

The Beginning of Everything

by BeneathTheBrownstone

Catherine woke gasping.

Again.

The apartment held its breath around her - soft night lights glowing like worried sentinels in the bedroom, the bathroom, the living room beyond. Small pools of amber against the dark. She'd placed them there herself, fighting back something she hadn't felt since childhood: that primal, irrational fear of what lived in the shadows.

She was an Assistant District Attorney who prosecuted violent criminals for a living, and she was sleeping with night lights like a kindergartener afraid of monsters under the bed.

The irony wasn't lost on her.

At first, when the nightmares began, she'd tried to push through with sheer stubbornness - the same quality that had gotten her through law school, through the attack, through rebuilding her entire life. She told herself the unease was temporary. Stress from a difficult case. Too much coffee. Mercury in retrograde. Whatever rationalization would let her pretend she had this under control.

But the nightmares didn't care about her rationalizations, and they certainly didn't respect her law degree.

Two, sometimes three times a night, she would jolt awake with her heart hammering against her ribs, absolutely certain — *knowing* — that someone was in the room with her. Not Vincent. Never Vincent. She would sense his presence like warmth, like safety. This was different. This was the feeling of being watched by something that meant her harm.

The ritual always followed.

She would throw back the covers, turn on the overhead light. Check the bathroom — shower curtain pulled back, medicine cabinet opened and closed. Under the bed, though she knew it was irrational, knew nothing could fit in that narrow space. The closet, pushing aside dresses and coats with shaking hands. Then out to the living room, every lamp switched on. The kitchen, opening cabinets, she knew were empty of anything but dishes.

Nothing. Always nothing.

In those moments, she would reach for the memory of Vincent — the weight of his presence beside her, the way his voice could gentle the sharpest edges of her fear.

She missed him with an ache that was almost physical. Missed the certainty of his protection, the comfort of knowing he was near. If he were here now, she could close her eyes without fear. She could rest.

But he wasn't here. He'd been staying away — she knew that, could feel it in the careful distance he maintained. He thought he was helping. Thought she needed space to heal, to sleep without the weight of his world pressing against hers.

He was wrong. But she was too exhausted to find the words to tell him so.

The checking didn't bring relief. It only bought her enough calm to return to bed, to lie there staring at the ceiling, willing herself not to close her eyes. Because closing her eyes meant returning to the dream.

And the dream always waited.

It began beautifully. That was the cruelest part.

She would be in Central Park, standing by the lagoon in that golden hour before sunset when the light turned everything amber and soft. Vincent would be beside her — his presence solid, real, more real than anything else in her waking life. They would skip rocks across the water, and she would feel something: the simple, uncomplicated peace of being with someone who understood her completely.

His stone would skip seven times. Hers, four.

She would laugh, and he would smile in that way of his — gentle, almost shy, as though her happiness was something precious he was privileged to witness.

Then the dogs would come.

She never saw where they came from. One moment there was only the lagoon and Vincent and the fading light. The next, she would hear the snarling — guttural, vicious, getting closer. She would turn and see them: two massive shapes, all teeth and muscle and rage, charging toward her across the grass.

Vincent would vanish. He was always gone by then.

She would run.

The dream would shift, the way dreams do, logic dissolving into pure sensation. The park would stretch impossibly long, the paths twisting back on themselves. And the dogs would change too — morphing into men on motorcycles, dressed in dark uniforms that looked like police but weren't. They would chase her through streets that were and weren't New York, their engines roaring, their faces hidden behind visors that reflected her own terrified expression back at her.

She would run until her lungs burned. Until her legs gave out. Until she woke up gasping in her bed, the night lights glowing their inadequate comfort, her heart racing as though she'd actually been running.

Then the cycle would begin again.

Catherine knew — intellectually, rationally — what her mind was doing. She'd read enough, talked to enough people, understood enough about trauma to recognize the patterns. The nightmares were her psyche's attempt to process what had happened to her. Not just one thing, but the accumulation of everything since that night almost three years ago, when two men had dragged her into a van, beaten her, slashed her face, and left her for dead in Central Park.

The night Vincent found her.

The night her life split into before and after.

Since then, there had been other attacks. Other moments of terror. Men with guns. Men with knives. Situations where she'd felt hunted, cornered, helpless despite all her training and all her determination never to be a victim again. Her subconscious was cataloging them, mixing them together, replaying them in an endless loop.

She understood this. She could explain it to herself in clear, clinical terms.

But understanding didn't stop the dreams. Didn't make her feel less afraid when she woke in the dark, certain someone was there. Didn't explain why Vincent — her protector, her anchor — always disappeared just when she needed him most in the dreamscape.

What were her dreams trying to tell her?

That she wasn't safe, even in her own home? That no amount of night lights, or locked doors, or rational thinking could protect her from the violence that lived in her memory?

Or were they telling her something else entirely — something she wasn't ready to hear?

Catherine lay in her bed, surrounded by soft amber light, and stared at the ceiling. Outside, the city hummed its endless song. Inside, the silence pressed close.

She was so tired.

But she was afraid to close her eyes.

The restaurant her father had chosen was all white tablecloths and crystal water glasses, the kind of place where conversations were conducted in hushed tones and the silverware never clinked too loudly against the china.

Catherine had arrived ten minutes late, which was usual for her. She'd overslept after finally drifting off around five in the morning, then spent twenty minutes in front of her bathroom mirror trying to make herself look presentable. The concealer helped, but only so much.

Her father stood when he saw her approaching, his attorney's eyes taking in everything in that single glance he'd perfected over decades of reading people. He kissed her cheek, held her chair, waited until she was seated before returning to his own.

"You look terrible, sweetheart," he said, with the kind of blunt affection only a parent could get away with.

Catherine let out a surprised laugh. "Good morning to you too, Dad. And here I thought the concealer was working miracles."

"If that's concealer, I'd ask for my money back." He smiled, softening the observation. "Seriously, Cathy. You look like you haven't slept in a week."

"Only three days, actually. I'm pacing myself."

"That's not funny."

"It's a little funny." She reached for her water glass, took a sip. "I'm fine, really."

Her father gave her that look — the one that had gotten countless witnesses to crack on the stand, the one that said *I'm waiting for the truth and I have all day*.

"Try again."

"I'm *fine*, Dad—"

"Catherine."

"I'm handling it?"

"Still not buying it."

She sighed, slumping back in her chair. "You're relentless. You know that?"

"It's why they pay me the big bucks." He leaned forward slightly, his expression gentling. "Talk to me. What's going on?"

The waiter appeared, mercifully, with menus and a recitation of the specials. Catherine ordered the eggs Benedict without really hearing herself speak. Her father ordered his usual—smoked salmon, capers, the works—and waited until they were alone again.

She could feel him watching her. Waiting.

"I haven't been sleeping well," she admitted finally, tracing the rim of her water glass with one finger. "Just some nightmares. Nothing to worry about."

"Nightmares." He set down his coffee cup. "The same ones, or...?"

"Different. The same. I don't know." She pressed her fingers against her temple, where a headache had been building since she woke. "It's just stress, probably. The Alvarez case has been—"

"Don't." Her father reached across the table and covered her hand with his. "Don't do that thing you do, where you explain everything away with work. I know you, Catherine. I know when something's wrong."

She looked down at his hand over hers. Something in her chest loosened slightly. "I'm handling it," she said quietly. "I promise. It's just... taking longer than I'd like."

He squeezed her hand gently, then released it. "Come to a party with me tonight."

Catherine groaned. "Dad, no. Please. I can't do the society circuit right now. I'll fall asleep in someone's champagne."

"Kay and I are going. It's at Robert Holcomb's place—you remember Holcomb? I'm handling the merger documents for his latest acquisition." He waved his hand as if the business details were secondary. "The point is, it'll be a nice evening. Good food, interesting people. A distraction."

"A distraction involving small talk about stock portfolios and summer homes in the Hamptons."

"Probably," he admitted with a slight smile. "But you'll have me there to suffer through it with you. And Kay. You like Kay."

Catherine started to decline—the thought of making small talk with Manhattan's elite while running on three hours of sleep felt insurmountable—but then she caught herself. What was her alternative? Going home to her apartment with its inadequate night lights? Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, waiting for the nightmares to come? She used to love going to these kinds of events.

Maybe a distraction was exactly what she needed. Something to pull her out of her own head for a few hours.

"Fine," she said. "But I'm not discussing real estate, and if anyone asks me about my skincare routine, I'm blaming you."

Her father's expression softened with something like relief. "Deal. Seven o'clock, Upper East Side. I'll send a car for you at six-thirty."

"I can take a cab—"

"Catherine. Let me send a car."

She smiled despite herself. "You know, for someone who raised me to be independent, you're very controlling."

"I prefer 'thoughtfully concerned.'"

"That's not a thing."

"It is now." He picked up his menu. "Now eat something. You look like a strong wind could knock you over."

"You really need to work on your compliments, Dad."

But she was smiling as she said it, and for the first time in days, the weight on her chest felt just a little bit lighter.

The party was exactly what she'd expected: elegant, expensive, and surprisingly not terrible.

Robert Holcomb's penthouse occupied the top two floors of a pre-war building on Fifth Avenue, with views that stretched across Central Park. The rooms were filled with the kind of people who appeared in the society pages—men in custom suits discussing market trends, women in designer dresses laughing at jokes.

Catherine moved through it with champagne in hand and her professional smile in place, determined to make the best of it. She was exhausted, yes, but she was also her father's daughter, and she knew how to work a room when necessary.

Her father had introduced her to Holcomb early in the evening. "Robert, my daughter, Catherine. She's an Assistant District Attorney."

"The one who put away the Stevenson brothers?" Holcomb had extended his hand, his grip firm and confident. He was handsome in that polished way successful men often were—sharp jawline, expensive haircut, eyes that assessed value instinctively. Early forties, she guessed, with the kind of presence that came from years of being the most important person in any room.

"Guilty as charged," Catherine said, shaking his hand. "Though technically, they were the ones who were guilty as charged."

Holcomb laughed—a genuine sound that seemed to surprise him. "I imagine the irony was lost on them."

"Most things were lost on them. Including their illegal firearms and about two million in stolen securities." She accepted a champagne flute from a passing waiter. "But your merger sounds considerably more legal. Congratulations."

"Thank you. Though I have to admit, corporate acquisitions are significantly less exciting than your line of work." His smile was charming. "No car chases, no dramatic courtroom revelations."

"Just dramatic boardroom revelations and the occasional hostile takeover. I've read about your reputation, Mr. Holcomb. You're not exactly playing it safe."

Something flickered in his expression—surprise, perhaps, that she'd done her homework. "Please, call me Robert. And you're right, I do prefer calculated risks to safe bets."

