

Windflwr

## **BAtB Fanfiction – Hold Fast To Dreams**

*“Hold fast to dreams*

*For if dreams die*

*Life is a broken-winged bird*

*That cannot fly”*

- from "Dreams" by Langston Hughes

### **Chapter 1**

Vincent squeezed the bloody rag out one more time and pressed it to his gut. At least the bullet had gone clean through, although that also meant he ached in two places at once. *Pain*. He was a soldier and not unfamiliar with it, yet this wound went much deeper than muscle and bone. It cut to the heart, and might be the death of him yet. Because this time Catherine had inflicted it.

He gritted his teeth, not in anger, but anguish. Reynolds had stolen his life in so many ways! The fact that he'd turned out to be Catherine's real father still stunned him, but he shouldn't have been surprised. Everything connected to Catherine was linked, somehow, to him. He should have at least finished the job. He'd had the man in his clutches. But he'd hesitated, and that's where he'd made his mistake. Or had he?

He hung his head. Where did this end? As long as that master manipulator still lived, it didn't. Tori was right—Reynolds deserved to die. The man had sent him out to kill other beasts as if they weren't human. But Vincent was a beast himself. And Tori. What had she done? Merely had the misfortune to be born to a father with tainted DNA.

As Catherine had her father's. But she was nothing like him.

“Why did I ever think I was different?” he asked the empty room, the kitchen of his boathouse apartment, bought and paid for by the good ole' U.S. of A.'s Federal Bureau of Investigation. He looked around at the sparse living space, soon to be confiscated back by them. It was as cold and sterile as his memories. For everything he knew was a lie. He was no soldier. He was just a pawn in a sadistic man's horrible, horrible game.

That he'd groveled before Reynolds at the house in Montauk, wanting to make a good impression for Catherine's sake, just made him sick. The man had played him from the start. It was embarrassing not to have figured it out before this. But as soon as he'd seen Tori tied up in that chair and heard the ticking of the bomb, he knew. He knew who had coldly set it all into play.

Vincent pressed his bandage harder. The bleeding wasn't stopping. This was an awful mess. Tori might be responsible for amplifying his reaction, but the rage was his own. And now he could pay the ultimate price.

Before meeting Catherine, he never knew what he'd lost. Then they found his nephew and he'd started to realize what giving his body to Muirfield had really cost him. Family. A future. Then there was Zach—a fellow victim of Muirfield twisted and torn apart by his own loneliness and isolation.

It was only having Catherine in his life that had spared him from that, as well. But now he'd lost her, too. He hadn't liked it when she talked about him losing his humanity. He was a *man*! This other part of him, the animal, wasn't who he was. But what did she expect him to do when faced with the man responsible not only for the original experiments on him but this diabolical scheme to use him to kill the others? Who was the *real* monster?

He closed his eyes and saw her face, the look of anguish when she shot him. She had pleaded with him to stop and he nearly had. But then he realized it was too late. And if he didn't stop Reynolds, no police precinct ever would. All of their lives would be in jeopardy. He had a chance to end it and he'd taken it. How could she blame him for that?

He left the scene after being shot and had run the entire way back to the boathouse. He'd lost a lot of blood, but he knew he'd survive. He always did. Just one more scar. Somewhere along the line he'd lost the ability to heal quickly, a trait he'd apparently had before. No matter. Mind-numbing pain was better. If only that were the case. Instead, he kept seeing the scene play out over and over in his mind – a lesson he'd never forget—and the pain went much deeper than skin. Amazing what a moment of clarity that was. She shot him. She. *Catherine*. The look on her face said it shocked her as much as it had him. No. No dying today. The guilt he felt would keep him alive for ten thousand more years.

Tori burst through the door of the boathouse while Vincent was still trying to figure out how to stop the bleeding without stitching himself up. And that seemed an impossible task. The pain was enough to make him pass out. If he didn't stop the bleeding soon, he'd do that anyway. Her mouth dropped open at the sight of all the blood. "What happened?!"

She started to rush forward but he held out his hand to stop her advance. "Stay back."

"But you've been *shot*!"

"I'm fine. You just need to keep your distance from me right now."

"But—"

"I went after Reynolds."

That brought her head up. “And he *shot* you? But you killed him, right?” Her eyes started to glow at the name, she was still so angry.

Vincent shook his head slowly. It hurt too much to move any faster. “No. Catherine stopped me. By shooting me in the gut.”

Vincent watched the shock contort to rage on her young, pretty face.

“Tori. Tori, listen to me. You need to calm down. I need your help, not your anger.” Her face slowly relaxed, but she fought it. She was coming to enjoy that rush of adrenalin.

“What can I do? I mean, Th-that doesn’t exactly look like something you can just slap a bandage over. You need professional help! Isn’t there someone you know—someone you can turn to?”

Someone other than her. For some reason JT sprang to mind—an image of him with a syringe in his hand. JT had helped him before. But he was too close to Cat, wasn’t he? Tori was growling and pacing. He needed to calm her down. “Listen to me. I need your help, but you have to calm down.”

He must have looked convincing or she realized how close he was to losing it because her face changed immediately to one of concern as she rushed over.

“This place is no longer safe. We’ve got to get out of here, and I don’t think I can drive.”

“Uh—sure, but . . . where should I take you? To a hospital?”

“No. No hospitals. They can’t get hold of my blood.”

“Right. Of course.”

“Take the extra sheet out of the linen cabinet upstairs and tear it into long strips. Then find me a clean shirt and help me into the car.” They’ll come looking for him. If not the Feds, then Catherine’s cronies at the precinct. He had no doubt about that. “You’ll have to drive, but I know of a place.” It was a small hotel downtown that he had a recollection of being in before, although he couldn’t quite recall why . . . .

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Vincent used the last cash he had from the emergency stash Reynolds had fed him and booked them into the only two-bedroom suite they had available. For the price, it was no luxury, but it would do.

He had to allow Tori to touch him, briefly, but made sure it wasn't skin to skin. He was having a hard enough time maintaining his calm with her in such close proximity. He wanted to tell her to leave, but he knew not only would he have trouble getting her to agree, but he had no one else right now. He needed her. And keeping her nearby meant she wouldn't be going after Catherine.

He changed the bandages one last time, although he was still losing blood, and got himself, awkwardly, into bed in one of the rooms.

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"This is Detective Chandler. Yes, I know I already called and asked the same question. Has anything changed? Anyone new brought in with a gun-shot wound? Fine. Thanks for your help." She slammed her desk phone into the cradle. "*Not!*"

"Cat. What are you doing?" Tess ran over to where Catherine paced in front of her desk at the precinct. "I've been looking everywhere for you. When did you get here?"

"I'm calling all the local hospitals. Somebody has to have seen him."

"You're looking for Vincent?"

"He's injured, Tess. And he can't heal himself quickly like he did when *you* shot him." That was ages ago now. Or so it felt. "What I did could *kill* him."

"I'm still trying to wrap my brain around the fact that both you and I have put a bullet in that man's gut." Tess shook her head. "And you think he checked himself into a local hospital?" She squinted. That seemed pretty unlikely.

"What if he couldn't make it? He could be lying somewhere . . . bleeding out onto the street!"

"Hey." Tess put a comforting arm around her friend. "Vincent is a doctor. Or was. Despite his memory loss, he should know instinctively what to do to save himself. He had the strength to run away. I'm sure he'll be fine."

"You didn't see the look on his face, Tess, when I shot him. I *shot* him! He's the man I have loved and poured my entire life into for the last year and a half and I fired a bullet into him!"

Tess looked at her best friend with sadness. This was about much more than a simple shooting.

"You didn't have a choice. Listen to me. You didn't have a choice, Cat. You gave him fair warning. You've given that man every chance under the sun since you found him again, and he was about to kill your father. Not that he didn't deserve it," she added, sotto voice.

Catherine glared at her.

"I know. It doesn't matter that Reynolds is the biggest jerk that ever lived. Vincent was wrong, and you had no choice but to stop him. Come here." Tess pulled Cat over for a hug. "I'll scan the hospital admittance records. You go home and rest. I'll call you as soon as we find him. Have you checked the boathouse?"

"Gabe headed there as soon as we booked Reynolds into the jail." Well, that wasn't exactly the truth. There was the time Gabe spent comforting her before heading out, but she wasn't about to admit that to her partner. She was having a difficult time going there, herself. She'd needed a friend to turn to and Gabe had been there. That's all. Although she was awfully glad he was. But it could have been anyone, really....

"And?"

"There was blood, but no sign of Vincent."

"Then that's good. He probably got home, patched himself up and then headed out with Tori to . . . do beastly things." At the look on Cat's face, Tess shrugged uncomfortably. "Not that I have any idea what beasts do in their spare time." Gah, this was messy!

"Tess, this isn't funny."

"No, it's not." She sobered. "But now is the time for you to step back out of the picture and let things play out. You gave him every chance. He made his choice. The next step is up to him." She picked up the phone. "I'm calling you a cab."

"I can drive—" Oh, yeah. Her pretty blue KIA was undriveable after the accident—which Vincent caused—and had been hauled away to the collision repair center.

"No arguments. And put some heat on your neck. You're going to be feeling it tomorrow."

The collision could have been worse, but she could still smell the acrid odor of the air bag as it deflated after protecting her head from ramming into the steering wheel. All the muscles in her neck, back and shoulders were really tight. A long, hot bath might be the best idea. But first—  
"I'll call JT."

"No. I'll call him. He'll find Vincent. He always does. Don't worry."

"Okay."

"Okay."

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Catherine agreed to go only because she thought there was a chance Vincent would show up at her place. He always did. But no. A cold, dark apartment was the only thing that greeted her. She sighed. Maybe it was better this way. She took a shower then dressed in some comfy sweats and her favorite flannel shirt. She dried her hair but nothing more. It was all she could manage at that point.

The doorbell rang just as she was about to slide down into the soft cushions of the couch. She grimaced and wearily opened the door to Gabe.

“What are you doing here?”

“Just checking on you,” Gabe said. “Mind if I come in?” He’d phrased it as a question, but he didn’t wait for an answer, just pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Catherine didn’t have the energy to stop him. “Gabe, you don’t need to babysit me.”

“You’ve had quite a shock tonight, Catherine. I didn’t feel comfortable leaving you alone. I’m here just—just as a friend, okay? That’s all I’m offering.”

“But—”

“Got any tea? I think I’ll fix us some tea.”

Catherine frowned as he walked into the kitchen and helped himself to her cabinets. “Okay, but I warn you—I plan to sit in front of the TV and veg while watching my favorite who-dunits for the next several hours.”

Gabe turned with a big smile. “Great! I love those.”

That wasn’t exactly an invitation. She inwardly groaned and rolled her eyes. She supposed it didn’t really matter.

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JT had spent the night scanning his computers, ever since Tess had called and informed him what had gone down last night. Once again he was terrified for the man he still considered his best friend, even though Vincent had few, if any, recollections of said friendship. When the phone rang, he nearly jumped out of his skin. It was 5:30 a.m.

“The *Beaumont*?” JT’s eyebrows shot to the top of his head. An excited Tori Windsor babbled to him in a worried and aggravated voice something about not being able to wake Vincent. Just the fact that V and Tori were together in a hotel room and Vincent had been shot didn’t give him warm fuzzies, but at the *Beaumont*? Could that have been a coincidence?

It was the same seedy hotel downtown that his pal's ex-fiancée, Alex, had lured Vincent to once upon a time in order to turn him over to Muirfield. He wondered if the choice of hotel was Vincent's idea or Tori's. Considering little miss heir-to-the-amazing-Windsor-fortune would never have been caught dead in such an establishment, it had to have been Vincent's idea.

He quickly jotted down the address she gave him and agreed to meet them there, although his gut squeezed in a familiar and uncomfortable way with stress. He grabbed his bottle of Tums. It hadn't sounded like a trap, and he'd have to go no matter what if his friend needed him, but he wasn't cool with she-beast Tori at all. What if he didn't do what she asked? She could slice him to bits in seconds. He tamped down his fear and tried to concentrate on Vincent and the fact that in his hour of need his old buddy still thought to turn to him. He grabbed all the medical supplies he had on hand and left.

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"How long has he been this way?"

"I—I don't know, exactly. He was fine when he went to bed, but this morning he wouldn't wake up."

"Did he wake in the night? Was he coherent?"

"I don't know. I was in the other bedroom and never heard him."

That was a relief, at least. They hadn't spent the night together, not that it mattered anymore, really, with the state of Catherine and Vincent's relationship. They were obviously no longer a couple. He spared a brief moment of sadness about that. So wrong. He knew how Catherine had anguished over Vincent's disappearance for three long months. To have come to this, well, it went past anguish to terrible heartache.

JT cautiously moved around the bed extremely aware of Tori's watchful eyes. At least they weren't yellow. He wasn't happy with the idea of his friend immediately turning to Tori, although he tried to understand it. But not only was she quite a bit younger than he or Catherine, she had a devastatingly negative effect on him—exactly what he didn't need. JT wondered to himself, not for the first time, if Tori's strange influence on Vincent was what had pushed him over the edge.

It didn't matter. He couldn't just order her to leave. He'd have to work around her until he could quietly suggest she remove herself for awhile in order to help Vincent. She obviously wanted to help. That might be the only way he would be able to convince her go.

An hour later he sent her off on an errand to get more supplies from the Club. She left reluctantly, but she left. Hopefully she wouldn't kill anyone along the way! He turned back to Vincent.

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Gabe woke to the tones of his phone reflecting off the wooden coffee table. He shifted to sit up and felt a stiffness in both his neck and right shoulder. Catherine's couch was not long enough for a grown man to sleep on. She'd offered the other bedroom, but he felt safer in the front room. If anyone came to either door, they'd have to go through him first.

He looked at the screen of his iPhone. Tess. "Detective. What have you got for me?"

Catherine must have heard the sound and had already been up. She came around the corner. "Anything?" She raised her eyebrows impatiently.

Gabe held up a hand to tell her to wait. "That's very good news. Thanks. And keep me informed of the other situation."

"What good news and what's the 'other situation'?"

"Tess got a call from JT. Vincent is alive and with him." He didn't tell her where; Catherine was better off not knowing. "See? Nothing for you to worry about."

"Gabe . . ."

"Catherine, Vincent is okay. That's what's important. You know JT will see to that."

Her relief was evident in the relaxing of her tense shoulders. Gabe itched to massage them, but he knew she wouldn't allow him to do that.

"I hear a 'but' in there."

She was too sharp by half. "We're looking for Tori." That was the part that worried him. He smoothed an unconscious hand down his jacket. The tranq was still there.

"So they aren't together?"

So she was worried about that? "Not at the moment. And she's not at the boathouse or any of her parents' holdings. JT sent her on an errand but she didn't return. I'm sure she's fine; I'd just feel better knowing her whereabouts right now."

"Especially if she's angry over what I did." Catherine caught his movement. "You think she'll try to come after me. Is that really why you're here?"

"I'm here because I want to be. And . . . yes," honesty was the best policy with Catherine. "If Tori knows what happened and blames you, she might—"



“Take it out on me. I got it.”

“Catherine, Tess is on it. She’s monitoring the situation and will let us know if she learns anything new.” Gabe walked over to the balcony door and tested the lock.

“That won’t stop her,” Catherine grimaced. “It never stopped Vincent.” She cringed. Not really what she wanted to admit to Gabriel Lowen. Thankfully, he pretended not to notice.

“How ‘bout some more of that tea?”

## Chapter 2

*Vincent was dreaming again. A light, as bright as the sun, shone from the end of a very long tunnel. Tunnels he understood. Dank and dark, he’d been wandering awhile when footsteps suddenly sounded from behind him and he realized he was not alone. Then Tess was shouting at him to stop. Didn’t she know who he was? She didn’t act like it; just kept shouting, and he could feel the adrenalin kick in—fear of being discovered, fear after having finally escaped and begun to taste the exhilaration of freedom. It seemed unreasonable to him, as was her continued yelling at him to turn around.*

*He did, but by that time it was too late. He could feel the surge of strength and rage as he turned to face her, his eyes already yellow.*

*Then he felt pain in his gut.*

*Vincent moaned and shifted around.*

“Oops. Gotta go. I’ll give you an update later.” JT hung up while Tess was still talking. “Vincent? Big Guy? Hey, it’s me. JT. Are you awake?”

*Catherine rushed to his side. He felt a surge of energy, of his body somehow fighting the intrusion of the bullet still inside him. Wait. The bullet Catherine shot had gone clean through. And Catherine hadn’t come to his rescue. She’d been the one to shoot him! Vincent tried to comprehend the images, but his muddled brain couldn’t make sense of them.*

*Then he was perched precariously across the railing outside Catherine’s bedroom window but he felt no fear. The blare of a siren could be heard in the distance along with other noises from the street several stories below, but there was no alarm. In fact, the lady in his arms had a beautiful smile for him. A light wind ruffled her silky hair. “You weren’t right down in the tunnels,” she was saying, and he wanted to frown. “I’m talking about when you wanted to run off and leave me.”*

*Who left whom? Vincent tried to make sense of the conversation. He knew he wasn't really there, but it felt so very real. A memory. "It was so you could have your life back," he heard himself saying.*

*"Okay, you ARE my life . . . . it's not what partners do. And you are my partner."*

*Catherine. His partner. Yes. She looked at him with eyes that spoke volumes: 'I love you. You belong with me. You are my life . . . .'*

*God, that was so true!*

*He leaned in to kiss her, not once, but several times. He didn't really want to leave. Then finally he leaped off the building. Such a feeling of exhilaration! Joy. Satisfaction. He was on top of the world. All the feelings flooded back. Hope. Happiness. Catherine!*

"Vincent?" JT leaned over and put a hand on his arm.

He roused and started to stir. His gaze was unfocused, but slowly cleared. He looked around the room, confused, before his eyes leveled on the man leaning over him.

"JT?"

The way he said it sounded so familiar, JT almost thought he had the old Vincent back. He blinked. But that couldn't be. Just wishful thinking. He gently pressed him back down onto the bed when he tried to rise. It took no effort at all. He was perspiring heavily, another sign of the strange infection that was wracking his powerful body. But it brought him down to manageable levels. The fact that his buddy had called out to Catherine in his sleep was both heartening and sad. "It's okay. I'm here. Tori brought you here last night. Remember?"

"Tori?" For a moment, Vincent couldn't put a face to the name. Then his head cleared.

"You're safe. She's safe. Everybody's fine. Well, except you—you're not exactly fine. You have an infection or—or something. Too bad you can't heal yourself anymore, huh? Could really use that right now." He laughed, but it fell flat. "Instead, we have to do this the old-fashioned way. But hey, we've done this before, right? Although, you don't exactly remember."

What was JT babbling about? This didn't feel familiar. Vincent closed his eyes and wished for blessed unconsciousness again—and for that look of love and total acceptance on Catherine's face. Had it just been a dream, or was that a memory? He sighed. He knew. Only a memory could have given him that powerful of a longing. A memory that reminded him of just how much he'd lost.

He started to turn but then gasped in pain. The left side of his body, both front and back, was on fire.

“Here. Drink this.”

Just water. Oh, what he’d give for a stiff— JT shoved the bottle up to his mouth.

“Slowly. That’s it. You lost a lot of blood. I mean, a serious amount. We need to get fluids into you, fast. Do—do you think you could sip something more substantial? I have some vegetable broth here.”

JT waved a cup of steaming soup under his nose. The smell was good but his stomach rebelled. “Not yet.”

“Okay. No problem.” The cup was removed and JT returned to his side.

“Where’s Tori?” The effort it took to breathe, much less speak, had him moaning in pain again.

“Just relax. Tori . . . left for a little while. I sent her for supplies.” That was a little white lie. She must have gotten waylaid. She’d already been gone for hours. He had no idea if she would ever return. And he didn’t want to THINK about where she might be headed in her aggravated state. He’d called Tess to alert her and let someone know he was still with Vincent, and had heard nothing since. “No worries. Like old times.”

“You keep saying that,” Vincent said on a painful grunt.

“Yeah, well. It was just you and me against the world for ten years, remember? But you didn’t get hurt or sick much then, really. I was talking about before. After nine-eleven.”

“I lost my brothers in the Towers.”

“Yes. You remember that?”

“I know it happened. Not the same thing as a memory.” Not like the memory of Catherine on the balcony. Short glimpses of his past life had been coming in for a while, but this last one was much more visceral.

“Right. Well, do you recall what happened after that? Before you enlisted? I—I can fill you in. I mean, you were pretty torn up after you realized your brothers didn’t get out. You changed.”

“Changed?”

“Yeah. Like, became a different person. Not—not different like you are now, just . . . different. Angry. You’d never been into drugs or alcohol, but after that you kind of . . . went off the deep end. Literally. Alex and I found you on the streets that night. You were so wasted.”

Vincent's mind bent on the name Alex. Yes. The fiancée he'd dumped at some point for Zach's girl, Gabriella. He closed his eyes but no actual memories came to him of her. He stopped concentrating and focused back on JT, who was droning on.

". . . didn't know what to do, but together we pulled you through. Then you enlisted, and we all know what happened as a result of that."

