons on her blouse and tore them open. He laid his hand on the skin above her heart and pressed gently, willing her to live--her heart to beat--as if just doing so would keep it going. Amazingly, after a few moments, her heartbeat strengthened. Just a little, but enough. He pulled the jacket back over her but left his hand where it was. *Please, God . . .*

## Chapter 6

"What are we doing here?"

Gabe counted to three and reminded himself that she was as worried about the situation as everyone else, but Tori's voice grated.

"We're waiting and watching." Tess nodded toward the big screen TV over the bar which was running non-stop coverage of the building collapse. They were the only customers left at the tiny restaurant within blocks of the site. Besides the bartender, a lone waitress and a bus boy idled around, their anxious gazes also tuned toward the screen as they went about their jobs.

"You don't even know if they're alive."

"They're *alive*," JT said, emphatically.

"It's been hours and it's still snowing."

"That's better than raining, actually," Gabe put in.

"How so?" Tori asked, that permanent scowl still on her face.

"Water runs down. With the building open like it is, if it was raining, you'd be able to add drowning to everything else working against them." At her expression, Gabe sighed. *Nope. That didn't help things.* The look Tess gave him had 'shut up' written all over it.

Just then an announcer came on the screen with inset pictures. "We just got word that a third body has just been removed from the structure. They aren't releasing any names at this time, but did say it was a male in his thirties—"

"Oh, my God!" Tori started breathing hard and everyone at the table turned toward her.

"The man is believed to be the missing kitchen worker, according to sources," the newscaster continued, to everyone's tremendous relief.

"See. It isn't him. It isn't Vincent." It was Blaise who came to the rescue this time. "Babe, come on. Let's go for that walk." He pulled Tori up by an arm. "This could take all night. You need to work off your anxiety."

Amazingly, she didn't balk and followed him out. Tess, JT and Gabe all watched them leave.

"What was that all about?" Tess finally asked the room in general.

"She's understandably upset. We all are."

"With good reason. Our best friends are buried under tons of concrete!" JT added.

"There are plenty of places in that building that they could survive in. Let's not go there."

"Tori's not the only one ready to beast out," Tess quipped solemnly, then turned her thoughts back to the couple that just left. "Is . . . is Blaise safe?" The young blind man's presence had been a surprise to her when she'd arrived at the scene, but JT had filled her in.

Gabe shook his head. "Safer than most," he said cryptically, his gaze on the door through which they'd left, but his thoughts had turned inward. "At first I thought Blaise was like a shiny new toy to her, or a puppy," he murmured. "But now I'm wondering who the real pack leader is." He shrugged. "He seems to have a positive effect on her, in any case. I wouldn't worry."

\*

Blaise hung on for dear life as Tori pulled him down street after street at a breakneck pace. Five blocks away he managed to yank her to a halt. “Stop! I may be good, but I’m not *that* good. Your faith in my ability to stay upright is endearing, but sheesh, woman, are you trying to kill me? One trip and I’ll fall headlong onto the concrete, and then where would I be? Kersplot. Ruined. You have a lot going for you, but this gorgeous face of mine is all I’ve got.”

She pulled them into a narrow alley out of sight of any traffic and set him against the wall, releasing his arm.

“You don’t understand,” she said, turning away.

Blaise sighed. “I know you’re worried about him. Vincent. But he’s going to be all right, Babe. Trust me.”

She spun around. “Why should I trust you? You know nothing. You can’t turn back time or-or pull that four-story building off of him, now can you?”

“No. Superman I’m definitely not. But you have to have faith,” he answered, still a light tone to his voice. “Just believe it. You said Vincent’s a soldier. He knows how to survive. Besides, bad things don’t happen to heroes; this much I know.”

She scoffed. *If only he really knew.* “You’re an idiot, you know that?”

“Yeah. But I’m a likeable idiot.” He flashed her a grin full of straight, white teeth.

God, he was cute. One corner of her mouth tipped up, despite herself. But joy was fleeting.

“All the people I’ve ever put faith in are dead, okay? Now, the only man I can really relate to may be, also!”

“Wait. What? Vincent? Honey, I don’t mean to make you feel bad, but isn’t the guy a little old for you?”

“You just don’t get it!”

Blaise pushed off the wall and faced her. “So you said. What is it I don’t understand? Because I thought you were *my* woman and you and he were just friends. Is there something going on between the two of you—”

“No!” She paced away. “No, okay? Nothing . . .” As she heard herself say it, Tori felt the impact of her own words. It was true. There was absolutely *nothing* between her and Vincent except for their jacked-up DNA, and even *that* wasn’t exactly the same. As much as she’d hoped there would be, he had made it clear some time ago that she wasn’t for him. But she still needed him—alive.

An overwhelming feeling of fear threaded all the way through her body and pushed its way to the surface. "Dammit!" she shouted. They were in an industrial area with no one around and she let go. Up-ending a nearby industrial-sized garbage bin, she sent it end-over-end down the alley in a banging roll.

The surge had been strong but brief, and as soon as she came down off of it, she realized her mistake. She looked over at Blaise. He hadn't moved. Oh, God!

"Feel better now?" he asked softly.

Had she growled, as well? Oh, what had she done? She looked around for some way to explain it, but there was none—no one else to blame it on this time. They were completely alone and he knew it.

She approached him carefully. He was biting his lip as if in indecision. Yeah, he'd made a mistake in hooking up with her. A *big* one. Now it was time to pay the piper. "Blaise . . . I'm—I'm sorry you had to see that," she whispered. *Crap*. "I—I mean—"

"Forget about it," he said automatically. "So I was right. You *are* Super Chick."

"It's not like that—not what you think."

"Oh? What do I think?"

She looked up at him, at those light colored eyes that held so much light and life in their dead gaze. "I have no idea."

"That's right. So don't go judging me. I may be blind, but I'm not stupid."

It was *he* who should be judging *her*! And yet not only had he stayed, he showed no fear.

"I'm a . . . a m-monster." As difficult as it was to say, it felt good to get it out finally.

"Really? Because that's not what *I* see."

Her head snapped up. "I don't mean to be rude, but you don't see anything."

"Au contraire, my love," he said softly. "I see much more than you think." He sighed and looked away, though what he saw in his minds' eye she couldn't imagine. "That's why it bothers you so much, isn't it? With your strength you could help, but they can't know."

Tori shrugged, then realized he couldn't see that either. "That's why Vincent went in. He's . . . he's like me."

That brought his head back around. “*Seriously?* A Dynamic Duo! Sheesh, now it all makes a crazy kind of sense. So you and he are—”

“No. We’re not. He only has eyes for Catherine.”

