

# *The Key To Any Door*

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Note: Certain dialogue was taken from the episode '*A Distant Shore*' from the *Beauty and the Beast* TV series, written by Marie Therese Squerciatti.



*"Ladies and gentlemen, we will land in New York in approximately 25 minutes..."*

Catherine shifted nervously in her seat and looked out from the little oval-shaped window into the clear afternoon sky above the sporadic puffy clouds that looked like snowy peaks.

4 days, 2 hours and approximately 37 minutes... That's how long she had been parted from Vincent since she left for Los Angeles, following a lead on an important counterfeit operation. Gina Barrett, the music showbusiness professional and an important witness for the New York D.A.'s office was sleeping in the seat next to her now. Catherine Chandler was truly a master of her profession.

While she kept busy and focused on looking for Gina during the days in the hot Californian sun, it was the nights as she returned to her hotel room when she felt lonely, longing for the warm and safe harbour of Vincent's arms, the soothing sound of his voice, the sensual and caressing look of his sapphire-blue eyes. Although having a large bed for herself, she felt lost in it, cold to the bone, embracing herself, imagining it was his beloved arms keeping her warm on her balcony. She was counting the days until they would see each other again.

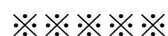
How was it possible to feel such longing? She asked herself the same question time and time again and still couldn't find the best answer. They were no teenagers anymore to feel the youthful excitement of first love. Yet somewhere deep in their minds, after all the perils and near-death moments they had endured, every moment Catherine and Vincent spent in each other's company felt like it could be their last. In many ways, their love resembled Romeo and Juliet, though the ending was a secret to them. Maybe that was the reason for the longing - the feeling of the urgency to spend every minute together filled meaningfully and to the utmost today, because none of them knew what could happen tomorrow.

"Rise and shine, Sleeping Beauty," Catherine whispered to Gina, smiling. The latter opened her eyes and squinted into the light. "We'll be landing soon."

"Thank goodness." Her companion yawned and straightened up in her seat. "I'm dying to see that boss of yours." She thought for a moment, then grinned. "Yeah, I bet Joe is the type who wears his pants above his gut."

Catherine laughed wholeheartedly, shaking her head. The wide smile lingered on her face as she leaned back again.

*I'm almost home, Vincent...*



It was already dark when the cab stopped at the curb next to her apartment building. Catherine hastily paid the driver and took her luggage from his hands, thanking him, while already running towards the entrance door. She flew through the hallway straight into the lift, fleetingly greeting the concierge. After pushing the button next to number 18, her eyes impatiently roamed the lift door in front of her. She was counting seconds.

*He's waiting; I know he is...*

Catherine almost tripped when she ran out of the lift, reaching her apartment door quicker than any time before. Fumbling impatiently with the keys to unlock it, her anticipation and excitement rose to enormous heights, her heart rate already elevated, as if she had just run for miles. She had barely closed the door, dropping her luggage and keys on the floor, when she ran towards the bedroom. Feeling a shiver of anticipation, she saw his shadow behind the French doors. She removed the last barrier between them by opening the door hastily.

He turned to her, interrupted from his restless pacing on the balcony. For an instant, the time stopped, and they were gazing at each other, almost in disbelief that they were standing in each other's presence again. But then the hands of time moved on again, and Catherine finally got what she had desired for four days, when she got lost in his embrace, holding him as tight as she could.

"Catherine!" Vincent breathed with a strained voice while inhaling the scent of her silky hair.

"I'm back!" she responded with joy, clinging on to him.\

"I felt your return," he said, as if amazed by his own exceptional ability to sense her wherever she was. "Oh, these four days..."

"I know... I know!"

As much as she didn't want to release him from their embrace, Catherine longed to look into his eyes again. She pulled back, remaining in his arms, though. Her fingers gently traced his right cheek and put aside a golden strand of his hair.

"There was a moment I felt you were in great danger," Vincent said, visibly distressed. "There was nothing I could do. I wanted desperately to reach out to you!"

"But you did, Vincent," Catherine interrupted him, stressing each word. "I could feel you watching over me. I heard you call out!" She paused to let the fact sink in, seeing his astonished expression.

"Vincent, you saved me!"

However strong he knew their bond was, he still wondered how much stronger could it still get, if it withstood thousands of miles already.

"Catherine, this..." He shook his head. "... this bond we share, this connection..."