"Muirfield." Just saying the word brought Reynolds' face to the forefront. And the rage. He shouldn't have hesitated. He should have gone for the jugular and finished the job. That man was more an animal than he was—and he hurt so many people!

Vincent's chest started rising and falling in rapid succession. JT checked his pulse. It was dangerously high.

"Vincent. Open your eyes. Focus. What's wrong?"

What's wrong? *Everything* was wrong! He'd failed in his mission—his last mission—to kill the true beast. And he'd lost Catherine in the process! Not that killing Reynolds would have gotten her back. No. She'd walked away from him in Montauk. He'd wanted her to, at the time, believing Reynolds was right and it was for the best. But now he didn't know. His heart ached more than his side. He willed his body to calm down.

"Look. JT. I'm sure you have family or someone you need to get back to. I don't need a babysitter. When Tori comes back—"

"Family? F-family? You—YOU are my family."

Just like Catherine had said, 'you are my life.' Vincent pressed his head back into the cushions and closed his eyes. He needed to remember. "Tell me."

"About us?" JT tilted the water bottle to Vincent's lips once more, then gazed off into the distance, into the past. "We were just kids when we met. Same school. You—you ran with the popular kids, though. I was just the nerdy little neighbor kid with glasses and buck teeth. But we were classmates and you befriended me. Being an only kid, I loved spending time at your house—so different from mine, you know? My folks both worked, so instead of doing the latch-key thing, you invited me to hang with you after school. Your mom was so great; treated me like I was just another member of the family. I felt like I grew up in your family—your brothers were my brothers. YOU were my brother."

Vincent frowned, trying to remember.

"It wasn't a great neighborhood—working class. Neither of us was rich, but I never noticed a lack."

“So we grew up together. Good friends.”

“Yeah.”

“Doesn’t explain why you’d give up a normal life to help me.”

“No. That came later. We were in high school. It was a rough time. Gangs were infiltrating the barrio. I enjoyed school, you know. Did great in class, but I was kind of socially awkward, I guess you would say. Other kids made fun of me. It’s stupid, now that I think of it.”

“Something happened?” Vincent hated the feeling of weakness. He wanted to sleep, but he wanted to listen more. He gritted his teeth against the pain.

“I’d stayed late one night after class. You had baseball practice, so we didn’t walk home together. There was one particularly creepy alley we always took—it was a short-cut. I’d never taken it by myself before, but I thought—what the heck—it would save ten minutes. Big mistake. I got beat to a pump from a gang of kids from the school just out looking for trouble. Kept me out of classes for a week. Blew my perfect attendance record.”

“You were hurt pretty bad?”

“A busted rib and lots of bruises, mostly. But you took one look at me and went on a rampage. You somehow learned the name of every kid who’d participated that night and you and your brothers not only gave each and every one of them a lesson they’d not soon forget, you protected me the rest of the year.”

“I beat them up?”

“I don’t really know what you did—you never told me. But I received a letter of apology from all six kids and no one ever bothered me again.”

“I was intimidating back then, too, huh?”

“Nah. Not at all. That’s the weird thing. You were a super nice guy. You and your brothers. But you protected your own. You always have.” He looked down at Vincent then, a soft smile on his face. “In my opinion, you saved my life, in more ways than one. Later, in college, it was more fashionable to be nerdy—those kinds of incidents didn’t happen. But we remained friends, and always will.”

Vincent took more water, then eventually the soup, but after an hour fell into unconsciousness again. And dreamed . . . .

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“Right this way, Ma’am.”

“Thank you.” Tori Windsor, dressed to the nines, smiled prettily at the guard as he motioned her to follow him down the long hallway of barred cells at the county jail. Bob Reynolds’ back was to them as the guard halted in front of his cell and started unlocking it. He swiftly swung around and, seeing her, blanched.

“What are you doing?”

The fear was evident on his face.

“You can’t let her in here!”

The guard, confused, looked back and forth between the two of them. Tori decided it wasn’t worth it. The last thing she wanted was to make a scene and be forced out of there before doing what she came to do.

“It’s all right,” she smiled at the guard, who was probably thirty-something and just on the thick side of handsome. “I can talk with him out here, if that’s okay.”

“Whatever you want, Ma’am.” He took the key out of the lock and put it back in his pocket. “Just call for me when you’re ready and I’ll let you back out.”

“Thank you so much.” She waited until the guard went through the gate at the end before turning her eyes on Reynolds. Eyes that may have gone just a tad bit yellow. She smiled.

Reynolds had backed up in his cell. “Now, look here. I told Catherine and the ADA that I was going to confess to everything but would say nothing about” he lowered his voice, “beasts. And that includes you, so I’m no threat to you.”

“No. You were so kind to me in Montauk. Like a father, almost. Until you tried to *murder* me.” She took a couple of deep breaths knowing she had to remain calm.

“Tori. I made a mistake. I’m sorry for that; I truly am. And so glad that Vincent was able to rescue you both—”

“Oh, save it, please. Groveling doesn’t suit you.”

Reynolds pressed his lips together. “Then why are you here?”

“I want names.”

“Names?”

"Don't play innocent. You didn't work alone. And you had your hand in a source of deep cash to fund Vincent and his missions. I may be young, but I'm not stupid."

"No. But I . . . beg to differ. Yes, there were funds made available to me for a need-to-know program. But the only two people, besides me, who were read into it are dead. Tucker and—"

"And the one I killed. Your cute little bomber boy."

"That's right."

"Well, I don't believe it. So here's what we're going to do. You write a list, to include phone numbers and/or locations, and mail it to this PO Box." She tossed a hand-written card into his cell. "And I'll consider it a good-faith pledge. It might just keep you alive for a little while longer. And Catherine."

"Don't you dare touch Catherine!"

"What? *You're* going to threaten *me*? I wouldn't if I were you."

"She had nothing to do with me and what I did to you or to Vincent."

"She *shot* him! To save you. That makes her involved."

"Tori. I'll do anything you want. You want names; you got 'em. But please, leave my daughter alone."

She closed her eyes in satisfaction. "It does feel good to hear you beg."

"I'll get on my knees if that's what it takes. Kill me, but save her. You'll be saving yourself in the process, since you know how he feels about her."

"Vincent? She put a bullet in him. Believe me, things have changed . . . and he's with *me* now."

Reynolds studied her face, wondering at the truth. He couldn't afford to be wrong. "*Please.*"

"The list."

"You'll have it. I'll work on it tonight."

"Good." She turned to go.

"Don't think he won't rip you to shreds if you touch a hair on her head."

She swung around. "If he doesn't kill her first." Tori laughed at his expression. "I guess we'll find out who's right sooner or later, won't we? Guard!"

\*

"Where do you think you're going?" As Catherine came out of her bedroom fully dressed, Gabe got up from the breakfast table where he'd been nursing a cup of coffee for the last hour.

"I'm going in to the precinct." When he gave her a look of I'm-not-so-sure-you-should, she put her hands on her hips. "I need to be there. At least let me work. Take my mind off things. I'm sure you can find something for me to do."

Gabe frowned then thought about it a second. At least they wouldn't be splitting their time watching her at her apartment. He nodded. "Okay then. Let's go."

\*

It was a different story once they finally got to the office. Gabe got pulled away on precinct business he'd been ignoring but could no longer avoid almost as soon as they arrived. Tess filled Catherine in.

"I just learned that Tori visited Reynolds at the jail."

Catherine hurried to catch up with Tess as her partner made her long-legged way past their desks and led them into an interrogation room for privacy.

"She *what*? Did she kill him?"

"No. Didn't touch him."

"Then let's go. Find out what she said to him. It might give us a clue as to where she is now and what she's up to."

Tess rounded on Cat. "Listen. I'm only telling you this because I know how worried you are. But this isn't your fault and you're not going anywhere. We've got it under control."

"We who? You and Gabe? Because there are only a few people who know anything about . . . this situation, and I'm one of them. Tess, let me help. I know that Vincent is with JT, so I'm okay with that. But you need my help to find Tori and . . . and I need to DO something."

Tess mashed her lips together. "I know you do. I wish this would all just go away."

"You're not the only one."



Tess nodded. She understood only too well. Catherine was torn between duty and love. No easy place to be. “Cat, I can’t take you with me. The less you are connected to this case, the better. The chief is all over Gabe right now, asking a LOT of questions. You need to maintain as low a profile as possible. We all do. I’m playing all this under the radar. You would actually be more help to me here, running interference for me, than tagging along, okay?” She waited a beat until her friend reluctantly agreed. “We’ll stay connected,” she held up her cell phone, “like this.”

“All right. But I want to know everything.”

“You got it.”

\*

Catherine heard the yelling from Gabe’s office. It filtered down through the entire first floor. The chief was laying into Gabe big-time. It made her wonder if she was next. Deciding it would be best to avoid another interrogation so soon, she knew she and Tess could talk more freely if she were outside the precinct. She headed to the coffee shop. As soon as she opened the door, though, she was reminded of her last talk there with Bob. Daddy Reynolds. She took a deep breath. It seemed like ages ago. Was it just the other day? For a moment, she’d actually felt a little bit of happiness knowing she had a father again and that he wanted to be in her life. Then he tried to play her for a fool! He was a hateful man. She pushed the memory of that last horrible chat and his face out of her mind, ordered a bagel and coffee and found an empty table in the corner.

She was studying reports on her iphone when someone pulled out the chair in front of her and sat down. Tori Windsor.

### Chapter 3

“Tori!”

“Glad to see me?”

Cat flustered and looked around the tiny café. Her back was against the wall, usually a good position, but it also meant her escape route was blocked. “Y-yes. As a matter of fact, we were just trying to find you.” Her quest for calm only went as far as her face. Inside she was shaking. Thankfully, Tori didn’t have Vincent’s ability to detect lies and nervousness.

“Why’s that?”

“We were worried. JT called. Said you had left to go get some supplies—”

"To help with Vincent. Whom you *shot*. You DO remember shooting him, right?" She saw Catherine's stealthy movement beneath the table. "Are you going to shoot me, too? You'd be too slow, you know. I can reach you before your finger can squeeze the trigger."

Catherine swallowed and tried to visibly relax her shoulders. The girl could no doubt do it, too. "Tori. I believe you, but I'm no threat. I don't want to hurt you. I didn't want to hurt Vincent, either. I know you're angry but you don't understand about Vincent . . . and me."

"He said you had some kind of epic love, but frankly I don't see it. People in love don't try to *kill* each other!"

Catherine had her doubts about that. She looked quickly around the room to see if their heated conversation was getting noticed. "I don't expect you to understand."

"I mean, what kind of relationship was even possible for you two anyway?" She gave her a scathing glance. "*Seriously.*"

The insult only bolstered Catherine's courage. "You'd be surprised."

Tori's eyes widened. At least they weren't yellow. Yet. Catherine let her statement sink in a minute before continuing. Tori obviously thought they couldn't have a physical relationship because of who he was. Maybe it wasn't what he and Tori could have together—no. She was NOT going to go there—but the girl had *no* idea. "I wish you'd known him . . . before they changed him."

"I know him *now*, probably better than you, because he's *like me*. We understand each other. And he's still a human being!"

"Yes. Of course he is."

"He bleeds."

She needed no reminder of that. Her heart still felt very heavy . . . and worried. "I understand you helped him by contacting JT. Thank you for that."

"He was unconscious when I left him!"

"Unconscious?" That didn't sound right. Unless he'd lost more blood than she assumed. What if the wound was worse than she thought? He could need surgery! JT couldn't do *that*.

"He could die! Don't you even care?!"

"Yes, of course I care. But he's in good hands. JT will call if he can't handle the situation. It's just—you need to understand—"

"That you tried to *kill* the person you claimed to love?"

"No. I just wanted to stop him, Tori. Not kill him. And I still love him."

"You love the person he *used* to be. But now he's more like *me*."

While he certainly wasn't the guy she'd fallen in love with originally, he was still *that guy*. "You can love someone and not be happy with the choices they make. And even though we can't be together anymore, I will love Vincent until the day I die."

Tori blinked. "Well, that might be sooner than you think. And if he dies," she added, "I'm coming after *you*. Fair warning."

Catherine believed it. She fought for calm. "Tori, this isn't you talking. You're a victim, too, remember? Let us help you. You-you can't embrace what's been done to you. You need to fight it."

"I don't *embrace* it!"

"Don't you?" Catherine laughed incredulously. "You're threatening to rip out my insides right here in the middle of a restaurant in broad daylight. Is that what *normal* people do? I know you're angry. And confused. I get that. But you don't know the history Vincent and I have together. More than anything, I want him to be well. To be happy. Please believe me."

"He'll be happier with *me*." Tori closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she was calmer. For his sake, she needed to remain calm. Once she had the list and Vincent was well again, they'd take care of this business once and for all. As for Catherine, she was pathetic, and not worth her or his time. There was no way he'd run back to this weak female once he tasted what she had to offer. She must remember that. She smiled.

"Well. I think I've made my point. Stay away from him. He's *mine*." She stood. "It's been nice chatting with you, *Detective*." She turned to leave.

Catherine stood, also. "Where are you going?"

"Back to Vincent, of course. He needs me. Stay out of the way and I'll let you live."

Catherine swallowed her response and watched the younger woman leave. Message received. She picked up her cell.

\*

Tori arrived back at the hotel room just as JT was leaning over Vincent, a concerned look on his face.

“What’s wrong with him? Why is he still so weak?”

JT swung around, unhappy to see his visitor again. She arrived with a bag of supplies she’d obviously picked up at the market, not at his place, from the receipt he could see through the plastic. “Did you get lost or something?” he asked her.

“Or something. I had a little business to take care of.”

He swung his head around. “Wh-what kind of business?”

“Don’t cry, science-guy, I didn’t kill anyone,” she stated in an annoyed voice. “Yet. Why isn’t he getting better?”

“I’m not sure.”

Vincent’s breathing turned more erratic as soon as she entered the room.

“There’s a secondary infection or something. I’m still trying to isolate the cause.”

“Well, try faster. This place is a pit.”

Instead of cowering, JT stood straighter. “It’s gotten worse just since you walked in.”

Her eyes widened. She’d always known she had some sort of affect on Vincent. Just a touch seemed to set them both off. Of course, it felt more like fireworks to her. “Maybe I can help.” She leaned in closer.

“No! I-I mean, I’m not sure that’s wise.”

She ached to touch him again, but geek-boy was playing hardball. She backed up. “Then what do we do?” She hated depending on friends of Vincent’s who were not likely friends of hers.

Vincent groaned and opened his eyes. “Tori?”

She rushed over to him but kept her hands to herself. “I’m here.”

“Where have you been?”

“I went to see Reynolds. At the jail. He’s getting me a list—of people who were involved. Of all the people who helped him. We’ll take them all down, Vincent, you and I, one by one.”

“No, Tori. That is *not* a good idea. Too . . . dangerous.”

“But we can do it—together. We’re stronger, remember?” As if he needed further convincing, she decided to flaunt Catherine’s weakness in front of him. “Catherine certainly won’t help. She let Reynolds live.”

He lifted his head. “When did you see Catherine?”

“I just came from visiting her. She’s weak, Vincent. She’ll never been strong. But you and I—” she grabbed his hand and they both felt such a rush, their eyes began to glow. JT backed up.

“H-hey, hey, hey—”

“What did you do? Did you touch her?” Vincent surged up from the bed with alarming strength considering how weak he’d been just moments before. It both awed and horrified JT, who watched their mutual transformation in alarmed fascination.

Vincent closed his eyes as his chest rose with the infusion of power. Then he opened them, smiled, and brought his face close to hers. In his gruff voice, now powerful again but dangerously quiet, he said, “Tori?”

“Yes,” she replied eagerly, her voice was filled with desire.

“You touch one hair on her head and I’ll RIP YOUR HEART OUT!!” he roared, and Tori flew back across the room.

Vincent collapsed again as quickly as he’d surged.

Tori gaped at him, confused, frightened. Then she scrambled back up and ran out of the apartment.

Vincent’s heart was racing erratically now. “Protect . . . her . . .” was all he managed before falling into unconsciousness again. Then his breathing completely stopped.

“Oh, no, no, no—!” JT sprang into action. Yanking back the sheet covering his friend, he bent to listen for any air through his passages, checked his pulse. Seeing none, did the only thing he could – he slammed his fist into Vincent’s chest to restart his heart.

\*

Exhausted, a terrified JT sagged back down when he felt the weak but steady rhythm of Vincent’s heart beating once again. That was too close! Too, too close for comfort.

He rubbed a sleeve across his face and watched for a few minutes before picking up his cell and dialing Tess. “I have to get him to my place. There’s equipment there I need. Call Gabe. Have him send a private med team to transport him to the Club. And tell him to hurry!”

A team of four lab-coated men arrived within half an hour, much to JT's surprise and relief. They didn't ask questions, just moved the patient onto a gurney and sped them both to the Club in an unmarked emergency vehicle in no time flat.

Money really does buy just about anything, JT mused as he hooked Vincent up to the instruments that would monitor his vitals more closely than he could by himself. The minute they left, Vincent flat lined again. This time, JT was ready. Without hesitating, he slapped the paddles to Vincent's chest and hit the current. Once, twice. His heart re-started; this time more regular.

JT slumped into his open palm. "I can't take much more of this, Big Guy. *Please* stay with me." He watched as Vincent eventually fell into an even slumber. He appeared to be resting more easily this time, but only time would tell.

Over the next hour, as Vincent slept, JT went about studying the results of the blood analysis. This was more than simple blood loss. Of course, the stress Tori put on his body hadn't help in the least. He was glad Vincent had had to strength to send her away. He fashioned a vaccine, of sorts, to boost his immune system. Thankfully, after a few hours, he started seeing the white blood cell count come down. That was a good sign. Whatever had gotten into his system, Vincent was slowly fighting, although it nearly killed him.

He glanced over to find his friend watching him. "You're awake." He rushed to get a glass of water.

"You should have let me die, JT."

"*What?*"

"...better for everyone."

"Are you crazy?!"

Vincent turned his head away. "It didn't work, you know."

"Th-the flat lining?"

Vincent didn't answer, but he didn't need to.

"It doesn't matter. I don't care what you are or even what you may become, Vincent. Your life is important – to *me*. I let you die once. *Never again.*"

Vincent turned back. "You should have let me stay dead then."

"You *remember* that? That-that was back when we first were on the run, from Muirfield. I'd given you a concoction as-as a test, and it'd had the complete opposite effect than I wanted. You reacted to it like an allergy. Anaphylactic shock."

Vincent watched his face, both lost in memories.

"Your heart stopped. And . . . for a moment, I . . . hesitated. I knew how badly you hated what you had become and you'd said on many occasions you wished you had never survived, but . . . I knew that wasn't you talking. The man I knew wasn't a quitter. Or a coward. I couldn't do it." He turned and looked him full in the face. "Because *I* needed you."

"JT." Vincent studied his friend's exhausted face. "Be reasonable. You've done so much. More than anyone should ever have to do. I don't want you to feel guilty if something happens to me. You have every right to live your life again."

"You remember almost everything now, don't you? I could see it in your face last night."

Vincent shrugged, a painfully weak movement. "Most things. Some areas are still a little fuzzy, but I remember all the important stuff."

"Like Catherine."

"Like Catherine," he agreed solemnly.

"Then you know why I'd never let you die if I could help it." He brought over the broth again. This time, Vincent drank it.

"What have you figured out?" Vincent asked, eager to change the subject. "This doesn't feel like a simple weakness from blood loss."

"It isn't. It looks like you were poisoned."

"*Poisoned?* When?" They'd all eaten Thanksgiving dinner together.

"That's what I can't figure out. My only guess is Reynolds. This is a sophisticated biological weapon. Something he'd have had access to. When you came in contact with him, it must have triggered some kind of rapid metamorphosis in your cells. That's what a simple cold virus does, but this is different. It specifically targeted your DNA."

"His last ditch effort to neutralize me. If I took him down, at least it would kill me."

"That's what I'm thinking. He must have had it on his skin. It wouldn't be lethal to anyone but you. Then, when Tori got close to you—"

"She amplified it—made it worse." He clamped his jaw together. That seemed to be her unique ability. "He's a smart guy," he murmured, understanding the intelligence behind such a diabolical scheme. Reynolds was a true fiend.

"Maybe. But I'm smarter." JT smiled for the first time that night. "Now that I know what we're up against, I can combat it. You'll be better than new before you know it."

Vincent frowned. What he wanted was to dream again and never wake up. "Don't tell Catherine."

"What?"

"Tell her I died."

JT stood up.

"It's better that way, JT, you know it. Better for her. Better for you. I can go away somewhere—"

"And do what? You're going to run away with Tori and live happily ever after? Never happen."

"Tori's not for me and you know it."

"I DO know it. *Catherine* is the one for you.

"Not anymore, JT. I crossed a line and I can't ever take that back. I can't . . . *un-become* what I am and what I've done."

"She'll come around. You just have to be patient. Don't give up."

"Maybe if the flat lining had worked—"

"She doesn't even know you as a quote unquote normal guy. She knows and loves you as YOU. Every part. You have to believe that."

"Maybe once. Not anymore. Why can't you let this go? Why is it so important to you?"