They way she spewed out the name told him everything. “Ah.”

“There’s no ‘ah’ about it. If anything happens to her—”

“So you *are* concerned about the good detective.”

She looked at him belligerently. “If she dies, it will kill him, don’t you get it? And then I’d really be alone! And there’s not a damn thing I can—”

“Stop.” In a flash of movement, he covered her mouth with his before she could go on. She struggled briefly but gave up and leaned into him, soaking up his reassurance like a sponge. Not since she’d come into her strength had she felt so weak.

Blaise spoke to her with his lips, his tongue, coaxing her to change her perspective, to hand over her fear to him. The tears in her voice had made him reach out. Now he tasted them on her cheeks and eyelashes. It took some work but she finally gave in, trusting him. He wrapped his arms around her. “I may lack superpowers, sweetheart, but I’ve got a good shoulder to cry on. And you won’t be alone. I promise. I’m not going anywhere.”

Tori slowly relaxed. There was nothing she could do but pray . . . and be thankful for someone in her life who understood. She gradually unthreaded her fingers from his wavy blond hair, but she remained in the circle of his arms.

“So none of the others are like you? Your other friends . . . ?”

“No.”

“But they know.”

“Yes.” And now he did, too.

When he said nothing else, she looked up at him. “Aren’t you going to ask any more questions?”

He shook his head. “Not tonight. You’ll tell me when you’re ready. Just let me hold you.”

An unfamiliar sting hurt the back of her eyes. She hadn’t cried in a long time. “Don’t let go.”

“Never.”

Long minutes later they sat together on a dry inset staircase, out of the wind and weather. “Why are you always so happy, by the way?”

Blaise turned his empty gaze toward the alleyway. “What’s the point in being angry? When I choose to be happy, I’m in control of my life. No one else.” He turned to her. “Who’s controlling you?”

She shrunk back, surprised at the question. “No one.”

“You need to do better than that. Even I can see the chip the size of Texas on your shoulder.”

It took her some time to respond. When she did, her voice was low. “There’s a man—he did this to us. I wanted to make him pay. But I can’t even do that right.”

“Will going after him change anything?”

Again, she was surprised by the question. Of course it would! Wouldn’t it?

“I mean, if you . . . hurt him, will it make you better? No, don’t answer that—it isn’t really a question. You know the answer already.”

“It would feel really good.”

“For a while. But revenge has a bitter after-taste, believe me.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Because I *know*.” He stood up, suddenly uncomfortable. He’d never told a soul.

“Blaise?”

“I lied about how I became blind, okay? It wasn’t some accident at birth.”

Tori gasped. How could Vincent not have known that? Or did he? She hadn’t realized she’d said the question aloud until he answered her.

“I’ve told that story so long I sometimes forget it isn’t true. My own father did it. He was an alcoholic, abusive, and a total jerk. He treated my mom like crap and me worse. I guess he didn’t like the burden we were. Why she stayed with him, I’ll never know. She was weak, but she was still my mom. When I was fourteen, I finally found the guts to stand up to him. For all my bravado, I was pretty dumb, and no match for him, but I was scrappy . . . and afraid to lose. We got in a fight. I don’t remember much of it. I must have lost, though, because all I know is at some point he hit me with something really hard.



They said the blow caused retinal detachment in both my eyes. It's something that can be fixed, but only if you get treated immediately. I didn't. When I woke up, we were on a train—just my mom and me, and it was days later.”

Tori searched his face. He spoke without inflection, as if he were reciting facts, not a devastating life event. “What happened then?”

“She took care of me as well as she could, but life was hard. One day she simply didn't come home. I think it was just all too much for her. I learned some time later she died.

“I'm so sorry, Blaise.”

He shrugged. “I'm just sorry I wasn't with her. Too many bad choices, and some of them mine.”

“But your father—”

“After a while, I got my feet on the ground, got some public aid, and at nineteen I had one goal in life. I went looking for him.”

“Revenge.”

“It isn't as sweet as you think.”

“You found him?”

“In a bar. Where else? He didn't even recognize me, but he was still a mean bastard willing to take advantage of anyone, even a young blind kid. I flashed some cash at him, acted naive, and lured him to an alley where he thought he'd make an easy buck. But I was prepared. I'd spent the last five years of my life doing nothing but working out—getting strong—and planning my revenge. Blind as I was, he was no match for me. I beat the crap out of him until he begged for mercy. That's when I told him who I was.”

“That must have been a shock.”

Blaise laughed. “Wish I could have seen his face. All I know is, one minute he was laughing—in a humorless kind of way—the next he was gasping for air. He died of a heart-attack at my feet.”

“At least you didn't kill him.”

“I might have. I don't know. The point is, dead or alive, I was still *blind*.” He turned as if to look at her.

“You rid the world of a miserable human being. That's all I want to do.”

“And another one will take his place. It doesn’t end, Tori. You can’t fix the world. Bad people exist out there and they always will. You can only control what you become. Who do you want to be? It isn’t easy to give up your anger, but it’s the only real way to beat him.”

“How can I do that?”

“By living. By conquering this thing, despite what he’s done. See, I’m pretty smart, aren’t I?”

The familiar cockiness was back in his voice. That kiss and their revelations to each other seemed to have empowered him. She should knock him down a notch, but she didn’t have the heart.

“You’re still an idiot.”

“But a loveable one. Come. Let’s go back to the bar. It’s freezing out here. Maybe there’s been some good news about Vincent and we can all go home.”

“And Catherine. I really don’t want her to die.”

He left an arm around her. “I know.”

\*

It was with the first rays of morning light that Vincent noticed the change. Or was it morning? There seemed to be more light in the crumbled space to see by now. The bulldozer’s grind and screech had been their constant companion through the night, but now the sounds were louder with voices mixed in. When had he fallen asleep? And for how long? He quickly turned to look at Catherine. The light illuminated her face in a deathly pallor, but her heart still beat. “Catherine?”

He couldn’t rouse her. “Catherine?” Sometime in the early morning hours she had slipped into unconsciousness. Even if he he’d been able to keep his eyes open, he knew there was nothing he could have done to prevent it. Her body was simply shutting down. That didn’t make the pain any more bearable.

He tried for several more minutes to awaken her, desperate to see those eyes on his again. Nothing. Despite the warmth of his body next to hers, she was still so cold. He touched her face, her hands, her hair—willing her to hang on. He sent one last prayer heavenward.