"Catherine," she offered in return. "And I can respect that. Though in my line of work, calculated risks usually involve witness protection and plea bargains."

"Different worlds," he acknowledged.

"But similar principles. Know your opponent, anticipate their moves, strike when they're vulnerable." She took a sip of champagne. "Though I imagine your opponents get better severance packages than mine do."

He laughed again, and this time it reached his eyes. "Considerably better. Prison jumpsuits aren't part of our standard exit strategy."

Her father had moved on to greet other guests, leaving them in conversation. Catherine found herself relaxing slightly. Holcomb was sharp, at least, and seemed genuinely amused rather than performing interest.

"I should let you get back to your other guests," she said. "I'm sure there are more important people to schmooze than an overworked ADA."

"On the contrary," Holcomb said, and there was something thoughtful in his expression now. "This is the most interesting conversation I've had all evening."

Before she could respond, Kay appeared at her elbow with a warm smile and another woman in tow.

"Catherine, I want you to meet Margaret Chen. She's on the board at Mount Sinai. Margaret, this is Charles's daughter—the one I was telling you about."

The next twenty minutes passed in a surprisingly engaging conversation about healthcare policy and the criminal justice system's intersection with mental health services. Margaret was sharp and passionate, with strong opinions about reform that Catherine found genuinely interesting. They exchanged business cards.

"You're a lifesaver," Catherine told Kay afterward. "I was bracing myself for conversations about yacht clubs and charity galas."

Kay laughed. "I know you do not enjoy these events as much as you used to."

"Thank you for understanding." Catherine responded with a smile.

Catherine drifted toward the windows, drawn by the view and the promise of a moment's peace. The city spread out below, a glittering sprawl of light and life. She found herself thinking about the tunnels beneath all of it, the hidden world that most of these people would never know existed.

"Quite a view, isn't it?"

She turned to find Holcomb approaching, two fresh champagne flutes in hand. He offered her one, and she accepted with a small smile.

"It's spectacular," she said honestly. "I never get tired of looking at the city from up high. It's like seeing all the chaos organized into patterns of light."

"That's a lovely way to put it." He stood beside her, looking out at the view. "Most people just comment on the real estate value."

"Well, I'm sure that's spectacular too," Catherine said with a slight smile. "But I prefer the poetry to the property assessment."

"You're not what I expected," Holcomb said, and there was genuine curiosity in his voice now.

"What did you expect? Someone who discusses case law at cocktail parties and carries handcuffs in her evening bag?"

"Maybe." His eyes crinkled with amusement. "Do you? Carry handcuffs in your evening bag?"

"Only on special occasions." She took a sip of champagne. "This seemed more like a civilized gathering. I left the tactical gear at home."

He laughed, shaking his head. "Your father mentioned you had a sharp wit. He undersold it."

"He's being diplomatic. My wit is a defense mechanism developed through years of dealing with defense attorneys." She turned back to the window. "Though I have to admit, this is nicer than I expected. I was prepared for three hours of small talk about stock portfolios."

"And instead?"

"Instead I had a genuinely interesting conversation about mental health policy, and got to see the city from a perspective I don't usually get." She glanced at him. "And you're easier to talk to than most corporate raiders."

"Corporate raiders?" He raised an eyebrow. "Is that what they're calling me?"

"Among other things. But I read the Journal article about your acquisition strategy. 'Aggressive but ethical' was the phrase they used, I think."

"You really did do your homework."

"Occupational hazard. I like to know who I'm dealing with." She met his gaze directly. "Though I have to say, you're less intimidating in person than your reputation suggests."

"Should I be offended?"

"Only if you were trying to intimidate me." Catherine smiled. "Were you?"

"No," Holcomb said quietly, and there was something genuine in his expression now, beneath the polished charm. "No, I don't think intimidation would work on you anyway."

"Probably not. I spend my days facing down murderers and mobsters. Corporate executives are considerably less threatening."

"Even when we're trying to be impressive?"

"Especially then." She softened it with a smile. "Though for what it's worth, this is impressive. The view, the party, the company. You've done well for yourself."

"Thank you." He was quiet for a moment, studying her with an expression she couldn't quite read. "You're not impressed by any of it, though. Are you?"

Catherine considered the question honestly. "I'm impressed by what you've built, by the work it took to get here. But the trappings?" She gestured at the elegant room behind them. "I've learned that the trappings don't tell you much about a person. Some of the best people I know live in walk-ups in Hell's Kitchen. Some of the worst have penthouses on Fifth Avenue."

"And which category do I fall into?"

"I haven't decided yet," she said lightly. "But you get points for asking the question."

Holcomb smiled—a real smile this time, not the practiced charm he'd been using with other guests. "You're remarkable, you know that?"

"I'm sleep-deprived and running on champagne," Catherine corrected. "But I appreciate the compliment."

"I mean it. You're—" He paused, seeming to search for the right words. "You're genuine. In a room full of people performing their success, you're just... yourself."

Catherine felt a flutter of discomfort at the intensity of his attention. He was looking at her like she was a puzzle he wanted to solve, and she suddenly felt too seen, too exposed.

"I should find my father," she said, setting her champagne glass on a nearby table. "Make sure he's not boring Kay with merger details."

"Of course." Holcomb stepped back, giving her space, but his eyes never left her face. "It was a genuine pleasure talking with you, Catherine. I hope we'll see each other again."

"Maybe," she said with a small smile. "Manhattan's a small town when you get down to it."

She moved away, back into the crowd, but she could feel his gaze following her. There was something in his attention that felt different from the usual social interest—something more focused, more intent. He wasn't fascinated because she'd dismissed him. He was fascinated because she'd engaged with him honestly, treated him like a person, rather than a prize to be won or a connection to be cultivated.

It should have been flattering. Instead, it made her think of Vincent, and how much she wished she were anywhere but here.

Catherine found her father and Kay near the bar, deep in conversation with a couple she didn't recognize. She touched his arm lightly, murmured something about needing air, and slipped toward the terrace before he could protest.

The night air was cold against her face, sharp and clarifying. She gripped the railing, looking out over the city lights, and felt something shift inside her—not the weight of exhaustion, but the lightness of understanding.

She missed Vincent.

God, she missed him. It was a physical ache in her chest, but not the hollow kind—it was the ache of knowing exactly what she needed and finally being ready to reach for it. He was worried about her. Concerned that his visits were keeping her awake, that she needed rest more than she needed him.

He was trying to help. Trying to give her space to heal, to sleep, to find her equilibrium again.

He was so wonderfully, frustratingly wrong.

Catherine felt a smile tug at her lips despite everything. Of course Vincent would think the solution was to sacrifice his own needs for hers. Of course he would stay away if he thought it would help her sleep. That was who he was—selfless to a fault, always putting her first even when it hurt them both.

But she knew better now. The nightmares weren't worse because he was there. They were worse because he wasn't. Without him, the darkness felt absolute. With him—even just knowing he was near—the shadows lost their teeth.

She reached out instinctively, following that golden thread between them, and felt him there. Distant, but present. Concerned. Waiting. Always waiting for her, even when he thought waiting meant staying away.

Tomorrow, she would go to him. Down into the tunnels, into the warmth and safety of the world Below. She would tell him that his absence wasn't helping, that she slept better—dreamed better—when she knew he was near. She would make him understand that what she needed wasn't space or rest or time.

What she needed was him.

The decision didn't just settle something in her chest—it lifted it. For the first time in days, she felt the exhaustion ease, replaced by something warmer. Anticipation. Hope. The knowledge that tomorrow, she would wake up and go home. Not to her apartment with its inadequate night lights, but to the place where she truly belonged.

To Vincent.

Catherine took a deep breath of the cold air and felt it clear her head completely. She could do this. One more night in her apartment, one more morning of going through the motions. And then—

Then she would go Below, and everything would be right again.

She was smiling as she turned back toward the party, already counting the hours until tomorrow.

The next afternoon, Catherine descended into the tunnels with a sense of purpose. The familiar passages welcomed her—the scent of earth and stone, the distant sound of water, the warmth that had nothing to do with temperature and everything to do with belonging.

She'd left the party early the night before, pleading exhaustion that was entirely real. Her father had understood, kissing her forehead and promising to check on her soon. She'd slept fitfully, as always, but this time the restlessness came from anticipation rather than fear. Morning had crawled by with agonizing slowness until finally, mercifully, she could make her way to the threshold entrance in the park.

Now, moving through the tunnels, Catherine felt her heart beating faster. Not from exertion, but from the knowledge that with each step, she was getting closer to him. She knew he was coming to meet her, that awareness she could never explain.

She rounded a corner near the junction that led to his chamber and stopped.

Vincent stood in the passage ahead, backlit by the soft glow of lantern light. He'd been coming toward her, drawn by the same pull she felt. For a moment, they simply looked at each other across the distance.

Then Catherine was moving, closing the space between them, and Vincent met her halfway. His hands came up to frame her face, gentle and reverent, and she leaned into the touch with a sound that was half-laugh, half-sob.

"Catherine." His voice was rough with emotion. "I felt you coming. I couldn't—I had to—"

"I know." She covered his hands with her own, holding them against her face. "I know."

They stood like that for a long moment, drinking each other in. Catherine felt the exhaustion of the past weeks pressing against her eyes, making them burn, but she didn't care. Vincent was here. She was here. Nothing else mattered.

"Come," Vincent said softly, his thumb brushing her cheekbone. "Let's go somewhere we can talk."

He led her deeper into the tunnels, their hands linked, until they reached the Chamber of the Falls. Water cascaded down the far wall in a silvery curtain, filling the space with gentle sound and cool mist. Lanterns cast warm light across the stone, and the air felt sacred somehow—a place set apart from the world.

Vincent guided her to sit on one of the smooth stone benches, but he didn't release her hand. His eyes searched her face, and Catherine saw the exact moment he truly registered what he was seeing. His expression shifted—concern deepening into something closer to anguish.

"Catherine." His free hand came up to touch the dark circles under her eyes, feather-light. "You look—"

"Terrible?" She tried for a smile. "I know. I've been sleeping about as well as you'd expect."

"The nightmares." It wasn't a question. Through their bond, he would have felt the echoes of her fear.

"They've gotten worse." Catherine took a breath, steadying herself. "Vincent, I need to tell you something. I need you to really hear me."

He nodded, his attention absolute.

"You've been staying away," she said carefully. "I know why. I can feel your reasoning through our bond. You think I need space to heal, that your presence somehow prevents me from resting properly. That if you just give me time and distance, the nightmares will fade."

Vincent's jaw tightened. "I thought—"

"You were wrong." Catherine squeezed his hand. "Vincent, I sleep *worse* without you. The nightmares are more intense, more frequent. The darkness feels heavier. I wake up terrified and alone, and I reach for you through our bond, but you're not there. You're deliberately staying away, and it's—" Her voice cracked. "It's making everything harder."