JT lifted his arms. "Because I didn't spend *ten years* of my life protecting you to see you throw it all away! I fought you getting involved with her initially, yes, but after I saw what it did for you—for both of you—I wanted it more than anyone. Because it made all the time I spent helping you, protecting you, worth it. Okay, I get that she's mad at you right now. She doesn't want anything to do with you because of what's happened, but you will find your way back together. I mean, I'm mad at her, too! But I know, deep down, she loves you. If you'd seen what it did to her to lose you for those three months. I'm just saying, don't give up, Vincent—on her or on yourself! She needs some space now. Fine. So do you. Give it a rest, but then, come back fighting."



Vincent wasn't persuaded. There was more to this than a simple argument. He turned his face into the couch. And slept.

#### Chapter 4

"You need to go after her."

JT swung around from studying his computer to see Vincent slowly rousing. "Hey. Her, who? You mean *Tori*? The she-beast you threw out? I don't think so." He got up and walked to over to where Vincent rested and checked his vitals again. "I'm perfectly fine with her gone. Frankly, she's not helping the situation. You flat lined after that little yelling episode, if you remember!"

"I had to make sure she knew where I stood—for Catherine's sake. C'mon, JT. She's just a kid. And frightened, alone and probably still angry."

"That's what I'm afraid of." He crossed his arms. "Let her vent that rage somewhere else. We don't need it here."

"JT—she has nowhere else. Besides, you're always saying, 'keep your friends close and your—'"

"—enemies closer.' I got it. But she *affects* you."

"I know that, okay? I will control the situation, I promise. She isn't a lost cause. Yet. But she might become that if we don't work with her, try to help her understand her new self and her responsibilities. And I'm the only one right now who can do that. I needed to make myself clear about . . . about Catherine, but now that she knows where I stand—"

"So you think she's good with that now? Really?"

"I'll make sure of it."

"Because you're not a hundred percent yet."

"I'm getting my strength back every minute, thanks to you. And the wounds are healing."

"But, *Tori*—"

"Is just a frightened young woman."

"She's old enough. Might I remind you that your lips were all over that 'young woman' just the other day."

Vincent sighed. "I didn't understand the influence she could have on me at first. Now I do. And that kiss was a mistake. One that I . . . *used* to force Catherine to walk away from me. That's all."

"Wait. What? Then there's no real attraction going on between you and Tori?"

"No. Not in the way you're thinking. Not from my end. I mean, I get that she feels drawn to me. I'm the only one like her in the entire world. But she's got the wrong idea if she thinks I'm for her."

"I'm pretty sure that's what she thinks."

"Then I'll set her straight. But I can't do that unless we get her back. We have to find her, JT." He sat up straighter. It was painful, but he could do it.

JT slumped. "All right. I'll check her credit card usage. That should be a clue."

\*

"What is it? The meeting with the chief didn't go well?" Tess stood as Catherine flew down the center stairs to their side-by-side desks. She wasn't happy.

"That's putting it mildly," Cat answered, and leaned onto her desk, bare of paperwork and cases now. "I'm suspended—administrative leave until further notice. Tess, they took my badge and my gun."

Tess gave her a sympathetic look. "Cat, you know that's just standard procedure during an investigation. Nothing to worry about, I'm sure. Gabe will just throw a little money around. And he's a pretty good liar. I'm surprised there's still an inquisition going on."

"Gabe's 'influence' doesn't extend to Chief Moreno, apparently."

"Well, it's actually nice to know there are some people who can't be bought."

"Not in this case. And unlike Gabe, I'm a lousy liar. Moreno knows there was another person involved, and I haven't convinced him otherwise."

"Okay, well then, we'll figure something out. Don't worry. You'll be back before you know it."

"Not before the new year." She ran a frustrated hand through her hair. "Gabe thinks it's a good thing. Says I should use the time to 'rediscover myself,' or some such crap."

"Gabe, the Dispenser of Sage Advice. *Not*. And since when do you listen to Gabe?"

*Since Gabe seemed to be rescuing her an awful lot lately.* No. Catherine refused to dwell on that. “It’s just – Tess, what am I going to do with myself? It’s the holidays, you know? This will be the first Christmas without my dad, without Heather, and I’ve just lost my boyfriend!”

“So I oddly find myself in Gabe’s camp right now. You should take this time to rediscover yourself.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means, figure out who you are *apart* from your family, your job, and *Vincent*. You weren’t dead before you met him, you know. You had a life, interests. Volunteer! Or, I know. You like to read, right? Join a reading club.”

When Cat frowned at her, she tried again. “Sports are out, obviously—”

“Thanks a lot.”

“But you like to work out. So take an in-line cycling class.”

That would fill up about an hour two or three times a week! “I don’t know . . . .”

“You must have something you’ve been wanting to do--other interests.”

“I like to cook.” Cat shrugged, still frowning.

“Perfect! Sign up for a cooking class.”

Catherine rubbed her temple. “I guess I could do something like that.”

“Yes! You’re free—for a while, anyway. Do something you’ve always wanted to do. Just think about it. You’ll come up with something.”

Catherine wasn’t so sure about that, but she’d think on it. She should really get going and let Tess get back to the real work, and before Moreno came out of his office to find her still there, but she needed to know . . . . She hesitated a moment longer, then blurted out, “Have you heard anything from JT lately? Is Vincent doing okay?”

Tess’s gaze was direct. “I know how hard it was for you to ask that. I’m in touch. I’m not going to lie to you, Cat. There were some pretty rough moments, but he made it through.”

“ ‘Pretty rough,’? What happened? Tess!”

Tess sighed and sat down, keeping her voice low. “Okay. I don’t want to upset you, all right? But not only was Vincent shot by you, apparently he was also poisoned.”

"Poisoned?"

"By Reynolds. Or—or at least that's our theory. JT thinks it's some kind of biological weapon designed just for Vincent—a virus which targeted his particular DNA, so no worries about a pandemic or anything."

Catherine thought about her biological father, much as she didn't want to. Bob Reynolds was an enigma. A monstrous one. That he would poison Vincent in such a way sounded just sadistic enough to be true. "But Vincent's all right? He's recovering?"

"He's on the mend now, yes. JT was able to synthesize a vaccine for the virus. It's working. It was pretty ingenious, actually. The guy's somewhat amazing."

Catherine had to agree with that, although the way Tess said it sent her eyebrows into her bangs. "That's JT. Now I *know* I should go see him."

"Vincent? Why? No."

Catherine looked up, surprised. "Tess, I'm responsible for his condition. At least a part of it. If my aim had been a little higher, he *could have died*."

"Cat, *Vincent* is responsible for his own condition, remember? Not you. And why would you go there? To apologize? See, that just negates everything you tried to do by stopping him. This isn't *your* fault! It's totally on him. He made his own bed; now he has to lie in it. Literally."

"I know, but—"

"I know you care." Tess took her hand in all sincerity. "You can't help yourself. But honestly, Cat . . . I don't think he wants you there."

Catherine felt the impact of those words like a blow. Tess wasn't kidding now. Her friend was being straight-up with her. Vincent didn't want her to come.

She sat down, deflated. "Of course not. You're right."

"You love him and, as hard as it is to hear that he's going through this, *you did the right thing*. He needed a little tough love, and sometimes love hurts. But you need to let this play out."

"But Vincent—"

"Has been the consuming factor in your life. I get it."

She flexed her neck, the soreness still there. "And right now I can't work, one dad is gone, the other is a monster, and my sister—"

“Cat, you need to get a life. And I don’t mean that sarcastically. Figure out who you are now—apart from them—and move ahead.”

She looked around. The main floor had been decorated by the clerical staff over the weekend. Shiny red and silver balls draped with tinsel hung in gaily twinkling clusters from the ceiling and fluttered merrily in the air currents. “The holidays don’t help. You know, I couldn’t even put up the decorations I got down out of the closet. Everything reminded me of Dad. And it’s not like I feel like celebrating right now, anyway.”

“I know. And I’m sorry.”

“With Heather so far away, and Vincent—. What made the season special is all gone.” She looked up, suddenly inspired. “Tess, do you think you’re grandmother could tolerate another single, intimidating 30-something female at her table this year?”

Tess’s eyes flew to hers, surprise evident. It was the first time Catherine had ever even suggested such a thing. She was clearly harboring some serious anxiety.

“I’m desperate.”

“Obviously. And thanks a lot. I’ll be sure to tell Nana you said that.”

“No! I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know. And you’re a brave soul.” Tess smirked at the idea. “Of course, she would love to have—oh.”

“Oh? What oh?”

“Well, it’s just that . . .” Tess hesitated. “I already have a plus-one coming for Christmas dinner. Not—not a real plus-one, I mean—”

Catherine sat upright. “You’re seeing someone and you didn’t even *tell* me?”

Tess shook her head. “No. It’s not like that. It’s . . . I invited JT, okay? As my . . . date. Sort-of. I mean, he’s just a friend, but, well, he really helped me through the Thanksgiving holiday and I figured I owed him. Besides, he’s a gainfully employed and respectable professor, and too nice of a guy for my brothers to give a bad time to.”

Cat smiled. “Oddly, I find I’m not surprised by this. No problem, then. I’ll find someone else. One of my college buddies—”

“But you know what, there’s no reason why you can’t come, too—”

“Uh, no. I’m not sure I’m ready for that.”

“For what?”

“To see the two of you . . . together. But thank you for the offer.”

“Just a *friend*.” Tess rolled her eyes. “Well, how about we do something together before-hand, then? Take in a movie—”

“No. You know what?” Cat stood, suddenly inspired. “I think I’ll take Heather up on her offer.”

“What’s that?”

“I have all this time off, right? I’ll go to Miami. She hasn’t been in her new job long enough to have any vacation, so she can’t come here, but I could go there. And just being together, away from here, would be good for both of us.”

Tess looked skeptical. “Okay, I’m all for that, but you’re seriously going to try to book a flight during Christmas at this late hour? Good luck with that! And Christmas in Miami is so wrong.”

Cat shrugged. Maybe, but it was better than here. Alone.

\*

Catherine managed to get a ticket, but it was on standby, non-direct, and she had to fly back Christmas Day. But she took it, and two days later would bid farewell to the arctic blast of winter. She was getting out just in time. But before she left, she needed to make one stop. Despite Tess’s advice to the contrary, she couldn’t leave town without making an appearance at the Club. But unlike times past, she found the front door solidly locked. She knocked. JT’s car was still around back, so it was unlikely the place was empty. She banged the knocker again. JT opened the door a crack.

“Oh, it’s you.”

“JT. Hi. How’s it going?”

JT looked around then back at her. “‘How’s it going?’ You’re asking about my work, or—?”

Okay, the indirect approach wasn’t going to work. “Is . . . is Vincent here?”

“Uh, he’s not . . . in right now.”

“Oh. Really? He’s out and about? Pretty miraculous healing for someone who can’t heal himself quickly anymore. I thought he’d still be recuperating.” Her eyes narrowed on his face. “JT, I can hear his voice.” She thought she heard his scruffy baritone in the background say something like, “Again.”

“I meant—now’s not a real good time.”

“I just want to talk to him for a minute.”

JT crossed his arms, barring the way. “You don’t get it. He doesn’t want to see you. I don’t know, something about being *shot*—”

“Can I at least hear *him* say that?”

“What about ‘he doesn’t want to see you’ don’t you understand?”

“JT, who is it?” Vincent asked.

“Uh—”

“JT, I’m . . . I’m leaving town, all right?” Catherine said quietly. “But before I go, I just need to see that he’s okay.”

“He’s okay.”

“JT?” Vincent’s voice again in the background.

At that, she pushed past him.

Against the far set of windows, locked in concentration, were Vincent and . . . Tori. Her heart sank. She shouldn’t have been surprised, but something inside her died just a little at the sight. That the girl was still with him said a lot.

Catherine saw Vincent freeze in a moment of recognition before looking up. He sensed her.

“We’ll try this again later,” he said quietly to the girl. “Go.”

Tori looked at him in momentary confusion, then turned as Catherine walked farther into the room, JT behind her. But rather than the haughty, threatening countenance with which she’d been greeted at the restaurant, the girl merely looked worried, and took herself off to another room without a word. JT also left, closing the door to the kitchen behind him.

Into the weighted silence, Vincent spoke without turning. "You shouldn't have come, Catherine."

"I'm sorry, I—"

"Are you?"

She saw the care with which he rose from the chair and turned toward her. He was still in a great deal of pain. *Because of her*. The look on his face would have frightened away most people, but she held her ground. She wasn't most people. And she understood this man more than he understood himself. If he'd wanted to hurt her back, he could have done so a hundred ways by now, even in his condition.

"I should have called first. That's what I'm apologizing for. And I . . . I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"I'm okay."

That didn't invite her to remain or ask any more questions. Tess had spoken the truth. He didn't want her there. Message received. Catherine couldn't stop her eyes from briefly flickering down his torso, but his shirt hid any evidence of his bandages. "Okay."

She held his gaze until her resolve started to crumble, then she turned away before she broke down in front of him. He was alive. She'd have to comfort herself with that. It would have to be enough. With determined steps, she quickly made her way back to the entrance. His voice, laced with sarcasm, stopped her.

"Happy holidays."

She sucked in a sharp breath, then jerked the door open and ran back out toward the street.

## Chapter 5

"What did you do?" JT re-entered the main room as soon as he heard the door slam shut. Vincent sat with his face in his hands, shaking.

"What I had to do," he said finally, and raised somber eyes to his friend. "I'm not good for her, JT. I'll rip my own heart out before I hurt her again."

"Don't you think you just did that?"

Tori came back into the room, too, a question on her face. Vincent dismissed her with his eyes and stood, grabbing for his coat. "I have to get out of here."



JT grimaced. This was so bad. “Where are you going? It’s like a frozen wasteland out there. At least take a hat!” he yelled as Vincent stalked past him, ignoring his pleas. “It’s below freezing,” he muttered to thin air. He glanced at Tori. She met his gaze, then returned to the back room. Great! The whole damn world was falling apart.

\*

“You were right.” Catherine set her jaw as she drove back to her apartment and spoke over her car’s BlueTooth. “He hurt me for the last time, Tess. I don’t know what I expected—something else, obviously.” *Someone* else. “No, I’m done. I want nothing more to do with him. End of story. In fact, I hope I never see his . . . sorry, unscarred face again!”

“Whoa. Okay, take a breath. Are you driving like this right now?”

“I’m headed back to my apartment.”

“Well, have a care, Cat. The conditions outside are nasty. With the state you’re in, it’s dangerous.”

“I just wanted to see if he was all right.”

“Well, if he was healthy enough to be abusive to you, I think you got your answer. Was he? Abusive?” Tess asked the question with some trepidation, a worried frown on her face.

“Just cold.”

“I’m so sorry. Listen, just . . . come back to the precinct. We’ll hide in the research lab until I get off, then we’ll get smashed later. It’s Friday.”

“I . . . can’t. I need to think. Thanks for the offer, but I still have to pack.” And then there was the problem of all those boxes of Christmas decorations she’d managed to pull down from the closet. “I’ll call you later.”

“Okay, but I’m here for you. Whatever you need.”

“Thanks, Tess.” She clicked off the phone and wiped her eye. “That’s the last tear I’m shedding over you, buddy.”

\*

“Where’s Catherine?”

JT looked up as Vincent entered the Club, his eyes a little wild. He hadn’t seen much of the guy in days and was pretty sure he hadn’t been sleeping there. After the encounter with Catherine a week ago, it was like he lived alone. Even Tori was starting to ask questions. “What do you mean? Is—is that where you’ve been sneaking off to?”

“I haven’t been ‘sneaking’ off. And yeah—I’ve been by her place a couple of times, but it’s cold and dark. Like she hasn’t been there for days.” He’d stood outside on the porch and peered in. Nothing. Not a sign of life. The monochrome blues she’d redecorated with didn’t help. Lifeless. They didn’t suit her at all. He missed the warm colors the apartment had had before.

“Now you’re stalking her place? What? You’re tracking sense is malfunctioning or something? Dude, last time she was here, she *told* you she was leaving.”

“*Leaving?* Catherine didn’t say anything about that!”

“Well, maybe she never got around to it because you acted like a *jerk* to her when all she wanted was to make sure you were all right.” At Vincent’s exasperated look, JT opened his arms. “Just being honest. You didn’t exactly make her feel welcome. And while I’m still a little angry with her, too, I think I’m on her side in this. Now suddenly you’re all worried? Make up your mind.”

“I thought it would be better to make her hate me—”

“Wow. On your way there, my friend.”

“But I was *wrong*.” The look on her face before she stormed out of the club still haunted him. Pushing her away for her own good had seemed right at the time, but even he was coming to realize that was a terrible idea, and not what he really wanted. They’d already been there, done that before. And it hadn’t worked any better then, either. He’d changed his mind. Now, it appeared, it was too late.

JT exhaled heavily. His gut was hurting again. “Catherine will never hate you, Vincent. But after the way you acted, I imagine she doesn’t like you very much right now. Can’t say I blame her. Since you’ve been back, you’ve done nothing but hurt her.”

The bald words made Vincent go still. Truth, ugly as it was. “I know that, okay? I feel awful . . . about everything, and want to make things right.”

“I never bought the whole ‘I’m-okay-without-Catherine’ routine, by the way, but it might just be too little, too late.” JT gestured to his head. “You need to get your head on straight. Seriously think this through. And maybe you two just need to sit down and talk, if that’s even possible now. What is it you really want—or who? Because if it’s still Catherine, then—”

“Yes.”

“At this point, I’m afraid you may have to do some serious groveling. And I don’t mean a simple apology. Face-in-the-dirt begging. For real. Because you can’t have it both ways. She probably thinks you’re still cavorting around with Tori. Maybe she took off with Gabe for a while, who knows? She certainly deserves a *little* happiness.”

That needed, but he wouldn’t admit it, even to JT. Gabe was waiting in the wings. “So you don’t know where she is?”

JT’s lips thinned to a tight line. Finally he shrugged. “Miami.”

“*Miami!*”

“She decided to visit her sister. I’m not sure when she left, but Tess said Catherine miraculously got last-minute tickets.”

Yeah, and he’d bet that was Gabe’s doing, too. “Did Tess know how long she would be gone?”

“She’s flying back Christmas Day, that’s all I know. And I only remember because that’s the night I’m going to Tess’s grandmother’s and she was all worried Cat would need a ride home from the airport, but I guess she left her car in the airport garage.”

Vincent rubbed an unconscious hand across his abdomen. He was moving easier these days, but there was still pain; now it was radiating to his heart. *So it wasn’t permanent. Just a visit.* That was a relief. The boxes he’d seen on her living room floor had given him a start. Now he didn’t know what to make of them. He sighed. That he’d been giving mixed signals was no surprise. He felt conflicted over their relationship in so many ways and so, apparently, did JT. But over the last few days, he realized he wasn’t strong enough to let it go. A muscle in his cheek clenched and unclenched.

“You know, if you’re bored,” JT suggested, “you could put some effort into cleaning up this place a little. It’s bordering on the morbidly morose. It *is* the holidays. I’m just saying. We could both do with a little cheer around here.”

The only cheer he wanted right now was from a bottle of Jack Daniels. “Since when are you interested in celebrating the holidays?” Vincent asked. They hadn’t put up decorations in the ten years they’d lived on the sly.

JT shrugged. “Tess brought over a box of stuff she no longer uses.”

Vincent turned away, frustrated. Catherine was gone until Christmas and JT had a new BFF. He dragged a weary hand across his face. The twenty-fifth wasn’t that far, but it was more than two long weeks away . . . .

\*

Miami—

Heather threaded her arm through her sister's as they walked through the terminal toward the parking lot. "Are you okay? You look a little . . ."

"What?" Catherine stopped and turned.

"I don't know. Sad. Or, far away."

Cat schooled her features into a smile and laughed. "How can I be sad when I get to spend Christmas with my favorite sis—"

"—your ONLY sister."

"—in sunny Miami?" She patted Heather's arm. "I can't tell you how nice it was to escape New York right now. It's been in the thirties for what seems like weeks."

Heather smiled. "I know, right? Seventy-five degrees here at Christmas! It seems so wrong, doesn't it? But I've decided to embrace it."

"I'm not only going to embrace it," Catherine said. "I'm going to soak in it. I plan to bring home a healthy tan."

Heather frowned. "It's too bad you have to travel back Christmas Day. That isn't right."

"Hey, I was lucky to get tickets at all at such a late date. And we'll still have Christmas breakfast together. It will be fun."

"Speaking of fun, since you'll be here for two whole weeks I have lots of things planned."

"Heath—"

"With plenty of downtime built in, don't worry. I realize you older types need that."

"Hey! I resemble that remark. But seriously, I'm sorry I didn't give you much heads up on this trip."

"Oh, no worries. I'm thrilled you were able to come."

"But I don't want you to feel like you need to entertain me. While you're at work, I can totally go exploring in town on my own. Or the beach. I'm fine with that."

“Well, save some of that to do with me. I haven’t seen all the sights yet, myself. I do have a couple of events to do. It *is* the holiday season, you know. But that’s all. When I’m off work, I’m all yours.”