Minutes later he heard them break through the wall. Time was short. “In a few minutes, Catherine,” he whispered to her unconscious form, smoothing a handful of dust-spattered hairs away from her face, “I’m going to have to step away from you, okay? I don’t want to, but I won’t be far and it won’t be for long.”

When she didn’t respond, he scanned her broken body once more then searched her face.

She'd stayed with him so long already. God wouldn't be so cruel as to take her from him so close to rescue, would he? Fear for her made it difficult to breathe. "The people are here to rescue you, sweetheart, and then you'll be safe and warm again. Please . . . keep fighting. For us. For me."

He didn't want to withdraw the insulated jacket he'd wrapped her in, but he needed to hide before they entered the room. He waited until the last second, not wanting to expose her to the cold, then gently unwrapped her and skittered away under the cover of shadows to the darkest corner of the room.

As soon as they broke through, he fell in behind them as one of the crew. If they didn't see her immediately, he would be there to point her out.

\*

"You should go home. You look pretty beat."

Tess looked at JT. "Thanks a lot. You don't look so good yourself."

She always had a way of making him sound like an idiot. "I just meant, you should get some rest." He nodded toward her leg and the set of crutches leaning against the side of the bar. "I'll call you if there's any change."

"Yes, Tess," Gabe agreed. "No need for all of us to hold vigil. Who knows how long it will take? When they bring her out, you'll be the first to know. You'll want to be well rested."

"How could I possibly sleep?" she asked passionately. "I am *not* leaving here! If there's any chance—" An anchorwoman interrupted their conversation and they all turned to the TV.

"We've just learned that a woman has been found alive inside the basement of the building, and the emergency team is bringing her out!"

The four of them all screamed at once.

"We believe this will be the missing detective, Catherine Chandler," the anchor continued, "who is thought to have been instrumental in alerting the Indian delegation of the threat and getting most of the people out of the building before the first explosion."

Tess hopped up and down on one leg as they all did a happy dance, then they followed the action on the screen. Catherine, wrapped head to toe and unmoving, was carefully being carried out to an awaiting aid unit in the driving rain.

"She may be hurt, but she's alive," Gabe reassured them.

It was JT who frowned first. "What about Vincent? He has to be there, too!"

Tess and Gabe turned to him, their joy turning to concern. The devastation on his face was palpable. On the screen, a dozen or more yellow-jacketed rescue workers swarmed the scene. "JT—"

"Wait. There!"

"What?" There'd been no other announcements, no shout of another discovery. Gabe and Tess studied the screen, trying to see what he was so excited about.

"Behind that other guy, following the gurney—in the yellow jacket. That's Vincent!"

Sure enough, a tall, dark-haired man with a familiar gait followed closely behind and anxiously looked on as the team moved Catherine to the emergency vehicle.

"Let's go!"

\*

Vincent sat on the edge of the bed. He knew he shouldn't crowd her so, especially with her injured leg, but he couldn't help himself. The single chair supplied by the hospital in the tiny room was too low, and he needed to touch her. The monitors on the rolling table next to him streamed a constant chatter of beeps and pings, displaying her pulse and oxygen levels—all steady and within acceptable limits, if not tremendously strong—but it was the mesmerizing sound of her heartbeat that drew his constant attention. Catherine was still unconscious and not completely out of the woods yet, but it was induced now to enable her body to heal. Nevertheless, he kept up a constant dialog.

The others had long come and gone. He'd had to have Tess clear him to remain after visiting hours because he promised Catherine he wouldn't leave her side, and he intended to keep that promise no matter what. Since Tess was just as adamant and stubborn, they'd agreed to take shifts. Last he checked she slept now, curled up on a bench seat in the waiting room down the hall.

"When you asked me to let you go, I couldn't do it," he whispered. "I'm sorry, Catherine. I just couldn't. I need you too much." He looked at the foot they had set in a plaster cast. Thank heaven, she hadn't lost it. Even the doctors were amazed. The fracture would heal with time, and she was alive. That's all that mattered.

He ran a hand from her foot up her leg, the length of her arm, and then to her face, every inch of her precious to him. “You know, one day we’re both going to be old and gray and one of us might make that same request. Just telling you now, I won’t be able to do it then, either. You and me, we’re a team. We stay together. I just got you back. I’m not about to lose you again. So you fight, Catherine. Fight and become strong again because . . . I need you, sweetheart--your strength. Please come back to me.”

\*

“Hi. My name is Heather Chandler, and I understand my sister is here—”

“Heather?”

Standing at the nurse’s station, Heather swung around at the sound of Tess’s familiar voice. “Tess!” She leaned in to embrace her, then stopped short when she saw the crutch. “Oh, my God! Were you injured in this accident, too?”

“Oh. No,” Tess blushed. “Just slipped on some ice.”

“How is she? Where is she? I came as fast as I heard. Well, actually, I had trouble getting a flight out of the Bahamas where I was working an event, but Jason called and told me what happened, and I thought I was going to die waiting to get off the island. Then the snow caused my flight to be delayed. I came straight from the airport. Didn’t even take time to pack. I arrived with only the clothes on my back—”

Tess smiled. Only lightly snoozing on the uncomfortable bench, she’d recognized the high-pitched voice immediately. Heather hadn’t changed a bit. Bouncing on high heels and dressed to the nines, she was still as flighty and chatty as usual, although this time her nervous chatter was filled with anxious concern. “It’s fine. She’s fine. And you’re welcome to stay at my place tonight.”

“Oh, thank you! I hadn’t even thought past getting here. Where’s Cat?”

“She’s resting comfortably, but still unconscious. It’s medically induced, though, so no worries.” She hadn’t seen Vincent in hours. He’d no doubt sought his own bed long ago. She gave Heather directions to the room around the corner and limped back to her spot on the bench. It would be a good long while before Cat’s little sister would want to leave her side. She might as well try to make herself comfortable again.

\*

Heather counted the door numbers as she made her way down the silent hall. A few rooms were open and she could see patients resting in the low lights of the nightshift. Finally, she got to room 4E. The door was open but a privacy curtain had been pulled across the entryway. She took a deep breath and was about to push it aside when she heard a man's deep voice coming from inside.

Thinking a doctor or nurse was attending Catherine, she waited silently at the door for a moment and listened. What she heard took her aback. This was not the conversation of a doctor to a patient, but a man in pain.

Carefully, she peeled back an edge of the curtain and saw a dark-haired man leaning so far over her sister their heads nearly touched. With the proprietary way he held Catherine's hand, it was blatantly obvious he was no hospital worker. Though she really needn't have looked. She recognized that rough, deep voice right away. Vincent Zalansky.