She watched the realization move across his face like a physical blow. His hand tightened on hers almost painfully.

"I didn't know," he said hoarsely. "Catherine, I thought—I was trying to help. I thought my world, my presence, was too heavy a burden when you needed rest."

"Your presence isn't a burden. It's the only thing that makes the darkness bearable." Catherine leaned forward, holding his gaze. "When you're near, I can sleep. When I know you're close, the nightmares lose their power. You're not the problem, Vincent. Your absence is."

He closed his eyes, and she saw the pain in the lines of his face. "I've been hurting you. All this time, thinking I was protecting you, and I've been—"

"You didn't know." Catherine reached up to touch his face, drawing his eyes back to hers. "But now you do. And I need you to stop staying away. I need you close. I need—" She hesitated, then pushed forward. "I need you to be there when I sleep. Not just nearby, but *there*. In my apartment. Close enough that I can feel you."

Vincent pulled back slightly, and Catherine saw the conflict in his expression. "Catherine, I can't—your apartment is your sanctuary. Your private space. I've rarely been inside, and even then only briefly. To stay there, to watch over you while you sleep—" He shook his head. "It's too much. Too intimate. I don't trust myself to—"

"To what?" Catherine challenged gently. "To be near me? To care for me? Vincent, you've saved my life more times than I can count. You've held me when I've cried, carried me when I couldn't walk. How is this different?"

"Because you'll be vulnerable. Asleep. And I'll be there in the darkness, watching you, and I—" He stopped, struggling with words. "I'm not as strong as you think I am."

Catherine felt her heart squeeze. She understood what he wasn't saying—the desire that ran beneath his protective instincts, the longing he kept carefully controlled. But she also saw the exhaustion in his eyes, the mirror of her own, and she knew he'd been suffering too. Suffering from their separation, from the distance he'd imposed on them both.

"Please," she said softly. "Just sit in a chair at the entrance to my room. You don't have to come closer. Just be there until I fall asleep. That's all I'm asking."

Vincent looked at her for a long moment. She saw him taking in the dark circles under her eyes, the exhaustion that made her shoulders sag, the desperate hope in her expression. Something in him broke—she felt it, the moment his resolve crumbled.

"All right," he said quietly. "If that's what you need, I'll be there."

Relief flooded through Catherine so powerfully she felt dizzy. "Thank you. Vincent, thank you."

He pulled her into his arms, and she went willingly, pressing her face against his chest and breathing in his familiar scent. "I should have known," he murmured into her hair. "I should have felt it through our bond. I'm sorry, Catherine. I'm so sorry."

"You're here now," she whispered. "That's what matters."

The new routine began that very night.

Catherine prepared for bed as usual—washing her face, changing into her nightgown, checking the locks on her balcony door more from habit than fear. But this time, when she climbed into bed, she wasn't alone. Vincent sat in the armchair positioned at the entrance to her bedroom, his large frame somehow fitting into the space despite its inadequacy for someone of his size.

"Comfortable?" she asked, unable to suppress a small smile.

"Perfectly," he lied, and she laughed softly.

"Liar. But thank you for being here."

"Sleep, Catherine." His voice was gentle in the darkness. "I'll be here."

And she did sleep. For the first time in weeks, Catherine closed her eyes without fear. She felt Vincent's presence like a warm anchor, steady and protective, and the nightmares that had plagued her couldn't find purchase. When she woke briefly in the night, she saw his silhouette in the chair and immediately drifted back to sleep.

In the morning, he was gone—returned to the tunnels before dawn—but the difference in how she felt was remarkable. She was actually rested.

The routine continued. Each night, Vincent came to her apartment after dark, entering through the balcony with the silence of shadow. Each night, he took his place in the chair, watching over her until she fell asleep. And each night, Catherine slept better than she had in weeks.

But for Vincent, the nights were becoming increasingly difficult.

He sat in the darkness, listening to the soft sound of Catherine's breathing, and fought a battle with himself that grew harder with each passing night. The urge to move closer was almost overwhelming. To leave the chair and cross the small distance to her bed. To lie down beside her, to hold her while she slept, to feel her warmth against him.

He'd never wanted anything so badly.

The chair felt like a prison of his own making. He gripped its arms until his claws left marks in the wood, forcing himself to stay still. To stay where he was. To not give in to the desire that burned through him whenever he looked at her sleeping form.

It was torture. Sweet, exquisite torture.

On the fifth night, Catherine shifted in her sleep and her blanket slipped down, pooling at her waist. Vincent watched, his breath catching, as she shivered slightly in the cooler air. He should cover her. That was the protective thing to do, the caring thing.

He rose from the chair, moving silently across the room. The blanket was soft under his fingers as he drew it back up over her shoulders. His hand lingered, and he found himself looking at her face in the dim light—the curve of her cheek, the slight part of her lips.

Beautiful. She was so beautiful it hurt.

Vincent forced himself to step back, to return to the chair. His heart was pounding.

The next night, it happened again. This time, her nightgown had ridden up slightly, exposing the pale skin of her stomach. Vincent approached to cover her, and his hand trembled as he reached for the blanket. His eyes traced the gentle curve of her waist, the soft expanse of skin that seemed to glow in the darkness.

He shouldn't touch. He knew he shouldn't.

But his hand moved of its own accord, fingertips brushing against her stomach with the lightest possible contact. Her skin was warm and impossibly soft. Vincent felt his breath stop in his chest as he let his hand rest there, palm flat against her, feeling the gentle rise and fall of her breathing.

This was wrong. He should stop. He should—

Catherine's breathing changed, deepening, and Vincent froze. Her eyes opened slowly, still soft with sleep, and found him standing beside her bed, his hand warm against her stomach.

For a moment, neither of them moved.

Then Catherine's hand came up to cover his, pressing his palm more firmly against her skin. "Don't," she whispered.

Vincent's breath caught. "Catherine, I—"

"Don't pull away." Her fingers threaded through his, holding him there. Her eyes were clear now, fully awake, and there was no fear in them. No anger. Only warmth and something deeper that made his heart race. "Please."

Shame flooded through him anyway. "I shouldn't have touched you. I promised to stay in the chair, to watch over you, and I—" He tried to pull back, but her grip tightened.

"Vincent." She sat up slowly, keeping his hand pressed against her stomach, and reached for him with her free hand. Her fingers found his face, cupping his cheek. "Look at me."

He met her eyes, and what he saw there made something in his chest crack open.

"I'm not angry," Catherine said softly. "I'm not frightened. I'm not—" She paused, searching for words.

"Vincent, your touch is welcome. It's always welcome."

"You were asleep. Vulnerable. I took advantage—"

"You covered me because I was cold." Her thumb brushed across his cheekbone. "And then you touched me because you wanted to. Because you couldn't help yourself." She smiled, tender and knowing. "I understand that feeling."

Vincent shook his head, struggling against the hope that was trying to take root. "Catherine, you don't understand what you're saying. The desire I feel, the things I want—"

"Tell me." She shifted closer. "Tell me what you want."

His breath came faster. "I want to lie beside you. To hold you while you sleep. To feel your warmth against me, to—" He stopped, the words too dangerous to speak.

"To touch me," Catherine finished quietly. "Not just my hand or my face, but all of me. To know me that way."

The truth of it burned through him. "Yes."

"Then stay." She tugged gently on his hand, still pressed against her stomach. "Don't go back to the chair. Don't punish yourself for wanting what I want too."

Vincent's resistance wavered. "You want—?"

"You." Catherine's voice was steady, certain. "I want you, Vincent. Not just near me, but with me. I've wanted it for a very long time." She leaned closer, her forehead nearly touching his. "When you touched me just now, when I woke to feel your hand on my skin—I wasn't afraid. I was grateful. Because it meant you wanted me too."

"I've always wanted you." The confession tore from him, raw and honest. "From the first moment I saw you, broken and bleeding in the park. Even then, I wanted—" He closed his eyes. "It shames me."

"Why?" Catherine's hand slid from his cheek to the back of his neck, her fingers threading through his hair. "Why should desire shame you? Why should wanting me be something to hide?"

"Because I'm—" He gestured helplessly at himself. "Because you deserve someone who can give you a normal life. Someone who doesn't have to hide in shadows. Someone—"

"Someone who isn't you?" Catherine pulled back just enough to meet his eyes. "Vincent, I don't want someone else. I want you. Exactly as you are. Shadows and all."

He searched her face, looking for doubt, for hesitation, for any sign that she didn't truly understand what she was offering. But all he saw was certainty. Warmth. Desire that matched his own.

"Stay," she said again, softer this time. "Please. Don't make me sleep alone tonight."

Vincent felt his resistance crumble. "Catherine—"

"Lie down with me." She shifted back on the bed, making room, and tugged gently on his hand. "Just hold me. That's all I'm asking. Just be close."

He should refuse. Should return to the chair, maintain the boundaries that kept them both safe. But the longing in her eyes, the warmth of her hand in his, the way she was looking at him—as if he was something precious rather than something to fear—it was too much.

Slowly, carefully, Vincent lowered himself onto the bed beside her. Catherine immediately moved closer, tucking herself against his side with a soft sigh of contentment. Her head rested on his shoulder, her hand splayed across his chest, and Vincent wrapped his arm around her, holding her close.

"This," Catherine murmured against his neck. "This is what I needed. Not distance. Not you sitting across the room torturing yourself. Just this."

Vincent's hand moved tentatively to her hair, stroking the soft strands. "I thought I was protecting you."

"You were protecting yourself." She tilted her head to look up at him. "From wanting something you thought you couldn't have. But Vincent—" Her hand slid up to cup his face again. "You can have this. You can have me. If you want."

"I want." The words came out rough, almost desperate. "God help me, Catherine, I want."

She smiled, and it was like sunrise breaking through darkness. "Then stop fighting it. Stop fighting us."

Vincent pulled her closer, burying his face in her hair, breathing in her scent. She was warm and soft and real in his arms, and for the first time in weeks—maybe years—he let himself simply feel. The desire, yes, but also the tenderness. The love. The bone-deep rightness of holding her this way.

"Sleep," he murmured against her hair. "I'll be here when you wake."

"Promise?" Catherine's voice was already drowsy, her body relaxing into his.

"I promise."

She sighed, content, and within minutes her breathing had evened out into sleep. Vincent held her, watching the gentle rise and fall of her chest, feeling the warmth of her body against his. His hand rested on her waist, his thumb tracing small circles on her skin through the thin fabric of her nightgown.

No shame. No fear. Just Catherine, sleeping peacefully in his arms, exactly where she wanted to be.

Exactly where he wanted to be, too.