“And if you need some help at an event, let me know. I’m just happy to be here and spending time with you—whatever you’re doing.”

“That’s great because I *do* have an office Christmas party to attend at the end of the week, and I already told them you were coming.”

When Catherine blanched, she added, “It will keep your mind off of detective-y things, you know? And the relationship you’re bemoaning.”

“Bemoaning?” They reached the car. Heather punched the trunk release and Catherine quickly took her bags around to the back to avoid her sister’s too-knowing gaze. Her encounter with Vincent still felt raw. And devastating. One thing was for sure—he still knew how to hurt her.

“Don’t give me that look. I’ve been through enough of those to recognize the signs, Cat. And you’ve got it bad.”

Catherine grimaced and pulled her thoughts back to the present. “This trip will be good for me. I needed to clear my head.”

“Perfect.” Heather smiled as they both climbed into the car. “Who knows? You might even meet the man of your dreams in Miami and decide to move down here with me permanently.”

“I’m not here for that, Heath,” Catherine warned. “And I don’t know how much partying I’m up to—”

“It’s just one party. Besides, I want you to meet the people I work with. One in particular.”

Catherine’s head turned from the late afternoon scenery to study her sister. “Already?”

“He’s not my plus-one. Yet. Just—just a distraction. A very tall, attractive distraction. Something you could really use, too.”

A distraction, yes, she could desperately do with that, but a guy? “Just *one* party, right? Not five?”

“One party. One night to sparkle.”

“I didn’t exactly pack ‘sparkle.’”

Heather waved away her concern. “I’m sure I have something you could borrow.”

Catherine sagged back into her seat. One night she could handle. For Heather. “As long as you don’t abandon me for this new guy of yours.”

“I promise. You won’t be left alone. And the rest of the time you’re here you can totally hang out at my place and veg on the couch, if you want. But if you bring ice cream into my apartment, you’re dead meat.” She turned the corner into a tree-lined drive. “I mean that.”

Cat laughed. “Got it. No ice cream. Scout’s honor.”

\*

The Company Christmas party was held on the upper floor of a swanky beachside hotel. They’d taken over the entire restaurant and lounge area.

“Wow.” Catherine paused after exiting the elevator and took in the room.

“Isn’t it beautiful?”

Reds, greens and golds sparkled amidst thousands of white lights scattered throughout the room. Multiple Christmas trees, almost certainly fake, were tucked into each corner among dozens of lighted palms.

“Nothing says Christmas like—”

“Palm trees and tinsel. I know. It’s balmy enough for just a light sweater, and there are people swimming in the surf as we speak. Crazy good.”

Catherine squinted at the view in the dying light. The calm, muted colors of an east coast sunset filtered lazily through the glass-lined wall and into the room. “It’s certainly different.”

“I like it because it’s different.” Heather said, leading her forward. “I mean, there’s no tie-in with the past. No memories to muddle. It just feels like *now*.” Soft music wafted past them as they perused the loaded tables of hors d’oeuvres. A small band was setting up in one corner of the dance floor.

“No, I get it,” Catherine agreed. “Nothing to remind us of our parents and the Christmases we had at home.”

“Or old boyfriends,” Heather said pointedly. “I mean, New York is New York and there’s nothing else like it, especially at the holidays. But here, we can make *new* memories; start new traditions.” She tucked Cat’s arm in hers again.

Catherine could see the logic in that. Everything was different, new. She suddenly envied her sister. As she peered around the room, she recognized the ambiance for what it was: wealthy. The PR firm certainly spared no expense. Heather would do well here. She passed a mirror and couldn't help checking her appearance.

Heather caught the covert glance. "You look fabulous. As always."

"I don't know. This dress isn't really my style."

"That's because you have no style other than jeans and boots these days. That dress looks great on you. You should fix your hair and makeup more often. You're gorgeous. And don't worry. Once the drinking starts, they'll only be looking at our legs."

Before Catherine could react to that, Heather was dragging her forward. "Oh! There he is! Come." She pulled her toward the buffet table.

Thinking Heather was going to introduce her to her newest 'distraction,' she obediently followed. But the man they approached was too old for her sister. She started to frown.

"Cat, I'd like you to meet Jason Hunter. Jason is the head of security for the firm. Jason, this is my sister—"

"Catherine. Nice to meet you." She held out a hand and he grasped it gently.

"Catherine? Howdy. The pleasure is definitely mine." He looked to Heather. "You mentioned an older sister, kid. But you two could be twins." He gave her a warm smile.

Twins, yet only half-sisters, Catherine mused. If he only knew the story behind *that*. She didn't quite know what to make of him. "We both take after our mother. And 'Howdy?' Do they really say that down here?"

"Beautiful *and* smart," he acknowledged. "Spent my youth in the deep south. Some things never leave you."

*How true that was.*

Heather piped in before she could dwell on that maudlin thought. "You two have a lot in common, you know. My sister works in law enforcement."

"NYPD," Catherine added.

"Different peas, same pod. Even more amazing," he said, good-naturedly, still holding her hand. "I'm sure my work pales in comparison to what an NYPD detective does."

"Don't let him fool you," Heather leaned in, mock sotto voice. "Jason flies all over the country, as well as internationally, supporting events that we put on. He just makes it sound like nothing."

"More in a management capacity," he added. "Certainly not like street work, where the real action is, I'm sure."

"Don't believe what you see on television," Catherine countered. "What I do is hardly glamorous."

"I know, right?" Heather laughed. "Jason is more like 007 or something."

"Or something," he laughed and looked as if he wanted to pat Heather on the head like a silly child. Heather didn't seem to notice, but decided to take that as her out. "Listen, I'm going in search of Daniel, but I'll be back before you know it. Why don't you stay right here and chat a few minutes—"

Meaning Jason was definitely not her sister's distraction but one for *her*. "Oh, uh, Heather—" she started to object, but Heather was already long gone.

"I promise not to bite. And I always keep my promises."

*A man who keeps his promises.* What a nice change. Cat turned back to him, embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"No worries."

He seemed very nice, and he had kind eyes. She took a deep breath and decided to enjoy it. "I'm . . . a fish out of water here, obviously."

"We get a lot of those," he quipped and she laughed. "Let me get you something to drink and you can tell me all about Catherine."

\*

New York--

"Can we take a break? I have a headache."

Vincent looked up at Tori. She was a strange combination of ferocious and fragile, he was coming to realize. The headaches came up often, especially during their focus sessions. She was coming along, but not fast enough. He nodded reluctantly. "Sure."

She sighed and slumped down into the overstuffed high-back. "Why don't we take the afternoon off and go do something fun?"



"Fun? Like what?"

"I don't know. A movie would be nice."

"I don't think so."

"Vincent. You're a free man now, you know. No monsters running you down. You can go out, have a life--a little fun once in a while. You don't have to hide here in this dingy club day after day."

He looked around. It wasn't dingy. He'd even put up a few of Tess's leftover decorations. And it felt more like home than that sterile boathouse ever had. "I don't like movies," he told her. *At least not without red vines and a certain dark-haired beauty.* He wondered what Catherine was doing now, if she was enjoying her time, or . . . .

Tori looked at him in disbelief. "*Everyone* likes movies. C'mon," she reached over to tug at his arm and he jerked back before they made contact.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think." She slumped back down. "Vincent, when will you let me touch you again? Don't you think we should start working through that? Now's as good a time as any."

"Tori—"

"Why won't you at least consider it? Vincent. I know what you feel. It's—it's good, not bad." When he turned away from her, she went to stand in front of him. "She *left* you. You're free. It's not cheating when you aren't together. Don't you want to find out what *we* can be togeth—"

"*No!* I told you."

"Right. That there's something special between you two. She makes you better. Yeah, not buying it. She isn't here. For all you know, she may never come back. She could be laughing it up with some new guy down there—"

Vincent stood, an ominous look on his face. She bravely held his gaze. "Where does that leave *me*? You're the only other one like me in the whole world. We're like the last two remaining of a species. It's only natural—"

"You're wrong."

"What? That we're not the only ones left? I thought—"

"No, not about that. Tori, it doesn't matter if we're the only ones 'of our kind.' It doesn't have to be *me*. You can find someone else."

“How?” she asked, incredulous. “Who would ever accept me the way that I am? It has to be you.”

“He doesn’t have to share your DNA or be like you. Catherine accepted me—all of me. I’m living proof that you and I—both of us—can find happiness with a regular person. You just need to concentrate on becoming the right woman for that guy. And that begins with control.”

She crossed her arms, unconvinced. “Happiness. Is that what you’ve got—really? How’s that working out for you? Your girlfriend accepted you until she *shot* you because you’re a beast!”

“No. She shot me because I was taking the law into my own hands—”

Tori covered her ears. “I can’t take any more of this. You know what? I can find better things to do with my time. I’m done here. And just so you’re clear on what you’re giving up,” she slammed her palms down over his hands on the chair. Immediately, he felt the infusion of power. His eyes started to glow, as did hers. He growled. Then as suddenly as it started, it stopped as she yanked her hands away before he threw her across the room. Demonstration enough. She grabbed her jacket off the back of the couch and sauntered slowly toward the door. Let him stew on that a while!

Vincent gritted his teeth until she was out of sight. Then he breathed a sigh of relief. As good as it felt to get that rush of power, he hated the loss of control. And he didn’t want it. Not anymore. Tori was still dangerous. Maybe it was a mistake to have taken on her training to begin with. But there was no one else to do it. And time was of the essence. He briefly thought of Gabriel Lowen, once a beast himself. He had eyes for Catherine. Maybe Tori could turn his head from her . . . .

\*

Tori went first to the Post Office box she kept under a fake name. She’d been checking it daily. Still empty. Damn, Reynolds! He promised her the list! She might have to threaten him again. Too bad Catherine was out of town and out of reach. She needed leverage. She pondered her next step as she slowly prowled the city streets . . . .

## Chapter 6

Catherine reclined in the soft, padded lounge chair with her eyes closed. Eighty-one degrees on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December! Unbelievable. She willed her skin to soak up every ray. She planned to carry it home with her and live in the afterglow for the rest of the season. As the rest of the country battled below-freezing temperatures as a powerful winter storm worked its way across the southern plain states, it felt surreal.

"There's a reason it's National Hate Florida month," Heather piped in, reading her thoughts. "The rest of the nation freezes and we get this. I'm not regretting this move one iota."

Catherine smiled and sipped her drink. There was no one in the apartment complex pool before them. Apparently, it wasn't warm enough for the locals. Better for her. She smirked and was about to dab on another dose of lotion when her cell phone buzzed.

"I hope that isn't work," Heather muttered beside her.

Cat picked it up and shaded her eyes to see the screen. "Just Tess. She's probably up to her ears in work." She pressed the screen and held it up to her ear. "Hey, partner. What's up?"

A seagull screeched overhead. "Wow. You sound like you're having a lazy afternoon at the beach," Tess said.

"Almost. The pool."

"Ah. I knew it. You get punished with a tropical vacation, while I'm stuck in a deep freeze. The precinct is so cold there are icicles hanging from the drinking fountain. And I'm not talking decorative ones. I am so making you regret this when you get back. You *are* coming back, right?"

"Eventually. Envious much?" Cat laughed, unsympathetically. "Did you call just to complain or is there a purpose to this sarcasm, because I have serious tanning to get back to."

Tess muttered something under her breath. "Oh, rub it in, will you? Uh, actually, I'm calling about your dad."

Cat sat up, alarmed. "Wh-what about him?"

She could hear Tess sigh heavily into the phone before answering. "He disappeared."

"What? How?"

"We're not sure yet. He was being transferred to another facility when his convoy ran into some trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Heather sit up, a concerned look on her face, and made an effort to speak more calmly. "What kind of trouble could there be?"

"They were attacked. The warden was killed and one prisoner. The other three, Reynolds among them, escaped. At this point, we don't know if he was the intended target or just one of the fortunate escapees."

"I know the answer to that," Catherine said, her lips tight.

"The important point is we don't know where he is right now."

"I'll catch the next flight out." Heather started to object, but Catherine waved her down.

"No! Cat, absolutely not. I only called because I didn't want you to hear it on the news and worry."

"I think I feel a right to worry. What's Moreno doing about it? Tess, I can help. He might try to contact me."

"If he does, we'll go from there. Until then, sit tight. Gabe and I are on it. If Moreno even *suspects* you're involved—"

"That wouldn't be good."

"No."

"Okay. I'll stay put, but keep me up-to-date."

"I will. By the way, you're still headed home Christmas Day, right?"

"Yep."

"That's when they're predicting that massive storm to hit our area."

Probably the same one wreaking havoc in Midwest right then. "Great."

"Thought you ought to know so you could be prepared."

"Thanks." It wouldn't change her plans, but it was good to know. She gazed up at the azure blue sky above her and sighed. A little difficult to imagine snow, ice and misery. "Don't worry about me. I'll get home eventually. Not like there's anything I have to hurry home to."

"Just be safe. I'll call you as soon as I know anything about . . . the other."

Catherine said good-bye and disconnected the call.

"What is it? Nothing wrong, I hope?" Heather leaned toward her.

"Just work. Something happened on a . . . a case I was working before I left. It's nothing, really. She was just letting me know."

“Okay.” Heather didn’t look convinced but didn’t push, thankfully. “What was that about a storm?”

“They’re expecting snow for Christmas. Just my luck.”

“Oh, dear.”

Catherine smiled at her sister. “Nothing to worry about. They always hype those things, you know. I’m not concerned. By the time it gets to New York, it will probably be nothing but drizzle. In fact,” she leaned back in her chaise and put her sunglasses back on, “I’m just going to count my blessings and enjoy every second of this.”

\*

Three days later the forecast was the same, but she didn’t care. She was going on a date. Jason Hunter had called in the afternoon to invite her to an early movie—with his precocious eight-year-old daughter, Arielle.

“The Little Mermaid is her favorite Disney flick, but she’s never seen it on the big screen. Must be a Christmas thing. I couldn’t pass it up. You really don’t mind?”

Before he asked her out, he’d explained the situation with his ex and daughter. Kendra was from old money. Around there that meant Daddy owned the bank. Because of that, Kendra was fragile and had been babied all her life. She didn’t take well to the frequent trips he made. He taken her with him at first, but once Arielle was born, she didn’t want the stress of carting around a toddler. They’d just grown apart.

He’d originally called to ask Catherine to something more adult when plans got changed. “When I’m in town, I get Arielle for the weekends. Since I’m often gone, I can’t miss it when I’m here.”

“I don’t mind at all,” Catherine heard herself say. “It will be fun.” She looked down at the blonde, gray-eyed child at her feet and smiled. “I’ve seen it before, but it’s been a very long time. I’m looking forward to seeing it again,” she told her.

“I’m named after Ariel in the movie!” the little girl said proudly, her big eyes fixed on Catherine’s in fascination. It made her wonder how often Jason had introduced his daughter to a woman he was dating.

“I guessed that, yes.”

“If you don’t remember the story, I can tell it to you.”

Jason winked at her over Arielle’s head and it did a funny thing to her insides. She told herself it was just lunch digesting . . . .

“Well, there’s this girl mermaid who just wants to be a human—with feet.” Arielle wiggled her toes in her sandals. “She saves Prince Eric from the sea by singing to him.”

“Ah, I think I remember.”

“She has some nice friends under the sea, but she wants to live in his world really badly, but she’s, you know, a mermaid, so she asks this bad lady for some real legs and feet but the lady takes her voice . . . .”

“Which means you should be careful what you ask for, doesn’t it?” Jason piped in. “Some things come at too great a cost. They aren’t worth the risk.”

“But this was, Daddy,” his daughter argued. The girl looked to Catherine for confirmation.

She shook her head convincingly, she hoped, but she’d stopped hearing anything after ‘she wants to live in his world very badly.’

“Anyway, you’ll see,” the child continued, snapping Cat out of her reverie.

“I’m sure I will.”

“My favorite part is when they are rowing in the boat and Prince Eric tries to kiss her!” She giggled. “And I know all the songs,” she added.

“I bet you do,” Catherine laughed.

“No singing in the theater, though, babe,” Jason gently reminded her.

“I won’t, Daddy.”

Catherine hadn’t been in a movie theater in ages, much less one with dozens of children in the audience. She and Vincent never had gone on that movie date they’d spoken of, although DVDs had been a frequent way of spending an evening together when they weren’t—. She stopped that thought before it began.

They took seats toward the center of the auditorium, which meant they were surrounded by urchins. Catherine had a moment of anxiety, then it passed. They were just children! Noisy, but not very obnoxious, and Arielle was a delight. She leaned her head back into the cushioned chair and relaxed. It did her soul good to spend time with this sweet, small family. And Jason was an attentive father *and* date, another pleasant surprise. And so different from Vincent. The thought hurt her heart a little, but she set it aside. *No one* was like Vincent.

\*

At the terminal three days later it was time to say good-bye. Catherine pulled her sister to her in a tight squeeze. "It's probably too late to say this, but take it slow with Daniel. No need to rush. And keep in touch. Not getting so busy you don't have time to call."

Heather laughed. "I'll call you every week. By the way, did Jason give you his number?"

Catherine looks disapproving at her sister. "Don't get your hopes up. We had a nice time, but that's all there was to it. I'm not ready for another relationship right now."

"Okay. But maybe the next time you come down you will be. Take care, Cat. I love you."

"I will. And I love you, too."

By ten thirty, she boarded her flight and headed into the storm.

New York—

"What's this?" JT blustered through the front door to find Vincent sliding on his overcoat. "You're all dressed up. You going out somewhere with . . . Tori, or—or—"

"I'm going to Catherine's. You said her flight's supposed to come in this afternoon."

"Yeah, but . . . in a tux?"

Vincent shrugged, embarrassed. "It's Christmas."

When JT raised his eyebrows, he continued. "You said we should talk. I know I have a lot of apologizing to do—groveling—but first . . . I don't know, JT, I just wanted to give her one happy moment for Christmas."

"That sounds nice but what are you talking about?"

"A dance."

"Uh, Dude, the last dance you two had, from what you told me, didn't go so well. The art auction?"

"Not that dance. The one before."

"From . . . from her dad's wedding?"

"I thought it could take us back to a happier time."

“Happier would be good.”

“Yes.” He didn’t tell JT that he’d already been inside Catherine’s apartment. After discovering what was in those boxes—her Christmas decorations—he’d pulled them out, bought a tree, and spent the morning transforming the cold blue space into a warm and inviting one with soft lights and a holiday glow.

The boxes had been a surprise. He’d only seen her tree from afar before, in the years he’d watched over her, never up close, but it always looked the same. She hadn’t bought anything new in a while, that was for certain. Box after box was filled with ornaments that had broken and been glued or carefully patched back together. Catherine made a decent salary, so he didn’t understand why she hadn’t just replaced them. He thought of going to a store and buying some new ones, but decided against it. She might not appreciate his interference. And he didn’t want anything to distract her from his purpose.

Decorating had been the easy part. Getting her to dance with him after the way they’d left things would be much tougher. He had no illusions about that. He checked his appearance one last time in the wall mirror.

“Well, good luck with that,” JT said. “And I don’t mean it sarcastically. If there’s one thing you both could do with, it’s a happy moment. I hope you get your wish.”

“Thanks, JT. You headed out?”

“Pretty soon. I just had to pick up a last-minute item at the store.” He held out a poinsettia wrapped in shiny gold foil. “For her grandmother,” he explained.

Vincent looked him over. “This sounds serious.”

“Nah,” JT laughed nervously. “I just don’t want to embarrass myself. It’s been a long time since I’ve been around, you know, *normal* people—a family. I guess I just have the jitters.”

“Don’t worry.” Vincent patted him on the shoulder. “They will love you.”

“Not so sure about that, but I don’t want to let Tess down.”

“You won’t,” Vincent said firmly.

“Okay, well, good luck with your plans.”

“Thanks. Uh, you haven’t seen Tori around lately, have you?”

“Not at all. Figured she’d gone back to one of her parent’s apartments or something.”



“Must be. Okay, well, I guess I’ll get going.”

“We’ll talk later and trade stories, huh? Um. Merry Christmas, Vincent. And . . . take care. It’s ferocious out there.”

The second ‘storm of the century’ in as many years had descended upon the citizens of New York.

After waving a tearful good-bye to Heather in sunny Miami, Catherine had joined the throngs of weary travelers passing Christmas Day in airports across the country. Because of the holiday, most people were making an extra effort to be friendly, but the day took its toll. Her flight out of Charlotte was cancelled. There wasn’t any hotel space for the number of stranded passengers, so she toughed it out at the airport with hundreds of others so that she wouldn’t miss a flight opportunity if it did present itself. *No room at the inn for me tonight, either*, she grumbled to herself.

Jason had phoned her at one point to check on her status. *So thoughtful*. Before she left he’d given her his card with his cell number. It was good 24-hours a day, he’d said. She smiled at the thought. Who lives like that? Then she remembered his parting words. He frequently got called to New York on business. Next time he did, maybe she would consider making some time for him. A smile had been her only answer.

By the time Catherine landed at LaGuardia, she was beyond beat. What should have been a 6 and a half hour trip, with a short layover, had turned into twelve. Her flight touched down just after midnight, now the day *after* Christmas.