Heather let the curtain fall back into place, hopefully unnoticed. His words to her sister were so personal she felt like she was intruding just listening to them. She was about to step away from the door when she heard him mention Tess. She barely had time to flatten herself against the wall when he threw back the curtain and walked out, never seeing her.

She waited for a count of ten then ducked into her sister's room. A half-hour later, Tess joined her.

"Is she still asleep? They said she might awaken any time now. I thought—"

"Vincent was with her before I came in—Vincent Zalansky—but she was still asleep."

"Oh." Tess's groggy brain searched for the correct response. Yes, Heather had met Vincent at one point, but that was a long time ago.

Heather shook her head. "I thought they broke up."

"Um. They did, actually. Then they reconnected recently, and . . ."

"I should have known. Jason never said anything to me, but I had the feeling he and Cat hadn't jelled like he'd hoped when he visited her over New Years. Now I know why. I didn't realize he was still around. He's 'ass,' you know."

Not wanting Cat to overhear their conversation, Tess pulled Heather outside the room.

"Cat might have something to say about that," she said, her voice low. "Listen, Heather, like it or not, Vincent is still around. And that's Cat's choice. He's saved your sister's life—and mine—more than once. And if you ask me, he's the only reason she's alive today."

"What do you mean? He rescued her?"

Tess considered before answering. "Sometimes when people have something to live for, they fight harder."

"You mean, because of him, she wanted to survive?"

"You'll have to ask your sister about that, but my guess would be yes."

\*

Two days later Catherine was awake and the subject of a lot of local interest. The fire chief was one of the first to greet her.

"I don't know how to thank you," she said humbly.

"From the sounds of it, you're the real hero here, Detective," the chief, a rosy cheeked man in his mid-fifties, patted her hand in a fatherly way. "You sounded the alarm that got those people out."

"I'm just sorry not everyone got out alive."

"One life lost is one too many in my book," he said, "but it could have been much worse. I'm more surprised you weren't another victim. Are you sure no one was down there with you?"

"What . . . do you mean? As in . . . an angel or something? Nope. It was just me and the terrorists. And they weren't exactly rooting for me to survive."

"Your body was a lot warmer than it should have been in those conditions. Strange. And the odd way you managed to be in an area so well protected. To be honest, I hadn't given you very good odds."

Catherine laughed and fished around for an appropriate response. "I'm sure stranger things have happened. I mean, I once thought I was saved by a mysterious beast. And well, we all know *that's* impossible . . ." She sobered. "I suppose I did feel a . . . presence with me."

He nodded, satisfied. "Indeed. Someone was obviously looking out for you."

*Yes, he was.*

\*

"You really don't have to carry me, you know. This cast is made to be walked on."

"Don't deny me the pleasure of holding you, smiling, in my arms once again," Vincent said, carefully stepping over the threshold to her apartment.

Her stomach did a funny little back flip at that remark. "Okay, but I don't need to be babied. I'm stronger than I look."

He set her gently on her feet. "Yes, you are, and every day I'm thankful for that."

"I even braved a whole room of reporters, you know. I just feel bad that I couldn't tell them how *you* saved me. Muirfield is gone, my father is locked up. Vincent, you don't have to hide anymore."

He shrugged, still holding onto her. "I felt it would create too many questions. Why was I there? How did I get in there? I did steal a rescue jacket, you know."

"Not really a criminal offense, given the circumstances, I don't think." She spread her fingers across his cheek. "I just know I couldn't have made it without you. Even the fire chief said the odds were not in my favor. You saved me, once again."

"As you've saved me more than once. Let's just call it even. In fact, let's call out for pizza."

She laughed. "I'm good with that, but you know Heather said she'd stop by this evening. I want you to stay, but—"

"But Heather is not really sold on me, so yeah. I get it. I'll order something in then go back to the club tonight."

"Maybe you could come back later tonight. You know, use the fire escape?"

His dimples deepened. "Hmm. Been awhile since I've done that. I've gotten used to being a front-door sort of guy now."

"I'll take you anyway I can get you. As long as you come."

"Then count me in."



## Chapter 7

"I found an extra pillow in the linen closet."

Catherine stopped writing and quickly closed the journal on her lap as Heather bustled into her room. As her sister tucked the cushion underneath her left leg and sat on the edge of the bed, she sighed. "Heath, I'm not an invalid, you know. Or bedridden."

"The doctor said you need lots of rest even though she cleared you to go home. I just don't want you to have a relapse."

"I'm not likely to have a relapse of a fractured ankle. I didn't fall; something fell *on* me."

"No difference." Heather crossed her arms, unwilling to give an inch. "Besides, this is not just about your ankle. You have broken ribs—"

"One; the others are just bruised."

"—you lost a lot of blood, and you hit your head. Stop trying to be the tough guy. You're not as young as you once were."

"Thank you. I feel so much better now."

"You're welcome. By the way, the refrigerator is stocked, I cleaned both bathrooms, and ran the dishes from last night. Oh, and I watered your plants."

No doubt more housework than she'd done in all the time they'd been roommates.

"Wow. Thank you. You know, I'll probably be back to work before your plane lands in the Bahamas."

Heather gasped.

"Just kidding! Good grief, you've become such a mother hen."

Her younger sister shook her head. "I'm trying to do my sisterly duty before I have to jet out of here. I feel so bad leaving now. You'd think this would qualify for some paid time off."

"Sister-sitting compensation?"

Heather grumbled. "Stupid company policies."

"You haven't been there long enough. I don't want you jeopardizing your job. Besides, if you stay another day or two, you'll go stir crazy and you know it. I'm *fine*. Really."

"It's just that . . . you should have someone taking care of you. I don't like the idea of you being here all alone. Tess is still limping around, herself. Maybe I should call that visiting nurse service—"

"*Heather.*" Catherine waited until she got her sister's attention. "I'm not going to be alone."

Heather blinked. "You're not? Oh. *Oh.*"

"Yes, oh. Trust me, you can go your merry way confident that I'll be in good hands—a doctor's hands, actually."

Heather opened her mouth to speak, then clamped her jaw shut.

"What is it? Have I finally shocked you?" Catherine asked.

Heather looked everywhere but at her. "No. It's . . . it's Vincent, isn't it? Vincent Zalansky. I saw him at the hospital."

"You did?" Tess said he'd come every day, but this was the first her sister had mentioned it. "And it isn't Zalansky. I made that up. It's Keller."

"It is?"

"Long story."

Rather than badger her about another lie, Heather just nodded. "I like Keller better. Anyway, he was leaving. He didn't see me. But I recognized him right away, even without the scar."

