

Windflwr

BAtB Fanfiction – Love Shall Not (complete)

“Though lovers be lost, love shall not, and death shall have no dominion.” –Dylan Thomas

Chapter 1

Catherine was speeding. She didn't care. As the glare of streetlights made star trails across her moon roof, she furiously swiped at her eyes. Rolling through another light, she hoped the traffic camera over the intersection caught the insignia on the side of her vehicle, NYPD. She had a portable strobe light just above her driver's side door, too, but hadn't turned it on. Yet. She would if she had to. Breaking rules didn't matter just now. She had to get to him.

Sensing her imminent arrival and agitated state, Vincent opened the door before she even knocked. “What's happened?”

“Vincent, I need you!” Catherine threw herself at him.

Rather than staying the night at her apartment, as he frequently did these days, he'd returned to the club last night because his best buddy was having 'female problems' and needed a friend. Apparently, Sarah wasn't buying all of JT's excuses for why she couldn't visit him at his place and they'd had a little tiff. Being the good friend he was, Vincent had ordered a pizza and put a game on the big screen. Now he wished he'd never left.

Though the game was long over and JT had bid him good-night hours ago, Vincent's night-time restlessness had kept him awake. It was his fault JT couldn't invite Sarah over; his fault his best friend, who'd literally given up his life for him, couldn't carry on a normal relationship with a woman. Even over the three months he'd gone missing, JT had never given up hope of finding him and had refused to move on with his life. And then there was Catherine. He felt split between the two people he cared for above all. Catherine was his future; JT was his past. But they were all in the present, caught between worlds.

He swept Catherine up in his arms, bewildered. It wasn't like her to be so distraught. Although she'd cried when he first came back after his three-month ordeal, he learned from Tess that that had been one of the few times tears had fallen. Now she was sobbing so hard she could barely speak. The last time he'd seen her so broken up had been after Evan's sacrificial death. He shuddered to think what caused this now. He murmured to her soothingly. “Sweetheart, tell me. What's wrong?”

“He's gone!” Saying it out loud sent her into another tailspin.

“Who?”

Finally, she dried her tears on his shirt and tilted her face to his. “My dad, Vincent. He—he-he had a-an aneurism or something. They think it might have been related to the accident. One minute he was talking to Brooke in the family room getting ready to take her to dinner and the next he just collapsed! They rushed him to the hospital, but he didn't make it!”

Vincent absorbed the news solemnly. He'd lost so many of his own friends and family that death, over the years, had become an almost constant companion. He understood her grief only too well. He carried her over to the big easy chair and pulled her onto his lap. This was too cruel. First her mother, now her father, although she now knew and had accepted the fact that Michael Reynolds, not Thomas Chandler, was her actual biological father. But there was no closeness between them, nor would there likely ever be. Thomas Chandler was the man who had raised her, had seen her through the loss of her mother so many years ago, had been the one constant in her life. To have lost him now was devastating.

He soothed her with soft kisses to her hair, her cheek, her lips. "I'm so, so sorry, Catherine. What can I do? Tell me what I can do."

Catherine sucked in a ragged breath. "I just need you to hold me."

He obliged, cradling her close. "Did you just come from the hospital?"

She nodded. "I've been there all night. I have to go back. Brooke is still there, but I had to see you."

If only he could have been by her side. How frustratingly complex their lives had become that they couldn't even be there for the other's most difficult moments. He cursed his situation and the wretched experiments that strengthened his body while making him less of a man. At least, comfort he could do. "What about Heather?"

"They sent us both home to rest, but I can't sleep. I'll go back in a little bit; not that there's anything I can do."

"Let me take you there. You need to be with Brooke and Heather when she returns."

Catherine was calmer now, but not quite ready to leave. "They kept him on life support until we all got there," she said. "Then, one by one, let us go in to say good-bye. All the machines were beeping and his chest was going up and down, but I knew he was gone. I was too late. I meant to go and see him this week; I really did."

A fresh stream of tears rolled down her cheeks. He ached with her. "Catherine, don't torture yourself. You couldn't have seen this coming."

"But I should have been there more often! He wanted me to come. I-I-I just didn't make the time."

"You've had a lot to deal with in the last few months, not the least of which was finding me, then learning about Michael Reynolds. It's understandable."

Her large eyes were red and puffy, her face streaked with tears and what little make-up she normally wore. But to him, even in her sorrow, she'd never been more beautiful. The look she gave him was so heartbreaking; he felt his own eyes tear up. "If I could take this away from you, you know I would."