Vincent had waited through the hours in her apartment. He couldn’t bother JT or Tess to ask if Catherine’s plans had changed, but standing at the living room window watching the wind swirl the falling snow in patterns across the glass, he had to assume her connecting flight had been delayed because of the weather. Just before midnight he fell into a fitful sleep on her couch. He woke the moment he sensed her in the hallway.

\*

## Chapter 7

Catherine wearily pressed open her apartment door after keying the lock and flipped on the small entryway light—and immediately knew she wasn’t alone. She started to reach for her non-existent gun.

“It’s just me.” Vincent spoke from the shadow of the darkened room.

“Vincent! Oh, my God.” She clutched her jacket to her neck.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I let myself in from the porch. I hope that was okay."

Her nerves were so frazzled, she might have jumped just as high at a mere phone ringing, but her heart was in her throat for a different reason. *Why was he there? Had something happened? Was he still angry?* She couldn't tell from his expression what was up and didn't trust herself to read him properly.

She took a breath, consciously relaxed her shoulders, and shrugged in a way she hoped seemed nonchalant. "It's not like you haven't done that a dozen times before." Not that it was particularly appreciated now. It was definitely time to set some boundaries. She placed her keys on the entryway table.

"Vincent, why are you here? Is everything okay?" An image of her biological father sprang to mind. The news Tess had given her of his recent escape still had her reeling.

"No. I'm—I'm just relieved to see you. Tess said you'd be in hours ago."

"So you've just been . . . hanging out here?"

"I was worried."

In the dim light, she heard rather than saw him slide his hands into his pockets as he was so fond of doing. It was an unconscious gesture, she realized. He was unsure of himself. *Or of her.* Catherine let out a long breath. At least this was better than the angry, mocking Vincent she'd left two weeks before. So Tess must have told him where she'd gone.

"That's kind of you, but you really didn't need to be. It was just the weather," she said. "My connecting flight was cancelled. I was stuck in Charlotte for half the day."

"I'm sorry. Especially since it's Christmas."

She checked her watch. *Was, actually.* Not that it mattered. "Christmas is kind of over-rated, anyway, don't you think? I mean, one day later and the magic is gone."

He didn't respond to that, just stared at her from the shadows--probably trying to assess her mood. She wished she understood it, herself. "Anyway, it's fine. I'm. . . It's just been a very long day. I'm really tired right now. All I want to do is go to bed."

"Right."

That should have been a hint, but he didn't move. "But?"

"I need to say some things to you."

“Vincent, it’s really late—”

“It’s just that I feel like I’m too late already. The thing is, Catherine, you were right. I know you were right and I was wrong. You had to stop me.”

Her eyes went unconsciously to his side. At least, what she assumed was his side, still in the shadows. She swallowed.

“I wish I could explain why I did what I did, but they’re just excuses, and *no* excuse makes it right. And I’m so, so sorry.”

“Vincent—”

“Truth is,” he continued, cutting her off. “I’m especially sorry because it put a wall between us—you and me. You know, in the last ten years, even when it was just JT and me in hiding and all . . . I never felt lonely.”

*Until now.* She heard the words as surely as if he’d spoken them and her heart squeezed painfully. “Oh, Vincent, don’t do this to me. Not tonight.”

“And . . . we never got to celebrate Christmas last year because of your accident. After you’d been shot.”

Her eyes flew to his. They’d never talked about that in the months he’d been back, but that didn’t sound like information he’d been fed by JT. It sounded like a memory. She attempted to digest that while trying to figure out what it meant. “And this year it was you,” she said.

“Yeah.”

She set her purse down on the counter with the keys. “Well, it’s not like either of us have been in a very celebratory mood lately.”

“No,” he said. “And that’s my fault. Just me.”

She nodded. “Thank you. I appreciate you saying that, I really do, but . . . after the way you treated me at the club, I’m not sure I’m really ready to reconnect.”

He pressed his lips together. “I know that. And what I want to say you’re probably not ready to hear. But right now—this moment—it isn’t about our present, or even our future, if we have one. It’s about our past.”

She squinted. “What do you mean?” The headache she’d felt coming on for hours was threatening again. She wasn’t sure she trusted herself to understand what he was saying.

From the edge of the dark room, he held out a hand.

"I'm not going to hurt you—ever again. Never. I'll tear my own heart out first. And I know I can't change what I did—what's happened between us—"

"No."

"But, if we can put that aside for just a few moments, I just wanted . . . my gift . . ."

"You seriously thought we'd exchange gifts this year? Because—"

"No. This is only from me to you. *My* gift. I just want to dance with you tonight."

"Dance?"

For the first time, he came fully into the light, and she gasped. There before her was the Vincent who'd crashed her father's wedding what felt like ages ago. Dressed to the nines in the same tux he'd worn that night, he took a step toward her.

Her heart did a double-flip. "Have-have you been out somewhere? Because you're all dressed up—"

"—with nowhere to go," he quipped.

She didn't want to think where he may have been, or who he may have been with . . . . Catherine looked down at the clothes she'd been traveling and sleeping in for an entire day. Her wrinkles had wrinkles. Her hair and the once-crisp white blouse she wore were now unaccountably wilted. He didn't seem to notice. Instead, he turned away from her briefly, flipped a switch and the entire room illuminated with twinkling white lights. Soft music started playing in the background.

"Oh, my God." Just like the rooftop on their anniversary, he'd created a magical fairyland for her to come home to. "You did this?"

"I didn't want you to come home to a cold, dark apartment. Not on Christmas. I know how you always loved to decorate for the season."

She and Heather usually spent time at their Dad's at the holidays, but Catherine had always made her apartment look festive in the weeks before and after. That he knew that about her said a lot. She eyed him critically. Another proof his memories had returned.

"Overcompensating, as usual," she explained. "For Heather."

"Ah."

He took another step forward, his hand still outstretched. "It's just you and me now, so, . . . may I have this dance?"

She tilted her head, a question in her eyes. "You—you really want to—"

"One dance. Five minutes. For old time's sake."

She looked at him warily, at the hand still waiting for hers, and hesitated. "You can't just turn back the clock and erase the last few months with one dance."

"I know that. I'm not trying to." He advanced another step.

She backed up at the determined look in his eye. "—or-or throw a switch and change the situation—"

"You're right." He kept coming forward, almost upon her now. She licked her bottom lip and glanced around frantically. No sister to burst in this time and crash the moment! The sultry lines of 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' filtered into her brain: ". . . from now on, our troubles will be out of sight . . ."

"Catherine." He took a final step, and this time she had nowhere left to go. And just like the first time he'd stalked her across that room, her heart began pounding in triple time. He reached for the collar of her jacket and slowly slid it off her shoulders, pausing briefly at the soft roundness there. Then he ran his hands down her arms until their fingers interlaced. Her throat made a little strangled sound.

"Shhhh." He said, and gently tugged her forward. "Just breathe."

Breathing was definitely something she definitely needed to concentrate on. Unable to resist, she let him ease her into his embrace.

Catherine heard him let out the long breath he'd been holding. *Still so unsure.* And so unlike the man she'd known for the last few months. He brought her body close to his with the utmost care and gentleness. She didn't fight it. After all they'd been through, it felt so, so good. He was an excellent dancer. Where that came from, she had no clue. She only knew she didn't need to think as he led her in a small circle around the room. One hand slid automatically up his thickly muscled arm.

As her body unconsciously followed his every move, she closed her eyes against the tears that threatened. This was the Vincent she'd lost! That she missed so much. Her rock. Her place of comfort and safety amidst all the turmoil of their lives. One still lived above the sea and the other beneath, but she wanted to live in his world so badly . . .

As soon as the song came to a close, another one started. He felt her momentary confusion but didn't release her. Not yet. She tilted her head back to look in his eyes. He was smiling. Gone was the furrow between his brows that had been there nearly every day in the last few months. Gone were the hard lines of his face. Star-shine twinkled in eyes that looked at her with such softness for a moment she was back in time, back at that wedding and their first magical moment. His hair was much shorter now, but she threaded a hand through it, covering that now-unscarred cheek, and she could almost see him—the man she'd fallen so deeply in love with.

She'd dated handsome, well-built men before. Even Jason, beneath his collared shirt and tie, would certainly turn any girl's head, but Vincent didn't flaunt his incredible body. He didn't value his almost supernatural strength or bodily perfection—only used it, until recently, mostly to protect her. He probably had no idea what his extremely sensitive and heightened senses brought to their physical relationship, but she did. Oh, *she* did. He could play her body like a finely tuned instrument. She felt the pull even as her limbs trembled from a mixture of exhaustion and over-stimulated buzz.

Vincent tried to control his breathing, but he finally had the woman he loved in his arms once again. He wanted to close his eyes and live in this moment forever, but when she pulled back and gazed up at him, he became lost in her eyes—those huge, luminous eyes. They held a look of almost wonder, but there was also question in them: 'how can this be? How did this happen? why are we at this place? where do we go from here?' He didn't know the answers. The whats and whys would come later. He only knew what he wanted very, very much.

Finally, her eyes filled with unshed tears and she laid her forehead against his chin. He couldn't help pressing a kiss there. "I'm sorry." Another gentle press of his lips to her temple. "I'm so, so sorry, Catherine." And then, unable to help it, he dragged his lip along the line of her cheek. "Please forgive me. I love you so much."

She trembled in response. His breathing became heavier, as did hers. Even with no fragrance, she smelled so good. Like an intoxicating drug. He closed his lips over the shell of her ear and breathed hot breath into the tiny cavern. She groaned. That was all the encouragement he needed. He murmured her name and then she lifted her face to his, offering her lips, opening her mouth to him. It was an unexpected gift he couldn't refuse. His tongue sought her out. She pressed forward with hers and met him half-way. Both arms reached up around his neck as he brought their bodies into alignment and pressed her ever so closer.

Catherine felt herself blush with heat at the feel of his powerful body reacting to hers. It was unlike anything she'd ever experienced with another man. If she looked into his eyes right then, she knew she'd see more than twinkling lights—an amber glow lit from his own inner fire. Sparked by her.

Then one of his hands was on her blouse, the tiny rows of silk-covered buttons being moved aside in deft, rapid moves. Then he was inside, on her skin, as his other hand dragged her by the rump even closer and his mouth continued to devour hers. Pleading. Begging. Worshiping.

Vincent's thumb brushed the underside of her breast. He knew that curve. He knew every curve, every hollow, every mole, every super-sensitive and ticklish spot on her body, the taste of her skin, the smell of her hair. Because she was *his*.

She was lost in sensation, lost in time, lost in her body's unerring memory of his. Needing to feel his skin, too, her left hand slid inside his suit jacket and down his shirt to pull it up. At that invasion, she heard his soft exhalation. Two could play this game. She grasped the fabric, tugging it from his pants, then reached down with her right hand to do the same when he . . . flinched. They both froze.

Her eyes flew to his.

"It's okay," he breathed.

Her thumb rubbed the edge of a thin bandage—all that was left now as the wound, with an identical patch on his back side, had begun to heal. She gently spread her fingers over it, judging the size and shape of the injury she'd caused. "Does it still hurt?" she whispered, lifting her eyes to his, afraid of the answer.

"Every second," he answered, and she knew he wasn't talking about physical pain.

Carefully, but with firm resolve, he eased away from her, but his eyes wandered to her open blouse. Catherine leaned against the wall, grateful for its support, and self-consciously reached up to clutch her blouse together.

"I didn't come for this. I swear," he said, breathing heavily. He backed up a step, reluctantly setting her away from him, and covered his face with one hand, trying to get himself under control. "I swear," he said again.

Had they continued any longer, Catherine had no illusions they would have ended up in her bed. There would have been no sleeping tonight. That he'd had the strength and desire to pull away both surprised and bewildered her.

"What *did* you come for?" she finally managed.

He'd ruined everything again. *Dammit!* Under every other circumstance—well, most others, anyway—he had control. But not when it came to Catherine. Blindly reaching for the counter behind him so his hands wouldn't reach for her again, he said, "I just wanted to give you—us—one happy moment." He closed his eyes. What a fool he was! Then he pushed off the wall and straightened. "It won't happen again."

*It wouldn't happen again? No more happy moments?*

At her confused look, he backtracked. "I didn't mean to catch you off guard. I wasn't trying to manipulate you. Please believe me. Catherine, I don't know if we can ever get back to where we were, but—" he swallowed, "is there any way we can we try to be friends again? Because, as much as I try to push you away—"

"I keep showing up, too." They locked eyes. *Memory*. "I want that. I do," she admitted. "But, . . . we have to set some boundaries." She glanced at the porch door then down the length of him.

*Physical boundaries*. He got it. He nodded, set his jaw, and reached for his jacket in the corner, dragging the coat over his still-unbuttoned shirt. The hat went back on his head. "Lock your doors and windows tonight. I don't completely trust myself."

She knew what it cost him to admit that. "And that would stop you?" Her eyes expressed doubt, not anger.

"It will tonight," he murmured, and left the apartment.

Before she could speak, he was gone.

\*

After he finally left, Catherine wanted to collapse. She slid down onto the couch next to the small, lighted tree. The tears welled up again and this time she let them fall. Trembling knuckles pressed at lips that refused to still. Whether he was in her bed or not, there would be no sleeping tonight . . .

Finally, she raked a hand through her long hair and sighed as the glint of sparkle off one of her favorite ornaments winked at her. She rubbed her fingers across its shiny surface marred by a long jagged line where it had been lovingly glued back together. She thought of Vincent opening her boxes and going about decorating her tree for her. A lovely gesture. It wasn't exactly how she usually did it, but it was beautiful. She wondered what he thought of her sparse set of rickety, old, patched-up ornaments. They were precious to her—each one with a tale to tell—but Vincent had known none of that. He'd merely displayed them with the care and dignity she herself would have done.

"Oh, Vincent," she murmured and was about to flip off the switch and head to bed when her phone rang. She grabbed a tissue and wiped her nose as she studied the screen. Not a number she recognized. Thinking perhaps he'd gotten himself another burner phone, she answered.



“Oh, Jason. Hello.” Catherine swiped at her eyes and attempted to get herself back under control. “No, I wasn’t asleep yet. Yes, I got in just a little bit ago. I’m sorry—I meant to call you. It’s just . . . a friend surprised me by decorating my apartment for me, and I was a little overwhelmed. No, I’m not crying,” she sniffed. “It’s just the cold. I’m not used to it now. Made my nose run.”

She listened as he told her his news. “You are? That . . . that would be great. Yes, I’d love to see you again. Wow. So soon. Nope. I’ve got no plans. Yeah, hey, I’m sorry to be so tired. It’s been a really long day. Do you mind if I call you tomorrow? I’m afraid my brain won’t remember any of this in the morning. Okay. Thank you. Bye.”

## Chapter 8

Tess sat with her gloved hands around a steaming mug on one of the rooftop chairs opposite Catherine. Sunrise lent a rosy glow to the cityscape, but it did nothing to warm the air. “Is there a reason we’re up here freezing our butts off on the roof on a snowy, winter morning? Aw, you were missing this, weren’t you? Because Florida might have sun, but we’ve got skyscrapers and this spectacular view—”

“My apartment isn’t exactly private anymore.” Catherine told her.

“Oh? You have a new roommate I don’t know about?”

“No. I just . . . wanted to talk about, you know—”

“Vincent?”

“And Jason.”

“Ah, yes. QMK’s resident security chief hottie.”

Catherine gave her a withering look. “He’s a really nice guy, Tess. Has a daughter. In fact, I met her--our movie date ended up being a threesome—to see *The Little Mermaid*.”

“Wait. Your first date with the guy was to a theater showing of a Disney flick with his kid?”

“A sweet, little girl, yes.”

“Okay, now I’m worried. Who are you again? Because *my* partner—”

“Your partner was . . . trying something new.”

"I'll say. That must have been different for you."

"It was. But also unexpectedly enjoyable."

"And we're up here in the frozen North Pole because you don't want to Vincent to know. Expecting him to be lurking in the shadows?"

"Less chance of that up here. He *was* waiting for me in my apartment last night."

"Okay, this is getting interesting. What happened? Spill and spill quickly. I'm all ears—at least until they freeze over. I thought you guys had a falling out and you were done."

"I wasn't exactly expecting him, no. But Tess, he . . . he just wanted to apologize and . . . dance." She shook her head, still amazed.

Tess's eyebrow quirked up. "As in—"

"As in *dance*. Said he wanted us to have 'one happy memory' for Christmas." She started to tear up again at the thought. Was there no end to her blubbing lately?

"Oh, God. And he kissed you, didn't he?"

"He didn't *mean* to."

Tess tsked and shook her head. "It takes two . . ."

"Tess, it's like we're . . . magnets and iron. No matter what forces try to keep us apart, there's just this unstoppable attraction. For both of us. He's in every pore. I can't shake him even if I tried, which I didn't. But that's not the worst part."

"There was *more* than a dance? TMI."

"No. Things started out nice—sweet, really—then, got a little more . . . intense. And then he stopped. Said he hadn't come for that." She rubbed her eyes. "I don't know, Tess. This is harder than I expected. Afterwards—after he left, Jason called. He's coming to New York next weekend and wants to see me."

"*Oh*. What did you say?"

"I couldn't think. Vincent had just left, I was physically and emotionally exhausted. I'm just not sure where he and I are right now. But I'm not going to put my life on hold while we figure it out. So I told Jason 'sure.'"

"So you're interested."

"I don't know. I might be. I want to be. I'd like to give him—us—a chance. He's a good guy."

"That's what you always said about Vincent."

"Well, Vincent's a good guy, too, underneath. Somewhere. At least, he was." After last night, she was pretty certain that guy was still there. "He says he regrets what he's done and knows he was wrong. He wants to change."

"Can you trust him?"

"I want to, but I don't know if I can. It's going to take more than a simple, "I'm sorry" to fix things between us."

"Okay. Well, Vincent knows you're not really together now, right? So he can't expect you to just sit around and not have a life. Are you worried that he'd hurt Jason?"

She shook her head definitively. "No. No, I'm sure he wouldn't. Last night he seemed, I don't know . . . broken? Different. More like the guy I fell for last year."

"Who's 'in every pore.'"

Catherine gave her a look. "An *expression*."

"One which says a lot about where your head's at. Or heart." Tess leaned forward. "You know, Cat, it isn't Vincent or Jason who should decide how things go from here on out. It's you. Don't let these guys dictate your feelings. Or your actions."

"So I shouldn't see Jason?"

"No. I'm saying the opposite. Do what *you* want to do. Go out. Get to know Jason, if that's what you want. Give him a chance. Then make up your mind. I mean, honestly, one of them has a lot of baggage."

"Jason is divorced and has an eight-year-old daughter in Miami."

"Okay, so not so uncomplicated himself. But still. Give your heart a chance to decide—knowing everything."

Catherine took a sip from her cooling mug and looked out over the city. "I want to reconcile with Vincent. I can't completely let go."

"So you want to be just friends?"

"He even suggested that last night."

Tess's eyebrows raised. "Is that even *possible* at this point?"

"Anything's possible, I suppose. We need to try. It's not like he has a lot of people in his life. Last night he said something that broke my heart. He said he was lonely. I understand that on so many levels."

"Wow. If that isn't playing on your heart-strings, I don't know what is—"

Catherine wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. "I don't think he was trying to manipulate my feelings. I think he was just being honest. But I hear what you're saying."

"Just give yourself time. Don't let either one of them pressure you. For any reason. You'll figure it out."

"Yeah."

Tess shifted on her chair. It was darn cold. "Any thoughts on what you're going to do in the meantime?"

Catherine smiled. "Take a cooking class?"

"Yeah? That's sounds good. What type?"

"I don't know. I was thinking about Asian. There's a Thai cooking class starting up at the local community college this week. I can probably still get in."

"Go for it. I love Thai food. I'll even let you practice on me. That's the one with the stars, right?"

"Stars?"

"Yeah, you know. For hotness. One star means bland, two a little hotter, three definitely hot, etc."

"Hmm. I'd forgotten that. I hope they plan to teach us the mild versions."

"You can probably fix it to taste."

"I guess we'll see." Catherine sniffed her cold, runny nose and decided they'd had enough of the boy talk. Back to business. "Any word on Bob?"

"We're still looking. It's like he disappeared into thin air. We caught the other two inmates—"

"Which means he was definitely the target of the escape."

"It's looking more and more like that. I'm sorry. That isn't good news for you *or* Vincent. Two men died in the incident."

Catherine grimaced. Another black mark against her biological father. When did this ever end?

"I'll see if Gabe has any ideas. Is JT on it?"

"Absolutely. Since Day 1. Just . . . nothing yet."

"Tess, what about Vincent's tracking abilities?"

"Seriously? You want to involve him in this?"

"You're right. Probably not a good idea." Even though that ability was absolutely amazing. "So," she changed the subject and her mood, "what's going on with you and JT?"

\*

Tori Windsor stood in the empty alleyway, eyes closed, listening with her inner ears the way Vincent taught her. She'd done it once before, she could do it again, although the layer of snow and filth didn't help things. She took a slow, deep breath and focused on the scents, textures and colors of the space around her.