"Heath, I know I should have told you, but I really don't want to hear—"

"No, I wasn't going to say anything negative."

"Really? Because at one point you dragged me into an interrogation room to give me the third degree about him, if I recall."

"Not the wisest move on my part, I know. No, I was just surprised, that's all. I didn't realize the two of you had gotten back together. Tess said Vincent saved your life—more than once. And that, in a very real way, you're alive today because of him."

"She did?" Tess had come a long way, herself, in accepting Vincent in her life. "I'm sorry. I couldn't be honest with you about him before and I apologize for that."

"But now you can?"

The hopeful note in her sister's voice was not lost on Catherine. "Not . . . entirely. Just know that he's a good guy and he's in my life for a reason."

Heather nodded. "And I'm fine with that."

"You are?"

Reaching up to smooth a strand of hair away from Cat's face, Heather frowned. "You should cut it, you know. You always have hair in your mouth."

"Heather."

"Okay." She took a deep breath, then plunged in. "I may be young, but I consider myself something of an expert on relationships, you know. Seems I've been in and out of love a dozen times already. But at the hospital, . . . what I saw when he looked at you—and what he said—was deeper and more profound than anything I've ever felt for a guy. Or that anyone's ever felt for me. So I think I understand, now—maybe just a little—why you had a tough time staying apart. And why you and Jason didn't work out. Only one guy has ever turned your world on edge. And that's Vincent."

Catherine blinked, a curl of heat flooding her face. 'Turning your world on edge' was an apt description. Vincent wasn't a man of many words, but his simple 'I love you's could rock her world like nothing else. She didn't know what Heather had seen or heard, but she knew what he did to her own heart.

Curiosity made her ask. "What makes you say that?" It wasn't like her sister to be so perceptive.

"How does that song go? '*You're in my veins . . .*' It's not just that you were different from the moment you met him—which you were. It's that you could always let go—of the others. In fact, I used to envy your ability to do that. It was just you being you, but I thought it would never change. Then you met Vincent. They say there's always that one you just can't shake—who drives you crazy—but it's a crazy good, you know? That's Vincent for you, isn't it?"

Catherine felt her heart flutter inside her breast. "I guess you can't tell your heart what to do."

Heather smiled. "No. You can't. Love is blind and foolish and all things unpredictable. Cat, I just want you to know that I accept him. I accept you two together. And besides the fact that I owe him everything for saving my only sister, you have something rare and wonderful together. You don't have to worry that I'll go behind your back or try to wedge myself between you again." She reached out and took Catherine's hand. "I'm just happy you have someone in your life who loves you like that. Envious, but happy."

Catherine had to swallow a sudden lump in her throat. "Thanks, sis."

“Are you afraid?”

The question took Catherine aback. “What?” Just how much did Heather know?

“Love like that . . . can be a little scary. The harder you fall, the harder you *can* fall, if you know what I mean.”

*Unless you have wings.*

“I just don’t want to see you hurt.”

Catherine relaxed. Hurting they’d had plenty of already, but it was worth it. *He* was worth it, a thousand times over. “No worries there. I promise. I love you, Heather.”

“I love you, too.” Heather’s phone beeped just then, saving them both from blubbering. “Oh, no! Where has the time gone? I need to get going.”

“Is that your cab?”

“Yes. No, don’t get up. It’s not like I have any luggage. This is fine. Tess offered to take me to the airport, but she’s still babying her ankle.”

“Tell me about it. You should have seen us walking through the hospital ward together. Sad. I wish I’d gotten pictures. Between us we only have two good feet. The good news is, at least I’ll have some company on desk duty for a while.” She reached up for a last hug. Heather eagerly complied.

“I already miss you.”

“You, too.”

“But I won’t miss this weather.” She grabbed her purse off the floor and stood. “Sunshine and blue skies, here I come! I’ll mail this outfit back to you as soon as I get home, by the way.”

\*

Vincent had just turned the corner of the building adjacent to Catherine’s apartment when Heather stepped out toward an awaiting cab. It was now or never. As the cabbie opened the door for her, Vincent caught her eye. She turned as he approached.

“Vincent.”

“Hello, Heather.” He tucked both hands in his pockets. “Is Catherine—”

“She’s waiting for you.”

“Oh. Uh, thanks.”

“Your scar—it’s gone.”

He reached up, self-conscious. “I had it removed,” he said, shifting his weight. It was the first time he’d had to explain it. “Looked too menacing. Gave people the wrong idea.”

One corner of her mouth turned up. She fidgeted with her purse string. “I can see how that could happen. They did a great job, by the way. It’s as if it was never there.”

He rubbed a finger down the line of his right cheek and the dimple his scar used to cross, not sure what to say. When he’d awakened after Muirfield grabbed him, so long ago now, it had been erased—along with his memories. The memories he’d regretted; the scar, not so much.

“You really love my sister, don’t you?”

His lips opened in surprise. “With all my heart.”

“Good.” She threw her arms around him.

The hug was so unexpected, he had to take a step back to keep them both from tumbling.

Heather squeezed him hard. “Please take care of my only sister for me,” she whispered, then released him just as quickly. When she leaned away, she had tears in her eyes.

“I will.”

He waited on the street until her cab turned the corner, then walked to the back side of the building and looked up toward the lamp-lit bedroom window on the fifth floor and smiled. Front doors were so overrated . . . .

\*

Catherine sat with the lap desk on her knees. He would come soon, as he had every night since the accident, whether in the hospital or home, but Heather’s words had struck a chord and she needed to write. She had only pieces of memories from the night she spent on that cold basement floor, but she knew without a doubt she’d be dead if he hadn’t been with her.

She turned to a fresh page and picked up her pen. Every day felt like a miracle. If she had her way, they’d never be apart again. If only like were that simple.

Now it was her turn to tell him just what he meant to her . . . .