She sought his eyes. "I wanted him to know you, Vincent. One day, we were going to find a way. Now that will never happen."

He tucked her head back against his chest and let her cry until she had no more tears. 'One day' would never come, and he felt the loss nearly as sharply as she.

When JT came through the apartment an hour later, ready to leave for his morning classes, he stopped. Catherine was curled up asleep in Vincent's arms. He started to ask what was up, but Vincent put a finger to his lips and whispered, "Her father died."

"Reynolds, or-or-or—"

"Thomas Chandler."

"Oh, my God. Was there foul play? I mean, I thought he was getting better."

"I don't think so. Brain aneurism. Unexpected."

JT nodded, soberly. "Is there anything I can do?"

Vincent shook his head. "Thanks, JT, but I'm going to let her rest a little longer then I'll take her back to the hospital."

"Uh, not such a good idea. I mean, we all know how that turned out the last time."

"No more ex-fiancées to worry about, I promise." JT didn't laugh at his joke, so he promised, "I won't go in. I just want to be with her as long as I can. She needs me right now."

JT nodded. "I'll be in class for a few hours, then at Sarah's later tonight, but if you need *me* to do anything, just call."

"I will. Thank you." As soon as JT left, Catherine started to stir.

"I need to get back."

"You sure? It's early yet." Vincent gently rubbed away a dark smudge on her cheek.

"Yeah, I'm sure, but I should probably clean myself up a little, huh?"

"You need me?" He helped her stand.

His question brought a fresh spill of tears. She leaned into him and pressed her face to his. "I will always need you. Don't *you* ever leave me!"

Heather met her at the top of the stairs to the ICU wing. "You couldn't sleep either?"

Cat wondered what she looked like. She thought of checking her reflection in the mirror, but dismissed the thought. She probably looked just like Heather—worse than a day-after hangover.

"Brooke had to sign some papers," Heather explained, and Catherine wondered how much longer after she left her sister had remained. She tried to feel guilty about it, knowing neither Brooke nor Heather had someone in their lives to run home to right now, but couldn't. She and Vincent had had precious few moments of happiness and comfort, themselves. Those few hours with him had given her the strength and focus she'd desperately needed.

“We gave the hospital the name of the funeral home that handled Mom. I didn’t know of any other place. I hope that was right.”

Her mother was not actually in the gravesite they had been going to for years, but Heather didn’t know that. “That’s fine. Thank you. How’s Brooke?”

“She’s doing as well as can be expected, under the circumstances. I think she’s still in shock.”

Catherine knew the feeling. “Is there anything left for us to do here?”

Heather pulled a gold ring out of her pocket. “They gave me this, along with his watch. I g-guess we should put them in the safety deposit box or something.”

Catherine picked up her father’s wedding band and examined it. It was still shiny and new, hardly worn. As saddened as she was, she felt devastated for Brooke, his newlywed bride. They’d barely begun their life together. Twisting it in her fingers, she realized it had an inscription inside. She had to hold it to the light to read the tiny engraved letters, but right away knew what it said. She had a pendant at home with the very same quote: ‘Love Shall Not.’ It brought on a fresh round of tears. For someone who never cried, she was doing an awful lot of it lately.

“Cat.” Heather placed her hand over her sister’s closed fist. “What is it?”

She smiled at her sister through her tears. Talking about it right then would be impossible. “It’s nothing. I’m just sad.”

Heather hesitated. “Do you think we could go someplace and talk?”

Catherine shook herself out of her reverie. Her sister needed her. “Um, sure. How about over there?” A couple of cushioned chairs filled a small, quiet alcove. They sat down facing one another, but close enough to touch.

“Brooke wants us to come to the house, go through Dad’s things, see if there’s anything we’d like to have.”

“Oh, God.”

“She thought it might help us heal.”

Catherine sighed, knowing for Heather’s and Brooke’s sake she’d have to endure it. “I’ll come. Whenever you’re ready.”

“We’re all alone now, Cat.” Heather said starkly.

She knew her sister was no longer talking about their father’s belongings. “No. We have each other,” she said fiercely. “We always will. Heath, I’ll always be here for you. Don’t think I won’t.”

Her sister nodded. “I know. But it’s not the same.”