They had been there only days before. She'd seen the reports on the news of the attack: three vehicles traveling in a row, Suburbans, transporting prisoners to the regional justice center. Reynolds and the other two prisoners had been in the middle one. Gunfire. She breathed in slowly again. There had to be a trace of it, something that could lead her on a trail to the shooter. But the acrid bite of smoke was nowhere to be found. Wind whipped her hair into her face and she swore. This would be difficult on a perfectly still day. The weather as it was made it next to impossible. Another two inches was expected tonight. It was now or never.

Blood. Yes. Perhaps that was the place to start. Surely there was still a trace of it underneath the snow. They wouldn't have bothered cleaning the alley that thoroughly. She concentrated. She could do this. Her time with Vincent may have been short, but she was a fast learner.

For a moment, she thought she caught the whiff of gunpowder, then it was gone as quickly as it came. Damn, Vincent! She needed his help. But she wouldn't ask. Not about this. He would refuse. There was nothing he would do about Bob Reynolds anymore because of his precious Catherine—Catherine, who was most likely lost to him, so he was barking up an empty tree there. Still, Tori held out hope that he'd come around to *her* eventually. Better not to push, though. Not yet.

She shook those thoughts away. Concentrate! That smell again. *Not* gun powder. Ah. Something else. Cigarette? Or something like it. A unique blend. Yes. Good enough. The trail led north out of the alley . . . .

\*

JT sat on the opposite end of the sofa with Vincent, watching a game. It was all they did together, now. Especially lately. His buddy hadn't spoken much about last night, so things must not have gone well. JT frowned at that and popped another chip into his mouth. "So, are we going to talk about it?" he finally said. Neither one was really into the game. Just a distraction.

"You mean last night?" Vincent asked.

"Or whatever else you have on your mind. You have no idea what the score is, do you?"

"Am I that obvious?"

JT shrugged.

"I thought it would be easier," Vincent finally said.

JT turned to him. "What would be?"

"One happy moment—for the both of us. That's all I wanted to give her. After the last few months and how we've drifted apart—I wanted her show her I remembered. My memories are back and I remember us. We weren't forgotten. But all I did was dredge up the past."

"Your past is significant."

"It is, but it doesn't change what's happened since. It isn't where we're at today. Instead, I made her cry."

"She loves you, Vincent. If she cried, it's because of that."

Vincent looked at him with a tortured face. "How will I ever get her back? I can't undo what I've done. What if 'sorry' isn't enough? Do you think it's too late? Or will this separate us forever?"

"It's usually never too late, but—"

"But?"

JT sighed. "I wouldn't wait. If you don't want her to end up with some other guy, you're going to have to show her—not just tell her—that things have really changed. You have to prove it."

"How can I do that? By *not* killing anyone else? It's easier to prove something by action rather than inaction."

"You'll find a way. Just . . . don't wait too long."

"Wait. You know something I don't? C'mon, JT. I need help here."

"No," he started, then backtracked and sighed. "Yes. Tess said Catherine . . . met someone in Miami. But that's—"

Vincent stared. Already? In truth, he wasn't surprised. She was a beautiful, intelligent woman that any man would want. All she'd have to do is show the tiniest bit of interest. Of course, "Catherine always went after the bad boys."

"Well, she may have had her fill of those now." JT apologized with his eyes. "This one sounds legit. A real nice guy. Has a daughter."

"A daughter?" The thought was devastating.

"When women get the mothering bug, Dude, they change. That's all I'm saying. If she likes the kid, this could be it. You could lose her just like that." He snapped his fingers.

Vincent digested that. "A child is one thing I can never give her."

"That you *know* of. Things could still change for you two."

Vincent stood, shaking his head. JT was always the more hopeful one. "And we could have a child like Tori? No. I could never put Catherine or our child through that."

"I thought Tori was starting to accept what she was."

"She is. She's even starting to glory in it. Not that that's a good thing. She also wants everything a normal woman wants. Just like Catherine does."

"Vincent, none of us get everything we want. Life isn't like that. Catherine knows and accepts it, too. Okay, maybe . . . maybe the solution is separation."

When Vincent's widened, JT raised a hand to calm him down. "I know you don't want to think about that, but you said it yourself—one of you needs to walk away. But after last night, maybe that's not enough. You need to put some actual distance between you."

"JT, even if I wanted to, I couldn't—not at this point. And you know I can't leave Tori right now. She still needs my guidance, wherever she is." He sighed. "This guy—"

"—is in Miami. Maybe that's a good thing—for both of you. If Catherine likes him, she might decide to move there. At least that way you wouldn't be tripping over each other, tempting each other, on a daily basis."

Because he wouldn't be able to just drop in unexpectedly and mess everything up. Not that getting to Miami was impossible. It wasn't anymore. Vincent raked a hand through his hair. Miami was far away, but could he do it? Let her go? "She agreed to talk."

"Good. Then start there. That's all you can do."

The game went into half-time and a newsbreak came on mentioning that there were no new developments on the fate of the third prisoner, former FBI agent Robert Reynolds, who had mysteriously disappeared after a firefight during a routine prisoner transfer.

Vincent looked over at JT. "Still no word?"

JT shook his head. Nothing yet. I've got facial recognition software searching all the footage from traffic cams in the area. It takes time." He looked up as Vincent started for the door.

"Wh-where are you going?"

"I think it's time I found Tori." He grabbed his winter jacket off the coat tree.

"You think she went after Reynolds?" Brilliant as he was, JT apparently hadn't thought of that himself. "Could she have staged something like that?"

It wasn't likely, but what else made sense? "You have a better idea?"

He didn't. Vincent was right. Whether she was holed up somewhere or up to no good, they needed to find out.

\*

Vincent picked up her scent four blocks away—at the local post office. Scanning the rows of key-locked boxes, he finally found one with her fingerprints all over it. 5519. Bingo. Not large. It was one of the smaller boxes. As another customer came in, he pretended to dig in his pants for a key. As soon as the man left, he punched the lock in and yanked out the drawer. It was empty. Odd. Had she been waiting for something? Or already received it? She'd been there recently, that's all he knew. As recently as today. The prints were very fresh. He followed her trail out of the building.

\*

Catherine took the elevator down to the first floor of her apartment complex. She needed to go to the post office and get her mail. At least she'd had the presence of mind to put a stop on it before she left for Miami; otherwise, she'd have found her box downstairs overflowing with junk mail. That's about all she received anymore. That and bills. Still, there was always hope.



She headed down the street in her boots and overcoat. The sun was shining but it was bitter cold, and that icy north wind stung her eyes. Oh, to be in Miami still!

She kicked off the slush at the door and waited her turn in line. Mostly junk mail, as expected, with the exception of a few Christmas cards. There was one from Brooke. She smiled. It was nice to know her short-lived step-mother was moving on with her life finally. Another couple from the classmates she'd reconnected with at the reunion, and one from Heather, bless her heart. She must have sent it while she was in Florida still visiting. Nothing else, except for one large manila envelope—from the FBI. *What on earth?*

She took it directly to the only person she could think to trust with it—Gabe Lowen.

\*

"I was afraid to open it" she said, wringing her hands as she hovered in front of his desk. "I thought it was best to bring it directly here."

Gabe looked up as she handed him the envelope. "You're not worried that it's laced with ricin or anything, are you? Because we have people downstairs who could scan it—"

"No. Nothing like that. I'm just . . . afraid it contains something I don't want to know. You know, more secrets."

"Well, there's only one way to find out." He took a long thin blade out of his desk drawer and slid it under the top fold. Inside was a second, sealed envelope marked: "Catherine Chandler - Eyes Only."

Cat motioned to Gabe to continue. He slit that one opened as well and pulled out the multi-page document – lab reports, pages of them, in tiny type. And incomprehensible. Oh, to have Evan around! "What do you think they are?"

"Vincent Keller," Gabe read the name at the top of the page.

Catherine looked at him with a question. "Do you think these are from Muirfield?"

"Or Reynolds' own files on Vincent. They're from different dates," he noted, quickly flipping through the top sheets, "from three months ago all the way back ten years. My guess is that they're details of the injections used on him from the beginning. Could this be an olive branch?"

"What? My father is giving me Vincent's medical reports as some sort of way to get back into my good graces? If he thinks that's going to gain my sympathy and call off the search—"

"Whatever his reasoning, you know how valuable this information could be. It may very well lead to the development of a cure for Vincent. Your father did say he only wanted to protect you."

She didn't know if she believed that, but would he also protect Vincent? "Could something here also lead us to him?"

"I doubt it. He's probably long gone. And this was his parting gift to you."

"I didn't even think to check the date on it. When was it sent?" she asked.

Gabe studied the outer envelope. "The same day he escaped."

She looked at him. "Then that confirms the attack was no coincidence. Someone on the outside not only assisted him in his escape, but sent this for him. If we find that person, we find my father."

"Agreed. But why don't you take these to JT in the meantime?" He handed her the stack of papers. "He might find them very useful."

\*

JT scrawled notes as he cross-referenced page after page of the lab reports Catherine had brought over. It was good Vincent was out. He hated to think what the Big Guy would think of this. During the years of hiding they'd spent every available second analyzing his DNA, his blood, using all the tools they had access to in order to understand what had been done to him. Some of that was confirmed in these reports; other information was brand new. It could take him days to digest it all.

He flipped over another sheet and stopped. "Catherine Chandler?" The name was hand-written across the top of one page. There were no other identifying marks to indicate whose lab reports it and the following pages belonged to, unlike the previous sheets, which all had Vincent's name on them. He frowned. Reports on Catherine? He checked the dates. That didn't make sense. Some of them were much older than ten years.

JT pushed up his glasses and rubbed his weary eyes. Catherine Chandler had never been in Muirfield—that anyone *knew* of. Unless . . . .

## Chapter 9

Eight blocks from the post office, Vincent entered a quiet neighborhood. The buildings were large and stately there—and old, built in a different era. Many of them had wrought-iron gates lined with tall hedges, effectively separating the occupants within from the bustle and busyness of the city.

What would Tori be doing on a street like this? he wondered. Her family had money, that was certain, but they lived in a very different sector of town where high-rises and industrial tycoons ruled. This sector looked like old money—or foreign. He stopped, checked his bearings. The trail was fresh. Yes, she had been there very recently.

Night had fallen but he didn't need the daylight. He scanned the homes, the walkways, and finally found the imprint of her booted feet on the snow. *There.*

A thin service alley separated one building from the next, and as he tracked her down it, a rustle in the hedge brought him up short. *Tori.* "Hey!"

At the shout, Tori nearly jumped out of her skin. She lost her grip on the brick wall and tumbled back out into the alley. "Vincent! Wh-what are you doing here?"

Vincent looked her over. Except for the flash of red hair and her pale complexion, she was almost invisible in her black clothing. "I think I should be asking *you* that question."

She was about to lie, then realized the futility of such a move. And the danger. Vincent would be able to see right through it. And then all would be lost. She tried another tack. "Vincent, I found him! I used what you showed me and it worked. He's here!"

"He?" he asked, although he already knew. There was only one person she would be going after in such a dogged manner.

"Reynolds! I tracked him just like you taught me."

Vincent took a step closer. "I didn't know you were working on that."

His voice held the hint of a threat. He didn't like surprises. She ducked her head. "I know I should have told you. I would have, as soon as I confirmed it—"

"Looks to me like you were about to confirm it by going over that fence. Tori, you're playing a dangerous game."

She sighed. "He can't get away with it, Vincent. It isn't right, not in any book. This is our chance. He's protected here—it's an embassy."

Something he hadn't noticed when he tracked her there. But it made sense. Reynolds was a man of many connections, some obviously world-wide. And Tori was correct. If Reynolds had requested sanctuary here, there was nothing the law could do.

"The police can't get to him, but we can."

"So you planned to just climb the fence and do what—kill him?"

“Confront him, first.” That had been the original plan, although the other would come later.

“Tori, no. It never ends. Don’t you see?”

“He can’t get away with this, Vincent. If he leaves New York and gets out of the country, and you know he will, he’ll be out of our reach—and the reach of the law—forever. How will that help anyone? He *must* be stopped.”

“I agree. But this is not the way. We have to play by the rules now. I can’t allow you to hurt him.”

Tori looked at his eyes for a long moment. “You want her back *that* badly?” When he didn’t respond, she sighed. As much as she felt for the guy, he was just getting in the way. “I’m sorry, not even for you. I can’t—”

They heard a sound down the lane, and both blended back into the hedges. After a tense moment, the person moved on.

“Come back to the club with me,” Vincent urged in a softer voice. “You need to continue your training.”

That dingy place? No way. “Don’t you see? I’m already trained! I got this far—”

“You don’t have the control.”

She stared at him for a moment, then backed up a step, shaking her head. He wouldn’t be convinced. No matter what. So be it. “I have enough.”

“Tori—*No!*”

Before he could react, she leaped for the top of the wall, eight feet up. Vincent was fast behind. He pounced and caught the back of her jacket with his claws, then yanked her to the ground. She growled and started to scramble to her feet when he landed his full weight on top of her.

He tried to prepare himself for the rush of power—to resist it. But it never came. Tori met his eyes in surprise, as well. Then she looked at the hands that held her down—thickly gloved hands. With as many layers as they were both wearing, there was no skin-to-skin contact. And no power rush.

She grunted. Someone yelled a call of alarm down the alley. Vincent considered his options.

“Let me up. People will come,” Tori urged.

He stared at her for a moment longer, then made a decision. With one hand still holding her down, he pulled out his cell phone and pressed three numbers. The operator answered almost immediately. "9-1-1, what is your emergency?"

Tori gasped, outraged. "Are you crazy? You'll expose us both!" she whispered furiously.

So be it. He'd take that risk. With one arm easily pinning her in place, he answered calmly. "I'd like to report a prowler in the vicinity of 16th and State Street. Uh, my name? It's . . . Victor. Please hurry." He hung up.

\*

"Catherine, wait!" Gabe yelled down to the lower floor as Catherine slowly made her way toward the exit.

After dropping off the reports with JT, she'd returned to the precinct in the afternoon in hopes of talking Tess into going out for drinks after work. But her partner was out on assignment. She turned in surprise. Gabe was beckoning her upstairs.

His phone was still attached to his ear as he maneuvered her down the hallway. As he listened, he mouthed the word "Tess" to her. "Okay, thanks. Keep me informed. I've got Catherine right here."

"What is it?" she asked, as he hung up his cell.

"Someone named 'Victor' just called in a tip about a prowler near the Russian embassy."

"Okay . . . Gabe, I know we used the name Victor for Vincent in the hospital, but I'm sure there are hundreds of real 'Victors' in the city of New York, and why on earth would he—"

Gabe pushed a door to the left which opened to a small room filled with hardware. "I don't know, but you've got to hear this. Tess just sent it over." He manipulated the keys on a piece of test equipment, then pressed a button on the machine. It was a 9-1-1 call, and Vincent's voice could clearly be heard.

"I don't get it," she said. "He called 9-1-1?"

"For some sort of prowler in the embassy district. When the police showed up, no one was there, but workers in the area said they saw two people scuffling in the alley, one a slender, red-haired young woman."

"Tori. Why would she even *be* there?"

“Only one way to find out.” He went over to his computer and searched some files. “What I thought.” He studied the screen for a few moments. “Looks like Reynolds and the Russian ambassador are old friends. They crossed paths on a number of FBI cases.”

“So he called in a favor,” she said, easily putting two and two together.

“Looks like it. Bottom line—if Reynolds is in there, we can’t do anything about it. It’s not our territory.”

“But Vincent and Tori could.” Her eyes widened.

“Don’t jump to conclusions. We don’t know what Vincent was doing there.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she asked.

“Catherine, he called 9-1-1.”

“Maybe as a distraction?” She mashed her lips together. “It’s just that he said he wouldn’t do anything like this again. Gabe, he promised.”

Lowen shrugged. “All he’s guilty of at this point is calling 9-1-1. If I were a betting man, and I’m not anymore,” he assured her, “I’d say Tori found Reynolds and Vincent stopped her. And he did what any average citizen would do in such a situation: he called the police. That’s not the action of a killer.”

She digested that a moment. “He assured me he wouldn’t cross that line again.”

“So maybe he won’t. Question is, do you believe him?” Gabe asked.

“I want to. But can he keep his promises? I really don’t know. From what he told me the other day, he wants to. But part of him can’t always be controlled.” *Epecially around Tori*, she thought but didn’t say. This wasn’t good.

“I guess we’d better find out.” He shut the unit off and turned to go. Catherine stopped him.

“Gabe, if Reynolds is there, can we talk to him?”

“Maybe. If he hasn’t already bolted. I’ll see what I can do.”

\*

“We shouldn’t tell them, should we? I mean, th-this changes *everything*.”

Tess rubbed a weary hand over her face and dropped her elbows onto her desk as she spoke low into her phone. As if they didn’t have enough to deal with! “I don’t know, JT. On the one hand, they both have a right to know. But, what if telling Catherine makes her feel . . . *obligated* to Vincent in some way? She’s trying to get on with her life. Which you said *he also wants her to do*—well, to have the *choice* of doing, anyway—”

“Would *you* want to know?”

JT asked a reasonable question. “That the man stalking me can’t help it because I’ve been written into his DNA from the start? I don’t know. But knowledge *is* power. And they say ‘the truth will set you free.’”

JT grunted. “Truth set you free recently?”

Tess closed her eyes. He had a point. Knowing the truth hadn’t set *any* of them free. “Okay, why don’t you leave it up to Vincent? I mean, it’s *his* body. He should be told. You need moral support? We can tell him together, if you want.”

JT frowned. “He feels bad enough about everything already! This could kill him.”

“Well, then let’s just think on it a while. We could pass it by Gabe. I mean, this is new news to everyone. Maybe we need to consider all the implications before deciding to do anything. No need to rush into it. I’ll leave it up to you. But like I said, if you need help, I’m here.”

JT waived, but only for a second. “Thanks, but I can do . . . what needs to be done.”

“What needs to be done?” The door banged open. Vincent dragged Tori by the scruff of her collar through the doorway and into the club. The sudden commotion startled JT so badly he dropped the phone and jumped to his feet. He quickly bent to pick it up and murmured into it, “Gotta go. Call you later.”

Vincent pushed Tori further into the room until she came to a stop in front of the desk. “Found her.”

“Uh. Okay. Now that we’re all together again—”

“She located Reynolds. Thought she’d try to take him down on her own,” Vincent explained, disapproval heavy in his tone.

“Oh—oh, that’s—well, that wouldn’t be good,” JT stammered, confused. His brain was on overload.

“JT, could you keep an eye on her for awhile? I need to talk to Catherine.”

“Uh, bad idea. Me watching Tori, I mean. That didn’t work out so well the last time, remember? Actually, I need to talk to you a minute—privately.” And he certainly didn’t want the task of babysitting she-beast. Not for a second.

“It’ll have to wait. I won’t be gone long.”

JT rushed to block the doorway. “This can’t wait. And I think you’re going to want to sit down.”

Vincent frowned. JT was not usually bossy. Or terribly insistent. Something must be very wrong. He swung a look at Tori.

“In the kitchen,” JT suggested, away from prying ears.

Thankfully, Tori got the hint. She stormed across the great room to the bedroom she’d been using on the opposite side of the club and slammed the door. Before they reached the kitchen, they heard her loud music playing.

Vincent put a hand on JT. “Tori found Reynolds—at the Russian embassy.”

“B-but he’s still alive?”

“Yes. But I need to tell Catherine right away. He might try to fly the coop.”

JT looked up, surprised. The tracking ability Vincent had developed—and now Tori as well—certainly trumped technology. “Right away?” he wondered aloud.

“He saw me,” Vincent explained.

It had been dark, but before dragging Tori away from the embassy alley, he’d looked up from the shadows to see a man watching from an upper story window. It was Reynolds, he’d bet his life on it. And he probably knew exactly who was there. His own eyes, as well as Tori’s, had gone amber and reflective for a few moments during their tussle before he was able to calm them both down. He saw the man back up a step when their eyes met.

“But what was it you needed to tell me?”

JT faltered. “It’s—it’s not that important after all. Just that . . . well, Reynolds kept files on your experiments. The information could help us—maybe even lead to a cure.”

Vincent blanched. “A cure?”

JT shook his head. “Just—just a possibility. A long-shot, probably. Who knows?”



Vincent shook his head. A long-shot was right. And he'd had enough ups and downs on that particular roller coaster for awhile. "Don't lose sleep over it, JT. Right now that's the least of my worries."

They called Catherine. She didn't answer, so they called Gabe instead, and were surprised to find out he already knew about Reynolds. Vincent leaned back on the stool and sighed. There wasn't anything else he could do at this point unless Reynolds bolted, which he didn't put past him. Then, he could track him. He looked at his studious friend. "So, what else is going on?"

\*

"So Vincent tracked down Tori after she tracked Reynolds to the embassy." Tess leaned back in her chair and rubbed her chin, considering.

"And he stopped her from going in after Reynolds. At least, that's what Gabe says."

"Interesting. Sounds like Vincent is trying to turn over a new leaf. Or is it safe to be talking about him here?"

Catherine looked around the restaurant. "I think we're good."