Vincent,

*Sometimes, when I wake up, I can't believe you're here. I turn my head and find your arm around me, where it's been all through the night, and I know how lucky I am. Blessed.*

*It took us a long time to get to this point, but I remember those early days like they were yesterday . . . days when all I wanted was to touch you, have you touch me. But I was afraid, afraid you might disappear if I made a sudden move.*

*But you were who I wanted from the very start. Like Heather said, I can't let go. We have something rare and wonderful.*

*When I think of the times I nearly lost you, I get all shaky inside. If you felt a fraction of that fear, I'm sorry. I suppose we are doomed to great heights and the lowest lows, because nothing in my experience has prepared me for what I feel for you. And nothing ever will. Heather got it right—scary. But love is a risk, and I'll risk it all for you, over and over and over again.*

*Sometimes I want to weep for everything you lost, everything you sacrificed. Then I remember those things also brought you to me, and I refuse to regret that for one second of time. God knows, I wouldn't be here now without you being all that you are.*

*I know you were afraid to lose me, but we have a bond that stretches across time and space. We'll never truly leave each other. You believe your attraction to me is something you can't help, but it goes both ways. I am unable to resist you in the same way. You're in every cell. It isn't physiological, but it's real.*

*With the way our lives are, anything could happen, but as long as I have breath, I want all my moments with you . . .*

Catherine had just finished penning the last line when the soft swooshing sound of the window frame being raised turned her head. She quickly closed the book, tucked it into the nightstand, and snuggled deeper into the bedding. Seconds later one long, lean leg stepped through the window and into the room. The rest of him quickly followed.

"Hey."

She smiled, and her own dimples shown. "Hey, yourself. The coast is clear."

"I know," he said.

"You saw Heather leave?"

"I not only saw her," he smiled, gently nudging her over so he could lay his full length beside her on the bed. He propped himself up on one elbow. "She gave me a hug."

"My *sister*?"

"Uh-huh. Kind of surprised me, too." He brought his smile to her lips. She kept him there for so long, she nearly forgot what they'd been talking about.

"Odd, but very nice."

"Heather or that kiss?"

She grinned. "I'm not sure. Maybe we need to try that again."

Long moments later, he finally lifted his head and looked down at her with those mesmerizing dark, beautiful eyes.

"Um. Are you staying?" she asked. He'd kept careful distance since the accident, much to her dismay. But the fact that he was on the bed was extremely encouraging. She felt a little tickle of heat run up her spine. "Because if you are, I insist you take off your jacket."

He blinked. "Oh. Yeah." Sitting upright immediately, he quickly deposited it over the back of a nearby chair.

"And your shoes."

He looked at her. "Of course."

"Of course."

He started to lean back down. She put a hand on his chest.

"Your, um . . . shirt?"

Vincent hesitated a second, then peeled it off and sent the shirt flying.

"And of course your—" she looked pointedly at his pants.

"Uh-uh-uh," he said, shaking his head and smiled when she looked crestfallen. "I can see where this is going. And it won't work. You're still too sore."

She frowned and felt her tender middle. The ribs were healing but she still woke in the night in pain.

"You see, the thing is," he said, his deep voice resonating against her neck where he nibbled. "I'm supposed to be *waiting* on you, not bothering you tonight. Just call me Nurse Betty. Can I get you anything?"

Her eyes tracked the length of his bare chest. His very, very muscular, sexy bare chest. Nurse Betty he was *not*, and she could think of several things she badly needed. "Why don't you let *me* worry about getting bothered? I am, after all, a lot tougher than I look."

"I know that, but I'm the professional here, and I say it's too soon."

"But if you're really here to do my bidding—"

"Within reason . . ."

"—then I insist. Socks!"

"Catherine . . ." He shook his head and realized the futility of fighting with her. He knew what she wanted. He pulled off his socks and slid his feet under the covers.

"Oh, thank you. Thank you."

Icy cold toes searched his out. "Ahhh! Your feet are so cold!"

"I know. That's what *you're* here for—to warm them up."

He snapped his fingers. "I knew there was a reason I stopped by tonight." He slowly let out the breath he'd sucked in. "But, to borrow a phrase from Blaise—hey, that rhymes!—'Sheesh, woman!' I don't think even your snowlady had toes that cold."

She giggled and burrowed down deeper, seeking his warmth. "She had on boots, remember? And it's just because I've been sitting around too much lately—inactive. I need some *exercise*."

She gave him such a look, he growled involuntarily. "You're going to be the death of me, you know that?"

"In a good way, I hope."

Running a hand down her healing ribs, he said, "Catherine, you need to heal."

"I'll be fine. Truly. We just need to be more . . . creative, that's all."

Creativity was not his strong point, especially when it had been so long. He couldn't help himself—he kissed her, long, hot and deep—but that was all. Keeping a firm arm across her, he carefully curved his body around hers.



She sighed and gave up. "You know, if you ever leave me, it better not be in winter, I'm telling you that right now."

He raised his head, the furrow between his brows deepening. She was only teasing him, but those words hit a tad bit too close to home. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Is that a promise, Dr. Keller?"

"Scout's honor. I'm holding you to the same. And that one goes in the box."

She smiled. "The promise box? That works for me."

\*

Tori Windsor rattled the steel door that separated her from Bob Reynolds. His nose deep in a book, he nearly jumped a foot off the bed when he looked up and saw her. There was a small measure of gratification in that, at least. She still had the ability to shake him.

"How's my daughter?" he demanded without preamble.

Odd that he expected her to know.

"I've been worried sick since I heard what happened, and they sent *you*?"

"I volunteered. Surprised?" She grinned evilly. "She's fine, by the way. A few broken bones."

Bob let out a frustrated breath. "Thanks for the update," he said sarcastically.

"She'll live. No thanks to you."

"What's that supposed to mean? I had nothing to do with that building coming down and you know it."

"Defensive today, aren't you? Sorry. I automatically lump murderers, terrorists, and maniacal monsters together."

"But not beasts?"

She growled low.

"Fine. Enough with the threats. What do you want from me? I already told you I can't give you any names."

“Oh, Bob, Bob, Bob,” Tori said, pacing in front of him. How she’d love to scratch those smart-aleck lips right off his face, but . . . nope, he wasn’t worth it. Blaise was right. It was getting harder and harder to hold onto her anger—because she no longer wanted to. But best not to let ‘Bob’ know that just yet.

“What do I want?” she asked, stepping close to the bars. “I want you to get down on your knees and thank whatever god you serve for stopping you from killing Vincent Keller!”

“And why would I ever do that?”

“Because you’re right. That building came down without the help beasts or any of the messes you created. But Catherine would be dead if it weren’t for him.”

“If that’s true, it’s because of the abilities I gave him.”

“You see, that’s how much you don’t know. As strong as he is, his strength wasn’t enough. It was their *love* for each other that kept her alive.”

His head swung around. “What are you talking about? My daughter might be fascinated by that monster, but she could never love him like that. Who could ever truly love a beast?”

The way he said it and ran his insulting gaze down her body made Tori’s eyes go wide. *Evil incarnate*. Catherine should thank her ridding the world of him once and for all. But instead of giving into her anger, she counted to ten. Blaise would be proud. “I guess you’ll have to ask Catherine that, won’t you?” *And maybe Blaise*.

