

THIS IS WHERE YOU GO OUT

(Pilot episode expansion)

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Author's Note: Certain lines of dialogue have been taken from the episode 'Once Upon a Time in the City of New York' of the TV series Beauty and the Beast, written by Ron Koslow.

"No... No!" she cried, waking up in panic from the nightmare.

"You're safe, you're safe now..."

That voice... She felt her panic disappear immediately. The male voice which had just spoken to her was unlike anything she'd ever heard before. The quiet, deep, gravelly, velvet tone made her feel like melting inside.

"Where am I?" she asked with a hoarse voice.

"Where no one will hurt you. You're safe here," the voice replied calmly.

"Hospital?"

"No..., but you're going to be all right."

She wasn't sure why but, somewhere in the back of her mind, she believed him. On the other hand, a doubt crept into her head.

"Why aren't I in a hospital?"

"There was no time, you were bleeding."

Fair enough; whoever it was, her welfare was obviously a priority for them.

"What did they do?" she asked, and suddenly fear struck her as she touched the place where her eyes were under the layers of bandages. In fact, her whole head, apart from the mouth area, was bandaged over. "My eyes?!"

"Your eyes were not hurt, we made sure," the voice said reassuringly again, and she calmed down and sighed.

"Rest now," he said.

"All right..."

She had so many questions to ask, was confused and scared, but she felt too tired to investigate further at the moment, and the cosy and warm blanket covering her was welcoming her to drift away peacefully. All that mattered was that she was alive and safe. Safe... Well, *he* had said that. But who was he? She would ask, soon; for now, his word was enough. She trusted him, she trusted that voice.

He observed her for a moment as she drifted into sleep and then sat down to watch over her.

Only an hour had passed when she awakened again. She heard a quiet noise, as if somebody turned a page of a book.

“Who’s there? Who are you?” she asked, just slightly worried.

“Vincent,” came the reply from the gravelly voice she had heard before.

“Vincent...,” she repeated quietly, and suddenly she felt warm inside.

“My father and I treated your injuries.”

Catherine quickly tried to sit up, but a sharp pain sent her back down to the pillows, gasping.

“You have broken ribs, you need to be still,” he added quickly and urgently.

“Where am I?” she asked again.

“Where no one can hurt you,” he told her once more.

“My face hurts,” she said in a broken voice.

“Tell me your name,” he asked, trying to distract her from the pain.

“Catherine.”

“Catherine...” the voice repeated, and she felt her heart tremble at the way he said it.

“Try to rest. If you need anything, I’ll be close by,” he said. He took a few steps to walk away, then he stopped and added, “Don’t be afraid. Please, don’t be afraid.”

Something about the way he said it reached her deep inside and suddenly she felt at peace. “I’ll try,” she said quietly.

Catherine was lying still, listening to the sounds around her. It was strange how, now that she wasn’t able to see, her hearing was much more focused, as she tried to understand where she could be. She could feel that the blanket she was covered with was thick and quilted, and that there were patches, mostly using cotton and leather fabrics. It felt very cosy and kept her pleasantly warm. *Daddy will be scared to death about where I am*, she thought suddenly. But she had no more time to contemplate it, as she heard someone coming near her.

“How do you feel?” Vincent asked, with deep care in his voice.

Catherine sighed, but tried not to sound too negative. “A bit better, I guess.”

He knew she was in pain and admired how she tried to hide it from him.

“Father gave me more antibiotics for you. You should take them now.”

“Okay,” Catherine replied blankly. She tried to pull her arm out from under the blanket but felt terribly weak suddenly, and sighed.

“Don’t strain yourself, please!” Vincent said quickly. “I’ll put the tablets on a spoon so you can swallow them. I will raise your pillows a bit now, so I need to support you a little. Please, don’t be afraid.”

“I’m not,” she said, and he could feel she really wasn’t.

Catherine felt his long arm slip very gently under her shoulders, his elbow supporting her head as he slipped another big quilted pillow under her head. She could smell the scent of candle wax, old leather, wool and... yes, summer rain. *He smells really nice...*

Once she was in a slightly raised position, Vincent said, “I will give you the medicine now.”

She hesitated for a moment and then opened her mouth a little. When she felt a spoon on her bottom lip, she took the tablets into her mouth. The next thing she felt was the cool touch of a glass, and she took a few sips of water to swallow the tablets.

“Thank you,” Catherine said quietly.

“I brought you some soup, as well - beef stew, in fact. You need to eat to regain your strength.”

"I *am* a bit hungry," she said shyly. She heard him chuckle.

"I'm glad to hear it. It's not too hot, so don't worry, you won't get burned."

Catherine attempted to move her arm for the second time, but again it was no use.

"Please!" Vincent intervened. "I will feed you."

She relaxed and a hint of a smile appeared on her full lips, then she opened her mouth to receive the first spoonful.

"Do you like it?" Vincent inquired, after she had a few spoonfuls.

Catherine swallowed after chewing for a moment and answered truthfully, "It's good soup." Then her thoughts returned to her constant question. "Vincent, tell me, where are we? Somewhere there's an elevated train... Brooklyn? Queens?"

"No... not Brooklyn or Queens," he replied quietly.

"Am I still in New York? Vincent, please, tell me. Where are we?" Her fear was rising again as she begged.

"I have to keep it as a secret," he replied evasively.

"Why?"

"Because... a lot of good people depend on this place for safety." Vincent was reluctant to reveal too much.

"I'll keep your secret. And that tapping, it never stops!"

"It's people, talking to each other, tapping on the master pipes."

"You mean... messages?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Vincent, *please*? Tell me."

The quiet plea finally broke him, and he said with a deep voice, while he continued feeding her the stew, "We're below the city, below the subways. There's a whole world of tunnels and chambers that most people don't even know exists. There are no maps to where we are. It's a forgotten place. But it's warm and it's safe, and we have all the room we need. So we live here, and we try to live as well as we can. We try to take care of each other. It's our city, down here."