"Just not when we're at your place. Stalker, much?" Tess smirked.

Catherine ignored that. She stirred her drink with the straw and frowned. "We're still dancing around each other right now."

"Rather than dancing *with* each other—"

"Okay," she put a stop to that train. "It sounds like he did the right thing, Tess, this once. And now we've got our eyes on Reynolds. He's trapped. But—"

"But Jason is coming up in a few days. How are you going to handle that?"

"I'm actually looking forward to seeing him again."

"Aren't you a little worried that Vincent might pop in at an inappropriate moment?"

"We're working on setting boundaries."

"Ah."

"I just want to give Jason a chance, you know? He's a super nice guy. Perfect, really."

"Perfect? *Really?*"

"In many ways. We have similar interests, similar jobs."

"Cat, you haven't even known him very long at all. You know, you have to be careful about rebounding."

"It didn't take me long to realize who Vincent was beneath all the baggage. And I'm not rebounding. I just want to give this a chance."

Tess smiled slyly. "You *want* to like Jason."

"I do. Is that so wrong?"

"But he's just a one-star."

"Excuse me? Is that some kind of rating for how handsome he is, because beauty is only skin deep. I'd like to think I'm not that shallow. Besides, I think Jason is quite attractive."

"No, it's a hotness rating. For food."

"Tess, what are you talking about? I must have had one too many of these Margaritas because I have no idea what you're saying."

"You're taking that Thai cooking class, right?"

"Right."

"You see, those two guys are like Thai food entrees. Jason is your basic one-star—mild, safe for most tastes, family friendly, always pleasant and enjoyable—and no risk."

"All right . . ." Cat crinkled her forehead wondering just where her friend was going with this.

"But Vincent is a five-star. Smokin' hot. The alarm bells start sounding even before you take a bite. Definitely not for the faint-hearted."

"Okay, I'm seriously worried about you now. I think you've had one too many of—what is it you're drinking?"

"C'mon, Cat. Think about it. With a five-star dish, you know it's trouble, but you can't help yourself because it's just so, so good."

"Is this some reference to my liking bad boys in the past, because I assure you, I'm over that—"

"Just . . . stay with me on this. I'm having an epiphany. With a five-star, you're never prepared for that first bite, but you dive in anyway. Your friends think you're crazy—"

"I think my friend is crazy." Cat laughed.

"—and maybe you are, just a little bit, but you don't care. The payoff is that good. See, you're blushing. You know I'm right."

Catherine rolled her eyes and tried to look disinterested, but Tess continued on, inspired.

"The saliva starts flowing before you even pick up your fork. Then there's that terrifying moment when you take a bite full in your mouth and it's do or die. You start to panic, you can't breathe, and think you're going to burst into flames. The burning begins but just keeps getting hotter until you're sure you'll explode. But you fight through it, through the pain that you know is coming, through the burning in the nose and all the way down to the gut, past the watery eyes and reflexive gagging, because you know, you *know* in the end, it's totally worth it. And it doesn't disappoint. You may have to drink four glasses of water, excuse yourself to cough, but when all's said and done, the experience is absolutely amazing and you'd do it again in a heartbeat. It isn't for everyone, but it's for *you*." She leaned back and crossed her arms. "How am I doing?"

Cat coughed, blushing something awful. "Sounds like experience talking."

"I've been known to live dangerously a time or two."

Catherine twisted her lips. "That was an amazingly accurate description, actually."

"It's a gift." Tess looked around the lounge, assessing the natives, and sighed. "Makes you hungry, doesn't it?"

Cat scanned the crowd, but saw nothing of interest to her. "I've been hungry for awhile now, I think," she replied sardonically. "You know, I always thought of myself as the safe and cautious type: play by the rules, keep to the middle ground, act responsibly. But that doesn't explain anything about the last couple of years, does it? Like you said, I don't really know myself."

"It comes from being a rule-follower, I guess."

"Well, we *are* cops. Underneath. We have to stay within the lines. And I haven't."

Tess finished her drink and set it down. "The world needs all types. But the risk takers—they're the dreamers."

"Dreams?"

Tess leaned in close, a serious look on her face. "Cat, five-stars isn't for everyone. Makes some people sick. Lots of people aren't brave enough to ever try it. They run the other way."

"Because it could be dangerous—to *their health*."

Tess shrugged. "So they say. But then there're the folks who eat it every day and get used to it. Their insides become accustomed, tougher. It's still good and hot but they've built up a resistance over time to any negative effects. And it isn't so bad after a while. They don't think twice about ordering it. But they can never settle for one-star again."

"There are also those who never try it and don't know what they're missing, but are perfectly happy," Cat jumped in, trying to make a point, but she forgot what point that was, exactly.

"Question is, which one are *you*?"

## Chapter 10

Catherine stirred her bowl again and picked up a clean spoon for a taste. She frowned. Her cooking partner in the classroom kitchenette was testing her batch as well. "Mine tastes like it's missing something," she said. "You want to check each other's?"

The young woman, probably near Heather's age, readily agreed. They traded bowls. The younger girl took a bite and smiled. "I think it's good."

They tasted similar. Catherine frowned and took back her bowl and tried it again. Bland. Boring. *Blah*. She took another taste, then gave the bottle of pepper flakes a few more healthy shakes over it.

\*

Jason arrived the next day. After seeing to business, they agreed to meet for dinner. "I'm tied up during the day at a client's event, but I'll have the entire evening free."

"Great. Will you have dinner there, or . . . ?"

"No. I never eat when I'm working."

"Well, how would you like to be my guinea pig?"

"What?"

"I'm taking a cooking class and need to practice. How brave do you feel?"

He laughed. "I'm sure I can take anything you're willing to dish out."

He couldn't. After coughing up a storm and excusing himself to the bathroom, twice, Catherine was pretty sure he was flushing his meal down the toilet. What had she been thinking? Even the little he'd eaten had given him a stomach ache and spoiled the night. Half way through the evening, he decided to call it a night and head back to his hotel early.

"I am so sorry," she said for the twentieth time as he lingered at the door.

"No, don't worry about it. I guess I'm more of a meat-and-potatoes kind of guy. I haven't had that particular dish before. It just caught me off guard."

"I hope the antacids do the trick. I feel so bad."

"I'm sure they will, don't worry. I'll be fine. And better company two nights from now, I promise."

She lifted her eyes to his. "New Years Eve?"

"Feel like crashing a party? My staff's handling the event; I'll just be there to put in an appearance for the client. I'll have tons of free time. But it would be so much nicer to have a companion for the evening."

It had been a long time since she'd gone out on New Year's Eve just for fun. She so often spent that holiday working security detail. It would be pleasant to be on the party-goer end of things for a change. And she owed him after this night. "Sounds very nice."

"Great. I'll call you with the details."

\*

New Years Eve was also the night Reynolds decided to make his move.

Switching back and forth between street-sweeper, tourist and a tree that gave him visibility into the back of the residence, Vincent stood watch. Knowing Reynolds, he wouldn't wait long, so he wasn't surprised when he picked this night of all nights to play his hand. The streets of the city were filled with people, limos were everywhere and traffic was a nightmare.

Near ten p.m., he watched as two dark-clothed men quietly exited the house and stepped immediately into a waiting, unmarked limousine. Vincent silently jumped down and started to follow. Traffic was actually going to aid him, he realized, as he watched the limo make its way through the crowded streets. It was practically inching along.

Even if they weren't taking the most direct route, he knew where they were headed. He decided to get there first. Hopping a ride on the top of a subway train, he made fast time to the private airport. As soon as he arrived, he called Gabe and Tess.

“Where’s Catherine?” he asked, after he gave them the information.

“Vincent, we’ll get a hold of her. She’s at a New Year’s Eve event downtown at the Hilton,” Gabe explained. “Just stay put. Don’t do anything that would alert him. We’re on our way.”

He was pretty sure Gabe was trying to politely tell him not to kill Reynolds. “I’m not an idiot. Just make sure she’s safe. I’ll send you the plane number as soon as I get it.” He hung up. There were only a handful of private jets large enough to handle an international flight and that were readying for takeoff. He narrowed it down to one.

It was probably a good thing Catherine was otherwise occupied. He didn’t want her to worry. Apparently, she’d also been reinstated at her job, since she was working an event. That would also make her happy. He’d search her out later to let her know how things went down.

Vincent scoped out the plane for a while before deciding his next move. With all the activity around, no one noticed when he silently approached the single guard at the base of the staircase. He used the shoulder pinch to take the man out of commission, then pulled him behind an idle baggage cart and changed into the fellow’s jacket and hat. Then he took his place as guard.

When the limo pulled up on the tarmac, Reynolds and his Russian friend got out. Reynolds looked around the area and, seemingly satisfied, motioned to the other man to go before him. He was nervous. Vincent could smell it.

“Freedom is only a few feet away, my friend,” he heard the distinguished gentleman in the lead say to the former FBI agent in his thick accent.

“Right,” Reynolds smiled up at the guy, but he still didn’t look completely at ease—and wouldn’t be. Not until he was safely on that plane.

“Not gonna happen,” Vincent murmured under his breath. The headphone in his ear buzzed and Tess’s voice came over the line.

“We’re just turning into the airport and we’ll be at the terminal in two minutes,” she told him.

Two minutes too late. The men were twenty feet from him. The ambassador approached first. Vincent made what he hoped was an appropriately deferential gesture and motioned for the ambassador to proceed up the staircase.

Reynolds approached next and was about to do the same until he got a hand on his arm. When he swung around, Vincent tipped his hat, the one with the Russian airline insignia, just enough to show him his eyes—and smiled. Reynolds gasped.

“Weren’t thinking of leaving town, were you?” Vincent punched a button on his cell phone. “I’ve got him.”

“We’re at the terminal. Hold him right there.”

“Oh, he’s not going anywhere, are you . . . Bob? I’ll bring him to you.”

The ambassador started protesting as Vincent slowly walked Reynolds back to the terminal, to no avail.

“He only has so much power,” he told Reynolds mock-apologetically. “Right now he’s in a U.S. port. So don’t expect any more help from that quarter.” Vincent turned around and sent a friendly wave back to the plane.

Reynolds realized the game was up. He signaled to his friend to go on without him. Game over. Then Vincent turned him around and walked him silently toward the terminal, a steel grip on his arm.

Gabe and Tess ran out to meet the two as they approached the building. Gabe reached for Reynolds’ other arm. “We’ve got him. Thank you, Vincent.”

Vincent didn’t let go. Tess exchanged a look with Gabe.

“I said, we’ve got him. Good job.” As an added assurance, Tess clamped a handcuff on Reynolds’ wrist.

“Vincent, we’ll take him from here,” Gabe said again, a little more forcefully, and tugged. Reynolds looked from Gabe to Vincent and started to sweat. It would only take one quick move from the animal to punch into his chest and he’d be dead. Vincent stared him down a second before realizing Gabe was trying to pry his fingers off Reynolds’ forearm.

“Vincent, let . . . go.”

“Sorry.” He slowly relaxed his fingers and the man was yanked away from him.

“There. Good. We’re all good, see? He’s not going anywhere, I promise.”

Vincent shifted his focus to Gabe. “Heard that before.”

“This time he won’t get away. I swear.”

Vincent finally nodded, then looked once more to Reynolds, who wasn’t as convinced he was safe just yet. “Your heart’s beating quite erratically,” Vincent told him and patted him on the chest. “You should take more care. A man of your age could have a heart-attack at any time.”

He punctuated that ominous threat with a toothy grin.

At Reynolds' gasp, Gabe intervened. "Okay. I think we're done here. Good job, Vincent. Uh, we'll talk more with you later, okay?" Meaning, *scram for now*. He got the message. He had something else to do anyway.

\*

Vincent was still dressed in the embassy guard's attire when he pressed the button for the elevator to take him to the top floor of the Manhattan hotel. Sixteen floors up was the lounge where Catherine was working. She needed to know the good news.

Unfortunately, the security person at the door refused to let him into the event.

Jason was just about to leave to get Catherine a plate of hors d'oeuvres when they noticed the commotion at the elevator entrance to the room. "Excuse me, Catherine, I think I need to attend to something."

Catherine looked up to see Vincent trying to talk his way past the security guard. She put a hand on Jason's sleeve. "I'm sorry. That's—that's for me. Must be . . . something for work. It's so loud in here, I guess I didn't hear my cell phone."

Jason eyed the intruder. He looked a little dangerous.

"Oh. Okay, no problem." He caught the security guard's eye and signaled him to let the man in. Catherine ran toward the elevator.

"Vincent! What's wrong? Why are you here?"

He'd seen her across the room and had been transfixed. Stunning was the only word that came to mind. He looked her over appreciatively as she approached before answering. She was a vision in silver and black. He smiled. "You look so beautiful. Like a thousand tiny stars."

Her sequins were glinting off the multitude of twinkling lights. She blushed at his perusal. "Thank you. But, what brings you here?"

"Oh, uh. Tess said you would be here. I wanted to tell you the news myself so you didn't worry."

She blinked. *Tess told Vincent she was out with Jason on New Year's Eve?*

"I'm sorry to interrupt your work," he added.

Catherine blushed harder. He thought she was working! Out of the corner of her eye she could see Jason slowly approach. Yikes!



"No problem. Uh, what news?"

"Your father. We caught him."

"Oh!"

"He tried to get out of the country tonight, but we stopped him at the airport. He's back in custody now."

That 'we' sounded a lot like teamwork. She assumed he meant Tess and Gabe.

"That's . . . that's great. Wonderful news. Thank you for letting me know, but you really didn't have to come all the way down here in person."

"Believe me, it was worth it just to see you in that dress. Makes me wish for another dance—"

"Trouble, Catherine?" Jason got to within a few feet. He was holding a glass of champagne.

Vincent's eyes flew to the other man, then to Catherine with a question.

"Vincent," Catherine stuttered awkwardly, "I'd like you meet Jason. Jason Hunter."

Jason held out a hand.

"Jason, this is Vincent . . . my—"

"Partner—one of . . . several," Vincent filled in and took Jason's hand in a firm grip. Jason looked at him with surprise.

"Uh, Jason and I met in Miami, actually. He's here on business with the same firm that Heather now works for." Catherine swallowed, worriedly looking between the two men. Vincent was definitely taking Jason's measure and, though he wasn't as obvious, she was certain Jason was doing the same. They finally released grips.

Jason smiled. "Very nice to meet you, Vincent," he said, and turned to Catherine. "If you need to leave, Catherine, I completely understand."

Vincent started to nod in agreement with that, but Catherine said, "No. Everything's fine. Vincent was just . . . updating me on a situation we were watching." She turned to Vincent. "Thank you. I really appreciate it. I'll talk to you . . . later?"

Vincent put his hands in his pockets. "Uh. Yeah."

"Okay."

“Okay,” Jason repeated. “Well,” he reached for her elbow. “You still hungry?”

Catherine started to turn with him, but glanced back with an apologetic look before answering.

“Yes, that sounds wonderful. In fact, I’m famished.”

They turned to go. As he led her away, Jason put a hand to Catherine’s back—her bare back.

Vincent stared a moment, breathing slowly.

“Will you be staying, sir?” the first security guard asked him politely.

He pulled his eyes away from the retreating couple and schooled his facial muscles to relax.

“Apparently not,” he said curtly, and left.

\*

“I’m sorry about that,” Catherine began as they reached the outside balcony. The volume of music and the crowd noise made talking inside nearly impossible. Jason slid off his jacket and put it around her shoulders.

“No need to apologize.”

Time for truth. “No, I . . . Vincent thought I was working. I . . . surprised him.” She turned troubled eyes to him.

“I picked up on that.”

“You must think I’m terrible. First the awful meal I fixed for you, then this. It’s just, we have a history—”

He leaned an elbow on the railing and eyed the crowds gathering on the streets far below. “You know, it’s been two years since my wife walked away from our marriage, and there are still some nights when I sit and look through pictures of us—from the early days. I understand history. And I don’t think you’re awful. I think you’re pretty amazing.” He turned to look at her. “First woman to turn my head in a very long time. But that doesn’t mean we’re locked into anything.”

“I’m interested. I really am. But I want to be fair to you. Right now, he and I are still trying to work out the whole ‘friends’ thing. It sounds easier than it is.”

"You don't owe me an explanation, Catherine. But I'm interested, too. Very much so. If there's a chance. But I'll leave that up to you. You need to figure out where your heart is at." He straightened. "Long distance relationships aren't easy, but I do get up here on a regular basis for this particular client. I'm willing to make it work. I just need to know if you want me to keep calling or not."

She looked at him with a glint of tears.

"Why don't you think it over and let me know when you take me to the airport on Wednesday?" She smiled her relief. At least he still wanted her company a little while longer. "I can do that."

\*

Vincent threw down his cap and dropped onto the couch as soon as he entered the club. JT, studying a text book nearby, looked up sharply.

"You go to a New Year's masquerade party or what?" JT eyed the Russian insignia on the cap.

"Or what."

"I thought you'd be celebrating since Reynolds is back in the slammer, finally. He *is* back in the slammer, right? Tess called me a little while ago."

"Yeah, JT, he is. All's right in the world again."

JT frowned. "Ex-cept here. What's up?"

"I just met Catherine's new plus-one."

"*What?*"

"I thought she was working that party. Instead, she was a guest—of the guy from Miami."

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh. I embarrassed her. I showed up to tell her the good news. I understand why she didn't tell me. We're not a couple right now. I just . . . it still hurts, you know? He seems like a nice enough guy, but I don't want to lose her. And I'm not sure I have the strength to watch her fall in love with another guy and move on with her life. If that's what's best for her, I want it. I just can't watch it."

JT knew the reason for that, of course, but still couldn't bring himself to tell his friend. Telling him now would only make things ten times worse.

“Is there nothing else you can do—I mean, to win her over?”

“Short of not killing someone—her father, especially? Been there, done that. I’m out of ideas. I can only say ‘I’m sorry’ so many times.” He looked up, suddenly. “Wait.” He got up and went into his room only to return shortly with a small bound book.

“What is that?”

“It’s my journal. I started keeping it shortly before you and Catherine found me again. I was having these dreams—of a woman in white. Turned out they were of Catherine.”

“You were having dreams of Catherine before she found you again?”

“Yeah. I thought, at first, they were hallucinations—perhaps brought on by the drugs, you know—but they were so real. Of course, later I realized they were memories. Anyway, I started writing out my thoughts—all the things I was dreaming and thinking. Then she found me, and all those weeks we were playing games with each other, I kept a journal of how I felt about our interactions. Then they eventually turned into letters to her—letters I never sent. It was a way for me to make sense of all the changes—and my memory loss—especially regarding Catherine. I never shared them with her.”

He turned to JT. “Maybe they will convince her how conflicted I’ve been from the start—that she’s been in every thought, every motivation, like she’s woven into me so deep I can’t tear her out without ripping my own heart out in the process. It’s a long-shot, I know, but I’m out of ideas.”

JT swallowed. Woven in deeper, even, than that. He shook his head. Catherine *did* need to know. “Do it. Tell her how you feel. Share those letters. You’ve got nothing to lose.”

Except everything, if it didn’t work. Vincent stood, determination evident on his face. It wouldn’t be easy to relive those difficult moments with her, but he would give her the opportunity to see the real him if it meant a chance for them. Before it’s too late.

Tori watched from the door to her room as Vincent grabbed a pen from the desk and walked back to his bedroom.

\*

Catherine,

*Even though I wrote the letters in this journal to you, I never planned to share them. I was afraid to show you the real me—the man who was struggling to be a man and not a monster, who felt conflicted about who he was and who you were and who we were together. But since you have a choice to make, it's only right that you know everything.*

*I can't take back all the times I should have listened to you, should have stopped to think before I acted. I was glorying in my own power and self-worth—my missions. I should have suspected I was being used; instead, I thought I was doing a service and that I was better than the people I killed. I see it all so clearly now. How I wish I would have realized sooner that I was just a puppet.*

*I've never been good with words, but I desperately long to convince you I've changed. But even if I were a famous poet, nothing can erase the fact that I hurt you over and over again—when I shoved you across the roof, when I killed mercilessly, when I lied to you, when I kissed another woman in front of you, and when I tried to kill your father and nearly sent you to the emergency room in that accident. I know that list is not complete. It's just a start. And how I have the audacity to ask your forgiveness, I don't even know. But when you walked away from me—from us—and then shot me because you had no other choice—that's when I realized I had crossed a line that could cause me to lose you forever, and I couldn't live with that. I couldn't live with myself as that monster.*

*Whatever it takes, Catherine, I will defeat him. I'm still in here, fighting – fighting for you, fighting for us. Truth is, I would have succumbed to this beast long before if it hadn't been for you. I would have become like Zach, like the others. And I don't want that! I owe you so much.*

*I'm torn between wanting you back and setting you free. But I love you too much to ever hurt you again. And as much as it would shred my insides to give you up, I will do it in order for you to be happy, if that's what you want. I'll go to Canada, if I have to; you don't have to leave your life here. I want you to pick me, but I will abide by whatever you decide. I love you that much. Just know that I will love you for all time.*

-Vincent

\*

Catherine called later the next morning to ask if they could meet the following day. She had something to discuss with him. Fearing what that would be, he decided to head over to her place ahead of time, anxious to give her the journal before she decided anything . . .