Just thinking of him made her lose interest in the game. She straightened. Indeed. Who was the real monster here?

“Oh, that’s right. True love is something you only find in fairytales,” she said.

He frowned.

She walked out laughing.

\*

“What are you doing here? I didn’t expect you back to work so soon.”

Catherine looked up as Tess approached. She still had a slight limp but wasn’t using a crutch. “I got a note from my . . . doctor.”

Tess grinned slyly. “*Right*. I’m surprised he didn’t prescribe six more weeks of bed rest.”

Cat laughed. "Actually, I came to work to *get* some rest."

When Tess looked at her funny, she added, "Vincent has been . . . hovering."

"Well, I guess I can understand that. The man thought he almost lost you."

"He hasn't let me out of his sight for a minute since Heather left. And, well, . . . Vincent doesn't need much sleep . . ."

Tess's brows shot into her hairline. "TMI."

Catherine put a hand over her mouth. "I did not just say that out loud."

"But you *did*."

"Okay, that was perhaps a little misleading. Doctor that he is, he's been babying me to death—that's all."

"That's all?"

"And I could punch him for it, believe me."

Tess was about to reply when she caught movement over Cat's head at the top of the stairs. "Whatever you say. But you might want to douse the full body blush because our humble ADA just spotted you and he's headed this way."

"Great. Another hoverer."

Tess shrugged. "Give him a break. Vincent wasn't the only one extremely worried about you. And Gabe hasn't had the advantage of being with you every second since. He's kept a tight lid of his emotions, but he still cares."

Catherine nodded. "Right. I'll be gentle."

\*

"Thank God it's raining." Catherine sighed as she watched fat streaks of water dribble down the window pane.

"Wow. I never thought I'd hear you say that." Vincent sat with his leg up on the coffee table. Their movie over, he was busy picking out the last of the popcorn from a large bowl.

"Yes, well, it's been a long, cold winter. I'm tired of the snow. Oh. I wonder how long our snow people lasted." The cold temps had remained for so long, there were still drifts in the alleyways.

“However long it was, at least they went together,” he said.

She leaned her head on his shoulder. “A nice thought.”

“Tori and Blaise moved out, by the way.”

She lifted her head in surprise at the swift change in subject. “What? When? Where?”

“Not how and why?” He smiled. “Yesterday. Guess she found a brownstone across town. It’s a ground floor unit. Blaise wanted a penthouse, but Tori apparently didn’t think he could handle stairs.”

“Poor Tori.”

Vincent’s right eyebrow went up.

“If he can handle her, he can handle anything,” she added.

“I think you’re right.”

“Hopefully, one day she’ll figure it out.”

“Although it’s almost more entertaining if she doesn’t.”

“Good point.”

He laughed then slowly sobered. “It feels good, you know? They have each other.”

“Which means we don’t have to worry. We can have more of each other, too.”

“Most definitely. Speaking of which . . .” With strong arms he carefully lifted her onto his lap. “You okay?” He sought her with his eyes.

“Better than okay. This view is much more appealing.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“Can’t wait to get rid of this boot, though. It’s like dragging around an anchor.”

“You’re not the only one.”

Long fingers caressed her cheek, her jaw, the curves of her neck, then sought the neckline of her blouse where he proceeded to systematically undo her buttons.

“Um. What are you doing, sir? I thought it was still Prohibition.”

“It is. I’m just looking for your heart. It’s very precious to me, you know.”

“Well, you’ll have to tear through a few layers of skin to get much closer.”

“Mmm. This works for me.” He pressed his face to the gentle valley between her breasts where her silky skin was sweet and fragrant. Then his lips did their own searching.

“Um, Vincent?” she said, long minutes later, her breath catching.

“Yes, my love?”

“That isn’t my heart.”

He grinned against her. “Close enough.”

## **Chapter 8 - Epilogue – Six Weeks Later**

Vincent slid the key in the lock with one hand and twisted the knob, but before Catherine could cross the threshold, he scooped her up and into his arms.

“Vincent, you don’t need to carry me,” she laughed. “I’ve been walking all night. I can make it a few more feet.”

“Oh, you thought this was for *you*?” he smirked as he carried her into the apartment. “You did more walking tonight than you have in a long time,” he said, his face turning serious. “I know you’re tired.”

“My ankle’s strong. Truly. I was a good patient and took all of my doctor’s”—she looked up into his eyes with a smile of her own, “advice. The strengthening exercises must have really helped. I didn’t have any pain or discomfort tonight,” despite wearing heels for the first time in weeks. “I don’t need to be babied.”

“Indulge me, for once, would you?” With that, he took a deep breath and carefully lowered her legs. Then he slid her down his torso so tightly the hem of her dress caught on his clothes, giving him an even longer view of leg. He sucked in a deep breath.

"The symphony was really lovely," she said, still standing in the circle of his arms. "Thank you. I'll remember this night for a long time to come. And thank you for waiting until I got that boot off. I couldn't imagine walking into the theater with one high heel and one boot cast."

Vincent skimmed his eyes down the length of her, stopping to appreciate every inch, especially her long, silky legs, their bruising long gone. Thank God the fracture had been minor or she wouldn't be walking even now. She'd been lucky, but she'd also been strong. Her strength and resiliency always surprised him.

For some reason, when he showed up at her door, he'd expected her to be in a longer gown, but Catherine had chosen a thigh-length dress in emerald green that hugged her like a glove. It also sported an extremely enticing neckline—not something he'd seen her wear on too many occasions. To say he'd been pleasantly surprised would have been the understatement of the century.

"My pleasure," he murmured, walking her slowly backward toward her bedroom doorway.

"When the strings came in on the second movement, I just felt . . . transported."

He felt her intake of breath like it was his own. He was certain the orchestra had performed superbly, but her appreciation for it had drawn all of his attention.

"What was *your* favorite part?"

He lifted his head from where it had begun to seek out the fine hairs at her nape. She'd pinned up her long tresses for the event, but into a loose, soft swirl that left dozens of tendrils dangling. They'd teased him all evening. Now he couldn't wait to pull all of the pins and let it fall. He had to work hard to recall her question.

"Mine? Oh. The ending," he stated, emphatic.

"Hmm. Yes. So grand."

"No, I mean, that it *ended*."

She tilted him away from her. "You're serious? I thought you would have enjoyed it. Come on, you have to admit, the drums were absolutely intoxicating."

He tilted his head. "I wouldn't know. All I could hear was the beat of your heart."

Her breath caught. It was so like Vincent to say something so casually flippant and astoundingly romantic at the same time. "You could hear my heartbeat over that grand orchestra?"