"What are you doing down here? Why are *you* here?" Catherine asked with genuine interest.

She was intrigued by what she had just heard. Unconsciously, she managed to pull her arm out from under the blanket; her hand was resting on her chest now.

"I was a baby, abandoned, left to die. Someone found me and brought me here, to the man who became my father. He took me, he raised me, he taught me everything. He named me Vincent. That's where I was found - near the hospital, St. Vincent's."

It sounded almost like a fairy tale to Catherine. Her heart was telling her to trust, but her mind was still torn. "I don't know what to believe."

"It's all true," Vincent said calmly, and she believed him.

She felt a spoon nearing her mouth again and suddenly she felt an urge to touch him, to add a solid form to this beautiful voice. Quicker than Vincent could realize, she touched his hand...and pulled away in a second with a gasp of shock.

The hand was covered with something that felt like soft furry hair...

For a long moment, there was silence. Catherine was trying to rationalize what she had just felt with her own hand. Vincent was dead quiet.

Then Catherine swallowed and spoke hesitantly. "I... I must have touched the sleeve edge of your...sweater."

Still nothing.

"I'm sorry. I think it's still the shock from what happened." She heard Vincent's deep sigh. Something in it alarmed her; it sounded like he was in pain. "Please, don't be angry with me, Vincent."

He raised his head to her, hearing her desperate plea, and whispered, "I could never be angry with you, Catherine."

There, her heart trembled again when he said her name.

"Do you like books?" he asked, changing the topic.

"Yes... I do," she said.

"I could read you something, if you wished?"

The thought of listening to that soothing gravel voice for a longer time sounded very inviting to her.

"That would be nice," Catherine said quietly and attempted a smile.

Vincent stood up, put the empty bowl on the bedside table, and walked away from the bed. When he stopped at the mantelpiece, he closed his eyes for a few seconds and took a deep breath. Then he reached for an old leather-bound edition of one of his favorite novels and walked back to his chair at Catherine's bedside. He sat down, opened the book, and started.

"My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip...."(1)

Days passed spent by in a steady routine. Vincent always brought her the meals, though the food was mostly solid, so he didn't need to feed her anymore and, if there was soup, he brought it in a mug, so she could drink it. A kind older (judging by her voice) woman, named Mary, would help her to the bathroom and back, and with dressing. Vincent's father would regularly check on her.

She would rest in bed most of the day and, if she wasn't sleeping, Vincent would keep her company - reading to her, talking to her, listening to her. She found out Vincent was very sophisticated, had a profound knowledge of classical music and classical literature, and that he especially loved poetry - things that were her great loves, as well. They spoke about her life, and exchanged funny stories from childhood, which allowed her only few glimpses into the world Below. And although she still hadn't seen his face because of the bandages on her head, she felt like they had been friends forever.

Yes, friends, best friends... she thought and had to smile. She couldn't remember the last time she felt so pleasant, so comfortable and at ease with a man, and this was a man who not only spoke, but truly listened to her, and whose main interest was her own well-being and comfort. In fact, I have never felt like this with any man...

It was the tenth day of her stay Below. Vincent knew she was grateful to him for all the care, and enjoyed his company immensely, but over the past couple of days, he could feel the fear growing inside of her - the fear of what she'd find out once the bandages came off and she saw what those men had done to her.

When Catherine woke up from her afternoon nap, she knew she was alone. She grew restless again and impatiently sat up on the bed. The uncertainty was slowly killing her, and she desperately wanted to find out what damage had been done to her face.

She stood up shakily, as her legs were still a bit weak from all the lying in bed. She took a step forward and almost tripped over a footstool. She stretched her arms ahead and took a few more steps, trying to explore the place. Suddenly, she stopped, as some feeling inside told her she was not alone anymore.

"I know you're there. You can come in," she said, resigned.

Vincent felt her despair and tried to find a way to calm her down. "I'll read to you."

She turned her head to where his voice was coming from. "It won't help," Catherine said, resigned.

"It might. We can finish *Great Expectations*. Do you remember how it ends?"

Catherine's voice broke and she spoke shakily. "Vincent, I'm frightened. I'm worried." If she could, she would cry.

"I know... I can feel it. You're getting your strength back. I'll get you some tea, the herb tea you liked," he said with a lighter voice.

"Okay." She nodded and sounded a bit calmer.

When she was sure he was gone, Catherine reached up to the back of her head, searching for a way to take off the bandages. Her fingers were trembling and it took a while, but she finally succeeded. When her skin hit the cool fresh air, it was a bit of a shock, but she quickly adjusted to it, and soon her skin felt normal again.

Her hands came to her face and she felt stitches on large areas as she traced it. Her fear was growing again, and she was frantically looking around to find a mirror. Only superficially was she taking in images of her environment - a chamber carved in rock, a stone Liberty statue and a stone column reminiscent of an ancient Greek pillar at the entrance, a big bed where she had laid for days, covered with a quilted blanket, worn-out pillows and cushions, a large fan-style yellow and green stained glass window illuminated from behind, lots of candles all around, an ornamental iron mantelpiece from an old fireplace and a chest of drawers with lots of bric-a-brac, a massive old wooden wardrobe, a large bookshelf full of old books, a brazier with a fire warming the chamber - but no mirror.

Finally, her eyes spotted an old piece of headlight reflector on the mantelpiece. She took it and looked into its reflective surface. Her eyes widened in horror as she whispered, "Oh, God! No..."

As she was staring at her own reflection, seeing several long slashes across her face temporarily fixed by countless stitches, horrified by her own image, she suddenly heard him behind her.

"Catherine!"

She turned around quickly and saw him for the first time - and with a scream of shock she threw the reflector in his direction, hitting his forehead. He let out a growl, showing his sharp canines, and then he just stared at her, his expression turning into shame and his eyes reflecting a terrible pain inside.