Catherine understood only too well. “No, but we’ll manage. Together. And someday you’ll have a husband and family of your own—”

“—and you will, *too!*”

“Maybe. And then we won’t need to depend on each other so much. But we’ll always be family.”

“But what will we do until then?”

Catherine took her sister’s hands. “We’ll go on with our lives, just like we planned. And we’ll remember. We’ll always remember.”

“But we’re orphans now. Well, at least I am. You know, Cat, you have another father out there somewhere—maybe he’s still alive. You should try to find him.”

Oh, God. The hopeful note in Heather’s voice made her ache. If she only knew. But Michael Reynolds would never be her father. Even thinking of him at a time like this made her feel like she was kicking dirt on Thomas’ grave.

Vincent went straight to Reynolds after dropping Catherine off at the hospital. His dual roles as Catherine’s boss and the head of The Company meant there was a chance he wasn’t at the farm. Thankfully, today he was. He entered through the downstairs and made his way up through the house to his office, strictly off limits to the likes of him, but today he didn’t care.

“What is it?” Michael Reynolds asked, not even bothering to look up and see who’d burst into his office.

“Thomas Chandler is dead. Did you or The Company have anything to do with it?”

Reynolds looked up, surprised more by the question than who was asking it. “No.”

“If you’re not telling me the truth—”

“Are you here to threaten me again or get information?” He looked Vincent up and down. “Why would I lie about something like that? I’m sorry for her loss. He was... a good man. And, as you well know, I would have preferred she never find out about me. That’s on your head. Does she think I was involved?”

Vincent actually detected a hint of insecurity in his question. “Not that she’s said.”

“Well, I wasn’t. Now, if you don’t have anything else—”

Vincent quit the room while he was still talking. Reynolds sighed. The man was trouble. No matter how his daughter felt about the super-soldier, he didn’t have to like it.

“Oh look, Cat. You were so happy.”

As Heather pulled yet another family photo from the stack, she inwardly sighed. Yes, those were of course the days when her mother was still living, her dad was still her dad, and Vincent was still a young man trying to make good enough grades to get into med school. A simpler, happier time. Not that she didn’t enjoy remembering. She did. But so much had changed.

Brooke seemed to be enjoying the photos, as well. It was such a shame that she felt so much like family already. She'd probably go on to marry someone else someday and move out of their lives altogether. A sad thought. Just then Brooke made a startled exclamation.

"Look at these!" She handed both the girls an envelope with their name on it.

As Catherine hesitated, Heather ripped hers open and instantly burst into tears. "What on earth?"

"Open it, Catherine!" Heather cried. "You won't believe this."

Catherine slid her nail under the sealed flap of the envelope and pulled out the single sheet of paper. "To the man worthy of my daughter's heart," it began.

"He must have written these years ago. Oh. So sweet."

As Heather passed her letter to Brooke to read, Catherine swallowed hard. There, in her father's neat printing, was a letter from him to, she supposed, his daughter's intended. Perhaps it was something he wanted to bring out when they got engaged. She didn't know. In his thoughtful narrative, he told the as-yet unknown young man all about his little girl—her wants, her needs, her dreams and hopes—and then asked him to love her as much as he did.

As the other women whispered and tearfully laughed together, Catherine slipped hers quietly into her pocket. She knew exactly who her letter was written to.

The service was held three days later at the plot next to Vanessa's empty grave.

With the wedding only six months before, Brooke had a current list of all of their friends and family and had contacted most of them with the sad news. With his business contacts and friends from the precinct, there was quite a crowd. Catherine sighed. Everyone was there that should be—everyone except for Vincent, the only person who really mattered to her.

She sat up front with Brooke and her sister on chairs supplied by the funeral home, a temporary awning overhead to shield them from the direct sunlight. The other guests had to stand. At least it wasn't raining. The ground was wet from a good soaking the night before, but the sky was as blue and cheery as she'd ever seen it, and in great contrast to the way she felt. At least the rain the night before had cleared the smog.

The aroma of freshly dug earth wafted up to her. The casket, a shiny mahogany box, was suspended over the open dig site. At the conclusion of the service, after family members said their good-byes and draped cut flowers over the top, the four attendants waiting silently nearby would slowly lower it into the earth, his final resting place.

Catherine pressed her trembling lips together. She had endured the sympathetic hugs and well wishes of her father's co-workers and friends with unwavering strength until now. But as his casket went down, so did her dream of ever telling Thomas about the man she loved and why she loved him. And of getting answers.