“Like I said—distracting. Just like your neck.” He proceeded to place hot kisses there. “And your ear.”

The earrings she wore jangled against her skin as his warm breath swirled in and around her ear. She shivered—but not from cold. “Mmmm.”

They’d been circling each other for weeks. Stubborn man that he was, he’d played the saint and kept his hands to himself for the most part. Even at night. They’d curled together but that was all. His kisses, which he hadn’t denied her at least, were lovely, deep, and generously given, but she wanted more—so much more. He was trying to give her time to completely heal, she knew that. But enough was enough. As beautiful as it was to be cherished, she was frustrated as hell. With her cast finally off and her body whole again, she felt emboldened. Two could play this game.

Catherine ran her hands over his shoulders beneath his jacket, then pushed it back until it fell behind them on the floor. As good as the man looked in a suit, she was just about ready to rip it off him. Vincent hardly noticed.

“And here,” he continued, tracing her jaw line with his teeth and tongue, all the while maneuvering her slowly toward the bed.

She rewarded that action by popping open the buttons of his milk-white shirt, completely in tune with where he was going.

“Have I mentioned how distracting your legs are to me?”

“Hmmm. You’ve used that adjective already.” She’d been wearing sweats and flannel loungewear for weeks. What a pleasure it had been to soak in the tub, shave her legs and slip on a silky dress for the night. And pretty, strappy shoes. Now said shoes dangled in thin air as he suddenly lifted her.

“I have? How about tempting? Alluring? Tantalizing. Bewitching.” He punctuated each word with more hot kisses.

“Bewitching?” she asked.

“Enchanting.”

“Ooh, I like that one.”

As he wrapped her legs around him, he took the opportunity to slide his hands along their length and back again. That sent a jolt of electricity from the tips of her toes to the top of her hairline. She felt that little flippy thing happen again in her chest.

Vincent must have heard it, too. He lifted his head.

“That was just a little happy jump,” she assured him. “*Please* don’t let it stop you.” Her plea sounded desperate, even to her ears. Needing to pull him back in, she slid a hand beneath his open linen shirt and across the bare muscles of his chest and heard him suck in a sharp breath. *Oh, yes. Gotcha.*

“Not a chance of that tonight,” he grunted, dropping her gently onto the bed and following her down.

“*Thank God.*”

“Amen and hallelujah,” he murmured. As he captured her mouth, the fever tide they were riding got exponentially stronger. Their breathing grew heavier.

Caught up in the storm, Catherine never noticed when he did it, but she suddenly felt a looseness in her bodice that hadn’t been there before. A swirl of fresh air sent a chill up her back. Warm hands moved in and spread against her skin now exposed by the opened zipper. Then, just as quickly, they were gone and flat against the bedding on either side of her. A puncture, then a ripping sound had her opening her eyes. Razor sharp nails pierced and then embedded themselves deep into the mattress below. His eyes cast an eerie glow over the bedding.

He ducked his head. “Dammit. Distract me!” he gritted out.

“I thought I was!”

Catherine wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. After a few intense kisses that were hot enough to fry bacon, the thought that he might pull away now made her eyes start to cross. That he still felt embarrassed by his beast was ridiculous, but she didn’t dare treat lightly what he so dearly wanted to control for her sake. But that part of him loved her, too, and she knew it.

And because she loved him more than anything, she did what he asked. “Uh, how’s JT? What’s new at the club?” It was all she could think of.

She watched him struggle, fight it, then slowly start to come down. “They’re not at the club anymore, but . . . Tori wants to get pregnant,” he blurted out.

It was her turn to be astounded. “*Pregnant?!*”

“Mm-hmm.”



Really not wanting to go there, she gritted her teeth, then just couldn't stop herself. Catherine propped herself up on her own elbows. "Vincent, that's crazy, dangerous . . . I mean . . . they can't! We don't know what could happen."

"No," he agreed. "We don't. But as much as we might be concerned, we're not the beast police. We don't have the right to tell them what they can and can't do just because it's not something I want *us* to go through."

She laid back down, an arm over her head, and gazed hard into his eyes, so close to hers. In them were written so many emotions, so many questions. None of which they had answers to or possibly ever could. Would life never be so simple for them?

"At least, not yet," he tempered his statement.

Catherine curled a hand around his head and brought his face close to hers, stopping herself from asking any more questions. She didn't want to know. There would be time for those conversations later. Much later. Right now, she had a mission. "I love you, Vincent Keller. And we haven't closed any doors." She had to ignore the moisture that filled his eyes at those words or she'd start blubbing, too. "Why are we talking about Tori and Blaise, by the way? Don't you know it's bad manners to mention another woman—"

"My humble apologies." Vincent rolled his eyes at himself then looked at her soberly. "I didn't want to attack you."

"Attack?" she asked carefully, repeating his word.

"More like . . . pounce. It's been a very long time."

She covered her face and felt her body shake in silent laughter. "Way too long," she said with feeling. "I accept your apology, but, just for future reference, you mention another woman's name again while in bed with me and I just may beast-out myself."

"Beast-out, huh?"

"What? You think I can't be beastly? You obviously haven't seen my jealous side."

"I think I'm seeing it now. And you are and always have been a formidable opponent."

"You'd better believe it. If you don't start kissing me again, and soon, my own claws are going to come out."

"Yes, Ma'am." He licked his lips, then tucked one side under his teeth. It was such a childish look but so endearing. She grinned.

“You know, gentleness is so overrated.”

\*

Sometime later they lay side by side, his fingers entwined with hers. She was already exhausted, but completely wide awake and he knew it. He turned to look at her.

“What’s that expression for? What are you thinking?”

She sighed and stretched. “Hmm. About the symphony.”

“You were frowning. I thought you loved it.”

“Oh, I did. But you’re right. Too many people. I was remembering our other date—that snowy night. This was nice, but, I don’t know. I guess I just . . . I would have liked to dance with you.”

The memory of them waltzing around a darkened room before a snow-lit private garden came immediately to mind and sent them both back to that time and place.

Vincent leaned over her, that look in his eyes she knew so well. He was already ready for more. “Oh, we’re going to dance.”

The look he gave her curled her toes. It always surprised her—that wide-eyed stare that said, ‘I can’t believe you’re here with me, that you chose me, that you love me. And I am so in love with you.’ His eyes spoke volumes. What would it take to make him stop doubting? She didn’t know, but she’d spend the rest of her days trying. She put a hand to his cheek. “Good. Just never let me go.”

“Not in this life.”

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

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