"Yes," she confirmed, the expression on her face leaving no doubt. "*That* strong."

One more intense look into each other's eyes and they were in a tight embrace again. They cheated death again, three thousand miles apart. How many more times would they? Neither of them could suppress the unspoken question in their minds, but being well aware of their luck, they held on to each other with the verve and passion of survivors. The feel of their bodies clinging together in the mild spring night air was all that mattered at that moment.

"I missed you so much..." Catherine breathed when they finally pulled apart again. "I could feel you in my heart, but it wasn't the same, I was all right when focusing on the case, but the rest of the time, Vincent... I felt so lonely... Sometimes it scares me how much I feel bound to you, to your presence, to being close to you every day," she admitted shyly, while her beloved was watching her quietly but with understanding. "It scares me because I'm afraid I might drive you away..."

"You could never drive me away, Catherine, not with your love. I felt... I *feel* the same," he proclaimed, with a hint of a smile. "I know it's only been four days, and people often need to spend even longer time away from their loved ones but..." His voice trailed off, afraid to confess too much.

"But we are not them." She smiled, and her look softened again. "We are something that has never been."

Vincent sighed and buried his head in her shoulder, holding her tight against his solid frame.

"Yes....," he whispered, and Catherine sensed he was smiling.

Gently stroking his hair, she succumbed to the feeling of pure bliss, warming her heart that felt incomplete for four days.

He raised his head and placed a kiss on her crown while rocking her softly. "We are together now; that's all that matters," he whispered, and his soothing gravelly baritone affected her with the same intensity as always.

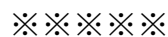
They stood there wordlessly for a few minutes, then Vincent's rational side (and the bond) spoke again.

"You are tired, Catherine," he stated.

She lifted her head to look into his eyes again. They were calm again, the distress from before gone for good.

"Jetlag." She chuckled softly. "It's starting to kick in, but I can't go to bed just yet. Not when I was waiting for this for days..."

The longing in her eyes made him smile and convinced him it was pointless trying to persuade her to rest. If he was honest with himself, he wouldn't have had the strength anyway. The longing was mutual.



*"There be none of Beauty's daughters  
With a magic like thee;  
And like music on the waters  
Is thy sweet voice to me:  
When, as if its sound were causing  
The charmed ocean's pausing,  
The waves lie still and gleaming,  
And the lull'd winds seem dreaming ... "* (1)

Vincent lowered the book in his hands and looked at Catherine, comfortably leaning against his arm, resting. He couldn't count the times they had sat on the balcony like this, spending the precious minutes and hours the night graciously offered them. It was he who read to Catherine most of the time, and he obliged her gladly, knowing how the sound of his voice calmed her soul, especially after a stressful day at work.

And yet, the moments when she took the book from his hands and decided to read to him in return were the ones he cherished the most - her voice was *like music on the waters* to Vincent's ears. His mind travelled back in time to the night when he

sat on the same balcony for the first time, insecure, undecided but unable to leave. It was the same night when Catherine took the volume of *Great Expectations* in her hands and with great enthusiasm read the last chapter to him...

"Keep reading, please," Her soft voice brought him back to the present. "I've missed this, very much."

Vincent smiled and gently brushed his cheek against the top of her head. Then he picked up the volume again and continued.

*"And the midnight moon is weaving  
Her bright chain o'er the deep;  
Whose breast is gently heaving,  
As an infant's asleep:  
So the spirit bows before thee,  
To listen and adore thee;  
With a full but soft emotion,  
Like the swell of Summer's ocean." (2)*

Catherine's contented sigh made him smile.

"That was the last one," he stated and sensed her heart sinking a little - she knew he would have to leave soon. The way she nestled closer to him only confirmed it.

"I wish you could stay," Catherine whispered, more to herself than to him.

Vincent's smile faded as she spoke out loud his own thought. Lately, it was getting much harder for him to part from her, whether they met on her balcony or Below, in the tunnels. Especially since the night she almost drowned in the lake in Stony Point... He shuddered involuntarily at the memory he had been trying to erase for almost three weeks now.

"Vincent, what's wrong?" Catherine lifted her head to see his face in the soft light cast from her bedroom.

Once more, Vincent was reminded of how much stronger the bond was becoming on her side.

"Nothing to trouble you," he replied with a small smile. She didn't seem convinced, though, and when he saw the unasked question in her emerald eyes, he sighed and leaned his head back against the half-wall. "I was only thinking how I sat here on the night when I almost lost you in the lake."