Vincent closed his eyes and let himself rest, holding the woman he loved, finally allowing himself to believe that perhaps—just perhaps—he was allowed to have this after all.

The Manhattan District Attorney's office hummed with its usual controlled chaos—phones ringing, voices rising and falling in conference rooms, the shuffle of case files being moved from desk to desk. Catherine sat at her desk reviewing witness statements for an upcoming trial, but her mind kept drifting to the moment just before dawn when she'd woken to find Vincent already dressed, standing by her bedroom window.

She'd been terrified in that instant. Terrified that he would retreat into shame and distance, that the intimacy they'd shared would send him running back to the tunnels, convinced he'd crossed some unforgivable line.

But when he'd turned to her, there had been no shame in his eyes. Only peace. A quiet serenity that had taken her breath away.

"I'll come back tonight," he'd said softly, before she could even ask. "If you want me to."

If you want me to. As if there were any question.

"Cathy." Joe Maxwell's voice cut through her reverie. "Got a minute?"

Catherine looked up to find her boss standing at her desk, his expression serious. Beside him stood a man she recognized immediately—Robert Holcomb, looking considerably less polished than he had at his penthouse party. His tie was loosened, his jaw tight with barely controlled anger.

"Of course." Catherine rose, gathering her notepad, and followed them into Joe's office.

Robert's eyes tracked her movement as she entered, something flickering in his expression—recognition, perhaps, or interest. Catherine met his gaze briefly, politely, then turned her attention to Joe.

"Mr. Holcomb has a situation that requires our immediate attention," Joe said, gesturing for them both to sit. "Robert, why don't you walk us through what happened."

Robert leaned forward, his hands clasped tightly together. "Yesterday afternoon, a man named Gerald Brennan entered my building armed with two handguns and over two hundred rounds of ammunition." His voice was controlled, but Catherine could hear the fury beneath it. "Brennan was the owner of one of the companies I recently acquired. He'd been... resistant to the merger. Apparently, he decided the appropriate response was to shoot his way up to my office and kill as many people as possible before putting a bullet in his own head."

"How many casualties?" Joe asked.

"None." Robert's jaw tightened further. "Security intercepted him on the fourteenth floor. He'd already fired multiple shots—shattered glass, destroyed property, terrorized my employees—but they managed to disarm him before he could reach anyone."

"That's fortunate," Catherine said, her voice professional and measured.

Robert's gaze shifted to her, and something in his expression sharpened. "Fortunate," he repeated. "Yes. Though I'm not sure my employees who spent twenty minutes hiding under their desks while a madman fired rounds down the hallway would use that word."

"Of course not," Catherine said evenly. "I only meant that it could have been much worse. Your security team prevented a tragedy."

"They did." Robert held her gaze a moment longer than necessary. "But that doesn't change the fact that Gerald Brennan came to my building with the explicit intention of committing mass murder. I want him prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Attempted murder, terrorism, weapons charges—everything you can make stick."

Joe nodded, taking notes. "We'll need statements from your security team, any employees who witnessed the incident, surveillance footage—"

"You'll have everything," Robert interrupted. "My legal team is already compiling the materials. I want this man to spend the rest of his life in prison."

Catherine watched him as he spoke, noting the controlled rage, the way his hands gripped the arms of his chair. He was a man accustomed to control, to getting what he wanted, and Gerald Brennan had shattered that illusion of invulnerability.

She understood that feeling. The sudden awareness that safety was an illusion, that violence could find you anywhere.

"Ms. Chandler will be the lead prosecutor on this case," Joe was saying. "She'll coordinate with your legal team and keep you updated on our progress."

Robert's attention snapped back to her, and this time his expression shifted—less anger, more interest.

"Ms. Chandler," he said slowly, as if tasting her name. "We've met before, haven't we?"

"At your party," Catherine confirmed. "My father is your attorney. Charles Chandler."

"Of course." Robert's posture relaxed slightly, and something that might have been a smile touched his lips. "You were the one by the window. Looking like you'd rather be anywhere else."

Catherine met his gaze calmly. "I was tired."

"You were honest." Robert leaned back in his chair, studying her with open curiosity. "Most people at that party were performing. Networking, flattering, angling for something. But you—" He paused. "You weren't interested in any of it."

"I'm not much for parties anymore," Catherine said simply.

Joe glanced between them, his expression mildly amused. "Well, now that we've established that Cathy's not a socialite anymore, let's talk timeline. When can you have the initial charging documents ready?"

Catherine pulled her attention back to the case, to the professional requirements of her job. "I'll need to review the evidence first. Assuming your team can get me the materials by end of day, I can have preliminary charges filed by Friday."

"That works," Joe said. "Robert, we'll be in touch as soon as—"

"Actually," Robert interrupted, his gaze still fixed on Catherine, "I was hoping I could take you to dinner tonight. To discuss the case in more detail."

Catherine felt Joe's eyes on her, waiting. She set down her pen carefully, meeting Robert's gaze with polite but absolute clarity.

"That won't be necessary," she said. "Any case-related questions can be handled through official channels. But I appreciate the offer."

Robert's smile widened, as if her refusal had somehow pleased him. "Official channels," he repeated. "Of course."

Robert stood, buttoning his jacket with practiced ease. "But surely even dedicated prosecutors need to eat. It's just dinner."

"I have plans tonight," Catherine said, and it wasn't a lie. Vincent would come to her apartment as the sun set. He would sit in the chair by her bedroom door, or perhaps—her heart lifted at the thought—perhaps he would lie beside her again, holding her as she slept. "But thank you."

Robert studied her for a long moment, and Catherine could see the wheels turning behind his eyes. He was a man accustomed to getting what he wanted, to charming his way past obstacles. Her continued refusal wasn't discouraging him—it was intriguing him.

"Another time, then," he said finally, extending his hand. "I look forward to working with you, Ms. Chandler."

Catherine shook his hand briefly, professionally. "We'll be in touch once I've reviewed the evidence."

After Robert left, Joe leaned back in his chair and gave Catherine a knowing look. "You just made that man very interested in you."

"That wasn't my intention."

"I know." Joe grinned. "Which is exactly why it worked. Robert Holcomb is used to women falling over themselves to get his attention. You just treated him like any other client."

"He *is* like any other client," Catherine said, gathering her notepad.

"Sure he is." Joe's grin widened. "Just be prepared for him to find reasons to stop by the office. Men like that don't handle rejection well—especially when it's genuine."

Catherine paused at the door. "Joe, I'm not interested in Robert Holcomb. Not romantically, not socially, not in any way beyond the professional."

"I believe you." Joe's expression softened slightly.

She returned to her desk and tried to focus on the witness statements, but her mind kept drifting to the hours ahead. To sunset. To the moment when Vincent would appear on her balcony, his eyes finding hers in the gathering darkness.

I'll come back tonight.

He'd promised. And Vincent never broke his promises.

Catherine glanced at the clock on her wall. Six more hours. She could wait six more hours.

She'd waited her whole life for Vincent. Six more hours was nothing.

Vincent arrived as the last light faded from the sky, appearing on her balcony like a shadow given form. Catherine had been watching for him, waiting by the glass doors, and the moment she saw him her heart lifted with a relief so profound it almost hurt.

She opened the door and he stepped inside, his eyes finding hers immediately. There was something different in his expression tonight—a quiet certainty that hadn't been there before. No hesitation. No shame.

"Hi," she said softly.

"Catherine." His voice was warm, and when he said her name it sounded like a promise.

They stood there for a moment, just looking at each other, and Catherine felt the question forming before she could stop it. It was such a small thing, really. Insignificant compared to what they'd already shared. But somehow it felt more vulnerable, more domestic, more *real* than lying in each other's arms in the darkness.

"Would you—" She paused, gathering her courage. "Would you like some tea? I have cookies. We could sit in the living room for a while. Before..."

Before bed. Before they lay down together again. Before the intimacy of sleep and touch and whispered breathing in the dark.

Vincent's expression softened, and something that might have been surprise flickered in his eyes. "Tea," he repeated, as if testing the word.

"It's silly," Catherine said quickly. "We don't have to—"

"I would like that very much."

The simple acceptance in his voice steadied her. If they could share a bed, if they could hold each other through the night, surely they could share tea and cookies in her living room. It was less intimate, wasn't it? More ordinary. The kind of thing normal people did.

Except nothing about them was ordinary. And perhaps that was exactly why this felt so significant.

Catherine moved to the kitchen, acutely aware of Vincent following her with his eyes. She filled the kettle, set it on the stove, pulled down two mugs from the cabinet. Her hands were steady, but her heart was racing.

"I have chamomile," she said, opening the cupboard where she kept her tea. "Or Earl Grey, if you prefer."

"Chamomile is fine."

She could feel him watching her as she prepared the tea, as she arranged cookies on a small plate—the shortbread ones she'd bought at the bakery near her office, thinking of this moment without quite admitting it to herself. When the kettle whistled, she poured the water over the tea bags and carried everything to the living room on a tray.

Vincent had settled on the couch, and Catherine's breath caught at the sight of him there. He looked so out of place in her modern apartment with its clean lines and soft lighting, and yet somehow perfectly right.

She set the tray on the coffee table and sat beside him, close but not touching. Vincent reached for his mug, his large hands cradling it gently, and took a careful sip.

"It's good," he said, and there was something almost wondering in his voice. As if this simple act—drinking tea together in her living room—was a revelation.

Catherine picked up a cookie and offered it to him. "Try one of these."

Vincent took it, his fingers brushing hers, and bit into it carefully. His eyes widened slightly. "I haven't had cookies in a while."

"Then have as many as you want."

They sat like that for a while, drinking tea and eating cookies, and gradually the conversation began to flow. Two hours passed like minutes. The tea grew cold in their mugs, the cookies disappeared from the plate, and still they talked. About everything and nothing. About dreams and fears and small moments of beauty. About the way light looked filtering through the grates above the tunnels, about the sound of rain on Catherine's balcony, about the particular shade of blue the sky turned just before dawn.

It was ordinary. Domestic. The kind of evening two people might share anywhere, in any apartment, in any city.

And it was the most extraordinary thing Catherine had ever experienced.

Finally, she glanced at the clock and saw how late it had gotten. "I should probably get ready for bed," she said quietly. "I have an early meeting tomorrow."

Vincent nodded, setting down his mug. For a moment Catherine thought he might retreat to the chair by her bedroom door, might return to the careful distance they'd maintained before. But then she reached out her hand, palm up, offering.

"Will you come with me?"

Vincent looked at her outstretched hand for a long moment. Then, slowly, almost shyly, he placed his hand in hers.

His palm was warm and rough against her skin, and Catherine's fingers closed around his as she stood, drawing him with her. They walked together to her bedroom, still holding hands, and Catherine felt something shift in her chest—a settling, a rightness, as if pieces were finally falling into place.

