

A Midwinter Dream

by Angie

"Bare winter was suddenly changed to Spring..."

-Percy Bysshe Shelley

Catherine gazed out of the culvert entrance at the snowy world of Central Park at night and sighed. The lamps were hazy through the falling snow and the snow seemed to whirl and dance in those golden lights. Beneath one, a park bench was beginning to collect snow, and seemed the perfect image for the upcoming festive season now upon them.

Christmas card perfect, she thought and sighed. And she had come here to walk in it, yet, she could not make herself leave the culvert shadow. She was dressed for the weather, even wearing waterproof boots in case the culvert stream was not quite frozen over.

Suddenly, what was nagging her became painfully clear. In all the years she had known Vincent, they had never sat on a bench in Central Park. It would be nice, she mused, to just sit and gaze at one of the lakes, or some of the decorated trees, now shining their coloured lights, or just watch the snow fall.

A hand touched her shoulder and she jumped. Vincent was as quiet as usual, but his voice in her ear was still the only one she wanted to hear and she relaxed and leaned towards him.

"Why are you sad, Catherine?" he asked softly, moving beside her and putting an arm around her to bring her close under his cloak. "It is beautiful in the Park. A lovely night for a walk."

Catherine gazed up at him and smiled wistfully.

"Yes, it's beautiful, Vincent, and I did want to walk, until I thought of something. Vincent, we never just sit down sit on a bench and enjoy the peace and quiet. We walk and we stand for a short time, but then we move on, always moving, never lingering - well, except at Halloween."

Vincent said nothing for a few moments. He knew there was no need to explain the problem to his love. The benches were all in places on well-travelled pathways and therefore best avoided by him. They also tended to be brightly lit at night, a hazard he could not risk ... except at Halloween.

Not even a snowfall like the current one made it safe for him, because some night owls were abroad. Of course they could sit – if they could find a sufficiently secluded spot, but they had to be ready to jump and run at the first hint of anyone getting close. But in the night, under a park lamp standard, he would be visible for a long distance. Too risky. And dangerous. He did not want to have to be distracted from Catherine. And that was all too likely.

"So you would rather not go into the Park tonight?" he asked, already guessing the answer.

Catherine turned and hugged him.

"I guess I'm not in the mood for a walk," she admitted. "I think a nice hot chocolate and a story would be nice, though. Do you mind?"

"Of course not, Catherine," Vincent replied.

As they made their way back through the chilly upper ways to the home tunnels, he decided that something had to be done. Such a simple wish and he wanted to give it to Catherine. He would talk to Mouse.

They warmed themselves in his chamber then returned to their brownstone. Christmas was near, and Catherine had plenty to do, she berated herself, as they settled into bed. Pining for a sit down on a Park bench was not THAT important.

Vincent however, did not forget and managed to collar Mouse and put the problem to him. No one patrolled the Park more than Mouse, and truth to tell, Vincent suspected their tinker loved to look at all the Christmas decorations. If a light bulb - or few - went missing from some of the City strings, well, no one commented, and the sight of coloured lights gleaming in the home tunnels, powered by pirated electricity, was a sight no one could pretend they didn't enjoy.

Father diplomatically said nothing, even as the strings and lights seemed to increase every year. Mouse was careful in his harvesting. What the City crews thought is not recorded, but pilferage was not unknown in the Park. Vincent rationalized that replacing the bulbs was at least keeping the crews employed at a time when almost any excuse was used to cut staffing levels. Catherine had remarked on this, bewailed what it meant for the Park.

Mouse listened to the problem and his eyes lit up.

"Know where bench could be out of sight. Near tunnel entrance too. Mouse has metal bench in storage chamber. Found in junk yard. Needs piece welded, then paint white. More cheerful."

Vincent nodded, pleased and patted his friend on the shoulder. "I'll help you move it when it's ready, Mouse."

"Ok good. Get now and fix, then paint tomorrow. Ready in two days." The tinker ran off before Vincent could say more than "Thank you, Mouse" to his retreating back.

Two days later, true to his word, Mouse approached Vincent when he was alone.

"Bench ready," he announced in a stage whisper, looking around for any eavesdroppers. "Show you where bench goes now? Not far."

Vincent nodded and Mouse led the way to one of the tunnel entrances, a culvert that Laura had been prone to using. It was near one of the main Park entrances, and Vincent instinctively pulled back, uncertain.

"Don't worry," Mouse rebuked him softly. "Very safe."

They emerged from the familiar culvert facing a softly snowy area with a high bank, which effectively cut off the culvert from the nearby pathway, and the busy street beyond. A bench here would be perfect, Vincent decided. They could look up and see the City lights, yet would not be disturbed. The culvert stream made a right angle curve and its exit was also through a berm that blocked sight of the tunnel entry. And it was dim enough to satisfy even Vincent's enhanced sense of danger.

He focused on the little snowy dell and nodded. "And the bench, Mouse?"

"Ready. Come." Mouse ran back down the tunnel and Vincent followed him to one of their outlying storage places, one where they kept things that seemed unlikely to have a use. Just inside the entry, Mouse pointed at a plain metal bench, painted white.

Vincent smiled. "It is perfect, Mouse."

The two men grabbed an end and carried it back the way they had come. It was not heavy, fortunately, seemingly made as a decorative rather than a practical bench, but strong enough for their purposes, Vincent was sure.

They placed it against the wall to look towards the city, then stood back to regard it silently.

"Thank you, Mouse," Vincent said at last.

Mouse nodded and smiled. "Bring Catherine?"

"Very soon," Vincent promised.

And so it was. That evening, after dinner, Vincent proposed a walk, and his demeanour was enough to get Catherine to agree. They did not bother with additional clothing – and Vincent, for one of the few times in his life, decided not to go back to his chamber for his cloak. They were both wearing black wool outfits because they were trying on various Christmas costumes for the upcoming Christmas play. They would be warm and almost invisible in the dark little dell, even on a white bench. And it wasn't snowing.

He led her to the tunnel entrance, then stood back to let her see. He felt her astonishment and joy. Vincent looked out in turn, wondering at the reaction, and gasped.

There was a tree, a marvellous tree, next to the bench in the little dell. Not a real one, but one that seemed to be made of pearls. Where had Mouse found it? Perhaps it was better not to speculate, he decided. He was sure it was an interesting story. Mouse was much more careful about what he took from where these days. Vincent made himself relax and said nothing.

Catherine grabbed his hand and led him to the bench.

And for a few glorious minutes, that stretched until they were both starting to feel the chill, they sat together, gazing at the reflected light of the City and feeling both a part of its heart, yet apart. A few snowflakes began to fall and they looked at each other.

"We can come again, better dressed for the weather," Vincent remarked.

"Yes, but the first time is precious. I'm glad we are exactly as we are. Together, as if in our own backyard."

"Yes. We are all we need," he agreed. He reached under the bench and fished out what he had placed there earlier. With a flourish, he presented her with two roses - one red, one white.

Catherine grinned and gazed at him as she took the roses.

"Always, you know just what to do, to make a wonderful time, even more perfect," she told him.

"It is always perfect when you are with me," he replied softly. "But roses are precious. As you are."

"Our time together is precious," she agreed. "You never cease to amaze me, Vincent."



The End