The words came out unusually quickly as if Vincent wanted to shake them off before he could dwell on them.

Catherine sighed, closing her eyes for a moment. However, it wasn't the memory of her traumatic experience in the ice-cold water that resurfaced in her mind. It was the feel of Vincent's unusual lips exploring hers when it was all over...

She opened her eyes again and observed the serious look in Vincent's eyes, thinking about what part of that night to address, before speaking.

"I was so afraid for you," she whispered, her voice betraying her and making him look at her. "Don't get me wrong, I *was* terrified when he locked me in that car boot, but..."

Her eyes noticed the flicker of rage in his deep-set eyes, and she shook her head.

"I can't decide when I was more afraid for your life, Vincent, whether when you were trapped in the Maze or in danger of exposure by that... man." She couldn't find words to describe exactly what she thought of her stalker.

"I felt so desperately helpless," Vincent said quietly. "I knew you were being strong for my sake, but Catherine... You can't imagine what it felt like..." With a heavy sigh, he squeezed his eyes shut, leaning his head back against the balcony half-wall. *Oh, I know exactly what it felt like*, Catherine thought to herself but only put her hand on his arm.

"Tell me about it," she prompted him gently, suddenly realising they never talked about his own feelings and trauma from that experience, only hers.

There was a moment of silence while Vincent contemplated whether it was appropriate to burden her with his heavy thoughts, but her quiet patience persuaded him that it was. He looked into her caring eyes again.

"Every time you're in danger, fear is the first feeling washing over me, but then I immediately focus on helping you, and the fear steps back into the shadow in my mind. Maybe it's instinct or the rational side of my brain guiding me, I'm not sure. But that night..."

He paused and shook his head.

"That night, the level of anxiety and fear I felt was higher than I've ever experienced before, and I couldn't..." He swallowed hard.

"What couldn't you?" Catherine encouraged him to go on.

"I couldn't help but think, '*maybe this is it... maybe we've pushed luck too far*'..." Vincent replied after a bit of hesitation, gutted by the admission of his loss of faith even for a moment.

There was a short moment of silence, both pondering the gravity of his words. Then Catherine straightened herself a bit to face him. Her hand slowly reached for his cheek, forcing him to look into her eyes.

"Luck is a fleeting thing, Vincent; everybody knows it," she started. "It brought us together, spared our lives many times after, but we've always known we can't rely on

it to stay with us forever. And it has nothing to do with the fact that I work for the D.A.'s office and you must be invisible for the world Above..."

As in countless times before, Vincent was captivated by her determination when she was trying to make something important come across. There was a flicker of flame in her eyes, reflecting the passion with which she spoke every word.

"Life is unpredictable," Catherine continued. "Laughter can turn into tears in minutes. We know that only too well... Life generously gives us the gifts of joy, happiness, family, friendships and love, but it doesn't hesitate to take them away from us at any time, often when we are unprepared and refuse to accept it. But..."

A warm smile reappeared on her gently illuminated face.

"However brief the moments of happiness, or how impossible our dreams may be it's all worth fighting for and believing in, no matter how difficult the fight. As long as we are together, anything is possible."

Her thumb slowly traced his stubbly cheek until it stopped on the edge of his unusual mouth. Catherine couldn't suppress glancing at it with a look of longing as she remembered the feel of his lips on her own only a few weeks ago.

*Don't push... Give him time...*

Vincent's eyes never left hers; a smile returned to his face as well now, washing away the traces of anxiety from before. He didn't miss Catherine's inner emotions, their bond wouldn't allow it. However, it didn't scare him off; he appreciated her willingness to wait for him to make the move, even if he wasn't about to make it that night.

*"A very little key will open a very heavy door; (3)"* he quoted, still smiling.

"Yes," Catherine agreed with delight and slowly moved her hand from his cheek to his chest. "Together, we are stronger than you might think, Vincent. Don't ever forget that."

He didn't reply; there was no need to. A gentle kiss on her forehead was sufficient enough and silenced Catherine to blissful contentment as she laid her head on Vincent's chest, enjoying their closeness again. The beaming smile refused to leave her face even when she closed her eyes, slowly but surely succumbing to fatigue and the ever-present dreams of a happy life...



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(1-2) Lord Byron: *Stanzas for Music*  
(3) Charles Dickens: *Hunted Down*