She'd never learned what was so urgent that he'd asked her to meet him the day he was struck by the car, other than it had something to do with Michael Reynolds. Perhaps that's all it was, but she would forever wonder.

She clutched at the heavy heart-shaped pendant around her neck. There was yet another reception to endure, this one at her father's house, but Brooke would serve as the main hostess for that. As she turned to take her last look, the tall figure of a man could be seen on the far side of the grave site. Reynolds.

Even from that distance, she knew him. What was he doing there? As soon as she caught his eye, he started to approach. Just what she needed. She supposed he could claim to be there as her boss. Others from the precinct had come to offer support. But this was just plain awkward.

She decided to be proactive. Leaving her sister to ride back with Brooke, she slowly made her way across the lawn to where he stood. "What are you doing here?"

Chapter 2

Michael Reynolds hung back from the gathering at the gravesite, silently observing. He was too far away to hear the words of the clergyman, much less those of the family, but he could tell from their faces what they felt. The tall, pretty, blonde woman, Thomas Chandler's young wife of only six months, was seated in front, flanked on both sides by the younger Chandler daughters, the oldest being his own—Catherine.

He hadn't wanted to intrude. This was a private time for the family, but he was family, too, like it or not. Although he could use the excuse that he was there to support Catherine as her boss, the truth was he wanted to be there for *her*. Though he doubted she'd welcome knowing that.

He watched how she mourned for him—the man he had willingly turned her over to nearly thirty years ago. Her tears were genuine. He'd made the right choice leaving her to Thomas. He was a good man and had treated her well. Both of them. That the girls resembled one another so much had been an unexpected blessing. They both looked like their beautiful mother, Vanessa. It had made things much easier and helped keep the secret longer.

If Keller hadn't interfered and told her about him, likely Catherine would never have known. But that was in the past. What was done, was done. Now that she knew, he wasn't really sorry for it. He'd followed her progress over the years, albeit from a distance, and couldn't be more proud. In fact, she was nothing short of amazing. Even the fearlessness with which she confronted him spoke volumes of her strength and her resolve.

Of course, for her to be in a relationship with Vincent Keller took nerves of steel and a whole lot more. The first time he saw her with him, fear for her radiated through him. The man was a monster by all definitions of the word. And he should know. He'd looked into those glowing amber eyes, had seen the horrific destruction in the wake of his rages, and had experienced first-hand the fierceness of his anger. Even when not hyped up on adrenalin, he was not a man to trifle with. Michael shuddered to think what he could do to her—his own flesh and blood.

She, however, *wanted* to be with him, of all the idiotic ideas. *Insanity!* The animal could snap her neck with one of his hands, much less rip her to shreds in the process. Having had a hand in creating him to be what he was, brought a certain acid clarity to the situation. And it wasn't good. Reynolds didn't want to think about it, about him *touching* her. If they consummated their relationship in any physical way, he didn't want to know. The late Doctor Kenneth Bradley had intimated that they were mates. *Impossible*, or so he hoped.

That was why they'd brought in Cameryn Teague. With her own animal DNA, she would have at least been able to keep pace with Keller, keep him distracted and far away from Catherine. Not that it had worked. But now Cameryn was dead as well, and Vincent had hidden her body so that he could blackmail him with her, if needed.

A muscle ticked in Reynolds' jaw and he looked away from the scene. One day he'd find a way to get his daughter away from him, he swore.

The crowd began to disperse. As it thinned to only family, she turned to go and he stepped out into the light. She saw him. She must have realized she couldn't escape without at least acknowledging his presence, but he felt her reluctance in every step she took toward him.

"What are you doing here?"

She certainly wasted no time in telling him by that simple question that he had no business being there. So much for his plan to be there just in the capacity of her boss. Pride in the fact that she wasn't afraid to stand up to him almost made him smile. There weren't many men who could do that. He ignored her tone. "I'm sorry for your loss, Catherine. Thomas was a good man. It was the right choice. I hope you understand that."

She looked off into the distance instead of at him. "I may not understand why you did what you did, but I am thankful to have known him as a father."

Rather than you, she inferred without saying. He nodded. It was true. And to admit he was jealous would not be in his best interest or hers. He'd always told himself it was the best thing to do. Even Vanessa had been happier. He'd been a fool to have gotten involved with her in the first place, anyway.