She changed into her nightgown in the bathroom while Vincent waited, and when she emerged he was standing by the window, looking out at the city lights. He'd removed his boots, his cloak, and in the soft lamplight, he looked almost vulnerable.

Catherine crossed to the bed and pulled back the covers. Then she looked at him, waiting.

Vincent turned from the window and came to her. He lay down beside her carefully, as if afraid he might break something precious, and Catherine immediately tucked herself against him. His arm came around her waist, pulling her closer, and she felt his breath warm against her hair.

They lay there in the darkness, awake and aware of each other. Catherine's hand found his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath her palm. She traced small circles there, exploring the texture of his shirt, the warmth of him beneath it.

Vincent's hand moved on her back, caressing her through the soft silk of her nightgown. His touch was gentle, reverent, and Catherine could feel the wonder in it—the way his fingers lingered on the fabric, learning the feel of it, the way it slid beneath his palm.

"I love this," he murmured against her hair. "The silk. It's so soft."

Catherine smiled against his chest. "I'm glad."

His hand continued its slow exploration of her back, and Catherine felt herself relaxing into his touch. This was intimacy of a different kind—not urgent or desperate, but tender and patient. A conversation without words.

Vincent pressed a kiss to the top of her head, his lips lingering there. Then another kiss, this one to her forehead. Catherine tilted her face up slightly, and for a moment she thought about closing the distance between them, about pressing her lips to his.

But something held her back. Not fear, exactly. More like... respect. For the pace they were setting, for the boundaries they were learning together. There would be time for that. For now, this was enough. More than enough.

She settled back against his chest, her hand still resting over his heart, and felt his breathing slow and deepen. Eventually, she drifted into sleep, held safe in his arms.

The alarm went off an hour before dawn, piercing the peaceful darkness with its insistent beeping. Catherine stirred, reaching out to silence it, and felt Vincent shift beside her.

He rose carefully, not wanting to disturb her more than necessary. Catherine watched through half-closed eyes as he gathered his cloak, and boots, as he prepared to return to the world below.

Before he left, he came back to the bed. Catherine extended her hand to him, and Vincent took it gently, raising it to his lips. He kissed her palm, then her knuckles, his eyes holding hers in the dim light.

"Tonight," he said softly. A promise.

"Tonight," Catherine agreed.

Then he was gone, slipping out through the balcony doors and disappearing into the pre-dawn darkness. Catherine lay back against her pillows, pulling the covers up around her shoulders. The sheets still held his warmth, and she breathed in the faint scent of him—earth and stone and something uniquely Vincent.

She closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep.

No nightmares came.

Vincent made his way through the tunnels as the world above began to wake. The familiar paths felt different somehow—lighter, easier, as if the stone itself had shifted to welcome him home.

When he reached his chamber, he didn't immediately prepare for sleep. Instead, he stood in the center of the room, letting himself feel what was happening inside him.

Peace.

It was such a simple word for such a profound sensation. But there was no other way to describe it. The guilt that had plagued him for so long—the certainty that he was taking Catherine away from a better life, that his presence in her world was a theft of her future—it was fading. Not gone entirely, perhaps. But quieter. Softer. Less insistent.

He could feel her happiness. Not just imagine it, not just hope for it, but actually *feel* it through the bond they shared. Over these last two nights, Catherine had been more at peace than he'd sensed in months. Maybe years. There was a contentment in her that resonated through him, a certainty that steadied his own doubts.

Vincent sat down on his bed, his hands resting on his knees. He thought about the way she'd invited him to tea, nervous but determined. The way she'd reached for his hand when it was time for bed, offering without hesitation. The way she'd caressed his chest while he explored the silk of her nightgown, both of them learning each other through touch.

She loved him. He'd known that, intellectually. But now he was beginning to *believe* it. To trust it. To let it anchor him where his own sense of worth failed.

If he couldn't trust his own emotions—if the shame and guilt were too deeply ingrained to simply disappear—then perhaps he needed to trust hers instead. Catherine's certainty. Catherine's choice. Catherine's love.

She was happy. She was at peace. And she wanted him there, beside her, sharing tea and cookies and quiet conversation and the intimacy of sleep.

Who was he to argue with that?

Vincent lay back on his bed, fully clothed, and closed his eyes. For the first time in longer than he could remember, he felt completely rested. Not just physically, but in some deeper way. As if a weight he'd been carrying for years had finally been set down.

He thought about tonight. About returning to Catherine's apartment, to her balcony, to her arms. About the way she would smile when she saw him, the way her hand would find his, the way they would lie together in the darkness and simply *be*.

No shame. No guilt. Just Catherine and Vincent, learning how to love each other without fear.

Vincent smiled in the darkness of his chamber and let himself drift toward sleep.

Two weeks passed like a dream Catherine didn't want to wake from.

She knew, rationally, that she didn't need Vincent to come anymore. He'd missed three nights when urgent repairs below required his attention—a collapsed support beam in one of the older passages, Father had sent word—and Catherine had slept through each night without incident. No nightmares. No waking in terror. The darkness had lost its teeth.

But when Vincent had left the night before those three days, he'd promised to return. And Catherine found herself waiting by the balcony doors as the sun set, her heart lifting when his silhouette appeared against the darkening sky.

She didn't need him to keep the nightmares away anymore.

She needed him because she *wanted* him.

Their evenings fell into a rhythm that felt both knew. Vincent would arrive when the stars were out, and they would sit together in the living room—sometimes with tea, sometimes with the Chinese takeout Catherine brought home when she worked late on the Holcomb case, sometimes with nothing but each other's presence.

They talked. About everything and nothing. Catherine told him about Joe's increasingly pointed looks, about the way Robert Holcomb kept finding excuses to stop by her office, about the minutiae of legal briefs and witness statements. Vincent spoke of the tunnels, of the children's lessons, of the books he was reading, and the music that drifted through the passages.

"There was a concert today," Vincent said one evening, his voice soft as they shared lo mein straight from the carton. "They played Vivaldi."

Catherine smiled, watching the way his fingers held the chopsticks—carefully, precisely. "The Four Seasons?"

"Spring." Vincent's eyes met hers. "It made me think of you."

On another night, Catherine came home so late that Vincent was already waiting on her balcony, concern evident in the set of his shoulders. She'd brought Indian food this time—samosas and curry that filled her apartment with the scent of spices.

"I'm sorry," she said, setting the bags on the counter. "The deposition ran long."

Vincent shook his head, moving to help her unpack the containers. "You don't need to apologize. I was just... worried."

"I'm fine." Catherine touched his arm, feeling the warmth of him through his shirt. "Better now that you're here."

They ate sitting on her couch, their knees touching, and Catherine told him about the witness who'd broken down on the stand, about the way Robert Holcomb had watched her throughout the proceedings with an intensity that made her uncomfortable.

"He makes you uneasy," Vincent said quietly. Not a question.

"He doesn't understand the word 'no,'" Catherine replied. "But it's nothing I can't handle."

Vincent's hand found hers, squeezing gently. "If he—"

"I know." Catherine squeezed back.

As the nights progressed, Catherine noticed Vincent beginning to shed his armor. It started small—the leather vest left draped over the back of her couch one evening when the apartment felt particularly warm. Catherine said nothing, just smiled and adjusted the thermostat down slightly.

The next night, Vincent arrived without the vest entirely.

Then came the evening when Catherine found him sitting on her couch, in his stockingless feet, his boots and socks neatly placed by the balcony door. He looked almost embarrassed when she noticed, but Catherine just settled beside him and tucked her own bare feet beneath her.

"More comfortable?" she asked.

"Yes." Vincent's voice was quiet. "Your apartment is... warmer than the tunnels."

"I can turn up the air."

"No." His hand found hers. "I am ok now."

A week later, Catherine came home to find Vincent had already removed his outer shirt. He stood by her window in just his thin undershirt—the kind he wore in the summer months below, when the tunnels grew humid and warm. The fabric was soft and worn, clinging to the lines of his shoulders and back.

Catherine's breath caught. She'd seen him in his ruffled shirt. But this felt more vulnerable. More *real*.

"I hope you don't mind," Vincent said, not turning around. "It's quite warm tonight."

"I don't mind at all."

When he finally turned to face her, Catherine saw the uncertainty in his eyes—the question of whether he'd crossed some invisible line. She answered by crossing the room and taking his hand, leading him to the couch where their dinner waited.

They ate in comfortable silence, and Catherine found her eyes drawn again and again to the way the thin fabric of his undershirt moved with his breathing, the way it revealed the shape of him in ways his heavier clothing never had.

In bed that night, Catherine lay with her head on Vincent's chest, her hand resting over his heart. The thin undershirt was soft beneath her palm, and she could feel the steady rhythm of his heartbeat more clearly than ever before.

Vincent's hand moved on her back, tracing slow patterns through her silk nightgown. His touch had grown more confident over the past weeks—less tentative, more assured. His fingers explored the curve of her spine, the dip of her waist, the slope of her shoulders.

Catherine's own hand began to move, caressing his chest through the soft fabric. She felt him tense slightly, then relax into her touch. Her fingers traced the lines of his ribs, the plane of his stomach, learning the geography of him through the thin barrier of cloth.

"Catherine," Vincent murmured against her hair.

"Mmm?"

"This is..." He paused, searching for words. "I never imagined..."

Catherine tilted her head up to look at him. "Never imagined what?"

"That I could feel this... comfortable. This at peace." His hand stilled on her back. "With someone. With you."

Catherine's heart squeezed. She reached up to touch his face, her fingers tracing the strong line of his jaw.

"I'm glad you're here."

"So am I."

They fell asleep like that, wrapped around each other, and when Catherine woke in the pre-dawn darkness she found Vincent's hand had slipped beneath the hem of her silk nightshirt, his palm warm against the small of her back. Skin to skin.

He was still asleep, his breathing deep and even, and Catherine lay very still, not wanting to wake him. Not wanting this moment to end.

When his alarm—her alarm, set an hour before dawn—finally sounded, Vincent stirred. His hand moved slightly against her bare skin, and Catherine felt him tense as he realized where it had wandered in sleep.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't mean to—"

"Don't apologize." Catherine caught his hand before he could pull away, holding it against her back. "Please don't apologize."

Vincent's eyes met hers in the darkness, and Catherine saw something shift in them. A question. A possibility.

But then he was rising, gathering his clothes, pressing a kiss to her forehead before slipping out through the balcony doors. Catherine lay back against her pillows, her skin still warm where his hand had been, and felt the inevitability of what was coming settle over her like a blanket.