Catherine was staring at him, still shocked and with widened eyes, she was half processing what she was looking at and half realizing what she had just done. The voice belonged to Vincent. The unbelievable thing was that, knowing the soft and velvet gravel shade of it, she would never have imagined such an appearance: Vincent was very tall, probably over six feet, strongly built with broad shoulders, had a long golden mane, furry hands with claws - and the face of an animal.

He turned around and vanished as quickly as he had appeared.

Catherine took a few steps, as if to follow him, but then she stopped and started sobbing before she slumped back onto the bed, sitting with her head down and crying.

She didn't know how long she had been crying but when she stopped, her head still down, Catherine was thinking about how cruel she had been to Vincent. He had been nothing but kind,

gentle and generous to her, nursing her with patience and care, treating her better than anyone she had ever known, apart from her own mother... and in return for his kindness, she had hurt him badly, both outwardly and inside. She knew that the tears she shed were for both the destroyed image of her face and for the way she had treated him.

Suddenly, she heard a slight rustle at the entrance to the chamber. Vincent was standing there, leaning against the edge of the entrance, covered by a long cloak with a hood over his head. For the first time, she noticed his clothes; he was wearing an old white woollen sweater, a grey quilted vest, black slacks with multi-colored patches on his knees, a buckled belt, and high boots made of different types of leather and fur. The cloak reaching down to his feet was made of patches of black and brown leather and fabric pieces. For a second, Catherine thought of how unusual but how fitting his clothing looked; she couldn't imagine a more suitable style for him.

"I never regretted what I am... until now," he said quietly, looking at her, deep sadness in his voice.

She looked up at him. With half of his face in the shadow of the hood, she was looking at him with eyes narrowed in curiosity.

"How? How did this happen to you?"

"I don't know. I have ideas..." he nearly whispered, his eyes still focused on hers. "I'll never know. I was born... and I survived." Vincent stepped closer, his majestic figure towering over her. "It's time for you to go back."

Catherine's eyes were pleading in frustration. "Tell me it's a nightmare. That it didn't happen... that it can't be."

Vincent shook his head slightly. "It's not a nightmare. It happened... and you're alive."

Catherine looked away in misery.

He knelt in front of her, most of his face still in the shadow of the hood.

"Catherine, you survived," he said softly, but she looked away.

Survived, but with what face? she thought to herself.

Vincent saw her frustration and continued, "And what you endured will make you stronger and better."

She slowly looked at him. "I don't have your strength. I don't know how to do it." The expression on her face changed from frustration into sadness.

"You have the strength, Catherine... you *do*. I know you," Vincent said, resolved.

Suddenly, she wanted to believe him. No... she *did* believe him. At that moment, she forgot about her own misery and realized how much strength it must have cost him to face her, after how she had reacted to his appearance, and how he was trying to protect her by hiding his face in the hood. She felt a strong urge to see him properly.

Her hands moved up to the edge of his cloak. Vincent pulled back an inch, holding his breath, but then stayed still. She pulled the hood slowly down to his shoulders, observing the unique leonine features of his face, framed with a golden mane of long hair falling over his shoulders: his flat nose covered with fine short golden hair, his strong cheekbones, his cleft upper and full bottom lips, his stubby cheeks and chin. She wasn't afraid, she was mesmerized. And it was the first time she truly looked into his eyes – his magnetic feline-shaped deep sapphire blue eyes... warm, kind, honest, caring, observant. At first they were moving from side to side, like those of a frightened animal cornered by an attacker, but after a few seconds they steadied, and his gaze met hers.

Vincent saw the emerald green of her big eyes, and the acceptance, compassion, empathy, warmth and kindness he saw in them struck him like lightning.

They both felt a change inside, around their hearts – an unexpected, warm feeling, something unidentified pulling them together.

Catherine's lips stretched into a heartfelt smile, which made his heart skip a beat. In that moment, even if he had had any doubts before, Vincent knew for sure that he was bound to this woman by his heart forever. Still in a daze, he attempted a hint of a smile, letting his breath out.

After a moment, he stood up, holding out her coat and scarf to her.

"It's time," he said quietly.

The smile faded from Catherine's face, and suddenly she felt sad. And afraid. How could she go back to that world? Would she really be strong enough, as Vincent thought? She wanted to believe him and, although she knew it would be hard, she wanted to try. For herself. For him. He put his trust in her...

She took the coat and scarf from him. His hand was clawed and its back was covered with ginger fur but his palm looked like a normal hand. *It wasn't a sweater then.* Catherine sighed and looked up at him with a bittersweet smile.

"Give me ten minutes, please."

Vincent nodded and walked out of the chamber.

She slowly rose to her feet and took up the cleaned clothes and shoes that she had been wearing on the night of the attack. She noticed someone had carefully mended the tears in her evening dress. She changed into her clothes, put the coat on, and hugged the silk-lined hood around her neck. Then she folded the nightshirt she had been wearing. She suddenly felt strange leaving it behind. It was long, put together from large pieces of cream cotton fabric, and sewn together with large stitches using brown leather. Such an unusual piece of clothing, but she'd felt so comfortable and warm in it.

Lastly, she looked around Vincent's chamber, illuminated by candles and the soft yellow glow from behind the stained window. *I wish I could have gotten to know this place better. I'll miss it. I'll miss him...*

As they were walking through the tunnels, making their way up towards Above, Catherine found the courage to bring up something which had been bothering her, ever since it had happened. She stopped walking to look at Vincent, who turned around to face her.

"I am... so sorry for what I've done. There is no excuse for it," Catherine said in shame, with her eyes pleading with him for forgiveness.

Vincent looked at her seriously, knowing that she meant throwing the headlight reflector at him in shock. when she had first seen his face. In his heart, he could feel that she was truly upset about her act.

"There is no need to apologize, Catherine. I scared you and you reacted," he said quietly, with a sad but non-judgemental tone.

"You startled me and I was shocked, but it was wrong, and I hurt you, and not just physically... Can you... forgive me, please?" Her eyes were full of shame and guilt.