"Catherine, even though both of the people who raised you are gone now, I want you to remember—you're not an orphan. And you'll never be alone."

Whether those words comforted her or not was difficult to tell. She clamped her jaw together, nodded, and walked away. He shrugged. He'd done what he'd come to do. The rest was up to her.

Vincent watched the little encounter from a distance. His hearing was keen enough to have gotten the gist of their conversation, but he'd learned restraint over the last year when using his 'gifts' and didn't intrude unless he sensed danger. Today he did not. What Michael Reynolds was up to, he didn't know, but now was not the time to confront the man.

He slid silently back into the shadows and retreated. He'd come to pay his respects, but another time, in solitude, would do just as well.

Catherine texted him from home when she was finally alone.

The night air was cool and windless, but Vincent cradled Catherine in his arms as they sat together on the fire escape. It was the first time they'd done so in quite a while, and the memory of their first conversations flooded back to him and filled him with amazement. How excited he'd been back then—to have a 'normal' conversation with a pretty girl. Even though he'd watched over her for years, he never expected to actually meet the woman who haunted his dreams.

Oh, they'd had a few rough encounters, especially at first. He'd even made an effort to scare her off, little good it had done. She *wanted* to be with him, to know him. It took him a while to realize that, but now he knew. And he still felt humbled. The feeling had never gone away. He snuggled her closer. "I saw Reynolds at the funeral. What did he say to you?"

Catherine pursed her lips, still conflicted over that. "He said I wasn't an orphan; that I'd never be . . . alone."

"Hmmm."

"I know, right? One minute I think I have him all figured out, and the next he goes and says something like that. I think he was trying to comfort me in his own way. I told you what he said to me in the hospital, didn't I?"

The night she'd been drugged by Justin Mallory and attacked—another one of Michael's schemes that had gone horribly awry. He struggled with the push of anger that memory brought up. "No."

"He said he didn't like the fact that you and I were in a relationship, but he was coming to accept it."

"Well, good for him." Vincent personally didn't care *what* the man thought, but for Catherine's sake, he supposed it was a good thing.

"But I don't want or need his approval."

At least he and Catherine were on the same page there. "I think you've made that clear." He turned her to him. "Just like me, Michael Reynolds probably followed you for years. He knew who you were. And now he's just beginning to realize what he gave up when he left you to Thomas."

She cringed, oddly discomfited by that thought. "Really? I don't know. I'm having a hard time wrapping my brain around the picture of him having a soft feeling of any kind. This is Michael Reynolds we're talking about." She turned to him then. "He's not my father and never will be."

"No. Thomas raised you and was the father of your heart."

"Yes, he was," she agreed. "He and I had our moments, little disagreements—like any father and daughter—but he was my rock."

She fingered the pendant around her neck again. It was one he hadn't seen before. "What is that?"

She lifted it off of her skin to show him. The two-toned heart was half silver and half gold, the two halves separated by a curved braid of the same two metals. “Kind of reminds me of us—two different worlds but one heart.” She rubbed the braid. “It’s from Dad. I haven’t worn it in years.”

“Why not? It’s beautiful.” Vincent turned it over. “There’s an inscription on the back.”

“ ‘Love shall not,’ ” she quoted.

Vincent frowned. “What does that mean? Love shall not *what?*”

“It’s from a poem by Dylan Thomas. I have a book of his poetry—it’s my favorite. The quote is from a line in it: ‘Though lovers be lost, love shall not, and death shall have no dominion.’ To me, it means even if death separates two people who love each other, their love will remain. Love will always exist, even after we don’t. It crosses the chasm. Dad gave it to me after Mom died. I was having a rough time and he said this should remind me that I’ll never be alone.”

“That’s sweet. He wanted you to know that she’s never really lost to you. Your love for her keeps her alive in your heart.”

“Something like that, yes.” She knew he, of all people, would understand. She leaned her head against his shoulder. “But ever since I found out about her and—and Muirfield, I stopped wearing it.”

“Seems like that doesn’t change anything. She loved you, and so did he.”

“What hurts so much is that he’ll never get to know you, Vincent. I should have introduced you at the wedding reception. I let that opportunity slip away and now it’s gone. I wanted so much to tell him that I was in good hands, that he didn’t have to worry about me being alone. I looked forward to one day bringing him to meet you.”

Vincent understood her sadness. He would have liked to introduce himself to Thomas, as well. “But Catherine, he knows *now*.”

She looked at him, her eyes wide.