The next evening, Vincent arrived earlier than usual. Catherine was already in her nightgown and robe when she heard the soft tap on her balcony door, and when she opened it she found him standing there with an expression she'd never seen before.

Not uncertain. Not hesitant.

Wanting.

"Hi," she said softly.

"Catherine." He stepped inside, and the air between them felt charged, electric. "I've been thinking about you all day."

Catherine's pulse quickened. "Have you?"

"Yes." Vincent moved closer, and Catherine found herself backing up slightly, not from fear but from the intensity in his eyes. "About last night. About waking with my hand on your skin."

"Vincent—"

"You didn't pull away." His voice was low, rough. "You held my hand there. You wanted me to touch you."

It wasn't a question, but Catherine answered anyway. "Yes."

"I want..." Vincent stopped, closing his eyes. When he opened them again, Catherine saw the war being waged behind them—desire against restraint, need against fear. "I want to touch you again. More than just your back. More than through silk and cotton."

Catherine's breath caught. She'd been waiting for this, hoping for it, but now that the moment was here she found herself trembling. Not with fear. With anticipation.

"Then touch me," she whispered.

Vincent's hand came up to cup her face, his thumb tracing her cheekbone. "Are you certain?"

"I've never been more certain of anything."

For a long moment, they stood there, the space between them humming with possibility. Then Vincent's other hand found her waist, his fingers spreading against the fabric of her robe, and Catherine felt the last of his restraint begin to crumble.

"I don't want to rush," he said quietly. "I don't want to take more than you're ready to give."

Catherine reached up to cover his hand with hers, pressing it more firmly against her waist. "You're not taking anything. I'm offering."

Vincent's eyes darkened. His hand moved from her waist to her hip, then slowly, tentatively, to the small of her back. Even through her clothes, his touch burned.

Before Catherine could respond, a sharp knock sounded at her door.

Vincent's head snapped toward the sound, his entire body going still. Catherine felt the shift in him immediately—the way his muscles tensed, the way his breathing changed. Through their bond, she felt his sudden wariness.

"I'm not expecting anyone," she said quietly.

Another knock, more insistent this time.

Vincent stepped back from her, his eyes moving to the balcony doors. "I should—"

"Wait." Catherine touched his arm. "Just... wait on the balcony. Please. I'll get rid of whoever it is."

Vincent hesitated, then nodded. He moved silently to the balcony, slipping through the doors and into the shadows beyond. Catherine waited until he was out of sight before crossing to her front door.

She checked the peephole and felt her stomach sink.

Robert Holcomb.

Catherine closed her eyes briefly, gathering her composure, then opened the door but didn't step back to invite him in.

"Robert," she said, her voice carefully neutral. "This is unexpected."

"Catherine." He smiled, but there was something off about it—too bright, too eager. "I hope I'm not interrupting. I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop off these files." He held up a manila folder.

"Some additional documentation for the case. I thought you might want to review them before tomorrow's session."

Catherine didn't reach for the folder. "You could have sent those through your attorney or brought them to the office tomorrow."

"I know, but I thought—" He paused, his smile faltering slightly. "May I come in? Just for a moment?"

"Robert, it's late. And this isn't appropriate."

"Just for a minute." He took a step forward, and Catherine found herself stepping back instinctively. He took it as an invitation and moved into her apartment.

Catherine's jaw tightened. "Robert—"

"I won't stay long." He set the folder on her entry table, then turned to face her. "I've been thinking about what you said. About dinner. And I think you're being too hasty."

"I'm not being hasty. I'm being clear."

"Catherine, I don't think you understand—"

"No, *you* don't understand." Catherine moved to the door, holding it open. "Showing up at my apartment unannounced is inappropriate. This needs to stop."

Robert's expression shifted, the practiced charm sliding away to reveal something harder underneath. "This needs to stop? Catherine, I'm trying to—"

"I know what you're trying to do, and I'm telling you no. Again. For the last time."

"You're being unreasonable." His voice rose slightly. "I'm offering you—"

"I don't want what you're offering." Catherine's voice remained steady, but firm. "I need you to leave. Now."

Robert stared at her, his face flushing with anger. "You can't be serious. Do you have any idea who I am? What I could—"

"I know exactly who you are. And I'm asking you to leave my apartment."

"You're making a mistake." Robert took a step toward her, and Catherine saw his hands clench into fists.

"You think you're too good for me? You think—"

"I think you need to leave. Right now."

For a moment, Robert just stood there, his chest heaving with barely controlled rage. Then his hand came up, fast and sharp, aimed at her face.

Catherine started to move, started to block, but before the blow could land, a sound erupted the balcony—a low, guttural growl that was unmistakably *not* human.

Robert froze, his hand still raised. "What the hell was that?"

"Nothing," Catherine said quickly. "A cat. The neighbors—"

But Robert was already pushing past her, heading for the balcony doors. Catherine grabbed his arm, trying to pull him back.

"Robert, stop—"

"There's someone out there." He shoved her aside, not hard enough to hurt but with enough force to make her stumble. "You have someone here. That's why you won't—"

Catherine recovered and lunged after him, grabbing the back of his jacket. "Get out of my apartment!"

Robert twisted, trying to shake her off, and for a moment they struggled in her living room. Catherine held on, using her weight to slow him down, but Robert was stronger. He made it to the balcony doors and yanked them open.

The balcony was empty.

Robert stepped out, looking around wildly. "I heard something. I know I heard—"

Catherine pulled him back inside, her patience finally snapping. "Get. Out."

Robert turned to face her, his expression a mixture of confusion and fury. "You're hiding someone. That's what this is about. You're—"

"Listen to me very carefully." Catherine's voice was cold, controlled, and absolutely final. "You have two choices. You can leave right now, and you can stop this obsession with me, or I will file a restraining order against you tomorrow morning. Do you understand?"

Robert's eyes widened. "You wouldn't—"

"I will also be removing myself from your case. Immediately. Which means you'll have to bring a new prosecutor up to speed in the middle of trial. I'm sure the judge will be very understanding about the delay."

"Catherine, you can't—"

"I can. And I will. Unless you walk out that door right now and never contact me outside of official court business again."

Robert stared at her, his face cycling through emotions—anger, disbelief, humiliation. Finally, he grabbed the folder from her entry table and shoved it at her chest.

"You're making a huge mistake," he said, his voice shaking.

"The only mistake I made was being polite about this for as long as I was." Catherine didn't take the folder, letting it fall to the floor between them. "Goodbye, Robert."

He stood there for another moment, then turned and stalked out of her apartment. Catherine followed him to the door, closing and locking it the moment he was in the hallway. She stood with her back against it, her heart pounding, listening to his footsteps recede down the hall.

Only when she heard the elevator doors close did she allow herself to breathe.

Catherine moved to the balcony doors and stepped outside. "Vincent?"

For a moment, there was nothing. Then she heard movement above her, and Vincent dropped down from the roof.

He landed on her balcony, and Catherine saw immediately that something was wrong. His hands were shaking. His jaw was clenched so tight she could see the muscle jumping beneath his skin.

"Vincent—"

"I should have come inside." His voice was rough, barely controlled. "I should have—"

"You did exactly what you needed to do." Catherine reached for him, but he pulled back.

"He raised his hand to you. He *touched* you. And I stood out here like a coward—"

"You're not a coward." Catherine stepped closer, refusing to let him retreat. "You protected me by staying hidden. If you'd come inside—"

"I would have put him in his place." Vincent's eyes blazed. "I would have made sure he never came near you again."

"And then what? Vincent, if you'd shown yourself—"

"I know." He turned away from her, his hands gripping the balcony railing. "I know. But knowing doesn't make it easier. Hearing him threaten you, hearing you fight him, and being unable to do anything—"

Catherine moved to stand beside him, placing her hand over his. "You did do something. You warned him. You made him stop."

"It wasn't enough."

"It was enough for me." Catherine waited until he looked at her. "I handled it. And tomorrow, I'll make sure there are consequences. I'm going to Joe first thing in the morning. I'll tell him everything. Robert Holcomb won't be a problem anymore."

Vincent's hand turned beneath hers, his fingers lacing through hers. "I wanted to protect you."

"You did protect me. Just by being here." Catherine squeezed his hand. "Come inside. Please."

Vincent allowed her to lead him back into the apartment. Catherine locked the balcony doors behind them, then turned to find Vincent standing in the middle of her living room, looking lost.

"I hate this," he said quietly. "Hiding. Being unable to stand beside you when you need me."

"I need you now." Catherine crossed to him, reaching up to cup his face. "Right here. Right now. That's what I need."

Vincent's eyes closed, and Catherine felt the tremor that ran through him. When he opened his eyes again, they were filled with such raw emotion that Catherine's breath caught.

"Catherine—"

She kissed him.

It wasn't gentle. It wasn't tentative. It was fierce and claiming and full of everything she couldn't put into words. Vincent made a sound low in his throat and pulled her against him, his arms wrapping around her waist, his mouth opening beneath hers.

They kissed like they were drowning, like they were trying to erase the last hour, like they were proving something to themselves and each other. Catherine's hands tangled in his hair, and Vincent's hands moved on her back, holding her so close she could feel his heart racing against hers.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing hard, Catherine rested her forehead against his.

"I'm safe," she whispered. "I'm here. I'm yours."

Vincent's arms tightened around her. "I know. I know, but—"

Catherine kissed him again, softer this time. Then again. And again. Each kiss a reminder that she was here and whole and his.

Vincent's hands came up to frame her face, his thumbs stroking her cheekbones as he kissed her back with a tenderness that made her chest ache. There was no urgency now, no desperation. Just the slow, sweet exploration of mouths and breath and the taste of each other.

Catherine felt the tension begin to leave his body, felt the anger and shame and helplessness start to fade beneath the certainty of her presence. She kissed the corner of his mouth, his jaw, the sensitive spot just below his ear.

"I love you," she whispered against his skin. "And I don't need you to save me. I just need you to love me back."

Vincent's breath hitched. His hands slid into her hair, tilting her head back so he could look into her eyes.

"I do," he said, his voice rough with emotion. "More than I have words for."

Catherine smiled and pulled him down for another kiss. They stood there in her living room, wrapped around each other, kissing until the city lights outside her window began to blur and the anger finally left Vincent's body entirely.

When they finally moved to her bedroom, Catherine felt the shift between them—something deeper than comfort, more profound than reassurance. Vincent's hand found hers as they crossed the threshold, and when she turned to face him, she saw it in his eyes.

Not just need. Not just desire.

Everything.

"Catherine," he said softly, and she heard the question in her name.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes."

Vincent's hands came up to cup her face, and he kissed her with a reverence that made her tremble. Catherine's fingers found the hem of his undershirt, and she felt him still beneath her touch.

"Are you certain?" His voice was barely audible.