Vincent's look softened. "All is forgotten, Catherine. Don't worry yourself about it anymore, please." He tried to reassure her about his words, so he gave her a little smile.

Catherine still wasn't convinced it was enough to make him feel better, but that smile made her smile, too. She couldn't explain it, but there was something about him which was pulling her to him. Was it the deep, calm, and honest look of his sapphire blue eyes? The graceful way he walked? Or maybe his gentle way of caring for her well-being? Or the almost whispering, gravelly velvet voice, comforting her and almost hypnotizing her, especially when he was reading to her? *Probably it's all of it combined,* she thought, and sighed.

They continued walking until they reached a place with two large thick drainage pipes which they had to cross over. There was a gap between them and Vincent crossed it with one jump. Assessing the distance she had to jump and the still-present blunt pain in her two broken ribs, Catherine called after him, "Wait!"

Vincent turned to her and reached out to her. "You can do it. Give me your hand," he encouraged her and waited.

Catherine didn't hesitate. She trusted him fully, ever since she had heard his voice for the first time. She put her small hand into his large one and felt the soft furry hair on its back, the pad-like skin of his palm - the texture of which made her aware that he was not unfamiliar with hard labor - the lightest touch of the claws on his fingers. Touching his hand accidentally a few days ago may have scared her, fearing the unknown, but now, all she felt was the comfort, warmth and gentleness of his hold. She had never felt safer holding anyone else's hand before.

She jumped across the pipes and landed on the platform next to him. The impact with the hard ground caused her slight pain in the ribcage, but she had expected that, and just lightly touched the painful area instinctively, briefly frowning.

"Are you in much pain?" Vincent asked, concerned and still holding her hand.

"No, I'm fine," she replied, smiling at him.

Those deep blue eyes are truly magnificent, Catherine thought, moved by his look.

Vincent released her hand and, on the narrow platform, he let her squeeze by him to walk in front, putting his arm very gently around her waist for a moment, to protect her from falling into the gap between the platform and one of the pipes.

She felt a slight tremble all over her body as he did that - and she liked it. *What is happening with me?*

They walked for about twenty more minutes, until they crossed a narrow passageway and ended up at a threshold of something which looked like an unfinished door opening in a brick wall. Vincent stopped there and turned around to her slowly.

Catherine, a bit confused, looked around. On the left, behind the threshold, she could see a single ray of light penetrating through the shadows and falling on the concrete ground a few meters away from them.

Vincent sensed her unasked question and answered it. "This is where you go out."

"Where are we?" Catherine asked, still puzzled.

"The basement of your apartment building," Vincent answered.

"We are?" she asked in astonishment, her mouth breaking into a smile.

Vincent laughed quietly, but his smile faded quickly as he looked away from her. He leaned against the brick wall, looking down, his otherwise majestic, tall figure slightly bent over, suddenly looking vulnerable.

Catherine's smile vanished, too, and she could sense his sadness, mirroring her own. For ten days she had had a safe sanctuary, a peaceful, magical place with the most wonderful companion she could have ever dreamed of, someone who in such a short time became the best friend she had ever had, someone who really *knew* the real Catherine.

And now the magic was about to end, and she was to be thrown back into the deep waters of her own world. How could she ever thank him enough for what he had done for her? For her life, her newly found courage and strength? Without him, she wouldn't be standing here.

She was just about to walk towards the light, but suddenly couldn't move. She turned to look at Vincent and said seriously, "Your secret is safe with me, Vincent. I would never betray your trust."

Vincent's voice was quiet and sad. "I know. I knew that from the beginning, when you trusted me." Suddenly, he felt his heart racing and a lump forming in his throat.

The pain in his voice and the sight of him broke Catherine. Without hesitation, she reached out to touch his chest, stepping toward him and slowly laying her head against his shoulder, burying her face in his thick golden mane, and breathing in his unique scent. She couldn't really understand why, but it felt so right to do it. It felt like this was the place she was meant to be, with him, right now, forever...

She smiled with her eyes closed and, all at once, she felt his right arm very carefully and gently embracing her, as if she was a precious glass ornament which could break at the slightest pressure, and she heard a sigh escaping his throat. She looked up and saw his head leaning against the wall, eyes closed, and he was breathing heavily, as if desperately trying to fight some unidentified feeling rising in him, and yet, at the same time, basking in it.

Catherine smiled again, and for the first time since what seemed like forever, she felt truly happy. Quietly, while gently stroking the hair falling over his chest, she asked, "What can I say to you?"

Before Vincent could answer, voices from the basement above them broke the silence and Catherine looked into the light, slightly scared. When she turned back, she found Vincent had gone.

She called out his name but got no response. Suddenly, she felt very sad and lonely. Her eyes were burning from tears trying to break through, but after one last look into the place where Vincent had disappeared, she swallowed, took a deep breath, covered her head with the hood of her coat, and bravely crossed the threshold and walked into the ray of light.

Eight months. Was it even possible it had already been eight months since she was attacked? The eight loneliest months in her life...

The plastic surgery had been hard. Not the procedure itself or the outcome, but her state of mind before and after it. When she was under anaesthesia, she had a wild dream about running around her father's law firm, people staring at her scarred face, laughing behind her back - even her boyfriend Tom humiliating her in front of others and laughing at her because "*She showed promise but turned out to be a loser.*"

In the dream she had kept running, though she wasn't sure whether she was trying to escape from somewhere, or running *to* somewhere, or *someone*. When she tripped and fell to her knees, panicked, shocked, belittled, defeated... among all the laughing madness she looked up and saw *him*, his figure in the shadow of his carved-rock chamber, the caring look in his deep blue eyes encouraging and supporting her. *You can do it, Catherine.*

When she had awakened from the anaesthesia after the surgery, the only wish she had had was that someone would read her the last chapter of *Great Expectations*. Vincent had read the whole novel to her while she was recovering from the attack down Below, but she was ready to return to her world just when they had one last chapter to go. During those eight months, she often thought of getting herself a copy of the book to finish it, as the story truly had engrossed her, but every time she had reached for it in some book store, she had put it back down, thinking it would be sacrilege. Only *he* could finish reading it to her; without hearing his voice, the magic wouldn't be there.