“Just like your mom, he can see now how much I love you and you love me. He can see everything.”

Her eyes filled with hope then she twisted her lips. “Not . . . *everything*, I hope?”

He laughed and touched his lips to hers. “Okay. Let’s not worry about that.” He shifted her on his lap and they both looked out at the twinkling lights of the city. “You know, that quote,” he said, trying to distract her from her maudlin thoughts, “it’s not just for your mom or your dad.”

Her eyes found his in the shimmery reflections of the street lights.

“If death ever separates *us*—”

She put fingers over his lips, stopping him. “I can’t even think about that happening.”

“Catherine,” he said, kissing her fingers and talking around them. “You know that’s always been a very real possibility. And you’re a cop—your job is just as dangerous.”

“Maybe in the future when we’re both 95 years old—”

“Okay, if you’re 95, I’m a little bit older.”

She smiled for the first time. It was a welcome sight. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah.” He sobered. “The odds are still against us.”

She laced her fingers through his and leaned back into his warmth. “Then we’ll just have to beat the odds.”

Chapter 3

After reluctantly leaving Catherine’s warm bed the next morning, Vincent made his way through the ever busy streets of New York to the other side of the city and the neighborhood he’d grown up in. It was still basically the same, but there were little changes. The corner market had been remodeled and now donned the marquee of a larger chain store. The struggling bookstore he’d spent hours in had finally gone out of business and the space was now a hair salon.

He flipped his collar up, still uncomfortable walking around so freely in the daytime, but there was no threat. Not anymore. What few Muirfield operatives still existed were on the run. Thanks to him.

Finally, he made it to the church where his family had attended, at least while he and his brothers were young, and to the small courtyard behind it that housed a community graveyard. He brushed some fallen leaves off his mother’s headstone and squatted down. She’d succumbed to a fierce pneumonia six months after his father had died. Or perhaps it had been her weakened heart. The news of his own death may have been the last straws for his stalwart mother, but he couldn’t go there.

He rubbed his eyes. Maybe it was just wishful thinking that let him believe she could see and hear him now, but just in case . . . he placed a hand on the cold stone. “I’m okay, Mom. I don’t want you to worry about me. I’m so sorry they had to tell you I died. I was too ashamed and afraid to tell you the truth. All that is in the past now, but I want you to know how sorry I am. For everything. You were right. Anger doesn’t solve anything.”

He fingered the photo in his pocket—a copy of the newspaper article Catherine had been in when he’d first saved her. It was the only photograph of her that he had. He pulled it out and unfolded it. “You would like her, Mom,” he looked to the neighboring gravestone, “Dad. She saved me. And now we’re together.” If they could hear him, they’d understand.

His brother’s headstones were also nearby but he’d talked with them more recently and time was getting short. He stood and drew in a long slow breath. One more stop to go.

After a long, lingering bath, Catherine fixed herself a bite to eat then dressed to go out. It was her last day off and she needed to go to the cemetery one more time . . . to say good-bye.

Following the familiar path up over the grassy knoll to the tree which was always her marker, she made her way to the newly dug plot. The remains of several flower arrangements, those that still had blooms, had been carefully placed around the site—even a fresh bunch of roses, which surprised her. Perhaps Heather or Brooke had been there earlier.

Glad for the time alone, she went down to her knees and traced his name on the shiny, new headstone. “Daddy,” she whispered, and covered her mouth. “I miss you so much. I know I told Heather we’d be okay, but . . . what am I going to do without you?” She pulled the fine strands of her hair away from her face as a breeze blew through the wooded grounds. “I’m so sorry I didn’t come to see you more often in the last few months. I should have. I wanted to—I was just . . . being stupid. **Being me.** Afraid. Always afraid. But there was something I needed to tell you, *someone* I wanted you to meet—the man I love with all my heart. I wanted you to know him.”

A breeze was ruffling the leaves of nearby trees and she scraped the hair out of her eyes again. “The important thing is, I’m okay. Because of Vincent. He’s been watching over me for years and now we’ll take care of each other. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“I already feel I know him.”

She swiveled around, coming swiftly to her feet, and sucked in a breath. Thomas Chandler stood in front of her, that sympathetic smile she knew so well widening into a broad grin.

“Daddy!”

He held her to him and it felt so good.

“Are you real?” His body was solid, his grip as firm as ever.

“I’ll always be real, Catherine. Because I’m loved.”