"I've never been more certain of anything."

She lifted his shirt slowly, her hands sliding up the warm expanse of his chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart beneath her palms. Vincent raised his arms, letting her pull the fabric over his head, and Catherine took a moment just to look at him—the strength in his shoulders, the vulnerability in his eyes.

Catherine had taken off her robe before Vincent's hands moved to the straps of her nightgown, his fingers trembling slightly as they slid the silk down her shoulders. The fabric whispered against her skin as it fell, pooling at her feet, and Catherine watched Vincent's expression transform—awe and desire and something so tender it made her chest ache.

"You're beautiful," he breathed.

Catherine reached for the waistband of his pants, and Vincent caught her hands, bringing them to his lips. He kissed her knuckles, her palms, the inside of her wrists, before releasing her to finish what she'd started.

When they were both bare, standing in the soft light of her bedroom, Catherine felt the weight of the moment settle over them. This was more than physical. This was trust made tangible, vulnerability offered and accepted, the final barrier between them dissolving.

Vincent drew her to the bed, and they lay down together, skin against skin for the first time. Catherine gasped at the sensation—the warmth of him, the texture of his body against hers, the way every point of contact seemed to hum with awareness.

"Catherine." Vincent's hand traced the curve of her waist, her hip, the length of her thigh. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't." She pulled him closer, her leg sliding between his. "I trust you."

Vincent kissed her deeply, his body settling over hers with a care that made her eyes sting. Catherine felt his weight, his warmth, the tremor in his muscles as he held himself back.

"I'm here," she whispered against his mouth. "I'm yours."

Vincent's hand slid beneath her knee, lifting her leg to wrap around his hip, and Catherine felt him there—right there—and her breath caught.

"Look at me," she said softly.

Vincent's eyes met hers, and Catherine saw everything in them—love and fear and desperate want and the last remnants of shame trying to hold him back.

"I love you," she said. "And I want this. I want *you*."

Vincent's eyes closed briefly, and when they opened again, the shame was gone. Only love remained.

He entered her slowly, so slowly, and Catherine felt every inch of him—the stretch, the fullness, the exquisite pressure. Vincent's breath shuddered against her neck, and Catherine held him close, her hands on his back, feeling the tension in his muscles.

"Catherine." Her name was a prayer, a plea.

"I'm here," she whispered. "I'm here."

Vincent began to move, and Catherine moved with him, their bodies finding a rhythm that felt ancient and new all at once. It wasn't rushed. It wasn't desperate. It was slow and deep and aching tender—a conversation without words, a claiming that went both ways.

Catherine's hands explored the planes of his back, the curve of his shoulders, the strong line of his spine. Vincent's mouth found hers, then her throat, then the hollow of her collarbone. Every touch was deliberate, every kiss a discovery.

"You feel—" Vincent's voice broke. "I never knew—"

"I know," Catherine breathed. "I know."

The pleasure built slowly, a tide rising between them, and Catherine felt it in every nerve, every cell. Vincent's hand found hers, their fingers lacing together, and Catherine squeezed tight as the sensation crested.

"Vincent—"

"I'm here." His forehead pressed against hers, their breath mingling. "I'm here."

Catherine felt herself break apart, felt the wave crash over her, and Vincent followed moments later, his body shuddering against hers, her name on his lips.

For a long moment, they stayed like that—joined, trembling, breathing each other's air. Then Vincent carefully withdrew and gathered her against his chest, his arms wrapping around her as if he could hold her together while she came back to herself.

Catherine pressed her face against his neck, feeling the rapid beat of his pulse, the warmth of his skin, the slight dampness where their bodies had been pressed together. Her leg slid between his, and Vincent's hand found her back, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on her spine.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

Catherine lifted her head to look at him. "I'm perfect."

Vincent's eyes searched hers, and whatever he saw there made him exhale shakily. "I was afraid—"

"Don't be afraid." Catherine kissed him gently. "Not of this. Not of us."

Vincent's hand came up to cup her face, his thumb stroking her cheekbone. "I love you. More than I have words for."

"I love you too." Catherine settled back against his chest, her hand over his heart. "And I'm not going anywhere."

Vincent's arms tightened around her, and Catherine felt the last of his tension finally, completely dissolve. This was what she'd needed—not just the physical connection, though that had been extraordinary. But this. The aftermath. The quiet certainty that they belonged to each other now in a way that couldn't be undone.

"Thank you," Vincent murmured against her hair.

"For what?"

"For choosing me. For trusting me. For..." He paused, his hand stilling on her back. "For not needing me to be something I can't be."

Catherine lifted her head to look at him. "I need you to be exactly what you are. Nothing more. Nothing less."

Vincent's eyes searched hers, and Catherine saw the moment he finally, completely believed her. The moment he let go of every last shred of shame and doubt and just accepted that this—them, together, joined in every way that mattered—was enough.

More than enough.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too."

They kissed once more, soft and sweet, and then Catherine settled back against his chest. Vincent's hand resumed its gentle caressing of her back, and Catherine felt herself begin to drift toward sleep.

Catherine walked into the DA's office the next morning with her shoulders back and her head clear. She'd slept deeply, wrapped in Vincent's arms, and woke feeling extremely rested. The memory of the night before—the tenderness, the passion, the absolute certainty of their connection—carried her through the morning routine with quiet confidence.

But first, she had business to handle.

Joe Maxwell's office door was open, and he looked up when she knocked on the frame. His expression shifted immediately—concern replacing his usual easy smile.

"Cathy. Come in. Close the door."

Catherine did, settling into the chair across from his desk. Joe leaned back, studying her with the careful attention he gave witnesses before taking their statements.

"I got an interesting call this morning," he said. "Robert Holcomb. Before you even got in."

Catherine's expression didn't change. "What did he say?"

"That there was a misunderstanding between you two. That he stopped by your apartment to discuss the case, things got heated, but it was all a miscommunication." Joe's eyes narrowed. "He was very insistent that he doesn't want you taken off his case. Said you're the best attorney he's worked with and he trusts you completely."

Catherine felt a flicker of anger but kept her voice level. "And what did you tell him?"

"That I'd talk to you first. Get your side of the story." Joe leaned forward, his elbows on the desk. "So I'm asking. What happened?"

Catherine met his gaze directly. "Robert showed up at my apartment last night, uninvited. He claimed he wanted to discuss the case, but when I told him it was inappropriate and tried to close the door, he forced his way inside."

Joe's jaw tightened, but he didn't interrupt.

"I told him his behavior needed to stop. That showing up at my home was crossing a line." Catherine's voice remained calm, factual. "He became angry. Refused to accept that I was rejecting him. And then he raised his hand to strike me."

"Jesus, Cathy—"

"We got into a physical struggle," Catherine continued. "He tried to push past me to check my balcony—he thought he heard something. I fought to stop him. When he came back inside, I told him I would file for a restraining order if he didn't leave immediately. I also told him I was removing myself from his case."

Joe's expression had gone hard. "Did he hurt you?"

"No. The threat of losing his attorney in the middle of trial was enough to make him back down."

Catherine's hands rested calmly in her lap. "But I can't continue working with him, Joe. Not after that."

Joe exhaled slowly, running a hand through his hair. "You're absolutely right. You're off the case. I'll talk to Moreno this morning—he'll understand completely."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. This is non-negotiable." Joe's voice softened slightly. "Are you okay? Really?"

Catherine nodded. "I'm fine. I handled it."

"I know you did." Joe stood, moving around the desk. "But if you want to file a formal complaint, or if you want to take this to the press—"

"I just want to be done with him," Catherine said quietly. "I want him out of my life."

Joe nodded. "Consider it done. I'll handle Moreno, and I'll make sure Holcomb understands this is final."

Catherine rose from her chair. "I appreciate it, Joe."

"Cathy." Joe's hand touched her shoulder briefly. "You did everything right. You know that, right?"

"I know."

After Catherine left, Joe closed his office door and picked up the phone. He dialed Robert Holcomb's private line and waited through two rings before the man answered.

"Joe. Did you talk to Catherine? Did she—"

"She told me everything," Joe said, his voice flat and cold. "And you're lucky she's not taking this to the press."

Silence on the other end.

"You showed up at her apartment uninvited. You forced your way inside. You raised your hand to strike her." Joe's grip tightened on the receiver. "Do you have any idea how badly this could go for you? A prominent businessman assaulting his attorney? The DA's office would have a field day."

"It wasn't like that—"

"I don't care what you think it was like. Here's what's going to happen. Catherine is off your case, effective immediately. We're assigning you a new attorney—someone who will handle your trial competently and professionally. You will accept this without complaint. You will not contact Catherine again. Not at work, not at home, not anywhere. Do you understand?"

Another pause. Then, quietly: "I understand."

"Good. Because if I hear you've gone anywhere near her, I will personally make sure every news outlet in Manhattan knows exactly what kind of man you are." Joe's voice dropped lower. "Are we clear?"

"We're clear."

Joe hung up without another word.

Catherine left the DA's office just after noon, her briefcase light in her hand, her steps quick and purposeful. The weight she'd been carrying since Robert's intrusion had lifted completely. Joe had handled it. Moreno would reassign the case. Robert Holcomb was no longer her problem.

She thought about Vincent waiting for her tonight—the way he'd kissed her goodbye that morning, his hand lingering on her cheek, his eyes full of promises. The way he'd whispered her name.

Catherine smiled as she stepped out into the Manhattan night.

Catherine had barely stepped into her apartment, setting her briefcase down and slipping off her shoes, when she heard the soft sound of the French doors opening behind her.

She turned.

Vincent stood in the doorway, his silhouette framed against the balcony. He didn't hesitate. Didn't wait for permission or invitation. He stepped inside, closing the doors behind him with quiet finality, and crossed the room in three long strides.

His hands found her face, tilting her mouth up to his, and he kissed her with an urgency that stole her breath. No words. No gentle greeting. Just need—raw and undeniable.

Catherine gasped against his mouth, her hands clutching at his shoulders as he backed her toward the bedroom, never breaking the kiss. His fingers tangled in her hair, his body pressing against hers with a heat that made her knees weak.

"Vincent—," she breathed, but he swallowed the rest of her words, his mouth claiming hers again as they stumbled through the doorway.

They fell onto the bed together, a tangle of limbs and desperate hands. Vincent's fingers found the buttons of her blouse, fumbling in his haste, and Catherine laughed breathlessly against his mouth.

"Let me," she whispered, pushing his hands aside gently. She unbuttoned her blouse with trembling fingers, shrugging it off her shoulders while Vincent watched, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his eyes dark with want.

He pulled his vest over his head, then his shirt, and Catherine's hands found the warm expanse of his chest, tracing the lines of muscle and the soft fur that covered his skin. He shuddered under her touch, a low sound escaping his throat.