How she longed to hear that voice again. It was haunting her even in her dreams, but haunting her beautifully, especially since she started working at the District Attorney's Office. The memory of it calmed her, soothed her tired mind, and seeing so many atrocities happening every day, it caressed her wounded heart.

The decision to leave her father's corporate law firm and start working for the District Attorney's Office came to her quite soon after the surgery. After spending time with Vincent, listening to him

speaking about his world, the people in it, the reasons why they had left the world Above, all the pain and injustice in their hurt souls that they had brought with them, needing to heal, it opened her eyes.

She never felt comfortable with being a corporate lawyer; the results of her work didn't really bring her satisfaction. Catherine wished to do something meaningful, something which would make a difference in people's lives. But she kept her desire hidden for a long time, especially from her father, who she knew saw himself in her. However, the attack changed everything for her - her attitude towards life, towards work, towards herself, towards what was really important and, most of all, towards following the path she considered to be right. Vincent changed everything for her, in the best possible way she could have ever imagined.

Catherine still remembered the look on her father's face when she told him she was leaving and why. The shock, sadness, and hint of disappointment were inevitable and that didn't make her happy. But she knew there was no other way. And, in the end, Charles Chandler had accepted his daughter's choice because he loved her and wished only the best for her - only this time, it was she who chose what was best for her, and he had to trust her.

The first month at the District Attorney's Office was tough. She was overloaded with field work, and files and files of cases she had to go through. Her lazy working days at her father's office were long gone. She was at work before 8 am and never leaving before 7 pm, and she still had the feeling that she was behind. But as days went by, even her boss Joe Maxwell started seeing that she was not just a pretty face, but could work really hard, too. He noticed that she was trying to prove herself and her progress was slow but steady, and he soon began relying on her. And when Catherine finally completed her first case, for the first time in years, she felt really proud of herself. The fact that Joe recognized her effort made it even better. She really had his back now and it felt good. Her life was finally getting a real purpose - she was helping people who were the same victims as she was on that fateful April night.

Her life was getting better, more meaningful, more cherished. Yet she still felt incomplete - she was missing Vincent.

Even after eight long months, she couldn't forget about the calming sound of his soul-mending voice, the expressiveness of his deep blue eyes, the gentle hold of his hand, the warmth of his careful embrace, the radiating glow of his presence. She hadn't seen him for eight months now, but somehow he was still with her - deep down inside her heart.

She was still seeing Tom, but she realized she felt nothing towards this man anymore. In fact, she started wondering what it was that had made her start dating him at all, over a year ago. Finally, she decided to say goodbye to him, and so she did. He wasn't happy about it. In fact, he tried to force himself into her apartment, but that made Catherine even more decisive about not wanting to have anything to do with him anymore, and she parted with him for good.

When she closed the door of her apartment that night, she felt the best she had felt in the last few months, as if a burden had been lifted from her. She was finally free. To do what, she wasn't sure, but it made her heart lighter anyway.

Deep down below the city, Vincent was sitting in his tall velvet-padded chair as Father pierced him with his scrutinizing grey eyes.

"You cannot do this to yourself. It's been eight months, you must let go of her! She can only bring you unhappiness."

Vincent's eyes shot up to his father's and, like a lightning, he bolted from his chair.

"Then I'll *be* unhappy! But I can't forget her!" A bittersweet smile appeared on Father's face as Vincent continued, "We're still connected. I can feel what she's feeling, I know what she's thinking... when she's frightened, when she's happy or sad."

“Vincent, your senses, your empathic powers are quite... *extraordinary*. It’s your gift. And these powers have been heightened by the concern, the love that you feel.” Father tried to be gentle with his son. “But don’t let your act of kindness destroy you!”

Vincent looked at the book in his hands as he realized the inevitable. “Maybe I have no choice.”

It was already late, but Catherine Chandler still wanted to go over the file of a case she had brought home from work. She had started taking the paperwork out of her briefcase while sitting on her bed, when she thought she heard some noise on the balcony outside her bedroom. She looked out but saw nothing, so continued browsing through her papers. Suddenly, she heard something again. Her senses, strengthened by the self-defense training she had been getting for a few months now, made her alert. She opened the drawer of her bedside table and carefully pulled out a revolver she had bought shortly after she started working for the D.A.’s Office. She had been keeping it there only for moments of real urgency, as she didn’t want to end up like so many Americans, carrying a gun everywhere she went.

With the revolver in her hand, she carefully walked to the French doors leading out to the balcony and unlocked it, opening it wide. Her heart beat faster as her gaze landed on the wrought-iron bench in front of her and the old leather-bound book lying on it: *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. She gasped, her eyes widened and, if hope had wings, she would have been flying at that moment when she frantically looked around - and her gaze steadied on the tall, dark-cloaked figure standing in the shadows in the corner.

“Vincent!” her voice cried in excitement.

He stepped out from the recess in the corner but was unable to move further; the pure sight of her bewitched his heart and soul all over again.

Her feet were quicker than she thought and when she was within a step of him, she stopped for a second, contemplating whether she was allowed to do what her heart desired. But then she dropped all courtesy and convention and fell into his arms, embracing him tightly, her face buried against his chest, breathing in his scent - it was unlike any man’s scent she’d ever known, a mixture of candle wax, old leather, wool, and fresh summer rain, all reflecting the aromas of the world Below.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you. I’m sorry,” Vincent said quietly, and Catherine’s heart skipped a beat when she heard that familiar velvet tone of his deep gravelly voice.

“No, no! I’m so glad to see you!” Her face was positively glowing with a beaming smile.