The Velveteen Rabbit again. “Yes. When you are loved, that’s when you become real.” She sniffed and buried her face into his jacket, the familiar smell so good and comforting.

“But I can’t stay here much longer.”

She looked up, confused.

“The chasm, you know.”

Between death and life. But he was here now, just like he’d never left. “But, Dad—”

“There’s so much to say, and so little time. Just remember this, Catherine. You were always my daughter and always will be. That hasn’t changed and never will. And . . . tell that young man of yours . . . he has my blessing.”

She blinked and he was gone. As she swiveled around, desperate for one last glimpse, her eye caught on something shiny lying amidst the fresh roses. Catherine bent to take a closer look. A silver tube engraved with delicate scrollwork, roughly the size and weight of a pen, had been carefully placed among the petals. She picked it up.

Seeing that it came apart, she unscrewed the lid and drew out a single sheet of paper. It was a letter . . . addressed to her. Her eyes widened, puzzled. Had someone from the service left it for her to find? She looked around, but no one else was there.

Shrugging, she rolled it out. In carefully printed letters, it began with her name.

Dearest Catherine,

From the moment our eyes first met, love filled my heart. You became our pride and joy, and our lives were forever changed. Even as an infant, when you demanded our undivided attention, your mother and I gave it willingly because we knew one day you would grow up to be a game changer in a world rapidly becoming more and more complex and dangerous. You proved us right.

From your first word to your first step and beyond, we imagined your potential. You knew very early on just who you were and what you wanted (and didn't want). And all we ever desired was for you to be healthy, happy, and well loved.

Today you go from being a child, a sister, a daughter and a friend to being an independent woman—someone who, while she needs no one to help her stand, has so much to give. Although we know someday you will be a faithful companion and a loving partner, we wish with all our hearts we could be there to watch that happen, to see you fall in love, and to proudly hand you over to whomever you choose to share your life with. Unable to do that, we only hope he is worthy of you. Trust your instincts. They've always been true.

But no matter what path your future takes you down, we could not feel more blessed to have been a part of your journey and your life

Just remember, love never fails—no, love shall not.

*Loving you for all time,
Dad and Mom*

Catherine bent over with emotion. "Oh, God." As in her vision, her father was still speaking to her from the grave.

Booted feet stepped into view and she knew without looking whose they were. *Vincent.*

As he bent down to her, she held out the letter, knowing he'd seen it before. Another incredible gift from the man she loved with all her soul.

Unlike the note she'd found at her dad's house, this wasn't in the handwriting of either of her parents. "They didn't write this, did they?" she finally asked, when she was able to compose herself.

"It's what they would have written, if they could have."

She placed her hands on either side of his beautiful face, made even more beautiful by his heart, and suddenly remembered the folded piece of paper in her jacket pocket. Taking it out, she placed it in his larger hand. "And this is one my father *did* write."

He looked at her, stunned. Then he opened it. "'To the man worthy of my daughter's heart?'" he read.

"That's you."

****The End****

Postscript: The Letter

To the Man Worthy of My Daughter's Heart,

I don't know you yet, but I know my daughter, and as her father I have some things I need to say. If you love her like you say you do, then I hope you will heed my words.

She is the sunlight in my life—a shining star in a heaven filled with dimmer lights. You won't find her an easy mark, a pushover, a clown, victim, or fool, or even one who trusts easily, but neither will she ever betray you, give you cause for regret, abandon, or walk over you.

Catherine is meant for greatness. She has a drive and determination that few have achieved or ever will. It will take her to the top of mountains, through the lowest valleys, and into your heart so deep you can't breathe without feeling her presence. I know this because . . . I'm her dad.

Don't push her too hard, go back on your word, cause her regret, or lie to her face (I tell you this for your own safety). On the other hand, I hope you will dig deep, speak from your heart, be there to catch her if she falls, and let her see your own vulnerability. If you do, you will gain her trust and respect forever, and you'll witness a miracle as she blooms for you under even the worst of circumstances.

It won't be easy for me to put her hand into yours, but I trust my little girl to know her own mind and heart, and if she loves you that much, you must be pretty special, too.

That doesn't mean I completely trust you. If you hurt her, I will hunt you down, pin you up, and knock all the teeth out of your head. Because she is precious to me.

She was mine first. As I entrust her to you, remember that, and please take care of her heart.

-Thomas Chandler, Father of the Bride

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