\*

Tori let Vincent get some distance ahead of her and out of sight before she began to follow. It was good practice—she had to be extra vigilant with Vincent since he was so perceptive—and extra sharp. She frowned. It looked like he'd taken extra care with his appearance today. She wondered where he was headed. Then, catching his trail, she realized he was on a familiar path—to Catherine's. *What a surprise.* She gritted her teeth. Would the guy never give up?! She'd heard him, over at the club, telling JT about seeing the guy Catherine was dating and how he wanted to share something with her before it was too late. A burst of righteous indignation bubbled up. How dare Catherine play with his feelings in such a way by flaunting another dude in front of him! The poor guy was in torment!

Tori shook off her frustration. It had to end sometime. Those two were doomed. Catherine would never be able to fully forgive him, even if she wanted to. In the meantime, Tori would be patient and play his game. He wanted her to learn; she would learn. She turned, a stillness in her body tuned to every nuance of him. He paused here, then turned . . . .

Tracking in daylight was difficult with all the sights and sounds of the city, so this was good experience, although the pale winter light was swiftly dying. She watched him pause beneath the backside of Chandler's building. Tori ducked back around the corner as he surveyed the area for curious eyes, then he climbed. Catherine's porch window was lit, meaning there was someone inside.

Just for kicks, Tori climbed a fire escape on a building kitty-corner to Catherine's until she was at the same level. That's when she saw what he did: Catherine was not alone. Another man, not quite as tall as Vincent, stood in her entryway. They both had their jackets on and it looked as if they were about to leave the apartment when the man pulled her close. From Tori's vantage point she couldn't tell if it was a mere hug or more, but Vincent's reaction told her everything. He quickly ducked out of view, obviously surprised at the situation. Then he paused for a moment before leaping off the balcony. Tori had to hurry to do the same and keep on his trail.

She followed him across town. He was moving more aimlessly now, and slower. There was no rhyme or reason to his path. Poor Vincent! She imagined him having a conversation with himself, like she did at times, talking through what he'd seen and what he should do about it. Finally, he headed up a bridge. She didn't dare follow him there as he'd easily see her, so she took to the street level below and dogged his path along the waterfront until he paused. As distant as they were from each other, she could still read the anguish in his body language. Then he pulled something from a pocket, looked at it, and chucked it towards the water.

\*

Vincent tried to concentrate on breathing, keep his focus. If he didn't, he'd transform—and this wasn't the time or place for that. No. He had to control it even when no one was watching if he was to get the upper hand on the beast. He may have lost Catherine, but he wasn't going to lose himself! He'd conquer this thing in spite of losing her. And losing her he had. He was too late. She'd obviously made her decision. What was there to do, now, but wait for her to deliver the bad news to him?

The journal in his pocket was burning a hole there. Empty words. They might have meant something once; no more. Because it was over. He wanted to howl. He wanted to roar. He wanted to shout that it wasn't fair—but who was he kidding? It wasn't fair to her to chain her to this life. If he truly loved her, he would release her to love someone else. But it was so, so hard.

He pulled the journal from his pocket and looked at it. If she read these words now, she would feel nothing but pity. Would they also make her feel obligated to him? She already felt guilty for her mother's part in his life, and then her father's. Because of that, she might decide to give up her own happiness for his out of a sense of duty. She had that kind of integrity. No. Better she never know.

He rubbed a hand across the leather surface one last time. His heart. He would rip it out before hurting her again. He leaned back, and with a powerful arm hurled it toward the water with all of his might.

## Chapter 11

Tori Windsor heard a thud then a splash as the small item sent her way landed not too far from her position. By the time she looked up, Vincent was gone. What had he thrown, and why? It hadn't sounded like a rock. Curiosity getting the better of her, she tracked to the location of his toss. Sure enough, the object hadn't gone into the water as he'd probably intended. Instead, it had hit a bulkhead support and bounced back into a puddle of thawing snow. Just as bad—whatever it was, it was surely ruined. She made her way to the spot and plucked the soaked and damaged object out of the water. A book. A small journal, to be precise.

She shook it off and tried to bend it back into shape, then shoved it into her jacket pocket soaking wet and headed for one of her parents' apartments. There, she carefully separated the pages from each other and took a diffuser hairdryer to it. When it was mostly dry hours later, it lay upon the table in front of her. She knew right from wrong enough to know it wasn't cool to read someone else's journal, but what if there was something important in it? Something she needed to know—about Vincent. It might help her understand him, reach him.

Finally making her decision, she picked it up. Sometime later she found herself at Catherine's door.

\*

Catherine had just curled up on her couch with a book when the doorbell rang. She'd finally finished taking down all of the Christmas decorations and put the boxes away. Doing so always left her a little sad. That, coupled with her roller coaster of emotions over the men in her life, had her feeling exhausted but unable to sleep, even though she'd made her decision hours ago, and knew in her heart it was the right one.

Strange, though, that someone would be at her door at this hour. Not the time of night for visitors. Vincent didn't ring or knock, so it wasn't him. Could it be Jason? She planned to take him to the airport in the morning, but maybe an emergency had come up.

She tied the robe around her waist and peered through the peep hole at the door. Tori Windsor. She shrank back.

"Catherine, I know you're there. I'm not going to hurt you, I promise. Please let me in." Tori's high-pitched voice carried easily through the door.

Catherine hesitated then reached for her holster and the gun they'd just reinstated to her that morning, along with her badge. She tucked the weapon into the back of her pants. She needed something, just in case. She slowly opened the door.

"Tori? What . . . a surprise. What brings you here so late?"

"Please invite me in, Catherine. It's freezing in this hallway."

Good manners had Catherine stepping aside and letting the young woman in.

"What brings me here? Actually, this." She held out a dirty, mangled book.

Catherine frowned. "What is that? I've never seen it before."

"Of course you haven't," Tori said, walking all the way into the front room before turning. "But it's yours, nonetheless," she said, still holding it out.

Catherine carefully accepted the item and looked at it suspiciously. It had an unmarked cover.

"Pretty damaged. Did it go through a storm or something?"

"Or something," Tori replied. *The storm of a man's heart.*

When Catherine continued to frown, Tori sighed and scanned the unfamiliar apartment before explaining. "I know you don't trust me and probably don't like me very much, but there's something you need to know, and I may be the only one who's willing and able to tell it to you. There isn't anything between Vincent and me. As much as I would like that, he has eyes only for you. And despite what he's done, he's changed. You shook him up. I don't know if it was the bullet you put in him," she said sharply, still aggravated at that, "or what Reynolds did to him, but everything is different. *He's* different. It isn't something he can prove, even though he singlehandedly caught your father *without harming a hair on his head* and turned him over to the police—despite everything that evil man put him through!"



Tori took a deep breath and paced the short length of the room, grasping for calm and the right words. Everything depended on it. This was all she could do for him. She held out her hands. “He has no way to show it to you, okay? I might not be beyond begging, but he is. And he won’t. He’ll walk away instead; you know he will. But before he does that, I think that book might help put things into perspective. He threw it away; I rescued it. It’s important. Just . . . open it. Trust me—it belongs to you.”

She crossed her arms until Catherine cracked open the first page. Tori waited for the moment of recognition. It didn’t take long. Catherine immediately dropped to the arm of the couch.

“I just . . . thought you should know.” Even as she spoke, Tori doubted Catherine heard anything else she said. “I’ll see myself out.”

\*

The first pages were descriptions of dreams—of a woman in white. Catherine recognized the handwriting immediately—Vincent’s—and the careful, methodical train of thought that led him to describe them in such detail. They took her back to the first interactions she had with him after they’d found him again. Surprising as it was to know he’d dreamt of her, then came the letters. The writing had turned to script on those pages, and one even had the edge torn back and if he’d intended to rip it out and give it to her at some point. Obviously, that never happened. She covered her trembling lips as she read each one.

It was several long minutes later when she looked up and realized Tori had left the apartment. Her only reason for coming by had apparently been to give her the journal. Had she said something about it having been thrown away? She teared up at the thought. What a terrible, terrible waste that would have been.

Catherine fought to read the text as her eyes blurred the pages.

*“I have memories of us,” he wrote. “Just scraps, but they are there and they are real. Please don’t turn away from me.”*

*“I told you about the ‘pull.’ It’s still there, stronger than ever. So much so that I can’t walk away from you, even if I tried . . .”* Oh, God!

*“Please wait for me. Give me time . . . and then we’ll dance again.”*

She was crying so hard at that point, she had to run for her bedroom where the tissue box was kept. He’d doubted himself from the very beginning, and repeatedly begged for her patience. He wanted to remember! And then he asked, *“Why did you fall in love with me?”* and she crumbled.

“Oh, Vincent,” she said aloud to the empty room. “Don’t you know by now?”

She fell asleep on the couch with the book in her hand. The doorbell rang again. Who could it possibly be this time?

“JT?” She raked a hand through her tousled hair and opened the door, stuffing the book into a pocket. “What is it? Come in.” Still dressed in her robe, she let him into her apartment, a place he’d strangely never actually visited before. He looked around, nervous.

“Thanks.” He looked at her clothing. “Sorry it’s so late.”

“No—no problem. I wasn’t actually in bed. Uh, Gabe says you’ve been working diligently on interpreting those reports I received,” she said, trying to clear her thoughts and the turmoil in her heart. “I just want you to know I appreciate all your efforts, no matter what you find.” She hoped that was all he was there to discuss.

“Be careful what you wish for.”

That sounded strangely ominous. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe we should sit down.”

“Okay.” She moved aside a cooking magazine she had left on the table, her heart racing, and offered him a seat, then waited for him to get to the point. He took out the envelope of papers.

“These aren’t all about Vincent.”

“You mean, my father also gave us reports on the other beasts? I suppose that could still be of some value—”

“No. I don’t mean other beasts. There are several pages here . . . on you.”

She frowned. “Me? Why would my father have lab reports on me? And where did he get them?”

“I don’t know, but they’re not recent. They’re from your birth, or-or shortly thereafter.”

“*What?*”

“And that’s not the interesting part.”

She closed her eyes. Sometimes it took awhile for JT to get to the point. “Okay, start from the beginning.” Her head was starting to pound.

"I don't know the hows or whys, but these reports—they show that you were *encoded* into Vincent's DNA from the start. You're . . . a part of his physiology. He never knew why he was so drawn to you, only that he was. It's like . . . like tides to the moon. But now we know that was by design. Vincent sought you out because he couldn't help himself."

"Wait. What? All those years he was following me—"

"It's sort-of as if he has a built-in radar which only points to you. You're his True North. No matter what other relationships he tries to have with other women, he's going to keep returning to you. *Because you are written into his DNA. You're in every cell.*" He leaned back and crossed his arms, waiting for her response. "I just thought you should know before . . . you know, before deciding anything."

Meaning between Vincent and Jason. Catherine closed her eyes, trying to digest such incredible news. She didn't normally understand all of the technical jargon JT routinely spouted, but she got the gist of this: Vincent couldn't walk away from her even if he tried. Bless his heart. And he tried—over and over and over again. But there was still something that didn't make sense. "But it was dormant for ten years. Other than when he saved me the first time, he kept his distance."

"I don't know. Maybe, once he had a taste, you might say—"

"You mean, once I found him in the warehouse and we came into contact?"

"Right. Things really kicked into gear then. Remember the fugues that started soon after?"

"But I thought those were just a random side-effect caused by the experiments—"

"—which may have been *triggered* by the closer contact with you in his life."

Catherine rubbed her head. This was beyond anything she could have dreamed up. "Still doesn't explain why. Why *me*?"

"Well, you are your mother's daughter. Maybe, after he saved her life she added you into the injections. I don't know. She saw the hand-writing on the wall with Muirfield? She wanted to protect you."

"Protect *us*. She had *two* daughters."

"But . . . only you are your father's child."

She stared at him. It sounded more plausible that this was Reynolds' doing, not Vanessa's. Oh, God. "He did it to protect me—from Vincent."

JT frowned, considering. "You think—"

"He knew what he was creating and wanted to protect his only child."

"Or have Vincent protect his only child. But this goes beyond a simple protective instinct."

Yes, it did. Way beyond. She rubbed her neck. "Does he know? Did you tell Vincent any of this?"

"No, I—I couldn't bring myself to do it yet."

She gathered up the reports. "And you can't. Promise me."

JT blustered. "B-but he should know. Everything. Shouldn't he?"

"Not this. Please, JT. It would kill him to think he didn't have a choice, or control, even over his own heart."

In the end, JT reluctantly agreed.

\*

The next morning, Catherine pulled into the airport garage and parked.

"You really don't have to come in with me. Save yourself the parking fee, Catherine."

"No. I want to. It's nothing. Besides, we're a little early and I . . . I had a few things I needed to say."

Although she'd already made up her mind long before Tori's or JT's visit last night, they'd both confirmed her decision.

Jason sighed and drew a hand through her silky hair. "You know, you don't have to say anything. Neither one of us is really invested here, or truly ready for anything more. But I'm not going to say I regret a moment. You gave me something I'll cherish for a long time to come."

Catherine felt a wave of relief. She hadn't looked forward to this moment, although she knew she had to do what she came to do. But this was a new twist. She looked up at him, curious.

"You gave me hope." He smiled, only one side of his face tilting up. "I always thought of myself as a one-woman man, you know? It was a real blow to my ego to have my 'one woman' walk away from me. After Kendra did that, I figured it was me. I thought I was damaged, somehow, and that I was going to have to face the rest of my life alone."

But then I met you and started to see . . . possibilities. The future didn't look so grim. You made me realize that there were other women out there—like you—who could still make me feel; who could look at me as whole, and make me hope for a life with someone again. That didn't mean it was going to be *you*—just that there would be *someone*. I can't thank you enough.

"Oh, Jason. I'm so sorry. I guess . . . I guess I wasn't ready for another relationship yet."

"Because there's still one you're hanging onto."

She hung her head. It was the truth. "Yes."

"Lucky man—Vincent. Don't apologize, Catherine. Ever. Just live and don't regret. You are amazing and beautiful and know your own mind and heart. I wouldn't have you any other way. But," he put a hand to her cheek. "If things don't end up working out, and by some crazy chance we both find ourselves truly alone again sometime in the future, I hope you will look me up. You never know. Miracles can still happen."

She smiled. "They really can." And her miracle was waiting at home, probably terribly anxious. She drew Jason in for a last hug. "Thank you for understanding. And I'll remember that."

"That's all I can ask." He picked up his bag and waved good-bye with a salute and a big grin. She smiled back with eyes starting to tear up. And now to put the love of her life finally out of his misery . . . .

\*

JT, dressed for class, came into the front room to find Vincent sitting, idly staring into space.

"Where's Catherine? I thought you said she was stopping by today."

"She's seeing Jason off at the airport."

At the sound of his best friend's voice, JT sat down opposite him at the chess table. "That's a *good* thing."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Vincent spoke without looking up. He picked up the queen piece on the board and studied it.

"You'll see when she gets here," JT assured him.

"You mean, when she makes her choice."

"Is that what she's doing?"

"This is it, JT. This is my life."

JT put a hand on his friend's arm. "She'll choose *you*."

"I wish I was as certain of that as you, but I'm not. And truth is, I don't know if it would even be the right thing—"

Before JT could argue with that, there was a brief rap at the door and Catherine walked in. The guys looked up from the board, then to each other, before turning to look at her. Catherine's eyes were only for Vincent.

JT stood suddenly. "And . . . I'm late for class—again. I'll—I'll see you later, okay?" He patted Vincent's shoulder encouragingly before scrambling out the door.

Vincent couldn't tell from the expression on her face what she was thinking as Catherine slowly walked into the room and came to stand in front of him. He tried to head off the conversation before it began. "Don't feel you have to protect me—"

"—yet you'll always protect *me*," she finished for him.

He looked up. "Always. But that doesn't mean—. Catherine, truth is, Jason's a good guy. And with him you can have a clean start—no complications, no history. I'll never hurt him. Never. He's what you need—what any woman would want—"

"Then you don't know me very well." She wanted to put her fingers through his hair, soothe that frown line on his forehead. "Vincent, you put up my Christmas tree. Didn't you see?"

He lifted his eyes. *The Christmas tree?* What did that have to do with anything? "See . . . what?"

She took another step forward and placed her hands on either side of his face, forcing him to look at her. The agony in his eyes made her own tear up. "That shiny and new was never my preference. I love history. And . . . *I want the one with all the broken pieces.*"

For a moment Vincent thought he hadn't heard her right. But her face—. He stood, amazement and fear that he misunderstood warring within him.

Seeing his confusion, she made it very clear. "Vincent, I choose *you*."

His knees buckled and he sank to the floor. A sharp clench in his gut forced the breath right out of him and a sound from somewhere deep inside bubbled up and refused to be squelched.

And then the powerful man who feared nothing and no one else . . . broke down and cried like a child. Through his tears he reached for her and she went willingly into his arms, kneeling with him. When he could breathe, he lifted his eyes to her face to be certain it was true.

She was smiling.

He pressed his face to hers, their tears mingling. "I was afraid to dream . . . ."

## Chapter 12 – Epilogue

"Is it too late to make New Year's resolutions?"

They lay in her bed as late morning light filtered through the gauzy sheers.

Vincent propped himself up with one elbow as he leaned over her. "I don't think so. We're only a week out. Mine is to spend as much time as possible in bed. This one, specifically." He punctuated that statement with a hot kiss to her neck.

Catherine made a soft exhalation and smiled. "You feel you need more beauty sleep? I don't think so," she teased.

He shook his head. "*Not* sleeping." His words were a soft whisper against her lips.

"Ah," she said, and opened her mouth for another one of many, many morning kisses. "That just . . . happened to be on the top of my list, as well."

His heart-stopping dimples were out in full force and she reached up to lovingly draw a finger down the length of the one on his now scar-less cheek. He tried to grab her fingers with his teeth.

"I'm glad about that. What else?"

"Mmmm . . . I want to laugh more."

"I can help with that." Hidden fingers searched out her tickle spot. She gasped and tried to squirm away. "Yes, you certainly can." God, how she loved his smile!

"Laughing's good. Any more? Because those were pretty . . . ."

"What?"

"Not exactly stretch goals."

"Oh, is that right? Well, I think I'm also going to take another cooking class."

"Yeah? What kind this time?"

“Hmmm. Maybe Italian?”

“I *love* Italian. All those oils and slippery pasta . . . .”

“Italian it is, then,” she giggled and gasped again as what he was doing to her with his mouth.

“Anything else? Let’s see, we’ve got sleep more, laugh more, eat more—”

She hit him. “No! Not *eat* more.” She laughed again, and it felt so good. *This* felt so good. So right. So *normal*.

Vincent was in a happy mood, too, and doing gentle things to her body that were starting to mess with her concentration, and he knew it. The dog! Two could play this game. She stretched languorously and sighed like a contented kitten. He groaned and inhaled a deep long breath as he felt the slide of contact all the way down. It took him a moment to remember they were having a conversation. “I’m sorry. What were we talking about?”

She snickered. “Resolutions.”

He kissed her nose. Her cheek. The corner of her mouth. “Oh, yeah.”

“And . . . I think I’ll start a journal.”

He lifted his head and licked his lips, hesitating. He wanted to tell her. She pretended not to notice.

“Yeah. I want to write down my thoughts and feelings – about us. I want to remember everything.” She nodded at him. “Just think how much that would have helped if you had done something like that.” The hand behind her head reached beneath the pillow to brush the edge of his journal she kept hidden there. Some day she would tell him she had it. When he was ready. For now it was her secret treasure.

“Okay. But I think the odds are against either of us ever getting amnesia again.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. One never knows. And lastly—”

“There’s more?”

“Just one. I want . . . to dream more.”

“If that involves sleeping, then—”



"No." She threaded her fingers into his hair, drawing him closer so he could see she was serious. "No, I mean for *us*." With her other hand, Catherine ran a thumb over the soft stubble of his beard and then along his bottom lip. His tongue came out to taste her and she lingered there a moment. "I don't want to give up—anything. You know, you and I—we're going to be together for a long, long time, mister. Anything can happen. I've already seen miracles." She slid both arms around his neck and pulled him full on top of her. "I want to hold fast to our dreams . . . for the future. I'm not willing to settle for less. Will you—will you do it with me?" Her question seemed almost shy.

Vincent looked into her eyes—luminous, sleepy, satisfied, but still wanting so much more. As did he. " 'Hold fast to dreams?' My love," he whispered, placing another kiss on her full, soft lips. "I'm way ahead of you there . . . .

\*  
\*

Bob Reynolds rolled over on his lumpy cot. Eventually they would move him to better quarters, but for now he'd have to put up with this. He supposed it was better than death. Only slightly. It was early morning, he could tell from the small, barred window high on the wall. It let in light but no warmth. It should have been a quiet time in the jail, but the incessant clanking of the heavy metal gates as the guards came and went never quit.

He sighed and turned his head, his sleep ended, and cracked open his eyes.

Through the open wall of bars, two reflective, amber eyes blinked back at him.

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

*A/N: This story concludes with "If Ever I Would Leave You."*

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