Vincent suddenly saw Catherine’s face in full light; the scars were gone. Only one remained, a line along her left ear, but it wasn’t visible when strands of hair were covering that part of the face. His hopeful expression faded, a shadow of sorrow overcast his deep blue eyes.

“Your face...” he said faintly.

“They fixed it,” Catherine said, and suddenly realized the reason for his sadness.

Before, her scarred face made her somehow similar to him, the disfigurement brought them closer in a way. But now, the differences between them were too great, and he felt like an intruder in her world. He must have felt unworthy of any friendship she might have offered him.

“Come inside,” she said, trying to chase his doubts away, but he started pulling away from her.

“No. I have to go now.” He turned to leave.

“No! Not yet!” Catherine cried desperately.

“I should never have come here!”

His quiet but tormented voice was hurting her ears. She grabbed his arm and made him face her.

“Vincent! I’m glad you did.” Her voice turned softer and she looked him deep in the eyes. “Come here, sit down.” She pointed at a bench and they sat down, still facing each other.

Catherine put the revolver on the floor beside her, and a smile and an expression of utter joy returned to her face when she looked at Vincent.

“I wanted to see you,” Vincent started. “There are so many things I wanted to tell you.”

Catherine sighed, taking his hands in hers gently. “I have so many things to tell *you*,” she said.

“I know.”

Catherine looked away for a second, trying to find the right words. “It’s been hard, Vincent. I’m learning to be strong.” She smiled again at him.

“I know,” he said gently, and she could see a smile appear on his unique leonine face.

“Catherine... I feel the things you feel when you do.”

“How do you mean?”

“Just know that it’s true. And that your pain is my pain. Sometimes, almost as if we are one. I came here... because I wanted to see that you were well.” Vincent tried to cover the main reason for his appearance that night, but his voice was suddenly overshadowed with pain. “And because I wanted to see you... one last time.”

His look met Catherine’s again and her eyes reflected a shock which she couldn’t hide. “I’ll never see you again?!”

Vincent looked almost absent-mindedly away into the thousands of city lights of the skyline.

“I’ve seen your world. There’s no place for me in it.” He shook his head. “I know what I am. Your world is filled with frightened people. And I remind them of what they’re most afraid of.”

A deep veil of sadness fell over Catherine’s face as she said, “Their own ignorance.”

Vincent corrected her quietly. “Their aloneness.”

She nodded with a bittersweet smile. “Yes.”

“So, now I have to begin to forget.”

A cold feeling of fear hit Catherine like lightning. “Forget me??”

He looked back into her eyes, his features softened and he whispered with a smile, “No, I’ll never forget you.” Catherine shivered and smiled at him before he continued sadly,

“But I must forget the dream of being a part of you. Find someone, Catherine, to be part of. Be happy. Goodbye.”

Vincent rose to his feet, ready to climb down the 18 floors again, but she grabbed one of his hands, reaching out for the other one. Despair and anxiety were written all over her face. He felt her heart beating quicker, and her urgent voice pleaded, “No! Not yet! There’s still time, it’s still dark. Don’t leave.”

Ever so slowly, Vincent’s free furry and clawed hand gently took the delicate hand so desperately reaching out in his, his own reason telling him to leave now and forever failing him completely as he utterly surrendered to the desire of his heart. And when a lovely smile graced her beautiful face, he knew he was lost forever.

He sat back down on the bench. Catherine asked him if he wanted to come in, as it was warmer inside, but Vincent was reluctant to enter her private space, so she rose in excitement, asking him to wait a minute, and ran off into her apartment, only to reappear within a moment wrapped in a warm cardigan.

She told him about all the events of the previous eight months, including the new job and why she had decided to do it, and what a big role his influence had on it. Vincent was humbled and tried to

tell her it was her own kind and gracious heart that led her to a profession where she could truly help people in need. But Catherine just shook her head and smiled.

"Maybe partially, yes, but it was *you* who made me believe I could do it."

A warm smile brightened his bronze-colored face, reaching up to his eyes.

"Shall we finish *Great Expectations*, Vincent?" she asked with enthusiasm.

"I would love that, Catherine," he replied quietly.

She took the book he brought her and sat down on the bench next to the one he was sitting at. Vincent put his feet up on the edge of the bench, embracing his knees and resting his head on top of them, looking at Catherine warmly as she started reading the long overdue last chapter of *Great Expectations*. Yes, for such a long time, she thought only he could read it to her, but now that the moment had come, she wanted to repay his kindness to her from eight months ago and took over the role of the reader and enjoyed it thoroughly. As long as he was there to listen...

"And as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so the evening mists were rising now; and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her."(2)

Catherine closed the book with a smile, wiping a solitary tear away from her cheek.

Moved by her emotions, Vincent moved his legs down from the bench and leaned forward to hold her hand in comfort. She gladly accepted it with a tight squeeze.

"You can't imagine how long I have been imagining this moment, Vincent - us, finishing the last chapter."

She stood up and moved to sit on the bench by his side, still holding his hand, and looked into his warm eyes, which were filled with gratitude and wonder and a much deeper feeling she barely dared to name.

"And you can't imagine how many times I was fighting with myself not to come to see you sooner." His voice trailed off into a whisper.

"Why?" Catherine wondered in surprise.

Vincent released her hand and walked away to lean with his hands against the low balcony wall, as if searching for support.

"Because I have no right," he said, almost depressed, staring into the lights in the distance yet again.

"No right?" Catherine couldn't conceal her amazement. She stood up and walked over to him, gently touching his arm and proclaiming softly, "Vincent, you have every right."

His deep blue gaze met her warm green one and what he saw in it almost took his breath away. He saw gratitude, joy, deep affection and, above all, a total acceptance of what he was.

When he lowered his eyes, still visibly uncertain of his right to share the same space with her, Catherine continued, "You saved my life, and in more ways than you could ever imagine." Her voice was as quiet as his just a moment before, yet he could hear the conviction in it. "You helped me to get stronger, follow the path I wish to follow, believed in me, even when I didn't believe in myself."