"Catherine," he murmured, his voice rough. "I need—"

"I know." She kissed him again, her hands moving to the waistband of his pants. "I need you too."

They shed the rest of their clothing in a blur of movement and shared breath, and then there was nothing between them—just skin against skin, heat and softness and the overwhelming rightness of being together.

Vincent's hands traced the curve of her waist, her hips, learning the shape of her with reverent attention even as his breathing grew ragged. Catherine arched into his touch, her fingers threading through his hair, pulling him down to kiss her again.

"Please," she whispered against his mouth. "Vincent, please—"

He positioned himself above her, his eyes meeting hers in the afternoon light streaming through the windows. For a moment, they were perfectly still, suspended in the space between wanting and having.

Then he entered her slowly, and Catherine gasped, her head falling back against the pillow as pleasure rolled through her in waves. Vincent groaned, his forehead dropping to rest against hers, his breath hot against her lips.

"Catherine," he breathed. "You feel—God, you feel—"

"Don't stop," she whispered, her hands gripping his shoulders. "Please don't stop."

He began to move, slow at first, each thrust deliberate and deep. Catherine met his rhythm for rhythm, her hips rising to take him deeper, her body opening to him completely. The sounds they made filled the room—gasps and moans and whispered encouragement, the slick slide of skin on skin, the creak of the bed beneath them.

"Yes," Catherine breathed as he quickened his pace. "Yes, Vincent, just like that—"

His mouth found her neck, kissing and tasting, and she cried out, her nails digging into his back. The pleasure built between them, mounting with each thrust, each shared breath, each whispered word of need and want.

"You're so beautiful," Vincent murmured against her skin. "So perfect—Catherine, I—"

"I love you," she gasped, her body tightening around him. "I love you, I love you—"

He groaned, his movements becoming urgent, almost desperate. Catherine felt herself climbing toward release, her whole body trembling with the force of it. Vincent's hand slid between them, finding the place where they were joined, and she shattered with a cry that was half his name, half wordless pleasure.

Vincent followed moments later, his body going rigid above her as he buried himself deep, his own cry muffled against her shoulder. They clung to each other, riding out the waves of pleasure together, their bodies moving in perfect synchrony until finally, finally, they stilled.

Vincent collapsed beside her, pulling her against his chest, both of them breathing hard. Catherine's hand rested over his heart, feeling it thunder beneath her palm.

"That was—," she started, but couldn't find the words.

"Yes," Vincent agreed, his voice rough and satisfied. His fingers traced lazy patterns on her back. "Yes, it was."

They lay tangled together, content and exhausted and knowing—absolutely knowing—that this was just the beginning.

Catherine woke in the darkness.

It was the middle of the night—that deep, predawn darkness where the world held its breath before dawn. The apartment was silent around them, the night lights casting only the faintest glow through the bedroom. She could feel Vincent beside her, his breathing deep and even in sleep, his body warm against hers.

She turned her head to look at him, but could barely make out his features in the darkness. What she could feel, though—the solid warmth of him, the rise and fall of his chest, the steady beat of his heart—was enough.

She shifted carefully, propping herself up on one elbow. She let her hand rest on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath her palm. Then she began to move her fingers, tracing slow circles through the soft fur that covered his skin.

Vincent stirred, his breathing changing, but he didn't wake. Not yet.

Catherine leaned down and pressed her lips to his shoulder, then his collarbone, then the hollow of his throat. She felt his pulse quicken beneath her mouth. Her hand slid lower, exploring the planes of his chest, the ridges of muscle along his ribs.

"Catherine," Vincent murmured, his voice thick with sleep. She felt rather than saw his eyes open, searching for her in the darkness.

"Shh," she whispered against his skin.

His hand came up to cup her face, but she caught it gently, pressing it back down to the mattress. "Let me," she said softly.

She felt him nod in the darkness, felt his breath quicken.

Catherine kissed him then—slow and deep, her tongue sliding against his as her hands continued their exploration. She kissed along his jaw, down his neck, across his chest. Her fingers traced the line of his hip, the curve of his thigh, deliberately avoiding the place where she could feel his arousal growing.

Vincent's breathing grew ragged. His hands gripped the sheets beneath him, his body tensing with restraint.

"Catherine," he breathed, her name half plea, half prayer.

She smiled against his skin and continued her slow torture—kissing, touching, caressing every part of him she could reach. Her lips dragged across his chest, her teeth grazing his nipple, and Vincent gasped, his hips lifting involuntarily.

"Please," he whispered, and the raw need in his voice sent heat flooding through her.

Catherine finally let her hand slide lower, wrapping her fingers around him. Vincent groaned, his head falling back against the pillow, his whole body trembling. She stroked him slowly, deliberately, feeling his responses in the darkness—the catch of his breath, the small sounds of desperation that escaped him.

"Look at me," she whispered.

She felt his eyes open, searching for hers in the darkness, and what she sensed there—trust, love, absolute surrender—made her breath catch.

Catherine released him and shifted, straddling his hips. She positioned herself above him, her hands braced on his chest, and slowly—so slowly—lowered herself onto him.

They both gasped as she took him in, inch by inch, until he was fully seated inside her. Catherine paused, adjusting to the fullness, the perfect fit of their bodies joined this way in the darkness.

Then she began to move.

She set the pace—slow at first, rolling her hips in a rhythm that made them both moan. Vincent's hands found her waist, his fingers digging into her skin, but he let her lead, let her take what she needed.

Catherine leaned forward, changing the angle, and cried out at the sensation. She moved faster, chasing the pleasure building inside her, her body rising and falling.

"Yes," Vincent breathed, his voice rough with need. "Catherine, yes—"

She could feel it building—the tension coiling tighter and tighter in her core. Her movements became more urgent, more desperate, her thighs burning with the effort. She was so close, so close—

But suddenly her muscles trembled, her rhythm faltering. She couldn't sustain it anymore, couldn't keep the pace she needed to push herself over the edge.

"Vincent," she gasped, her voice breaking. "I can't—I need—"

His hands tightened on her hips, and in one smooth motion he took over, thrusting up into her hard and fast. Catherine cried out, her hands bracing on his chest as he drove into her again and again, giving her exactly what she needed.

"Yes," she moaned, her body tightening around him with each thrust. "Yes, Vincent, don't stop—"

She could feel him everywhere—inside her, beneath her, surrounding her. The pleasure was overwhelming, building to an impossible peak. Her body clenched around him, drawing him deeper, and she heard his breathing become ragged, felt his rhythm begin to break.

"Catherine," he groaned, his voice raw with need. "I'm—I can't—"

"Yes," she urged, her own release hovering just out of reach. "Yes, Vincent, please—"

He thrust into her one more time, hard and deep, and she felt him shudder beneath her, felt the pulse of his release as he came with a cry that was her name. The sensation pushed her over the edge, and Catherine climaxed in the same instant, her body convulsing around him as waves of pleasure crashed through her.

She collapsed onto his chest, completely spent, her body still trembling with aftershocks. Vincent's arms came around her, holding her close as they both struggled to breathe.

Catherine felt consciousness slipping away almost immediately, exhaustion and satisfaction pulling her under. She managed one soft murmur—"Love you"—before sleep claimed her.

Vincent held her as she drifted off, her body warm and relaxed against his, their hearts beating in tandem. He pressed a kiss to her hair and closed his eyes, content to stay exactly where they were for as long as the night would allow.

This, he thought. This is what it means to be whole.

The sky was just beginning to lighten when Vincent finally stirred.

Catherine felt him shift beside her, felt the reluctance in his movements as he began to pull away. She opened her eyes, watching as he sat up on the edge of the bed, reaching for his clothes.

"You have to go," she said quietly. Not a question.

"Before the light comes." Vincent's voice was regretful. He pulled on his pants, then his shirt, his movements slow and deliberate. "I wish—"

"I know." Catherine sat up, pulling the sheet around herself, and watched him dress. The familiar routine of his departure—something they'd done dozens of times now—suddenly felt wrong. Incomplete.

Vincent turned to her, fully dressed now except for his vest. He leaned down to kiss her, his hand cupping her cheek. "Tonight," he promised. "I'll come back tonight."

Catherine caught his hand, holding it against her face. "Vincent, wait."

He paused, his eyes searching hers. "What is it?"

She didn't know how to say it. Didn't know how to put into words the realization that had been building in her chest since they'd made love the second time. Since she'd felt the absolute rightness of being with him, the completeness of their connection.

"This can't keep happening," she said finally.

Vincent went very still. "Catherine—"

"No, listen." She stood, still wrapped in the sheet, and moved to the window. Dawn was breaking over Manhattan, painting the sky in shades of pink and gold. "I don't mean us. I mean this—you leaving before dawn. You hiding. Us living in two separate worlds that only touch in darkness."

Vincent came to stand behind her, his hands resting on her shoulders. "I don't understand."

Catherine turned to face him, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "Everything has changed, Vincent. Can't you feel it? We've changed. What we have—it's not something that can exist in stolen moments anymore. It's too big. Too real."

"Catherine, I can't—" He stopped, his jaw tightening. "You know I can't live in your world. Not openly. Not the way you deserve."

"Then we find another way." Catherine's hands found his chest, pressing against his heart. "We build something new. Something that's ours. But I can't keep watching you leave every morning. I can't keep pretending that a few hours together is enough when I know—I *know*—that we're meant for more than this."

Vincent's hands covered hers, his eyes searching her face. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I love you. That I choose you. Not just for tonight or tomorrow night." Catherine's voice grew stronger, more certain. "I choose you for always. For a real life together. Whatever that looks like, whatever it takes—I want it. I want *us*."

Vincent pulled her against him, his arms wrapping around her tightly. She felt him trembling, felt the emotion radiating through their bond.

"I want that too," he whispered into her hair. "God, Catherine, I want that more than anything. But I don't know how—"

"We'll figure it out." Catherine pulled back just enough to look up at him. "Together. We'll figure it out together. But no more hiding. No more pretending that what we have is temporary or small or something that has to exist in shadows. It's not. It's everything. And it's time we started living like it."

Vincent's hand cupped her face, his thumb brushing away a tear she hadn't realized had fallen. "You're sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

He kissed her then, deep and slow. When he pulled back, his eyes were bright with emotion.

"Then we'll find a way," he said. "I don't know what it looks like yet. But if you're willing to try—if you're willing to build something new with me—then I'm willing to do whatever it takes."

Catherine smiled, her heart feeling lighter than it had in years. "Whatever it takes."

The sun was fully risen now, golden light streaming through the windows, and for the first time, Vincent didn't turn away from it. He stood with Catherine in the light, holding her close, and they both understood that this moment—this decision—was the beginning of everything.

The END

*to be continued