His shy look changed, now mirroring how deeply moved he was by her words.

"Vincent, you helped me find the real me. And there will never be enough words or ways for me to thank you for that. You coming to me tonight is the greatest privilege and joy I can ever imagine."

She swallowed as her own emotions were getting the better of her, and she found herself under the spell of his gaze again. The shyness was gone from his eyes. They were twinkling, piercing her right through to her soul, and what struck her made her heart start racing. *It is happening*

again, Catherine thought, and she trembled slightly under his touch when he carefully took hold of her hands again. Those comforting, warm and strong yet gentle hands. That touch was sending sensations through her like she had never known before, heating up the blood in her veins, spreading incredible warmth all through her body, reaching the center of her heart in a second.

Vincent could feel her heightened emotions and, though he couldn't believe it was him causing them, his body was reacting exactly the same way. He didn't know where he got the boldness to hold her hands but he just couldn't resist. He had been craving her touch ever since she put her small hand on his shoulder and leaned her body against his in that shy yet so meaningful embrace at the threshold all the months before.

And so, as she wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head on his chest, his long arms embraced her wholeheartedly. He leaned his cheek against her head and breathed in the sweet flowery scent of her freshly washed hair, imprinting in his memory every detail of the feel of her slender body against his.

"Catherine..."

That whisper of the deep velvet sound of his gravelly voice sent a shiver down her spine. No one had ever said her name like that. *Can I really be feeling this?* Her own bodily reactions, though, were telling her that she could, and though she was amazed by this realization, she was revelling in the sweet feel of it. *There is nowhere in the world I'd rather be now than right here, with you.*

And because Vincent could feel what Catherine was feeling, the curves of his mouth turned up into a smile at her pleasure and he sighed quietly.

They stood like that for a while and Vincent couldn't get enough of her scent and feel. Every fibre of his body was revolting, crying out to hold her tighter, to tell her about feelings he was trying to contain for eight months, about the flames engulfing his heart more with each passing second, to speak the unspoken reality of the truth he did not feel he was allowed to reveal to her. He knew he had to return back to reality.

"I... I should go now," he whispered into her hair.

She pulled back to look at him and he could see the deep sadness clouding her eyes. "Will I see you again?" she asked, with a slightly trembling voice, fighting hard against the tears wanting to break through.

Vincent tilted his head a little and took pity on her with a little smile of hope. "Perhaps."

He desperately wanted to believe that, but didn't want to give promises if he wasn't sure he could keep them. This was her world, he didn't belong in it and couldn't invade her life when she deserved so much more.

His smile vanished again and suddenly, he noticed it was harder to breathe. "Goodbye, Catherine."

Before she was able to react, he let go of her, turned on his heel, and started descending 18 stories down from her balcony. The last thing he saw before he disappeared from her sight, plunging into the depths, was a tear escaping her eye that rolled down the cheek of her beautiful glowing face.

Five days had gone by since he had seen Catherine on her balcony. Five days of almost sleepless nights. Five days of restlessness like he'd never known before. At times, he wasn't sure whether it was his or hers, as her feelings were mingling with his, and he still couldn't divide them in his mind and heart. But he was absolutely sure of one feeling coming through the Bond, as he named it - she was missing him.

How was it possible? Her life was so privileged, she could have anything she wanted, and yet, he could feel an emptiness lingering inside of her. Or was it his own? Maybe they both felt it.

Vincent tried to return his focus to the chess game he was playing with his adoptive father. It was their favorite pastime, and Vincent was practically unbeatable; his sharp logical thinking, almost photographic memory, and quick wit had long surpassed his teacher's qualities. Yet, Father (as the whole tunnel community called him, lovingly, as he was their unofficial leader and one of the main founders of the world Below) still found immense joy in sharing a game with his beloved adopted son, still hoping he might beat him again.

Vincent was making it easy for him, though, today, and Father knew exactly what the reason was for the younger man's distraction. Just when he was about to remark about it, Vincent suddenly straightened up in his chair and his face looked tense.

"What's wrong?" Father asked, but he didn't get an answer, for Vincent shot out of his chamber and disappeared.

Catherine unlocked the door to the tall brownstone, balancing a paper bag containing some groceries she had purchased just before getting a cab. The brownstone belonged to one of her friends who was away for some time, as the house was under renovation. She was allowed to offer it as a temporary accommodation for Carol, the woman who, as Catherine had found out in her investigation, had been the real target of the attack Catherine had suffered eight months before. The two women had some similar features and, because they had attended the same party that night, the attackers had confused Catherine with her. Later though, they did find her, and she wasn't as lucky as Catherine, not having the financial freedom to fix her face; the injuries she sustained had caused her a permanent disfigurement around one of her eyes. Carol was an important witness to her former employer's criminal activities, and her life was in danger. Therefore, Catherine arranged for her stay away from her own home until the trial.

Catherine was walking up the massive staircase, calling out Carol's name, but she didn't get any response. As she stopped at the opened door to the room where her witness was staying, she froze. Carol was lying lifeless on the floor, and when Catherine knelt to her side to examine her, she found out there was nothing she could do for her anymore.

At the same moment, a man's voice behind her said, "Don't bother, she's dead." A second man joined him, holding a knife. "And so are you."

In a second, Catherine grabbed the free-standing lamp next to her and slammed it into both men with force before running out of the room. She tried to run down the stairs but saw another man running up in her direction, so she swiftly turned around and flew into the nearest open room and quietly closed the door behind her. She locked it and listened for a few seconds.

The men were trying out all the doors on the other side of the corridor, but she knew they would reach hers soon. She looked around for any help she could find for her defense. As she grabbed a wooden footstool into her hands, she stepped back a bit and knocked something over, which caused a loud crash. At the same moment, she heard the men trying to break into the room. Luckily, there was another door, and when she tried it, it was open.

Catherine rushed out and made her way from room to room back to the staircase, just at the moment the criminals broke down the door to the first room. She saw a man at the staircase turned with his back to her, and she kicked him over. The man fell down the stairs and appeared shaken. She started running down the stairs past him when he grabbed her by the ankle and pulled her to the ground. After a bit of a fight, she suddenly saw the other two men at the top of the stairs approaching her. One of them was holding a gun and when he descended to her, he pointed it to her head.

"Say good-night," he said.

Just before he could pull the trigger, a deafening animal roar penetrated through the entrance next to them as its door got shattered into splinters. Catherine looked in the direction of the noise and her eyes widened - she saw Vincent. But he was unlike how she remembered him, He roared

again, snarling at the men in a terrible grimace, showing his fangs in full force, his eyes burning with rage.

With one slash of his clawed hand, Vincent disarmed the man pointing the gun at him, and threw him with immense power against the wall. Then he turned to the other man and, with another roar, he pushed him against the wall by the neck, breaking it. Just before the third man managed to stab him with a knife, he turned around and bore his claws into his stomach, pushed him to the ground and, leaning over him, killed him instantly.

The next moment, he turned his head to Catherine, and within a second the expression on his face changed - it turned from rage to shame. The moment Vincent met Catherine's eyes, he felt the ground beneath him shaking and his heart clouding with agony and despair.

Wide-eyed, her face displayed the horror she had just witnessed, but she was unable to say anything. She felt the terrible shock clamping her heart. And yet, she didn't run away, she didn't move from her spot, just kept staring at him.

It's over. She knows what I am now. I will never see her again.

He pulled back from the body beneath him, slumping down against the wall behind him, his head bowed deeply in shame and despair, his clawed hands hanging lifelessly over his knees.

Catherine's face suddenly softened and, instead of horror, her look turned into one of compassion, seeing how utterly ashamed and devastated he was at her seeing the dark side of him. *My God, who am I to judge him? He did it for me. Without him, I would be dead.*

She walked over to him and took his hands in hers. He lifted up his head in disbelief.

"We can't stay here!" she said, pulling him up, and their eyes locked for a moment.

Vincent realized she wasn't appalled, as he thought she would be, and in amazement, he took over the lead and quickly guided her out the same way he had come in, just moments before.

When they reached the basement of the house, she saw the huge hole in the brick wall, with bricks lying all over nearby. *It was him who did it! What enormous strength must be lurking in that body.*

Without looking back, they entered the world of tunnels, with Vincent leading her safely to a place not far from the threshold in the basement of her building. At first, there was silence between them. But after a few minutes, when they knew they weren't being followed, Catherine stopped him by calling his name.

He stopped but didn't turn around; he was afraid of what he would see in her eyes - surely by now she had realized what a monster he was.

"Vincent," she repeated again, softly touching his arm, and the gentleness in her quiet voice sent a shiver down his spine. He turned around slowly but was not able to look at her.

"I'm sorry you had to see that. When the darkness overtakes me, I... I lose control of myself." He whispered what was extremely difficult for him to put into words.

"Have you done it before?" she asked gently, feeling deep sympathy with this gentle giant.

"Only a couple of times. Only when the lives of those I love are in danger," he breathed.

There was a moment of silence as they both realized the deeper meaning of what he had just said.

Vincent closed his eyes then bowed his head again and held his breath.

"Thank you," Catherine said quietly.

Vincent looked up incredulously, staring at her in shock. She understood the struggle of the feelings inside of him completely.

"You don't need to be ashamed. I know you did it to save my life," Catherine added and smiled.

Vincent swallowed and a little sigh left his throat.

She saw tears starting to form in his beautiful eyes.

“I... I would do anything for you, Catherine,” he said with a hoarse voice.

Her body trembled at those words and her heart started pounding. She wanted to say something, but her throat was clamped for some reason, and so she just smiled at him; her eyes were full of empathy, gratitude and deep affection, which Vincent was as yet unable to understand. He attempted a smile and started walking again.

Reaching more familiar areas to her as she remembered them from their first walk up to her home, Catherine walked in front of him; he felt comfortable having her in his sight in case any unwanted intruders endangered them. When they came to a tall and wide stone hall with various staircases leading along the concrete walls, she stopped in her tracks and turned to him, immense gratitude and affection mirroring in her eyes.

“I owe you everything... *Everything!*”

Vincent’s face was calm but she saw great sadness in his eyes.

“You owe me nothing,” he said quietly. “I’m part of you, Catherine, just as you are part of me. Wherever you go, wherever I am, I’m with you.” He sighed and suddenly found it difficult to breathe. “Goodbye,” he whispered and his body slowly and unwillingly stepped back to retreat and walk away, but he couldn’t take his eyes off of her.

Catherine’s face and especially her eyes were full of sadness. She wasn’t willing to part from him. She felt a strong pull towards him. *You can’t leave me like this, it can’t end like this.* She took a few short breaths and suddenly, she quickly put her arms around his shoulders as tightly as she could.

Vincent sighed and closed his eyes as his arms embraced her slender body carefully but longingly. It was his turn to take a few short breaths now, and his heart was racing at light speed, heat and love spreading in his veins.

Catherine slowly pulled back to look into his crystal clear blue eyes, still holding his arms. “For now,” she said and a resolute smile appeared on her lips. Vincent was unable to speak, he just kept gazing into those green pools, and she could see how deeply moved he was. She released his arms and, still smiling, turned around and started walking away.

Vincent finally moved in the opposite direction, trying to catch his breath and slow his heartbeat. Just before he started descending the stone staircase, he turned around to look at her one last time. His heart skipped a beat when he saw Catherine turned around to look at *him* at the very same moment.

She smiled again and watched him turn eventually and walk down the stairs. *We will meet again, Vincent, it is our destiny,* she thought, and couldn’t stop smiling as she started the short remainder of her journey back home.

END

(1) And (2) excerpts from the novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens.