



The episode "Remember Love" has often been referred to in the fandom as Vincent's version of "It's a Wonderful Life," since the parallels between the old Frank Capra Christmas staple and the episode are fairly obvious. That got me to wondering what Catherine's version of "It's a Wonderful Life" would look like, and as often happens, that musing led to a little fic. It's dark in places, but that's unavoidable, in a world without Catherine's special light.

I hope you enjoy this humble Christmas offering, one in which most of our tunnel family are still with us. Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to Everyone. Remember love, and that darkness sometimes really is just the absence of the light. And that sometimes, that light is you.

It's a Wonderful Life, Catherine

By Cindy Rae

For the Christmas Celebration on Treasure Chambers, 2016



To the world, you may just be one person. But to one person, you may be the world. ~ Dr. Seuss, among others.



Prologue

"We, the people of the City of New York, find the defendant... not guilty, your honor," the foreman said, handing the judge the appropriate note.

Briefcases across the aisle from Catherine's snapped shut as the man she'd been trying to convict pumped the hand of his attorney.

"No!" Catherine mouthed the word to Joe Maxwell. She was aghast.

"Steady, Radcliffe," Joe said, *sotto voce*.

"Mr. Foreman, is this the consensus of the jury?" the judge asked, sparing the prosecution table a withering glance.

"It is, Your Honor," the foreman replied.

The man Catherine Chandler was certain had killed his wife shot her a look of triumphant malice, before he turned back to the judge. A judge who was about to have no choice but to give him his freedom.

"It is thereby the decision of this court that in the case of *The People vs. Derek Plessy*, that Mr. Plessy is... not guilty. The verdict will be entered into public record and the case closed. The court would like to thank the ladies and gentlemen of the jury for their time and patience in what was a--"

The judge's voice faded to background noise as Catherine looked at Joe, shock in her eyes. She leaned over to whisper to him.

"No. Joe, no. We had him. He did it! He--"

"Pipe down or you'll get hit with a contempt charge." Under the table, he nudged her foot with his as he reached across her for a file, to disguise her outburst.

The two of them rose when the bailiff told them to do so, and they proceeded out of the site of the DA Office's latest defeat.

A few minutes later, Catherine's temper was no better.

"I can't believe this!" Catherine nearly shouted in the elevator.

"Burden of proof is on us, kiddo. Sometimes it goes that way." Joe gave a Gallic shrug. Christmas muzak played a tinny version of "Have a Holly Jolly Christmas" on the speaker over their heads.

Catherine fumed, feeling considerably less than "jolly." Problem was, it had been "going that way" for Catherine often, lately, in both her personal and professional life. She'd been the lead prosecutor on the case. Joe was just there as co-counsel.

"We worked so damn hard," she bemoaned.

"Mm. Next time, we go smarter, not harder. Be more efficient," Joe said, already thinking of the other things that loaded his plate.

"You said we should think about going for murder two. I should have listened to you. I bet he'd have copped to it," Catherine second-guessed both of them, as the doors slid open for the lobby.

Joe shrugged. "Blood under the bridge, now Radcliffe. Besides, we both know it was really murder one."

"We had the knife! How could they ignore that his fingerprints were all over it!"

"Because he never denied it was his knife." Joe didn't have to tell her what she already knew. "His wife was an invalid. He cooked her meals. Three different neighbors testified to it."

Catherine rubbed her forehead with her fingertips.

"He killed her. He was tired of taking care of her so he took out an insurance policy and he--"

"He had an alibi."

"His bookie? His bookie is a credible witness?"

Joe shrugged. "Two different witnesses say they saw him there around the time she died."

"A hard liquor drunk and another gambler," Catherine scoffed.

"Reasonable doubt and burden of proof, Radcliffe. We'll get 'em next time," Joe held the elevator door open for her as they stepped into the lobby.

"No!" Catherine was vehement. "Judge Lowell was clearly biased!"

Joe brought her up short amid a crowd of onlookers. His voice sharpened, just a touch. "You want to shout that a little louder? I don't think they heard you, in say, Queens."

He gave her a hard look, and Catherine had the good sense to look embarrassed at what was clearly a professional breach. This wasn't Joe's office, or her apartment. It was a courthouse, and her outburst had garnered stares.

She lowered her voice, but it remained firm. "But, Joe--!"

His whisper had a bite as he rounded on her. "Cathy, Judge Lowell is nearsighted, and vain about his glasses. He's a bit of a snob when it comes to his prize rose bushes and I'll even grant you he drinks too much, sometimes. But if you're going to allege bias, you better get ready to bring suit, or keep it *zipped*, counselor."

"Look, I'm sorry. I'm on a losing streak, lately, and..."

"And that little outburst is gonna make its way back upstairs. And next week, when I gotta go in front of him again, he'll remember it. Thanks, Chandler." Joe was not in the mood to be mollified.

Unfortunately for both of them, Catherine wasn't in the mood to be corrected.

"I *said* I was sorry. If you'd like me to go back up there and apologize, myself--"

"Please, please, don't. You've done enough, for one day." He replied as he opened the glass door to the street. In spite of his earlier attempt to mollify her he was clearly now in no better mood than she was.

Outside, the chilly December wind had a bite, though there was no snow. Human traffic poured out onto the busy New York street. Quitting time, or close to it.



The Criminal Courts Building

Catherine was right on his heels. "I've done enough? And what the *hell* is *that* supposed to mean?" she demanded. Her voice was back up, and there was blood in her eyes.

Joe shifted his brief case from one hand to the other. His slow exhale meant he was reaching for patience. His next words meant he didn't find any.

"I think maybe it means you need to take a couple days off, for one thing," he replied, waving down a taxi.

Catherine was stunned, and her expression said as much. "You mean I'm being punished?" she asked, demanding clarity.

He gave her a stern look. "I mean you need a couple days off. I mean you're right about the streak you've been on. People have 'em. Maybe you need to take a couple days to reassess."

That did it.

"Maybe my percentages would be better if you stopped throwing more files on my desk than anybody else's!" She was hot, now, and again drawing stares.

"You've got the experience!" His voice rose to match hers. "We're short-handed until Ted gets back from a funeral and Arlene comes back from maternity leave!"

"So you make it my problem!" she charged, as a cab pulled up to the curb.

Now they were definitely getting stared at. Joe willed his voice lower, then rolled his brown eyes at her. "Cry me a river, Radcliffe." He was giving no quarter.

Catherine's response was equally biting. "I don't need this damn job, you know." She knew she shouldn't say it, even as she did.

Joe settled his full gaze on her, and openly took her measure. He wanted to ask her if that was her resignation notice. She saw it in his dark eyes. Instead, he opted for something just as cutting, but less final.

"Another month like this last one, and it might not need *you*, either. And if you don't *like* that, I don't blame you. But while you're stewing, just remember that *I* get to go give Moreno the good news about Derek Plessy, now, and file the paperwork," he added. "Take a break, Cathy. That's an order."

Joe got in the taxi and waved it on, not offering to share the ride.

Catherine stamped a well-heeled foot, and simmered, on the sidewalk.

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By the time she got home, Catherine had cooled down enough to think a bit more clearly, though not happily. Her win/loss percentages were lousy, this month. Everyone at the office had been burning the candle at both ends, lately. Joe was going to take the brunt of John Moreno's temper for not just the outcome of the case, but her outburst, in the lobby.

Great. Just great, Catherine thought.

She and Joe had taken their work frustrations out on each other, before. But not this badly.

And her personal life wasn't looking much better than her professional one, she decided, indulging in a little self-pity as she threw her brief case down on her sofa.

She and Vincent had barely spent more than fifteen consecutive minutes in each other's company for what felt like weeks, and when she pushed for more, she could feel the strain that caused, for him.

"I *hate* my life," she shouted to her empty apartment as she yanked off her boots and heaved them into the corner. She knew she probably owed Joe Maxwell some kind of an apology, but she wasn't feeling up to it, at the moment. And she was positive he owed her one, as well.

Her answering machine light was on. She punched the button and Joe's Brooklyn accent filled the room. He was calling to apologize, at least some.

"Hey. It's me. Listen, I'm... sorry for storming off like that. Of course you've had a tough time, lately. We'll get 'em next time. I'll shift some of your cases over to Escobar and you can call me a few choice words when you come back on Monday." He sighed into the phone. "I'll see if there's anything else we can get on Plessy. Go do some Christmas shopping, Cathy. Sorry for anything I said."

So. He was sorry. And implying she wasn't good enough to handle her cases, that they should be given to Rita, who was already swamped. And he wasn't taking back the "offer" to have her stay home a couple of days. And he apologized.

As apologies went, it was such a mixed bag, Catherine didn't know what to do with it.

Part of Catherine wanted to call back and say that she was sorry, too. Part of her wanted Joe to choke on the apology he'd just given her. She was mad, and wanted to vent. Derek Plessy's smug features swam before her eyes. Double jeopardy laws protected him from being tried again, and they both knew it. Charging him with illegal gambling was hardly going to make up for Charlotte Plessy's death.

Damn it!

Catherine knew she had to stop thinking about it, or she'd become furious, all over again. Joe was more than a little right. It was blood under the bridge, at this point.

Charlotte Plessy's blood, to be exact, Catherine thought glumly.

She stripped off her blazer and poured herself a glass of wine. She'd about decided to return Joe's call (for better or worse), when her phone rang. Thinking it might be him, again, she picked it up.

Charles Chandler's voice came over the line. "Honey? It's Dad. Are you running late?"

Was I running late? For what? Catherine thought, keeping the cordless phone up to her ear. She looked toward the clock. Five-thirty. Just.

"Hi, um... Dad? Was I supposed to meet you?" Catherine carried the cordless phone into the kitchen to check her wall calendar. The date was circled in red.

Damn. Again. Yes. She was late. And on the wrong side of town. And in no mood to put on a pretty dress and meet her father for dinner with Hal Sherwood.

The court date she'd had obscured the smaller notation she'd made for this day. Now that she saw it, she remembered it.

Charles continued speaking. "Hal's here. Says he'd love to--"

"Please, Daddy, tell him I'm so sorry. I just... it was a rough day, and--"

"You had to cancel last time, too... And I think, the time before that." Her Father's voice had just adopted that "patient" tone. The one parents use when their children are about to disappoint them. Again. The one that made Catherine feel about ten years old.

"I know," Catherine apologized. *Should I just throw on a dress and jump into a cab?*

No. No, she couldn't. Not after the day, and for that matter the month she'd just had. Was having. Still.

"I just... please send my regrets. I'll be sure to call him later, and apologize."

Charles' tone became almost frosty. "Well. If you can find the time." Charles was clearly feeling put out by being put off by his daughter. Which would have been unreasonable, had this not been the third time in as many weeks, the first two having to do with goings on in the tunnels. She'd had to plead "too tired" for one broken engagement, and then "feeling sick" for the second one.

She was running out of excuses, and they both knew it.

Catherine heard the click of the connection being broken and wanted to all but throw the handset across the room.

I can't believe this! She'd not asked for this mess, for this life. She'd not asked for it. And she was doing the best she could. Even Joe agreed with that. Even though this was the third case she'd lost this month, she was trying. Hard.

With precious little to show for it, on any front.

And all of a sudden Joe's "we'll get them next time" felt like just about as condescending as Charles' "Well. If you can find the time."

"Damn everybody!" Catherine swore out loud, slamming the phone down.



Chapter One

No Matter How Bad A Day Starts Out, There's Always Room For A Little More Deterioration...

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If the disappointing day had been lousy, the disappointing night ended up being worse. She'd had an hour to seethe, after sunset, and the time had made her mood no better.

Catherine paced her apartment and took a few moments to catalogue her "sins." She'd lost the case, and a man she was fairly sure had killed his frightened wife was now free and on the street, probably enjoying a drink with his attorneys, or even his bookie. She'd ticked off her boss, and probably a judge. She wasn't taking "a few well deserved days off," she'd been placed on leave, at her boss' behest, and at a time when they desperately needed the people. She'd annoyed her father, who, Charles Chandler-like, was pretending to not be annoyed, to show how annoyed he was.

So there was no speaking to either man, not for a couple of days, at least. Joe was Joe. He'd not had much faith in her to begin with, though she'd earned his respect the hard way. Catherine stewed about that as well, feeling like she had to work twice as hard to get half as far, sometimes.

As for her father, Charles never shouted at her. He simply looked disapproving, and adopted a certain tone. One that had always had the power to make Catherine wince, internally.

By the time Vincent came over her balcony wall, she was ready to simply grab him and hold on, and pour out every miserable difficulty.

"Vincent. You wouldn't believe the day I've had." She ran into his strong arms.

"I understand it was quite the challenge," he said, not bothering to tell her that the bond had been practically screaming at him, since late afternoon.

Vincent, however, had other obligations. He was well aware of her mood, having sensed it bellowing at him since the verdict at the courthouse. He also knew she wasn't in danger. And he knew she wasn't happy, at the moment.

"I know things have gone... not as you would wish, today," he said sympathetically, trying not to keep an eye on the clock.

"Work was awful. I lost a case, Joe is mad at me, and so is my father. Maybe a judge. Probably Rita Escobar, as well."

After a few precious moments of listening to her list some of her woes, Vincent couldn't avoid looking at the sweep of the second hand, on her mantle clock.

Regrettably, Vincent realized he had no real cure for any of her difficulties, at least none he could think of, right now. And that at that exact moment, a flooding chamber meant he wasn't even a very good sounding board.

He gave her a scant few minutes of his time, then told her he had to leave. That the time they were spending now was stolen from some other important chore he was supposed to be doing.

"Others are waiting for me. It's vital I return," he said.

Catherine was floored. She'd come home wanting more than Vincent's presence. She'd wanted his closeness. But tonight wasn't going any better for that than the other nights had been, lately. When he withdrew from her, when he started to make physical distance between them for what felt like the thousandth time, she exploded at him.

"You're leaving, already? You just got here!"

"I only came to tell you that the repairs to Olivia's chamber will take longer than expected, and--"

"Excuse me. Do I get to come first, at some point? Vincent, I don't think you even understand what it is I'm going through." She was complaining, openly, and she knew it.

Vincent felt pulled between two poles.

"I do understand. And I realize that today's ... outcomes weren't what you would want, and that you are... irritated. But... with Kanin gone, I *must*—"

Catherine felt as if she might pop a blood vessel. "Oh, and I suppose *that's* my fault, too, for trying to help Mrs. Davis! Fine! Go work, then," she snapped. She drained the wine glass, and set it down. Hard. He was glad it didn't break.

"People are waiting for me," he repeated, trying to explain. "The room is ankle deep in water. My strength is needed. I must *go*, Catherine," he told her, backing away from her outrage, and a little confused by it. His love was usually more understanding.

"Yes. You should. You should go." she'd repeated, willing her tongue to say nothing more cutting.

She didn't have to try to rein her words in. He could feel all of her anger, through their bond. All her rage, her need, her disappointment, and her frustration. She needed time to vent, to work through her grievances. He just didn't happen to have any, at the moment. And her mood was almost as exhausting for him as it was for her, considering how much he sensed her.

"I can try to return later," he offered.

"No," she refused. "It will be late. Other people need you. Other people *always* need you." She was pouring another glass of Chablis, well aware she sounded like the spoiled debutante she used to be. It only made her angrier.

Vincent was uncomfortable with the vitriol in her charge. "Perhaps it would have been better if I had waited to come when I could spend more time with you. Or at least better if I had not come only to say I had to go, again." he inclined his head, and turned to leave.

Cathy's head snapped up, from watching wine tumble into the glass. Did she detect a certain "tone" in that voice? She wasn't sure if she did, but she knew she'd had enough of *that*, for one day.

She also knew she didn't ask too much of him. That half the trouble between her and her father had been caused by the time she'd given to the tunnel community, time spent helping Peter box up and deliver much-needed medical

supplies. She'd forgotten what the other time she'd cancelled on Charles had been about, but was fairly certain it had more to do with Vincent's concerns than her own. There had been ... something. Something she couldn't quite remember the details of, given her present state of mind.

"I'm sorry if I upset you further," Vincent added.

Yes. He definitely has a tone in his voice, Catherine decided.

"Perhaps things will be better in the morning," he concluded, turning to go.

"Perhaps things will be better when I stop thinking we're more than we are."

Whether that was the Chablis on an empty stomach talking, or the bottomless well of her frustration talking, Catherine couldn't say, for certain. She only knew that she couldn't, simply could not, resist saying it.

She knew she didn't mean it. Except for the part of her that absolutely did, right now. She knew she was being petty, and that made her feel even more defensive. She wanted his presence, his steady advice, and even a little sympathy, if she was honest. And she was about to get none of those.

"Catherine!" He turned back to her. He'd felt her frustration, disbelief, and then her anger and sorrow, all afternoon. But he had no cure for Joe Maxwell's censure of her, or her father's disappointment. And short of a life or death situation, he needed to be somewhere else, an hour ago. Luke's crib was up on cinder blocks.

And Catherine was spoiling for a fight.

Or make that another one of those, considering the day she's been having, Vincent thought.

"I'm not perfect. Everybody wants me to be, and I'm just not. So everybody can just goddam deal with it." She rarely swore at him. And though he knew it was unwise to give her a show of temper back, Vincent too, felt that he was doing all he could, under the circumstances.

"Cullen looked at me in disbelief when I told him I had to leave. He, Olivia, and Rebecca are carrying everything she owns out of her chamber, and hauling it to higher ground, right now. And it isn't just about that. There's a security issue to

consider. There's a break in the main pipe near the chamber, and I need to hold it stable so it can be welded, be repaired, before city work crews try to come down and trace the drop in water pressure."

He tried to explain his situation to her without sounding like he was irritated, which he clearly was. An evening spent standing in cold water while a steel pipe rested on his shoulders was hardly a pleasant prospect.

Catherine raised a sandy eyebrow. "I said, 'go,'" she repeated. She blew out an unsteady stream of air, struggling for some kind of control. Truth to tell, she didn't really want to talk through the day from start to finish, since living through it was work and stress enough. She wanted to just be held. Wanted to be comforted. She wanted his time. She wanted... she didn't know exactly what she wanted. But typical of this day, she was positive she wasn't going to get it.

"Catherine..." his tone told her he was asking for her understanding.

She held up a staying hand. "You have things to do. I have things to do. Go do them," she said, giving him her back, as she snagged the glass of wine off the patio table, and stalked to the far corner of the balcony.

He stood for several long moments, then she heard him slip over the wall, leaving her to her own furiously disappointed company. She wasn't sure if she heard him say he would return as soon as possible, or not. In the mood she was in, she wasn't sure of anything.

She went inside her apartment, set the glass on a side table, and threw herself, hard, down on one of her small sofas. Tears came because they couldn't not come. She sat amid a storm of weeping, berating herself for being sharp with him, for having the poor sense to call out a judge in the lobby of a courthouse, for not being able to build a stronger case, for neglecting her father, and about life in general.

It was the kind of emotional storm where a woman could be inclined to question just about every choice she'd ever made. It felt suddenly as if nothing was working. Not her career, not her relationship with her father, not the barely-there relationships she had with the few friends she seldom saw, and not the relationship she shared (sometimes) with Vincent.

Suddenly, it all felt as if it was all too hard, and gave back too little. She missed her friends. She missed her mother, which had nothing to do with anything, right now. She wanted her life to mean more than interviewing witnesses, half of whom she now figured were probably lying, anyway. Wanted it to produce more than failed verdicts or plea deals with criminals who, guilty as sin, were just angling for a lighter sentence if they confessed to a lesser charge.

Catherine tried to compartmentalize her miseries, and found it nearly impossible.

She wiped her eyes. She'd hated corporate law, but at least she'd been able to do it. Though she knew she'd absolutely *needed* to leave it, at least her mistakes there didn't let murderers back out on the street. As for the plea deals, there were compromises to make in corporate law, too, to be sure, but at least they weren't *that* bad.

And for compromises, her relationship with Vincent seemed utterly built on those.

For a tiny, ill-gotten moment, she wished Elliot Burch was back in her life. Then she pushed the thought away as a horrible one, on every level. She was not in love with him. And dooming Elliot to a loveless affair would be cruel in the extreme, no matter what he felt for her. She knew he'd come over, if she called. And that such a breach would be beyond conscionable. Her heart wasn't free to love. She was in love with Vincent.

And speaking of love...

She was her father's only living relative, and she was neglecting him terribly. And she hadn't seen Jenny Aaronson in longer than she hadn't seen Charles. Jenny was now out of town, spending the holidays with her parents. She'd wanted to get together with Catherine before she left, but... well. Catherine couldn't even remember the last time she'd called Nancy Tucker, just to chat. There had simply been no time. Catherine felt like she was failing all of them.

She'd been ... overzealous in her career of late, pursuing leads hard, but sometimes too sure of her conclusions, and not examining things from every

angle, trying to see it the way a defense attorney or a jury might be made to see things... and that too, was causing failure after failure.

What if I'm not just on a streak? What if I'm just not much better at criminal law than I was at corporate law? How many people am I going to help if I'm incompetent, no matter how hard I try?

Shades of Nancy's comment regarding "fashion law" came back to haunt Catherine. It wasn't an undeserved charge, back in the day. She knew she'd spent more time in the boutiques than she had in the law library, to be sure. Back when she knew a job was waiting for her at her father's firm, so all she needed were barely passing grades and to pass the Bar exam.

What if I missed what I needed, back there? Catherine asked herself. What if I'm really not very good?

And Vincent. Their whole relationship was a series of stolen moments. And lately, they hadn't even had those.

Loving him doesn't mean I'm good for him, that I'm right for him, she thought morosely, as the wine turned her stomach to acid. And it doesn't mean he's good for me. What if this is how it's always going to be?

She hugged a throw pillow to her chest. *God, I hate this. It's like I wish I'd never been born.*

And though she knew it was hyperbole, the self-pitying sentiment felt right, at the moment.

Swollen-eyed, she rubbed her temples and lay curled up in a corner of the sofa, beyond exhausted.

And she slipped into a troubled, fitful sleep.



Chapter Two

Be Careful What You Wish For...

Exhausted and spent, Catherine slept hard. Very hard. Wrung out and depressed, she felt an inordinate amount of time pass, as her eyelids remained closed. It felt as if days were sliding by her, like the season changed, which was to say, it deepened. Catherine knew it did. It no longer felt like December. More like January, or even early February.

Eyes still closed, Catherine had an odd thought. *I missed Vincent's birthday.*

Though part of her knew she was still asleep on her sofa, the terrace door had remained ajar, and she'd fallen asleep without a blanket, or throw. The room grew cold, and in her dream, "cold" translated into snow.

Catherine woke up, and rose to close the doors. There was white, everywhere.

She crossed to her balcony railing, startled to see the park bathed not in the dark palette of a snowless December, but in no color at all, save white.

The snow was so thick and heavy, it obscured all but the stoutest trunks of the bare trees. The pines and spruces looked like something out of Currier and Ives, the white blanket of snow spread upon them so thickly that no green was apparent. Mist shrouded some parts of the park, and Catherine realized that a steady breeze was causing the snow to blow. Ice crystals climbed up her window panes. Frost glistened, everywhere.

Though the park was a fairyland of white, the balcony had been shoveled clean. The table was gone. So was the rose bush.

Had it died in the frost? She had no idea. And part of her knew she was still dreaming, even though this felt different than any dream she usually had.

How odd I dreamed that I woke up, she thought, knowing it sometimes happened.

Looking around the Spartan balcony, she got the impression that no one had been here, for a long time. Something about the beloved area looked... desolate.

Confused, she turned back to the park. She knew she didn't feel as cold as she should have.

Then, the scent of honeysuckle hit her nose. *Honeysuckle? But that's impossible. It's the dead of winter.*

The sweet, drifting fragrance awakened a memory. Caroline Chandler had once favored a honeysuckle scented cologne. Catherine remembered her small hands wrapping a bottle of it, as a Christmas gift. Charles had helped her pick it out.

"It's beautiful even though it's freezing, isn't it?" A voice came from her left. A voice very like her own.

Hair similar in color to Catherine's peeked out from under a hood so richly furred that it seemed like something out of a snow queen's fantasy. White wool draped a slight figure. The coat was luxuriously long, and pristinely gleaming.

"It's like the world's been swept clean," the voice said. The woman turned, and Catherine saw a slightly older-looking version of her own face, staring back at her. Somehow, Catherine knew it would be.



Graphic by Judi

"Mother?" she asked, knowing the hair was a little darker than her own highlighted blonde, and that the eyes were just a touch more green. It was like wishing for her had conjured her.

"Like it's all... untouched, somehow," Caroline continued. "Untouched by anyone. Untouched by you." The shimmering spirit described the scene as if Catherine hadn't spoken.

She continued to face Catherine, just a touch of sorrow in her lovely eyes.

"There are consequences for your wish."

Catherine shook her head. "How can you be here? There is so much I want to say to you!" Tears threatened, again.

Catherine charged forward to embrace her mother, but the white-clad figure of Caroline Chandler held up a staying hand, much as Catherine had done with Vincent, earlier. Her cashmere gloves were long, and the exact same shade as the coat.

"No. We can't. You can't wish yourself undone and then hope to receive anything but the consequences of that."

Catherine was appalled. What did her mother mean? "I didn't seriously mean--"

"But you did. And the universe listened, Catherine. I'm sorry, my baby."

"I'm still dreaming," Catherine said.

"Are you?" Caroline answered.

Catherine felt herself thrust off of her balcony, and with such a force that she now doubted that she was dreaming, any longer. This felt too "real" even as it felt unexplainable. New York was a blur, as the winter air whistled in her ears, and then... she stopped.

She was in the lobby of the executive offices of Chandler and Coolidge. She was standing near the elevator, dressed just as she had been when she'd fallen asleep on her sofa. Caroline stood near. The office traffic buzzed around the two women, clearly oblivious to their presence. The receptionist cradled the phone between her shoulder and ear, and waved a file at one of the interns, who took it.

A harried looking clerk stepped right through her. The sensation was unpleasant, but not overly so.

"They can't see or hear you," Caroline explained. Catherine got the gist of that. No one was looking at her. Normally, her presence caused something of a stir. Boss' daughter and all.

"We're at Dad's office," Catherine said.

"Are you sure?" Caroline asked. Catherine stepped aside as the human traffic flowed around her.

"Of course I am," she replied. "I worked here, back when--"

"Ellen, tell Chandler the meeting's been moved to three. And he better show up with the right figures, this time, or Dad will have his head," Mark Coolidge said, as he breezed off the elevator.

Ellen simply nodded, and made a note.

"Tell Chandler?" Catherine was amazed at his tone. "Who in hell does Mark Coolidge think he--"

The beautiful white apparition merely nodded to the large sign behind the reception desk. The one Catherine swore said "Chandler and Coolidge, Attorneys at Law"

A brass plaque had replaced it. "Coolidge and Coolidge," it declared, in ostentatious letters.

"No," Catherine shook her head. "This is my father's firm. He ... founded it!" Catherine protested.

Catherine's companion shook her hood-covered head. "Starting the law firm was a thing done the year you were born. He felt... ambitious, then. Like there was no mountain he couldn't move, no... great deed he couldn't do." Caroline looked at her daughter sadly. "Without you there, I'm afraid he lacked the drive you associate with h--"

"No." Catherine protested vehemently, vaguely aware that she was arguing with a ghost. "No, that's not possible. This is my *father's* business, it's his life blood. He's having dinner with Hal Sherwood, right now. Hal was one of his first clients."

Caroline shook her head, again.

"No, Catherine."

But Catherine was adamant. "He's in the corner office," she insisted.

Catherine strode purposefully down the hallway, passing many people she knew, and some few she didn't. She moved through what was clearly a busy corporate entity. Not as large or as successful as she remembered it, perhaps, but the building was the same, and the law offices sat behind various doors in the hallways, with Charles' being by far one of the more elegant ones.

Catherine headed straight for the corner office door. She knew that a view of midtown Manhattan was available from two sets of windows. It was oak paneled and...

And as she went through the door, she realized it was Mark Coolidge's.

He walked into the room just behind her, and tossed his brief case onto the credenza.

The furniture was different, black in color, and more sleekly modern. It lacked much of the old-world charm of Charles' more refined tastes. A picture of Mark kayaking down a river was hanging next to his law degree, both in a gleaming silver frame. He sat down at his heavy desk and opened a file, setting his fingers to his temple, in concentration.

Catherine continued to protest. "This is wrong. This is my father's company. He brought a partner in when it grew so much he couldn't handle the work load, anymore."

Caroline walked over to the wide windows, and looked out them. "The year you started kindergarten. He wanted to be able to take you in, in the mornings. Do you remember?"

It was something she hadn't really thought about, in years. Which was to say that she didn't, until she did, just now.

"I remember," she said.

Charles and Caroline had enrolled her in what would be the first of many private schools. It wasn't too far from his office, and he insisted on dropping her off, every morning, while her mother picked her up in the afternoon. Morning was "their time." They'd talk in the car, or sing off-key, children's songs like "Old MacDonald" or "There's a Hole in the Bottom of the Sea." He'd ask her about her friends, and what she hoped to do that day.

Catherine remembered those times. She hadn't thought of them, in years.

Charles had known that his often late, irregular hours meant evening time spent with Catherine would sometimes go begging. So he'd arranged a time for just the two of them, every morning.

Catherine realized the machinations for what they were, for the very first time. There were good schools closer to their apartment. He'd enrolled her in one near his office, so they could spend the morning commute together.

"I want to see my father. Now," she demanded.

"Catherine... it's enough that you understand his life was very different without you. Spare yourself anything else," her mother begged. "I love you. I wouldn't see you hurt."

Catherine turned around and left Mark Coolidge's office. Caroline simply followed, as if she had no other choice.

Catherine scanned door after door, until she found the name she wanted. "C. Chandler, Corporate Division," read a black plastic name plate etched with white letters, right near one of the dozen or so "regular" offices the floor boasted.

"This... this isn't a thing you're going to want to see, Catherine," the soft voice near her ear tried to caution her.

She moved through the closed door as she spoke over her shoulder. "Don't be ridiculous. It's Dad! He's--" She turned back, and stopped speaking.

Catherine suddenly had no idea what it was she was about to say Charles was, to this ivory-clad spirit. The sight of her father seated at his desk stopped her cold.

He was *old*. Almost desperately so.

"When is this? How old am I?" Catherine asked.

"You don't exist, honey. But to answer your question, it's the year 1987."

1987?! Catherine stared. It couldn't be. The Charles Chandler she knew was still there. But in a way, it was like he was buried beneath someone else.

There were deep lines of care around blue eyes that looked like they'd rarely had a happy day. Crows feet had etched deep marks in his pale skin, and they were echoed in the lines that bracketed his mouth and nose.

He was crammed into a tiny office, and when he pushed the rolling chair back, Catherine realized he was a good bit heavier than "her" Charles.

"Dad?" Catherine asked.

"He can't hear or see you," her mother said. "Because you were never born."

Charles moved around the small, cramped space, looked through a file as he punched figures into an adding machine. Though his suit was of good quality, it

wasn't the sharply tailored Brooks Brothers creation she associated him with. His hair looked more grey than she remembered, and he often rubbed his neck, as if he was nursing a headache, or rubbing away nervous tension. He took a roll of antacids out of his pocket, and swallowed several.

"This... this isn't right. It can't be," Catherine said. He looked years older than Catherine knew he was.

A picture of Caroline sat near the corner of his desk. A very young one. And there was no hint of Catherine in it.

"His life was very different without you to love," Caroline said.

"But... but he had you. He loved you, Mom."

Caroline nodded her head, sadly. "Without you to struggle for, to live for... I was gone that much earlier. We had very few years together, and then I became sick... He simply had... no reason to make himself into the person you knew."

Catherine shook her head, and tears pricked her eyes. She put her hand over her mouth when her father took a small flask out of his desk drawer, and took a sip.

"No." Catherine denied the picture in front of her. "Dad was always going to be successful. He's brilliant."

Caroline's voice held only sympathy. "He is. He is brilliant, Catherine. But it isn't enough, all by itself. How many brilliant people do you know, who are also less than successful?" Caroline stepped nearer to the husband she'd been forced to leave, and placed a loving hand on his shoulder. He didn't notice.

"He can't feel you," Catherine said.

Caroline removed the hand. "He can, in here," she said, indicating her heart. Then she dropped her eyes. "It's you he can't feel, Catherine. Because you didn't happen."

Catherine shook her head. This... paunchy executive couldn't be her father. He was too pale, too out of shape, for one thing. Her dismay clearly communicated itself to her mother.

"Tennis was something he took up so he could teach you. Remember?" Caroline prompted.

Catherine's eyes flickered, and then she recalled it. They were both at the country club, and Charles had been complaining that life in the office was causing his waistline to thicken.

A racket for you and a racket for me, and one for your Mom. We'll all take lessons together, honey, okay?" Catherine could hear Charles asking the question, as they took up the sport that she would all but abandon, once she started high school, but that Charles would love all his life.

Her father sighed, and checked his watch, clearly wishing it was closer to quitting time than it was.

"When he's done here, he'll go home to an empty apartment. Sometimes, he goes out to dinner with friends, but mostly... those days are falling behind him, too. He's tired, Catherine. *He needed you* in his life."

"It shouldn't have been like this. Not ever. Not for him." Catherine rubbed her forehead, as she looked at what was clearly a lonely, tired old man.

"I've been neglecting him, lately. There are things I can't tell him," Catherine said, owning the guilt of that, and feeling it.

"But he knows you're there. Knows you love him and that he loves you," the spirit said, as if it were just that uncomplicated. "We have no idea how much we shape the lives of others," she added. "It's just a simple truth. And... we need to go."

Catherine spun around. "Go? But we just—"

"Time moves. We must move, too," Caroline answered.

"What can I—"

But the sensation of being "pushed" happened again, and Catherine never finished the sentence.

And "sentence" was an appropriate word, considering where she was the next time she could make out the details.

Prison. Catherine Chandler was in prison.

“Why are we here?” Catherine asked, knowing her companion would be nearby. She was.

“Because time moved forward, a year. And because you need to see someone,” Caroline answered.

For a moment, Catherine thought she knew “who.” There was one tunnel resident Catherine had definitely seen in a prison cell.

“Father. Is Father here? Not my father, I mean Jacob. Jacob Wells.”

Catherine knew Jacob had gone to prison, and that she had saved him from it. Was that what she was supposed to see? That he was still there?

The immaculate vision led her down the cell block, without answer. Catherine followed, fairly sure of who she would find.

She rounded a corner, and watched her companion step mistily through the bars of a jail cell.

One that belonged to Joe Maxwell.

“Joe. No, no, there’s a mistake,” Catherine shook her head in denial. “Joe never —”

“There is no mistake,” her mother said, holding Catherine’s gaze with her own. “You weren’t there to save him, when he ran afoul of Erika Salven. He tried to fight the drug charge, but he lost.” Catherine and Caroline watched a much harder looking Joe Maxwell play solitaire with a grimy deck. His dark hair was cropped cellblock short. His prison blues were clean, his cell likewise.

“This isn’t possible.” Catherine denied the evidence of her eyes.

“It was a good fight,” Caroline said. “But in the end, Evan Brannigan made sure the jury saw things his way. Phillip Taylor is free. Erika is listed as missing, officially, but we both know she’s dead. Lawrence Cassut killed her, in a stairwell.”

Caroline pushed the hood of her coat down, and Catherine saw that the honey colored hair was indeed both a bit longer and darker than her own. Caroline stepped closer to Joe.

“They took away his license to practice law,” her mother continued. “He’s trying to find out if they’ll accept him as a police officer, when he gets out.”

“His dad was a cop,” Catherine said, eyeing a stack of official looking mail. Joe simply continued to play solitaire.

Time dragged on as she watched Joe play, and she realized that for Joe Maxwell, “serving time” was a literal thing. *Serving it or killing it, take your pick*, she thought. She knew the man who came out of this room would be far different than the man who had gone into it.

“How long?” Catherine asked.

“He’s been here for a few months. He’ll be here two years more,” Caroline answered. “I’m sorry, baby. I know he was your fr—”

“But that’s outrageous!” Catherine exploded. “He’s innocent! It was his first offense...”

Caroline sighed, and her expression was sympathetic. “Evan Brannigan has a long reach. Without you to save Erika, to save Joe... this is how his future unfolded,” the lovely woman said.

“Why are you showing me this? Why am I having this dream?” Catherine cried. “Mom! This is a nightmare!”

The ethereally lovely vision before her inclined her head.

“Because this is no dream. This is your wish, made manifest.”

“But... I didn’t mean it!” Catherine denied.

There was a brief pause. “Except for the part of you that did,” Caroline answered. She looked up, as if hearing some invisible bell, or checking an unseen clock.

“Time is moving, again. We must move with it,” Caroline said.

“But wait! I need to—“

But she felt another push at her back, and she knew they were off, again.



Chapter Three

The Power of Magic

The white snow continued to blow, beneath her balcony. Inside the multi-paned doors, her apartment now looked pristinely clutter free, and like it belonged to someone else. Or more precisely, no one else. It looked ready for sale.

“Where... I mean, when are we?” she asked.

“Just a few months later. Time is a fairly precise thing, but visiting through it isn’t. I wanted us to be here. I think we need to be.”

Catherine looked out at the beautiful parkscape, before her.

“Do you believe in magic, Catherine?” Caroline asked. “In the power of a child’s wish?”

Caroline continued to gaze at the park. “Making a wish and believing in magic are two different things,” Catherine answered, the lawyer in her coming out as she continued to watch the blowing snow.

“What else is a wish but a request for magic?” Caroline asked, even as she answered herself.

Catherine wasn't sure as she turned around and leaned against the wall. The same wall she often sat and leaned against, while Vincent read to her. *Has that ever happened, here?* Catherine asked herself, realizing it hadn't.

Through the icy windows, Catherine studied the now impersonal space that had once been her home. But it wasn't "her" apartment, anymore, just as this was no longer "her" balcony. The tony, overlooking-the-park residence looked much the way it had when she'd bought it - designed by an interior decorator and priced at the high end. She'd kept much of the furniture, but other things she'd gotten rid of. She eyed the mantle, and the walls. There was nothing personal of hers, in the space.

"You're saying I wished all this. But I *didn't*. I'd *never* have wished what we just saw." Her words were as biting as the air around them.

Caroline followed her daughter's gaze, then turned her back to the park. "A wish is like a magic spell. The results aren't often what you hope for. And sometimes, you don't get anything at all."

Catherine's eyes flickered, at that.

"Sometimes, that's as it should be," Caroline stated. "A wish can be a powerful thing. You never know when the universe is listening to you."

"It damn sure picks and chooses, then," Catherine replied, thinking about Charlotte Plessy and the verdict.

Caroline raised a well-shaped eyebrow at her. Catherine sighed.

"You're saying I caused this, with my anger," Catherine said.

Caroline nodded, slightly. "Be careful of the things you are thinking, lately, my daughter. There is not so great a distance, between a hard thought and a harsh word. Or between a harsh word and a hasty decision, or even a swift hand."

Catherine knew it was true. She saw it in her job, too often. She also knew she'd said a few things she wished she could take back, today.

Caroline then repeated her question, changing it only slightly.

"Do you believe in magic, Catherine?"

Catherine gave her mother a wry half-smile, and shook her lawyer's head. "No. No, not really. Fairies and unicorns... no." She tilted her head to one side. "But then, yes. Yes, I have to say I do. I could never have predicted Vincent, or the Tunnels, or what happened after we met. That *was* magical."

Caroline smiled at the answer she received. "Do you know that almost every adult answers that question just that way? With a 'No, I don't,' but a 'yes, I do?'" She looked back out over the park. "A child always answers 'yes.' An adult... It's not so clear anymore, is it?"

Catherine tilted her head to one side. *No. No, it wasn't so clear any more. With things going the way they had been lately, nothing was.*

"I think I used to believe more, before you died," Catherine said honestly.

Caroline closed her eyes over that pain. "I think I did, too," she replied softly.

A white gloved hand settled on Catherine's shoulder, much as it had on Charles.' At least this time, it could be felt. They embraced, softly, and Catherine could have wept for it.

Caroline pulled back a little, but still kept Catherine close. "Cathy... magic isn't the magician pulling a rabbit out of his hat. That's the trick, yes, but it isn't the magic."

"Because the rabbit is in there, the whole time," Catherine answered.

Caroline smiled. "Don't look at the rabbit. Look at the expression in a child's eyes, when it comes out of the hat." The smile was steady. "*That's* where the magic is. I used to see it in your eyes, all the time."

Catherine knew her mother was looking into Cathy's sea green eyes, and seeing a very distant time. A time of tea parties with tiny cups, and evenings spent with The Velveteen Rabbit. The loving look exchanged between mother and daughter was palpable.

Catherine smiled, in answer. "So don't look at the mundane thing. Look for the magical one? Not the rabbit, but the person?" Catherine asked.

Caroline nodded. "It isn't magic when a street performer pulls a rabbit out of his hat," she said, prompting Catherine to think of Sebastian. "It's magic when he

reaches *in* for a rabbit, and pulls out a ... unicorn, instead. Or pulls out... delight," she said.

"It's magic when you think your life is going to go one way, and it goes entirely another. I didn't' actually *plan* on falling in love with your father, or ever becoming a mother, myself. Matter of fact, I'd even decided against both. I thought I could never conceive. My own childhood was unhappy. I was content to remain alone, thinking that was the best way, for me. Then... life handed me unexpected blessings. My little bit of magic."

Catherine shared a soft look with her mother. A woman she realized she only knew "so" well. It felt good to stand with her, even though she realized she should be freezing. Caroline's influence was clearly keeping her warm. Or something was.

"You lost a bit of that sense of magic when you lost me, and I'm so sorry for that, baby. But do you remember when you found it again?" Caroline asked.

It's magic when you think your life is going to go one way, and it goes entirely another.

Catherine did. Of course she did.

"I didn't realize my life was going to change, when I went to Tom's party," Catherine said, translating Caroline's words into something she could relate to. "Didn't realize how being attacked would... bring me to something incredible. Something... magical."

Caroline smiled. "Vincent marvels that you celebrate it, still," she said. "That you'd take such a dark thing, and remember it with light." She brushed the soft scar on Catherine's cheek with a kiss. Catherine accepted it gratefully, and they embraced, again. They both turned and stood staring, out into the snow-swept park. They stayed shoulder to shoulder, for a quiet moment. Time ticked past.

"We aren't done, are we?" Catherine knew it wasn't really a question. She leaned her head on Caroline's shoulder, sensing more before them, yet not really wanting to go. Couldn't they just stay there, a while longer? Stay, and look at this wintry perfection? Talk about all the things they'd never got a chance to? It was a tempting thought.

But Caroline had said before that time was a moving thing, and that they were bound to obey it, somehow.

"I don't want to show you," Caroline replied. "But I think I must." She shook her head, sadly. "You've been... struggling. Starting to not believe in magic anymore, honey. What will become of you if you lose the power to understand who you are?" she asked.

Catherine raised her head from her mother's shoulder. "Can I go see Vincent?" He's alive, isn't he? Even if I never was?"

Caroline's expression grew sadder, still. "He is. But ... we shouldn't." For the first time, Catherine sensed real reluctance, inside her mother. More even, than when they'd seen Charles.

"Mother..." Catherine drew out the word.

"It will be hard. So hard, Catherine," the spirit before her said.

"Why? Why hard?" Catherine asked.

A shadow passed over Caroline's beautiful, expressive eyes. "Because... because all his magic is ... gone," Caroline answered sadly.

Catherine shook her head, the denial immediate. "No. You're mistaken. Not from him. Not while he lives. That's not possible. The tunnels themselves... it's like they *breed* magic, Mother. Like if magic has a home, it's there. It was an incredible place before I ever found it. It just was. And Vincent... well. You don't know him like I do. He was an astonishing person in his own right before he ever met me. He's... incredible. Amazing." She used the next word almost shyly.

"Magical."

Caroline's expression remained stark. "Is magic in the trick, or in the person?" Catherine's mother reminded her. "Remember love, honey. Love is the most amazing magic that there is." She glanced up.

"And it's time."



Chapter Four

The Universe is Listening

The feeling of being "pushed" caught Catherine again, and it seemed as if a large hand was against the small of her back. She was thrown forward.

And nearly into a granite wall.

Catherine looked around. The tunnels. She was in one of the passageways, but it was so dimly lit, she wasn't sure which one.

Catherine resumed her conversation as if they hadn't been interrupted.

"Vincent. Vincent will be the same. In some ways. Not all mind you, but some. Maybe even better, somehow." Catherine assured her mother wryly. They walked through the scantily illuminated hallway as Catherine struggled to get her bearings.

"There were times when I hurt him. Physically and emotionally. Times when my choices caused him to come to terrible harm," Catherine admitted, thinking about what he'd suffered at the hands of the Silks.

"We are our choices. Even the ones we never got to make," the spirit said simply. "Like everything else, he, too, is not as you remember."

No, no he wouldn't be. That didn't mean he wasn't doing well.

Catherine pictured tunnel life much as it must have been before her life had intersected with it. Busy days. People who struggled, some, yes, but overcame those struggles, and held fast to each other.

"You don't know this place like I do. Don't know him like I do." Catherine said blithely, as she spotted the whispering bridge and adjusted her course. "If they're in a rough patch, they'll overcome it. They help each other. Keep each other warm, and safe. And as for Vincent... There's a ... a nobility to him that nothing can touch."

"There is," Catherine's companion agreed. "But that doesn't mean that's all there is," her mother added. "He is in Jacob's chambers, right now," Caroline directed.

Catherine nodded, and walked through Vincent's tunnel home until she found her way to the more commonly used passageways. For the most part, the world Below seemed much the same. *Rock walls don't tend to change, much,* Catherine realized.

Though even with that as a given, something felt... different. Vincent's stone home seemed darker, somehow, as if the torches and lanterns couldn't push back the gloom that enfolded them.

Zach ran by her, dressed in cast-offs as always, and in a hurry. He had a bad cough and he looked... serious. Then Samantha walked by, holding Nana's hand. Nana was dragging a ratty doll, and the smaller girl had clearly been crying. Neither one spoke, as they walked down the shadowy hallway. Catherine didn't see anyone else.

"It feels cold," Catherine said, as they drew close to the open air of the Music Chamber. It was. She could see her breath. She had no idea why that would be so, down here, when it wasn't, up Above.

"It's January, again." the spirit beside her replied. "Another year has gone by. We are in 1990. The very beginning of it."

The frigid hallway wound on before her, and it didn't feel much warmer for having put some distance between the area where the roof was open to the sky, and the rest of the place. Catherine passed several dark rooms, and no braziers were lit, to lessen the chill. When they rounded a certain corner and came to a particular intersection, Catherine knew they were close. Father's chambers were just up ahead.

"It's so... quiet," Catherine realized. There was almost no tapping, on the pipes. Catherine realized how much that sound was the "background music" of the world Below. Now absent, it gave the darkened hallways an almost eerie feel.

Maybe it's just the middle of the night, she concluded. But that didn't sound right, and she didn't say it out loud. *Why do some of the walls look so... black?* She wondered, then dismissed the thought as she approached Jacob's rooms.

The light from a sputtering lantern struggled to push back the heavy darkness. The oil inside it was running low, and the wick was turned down, to conserve what little was left.

Devin sat with Vincent at a scarred and battered table, a lone pillar candle burning on a desk, behind him. The brazier flickered with a low light. The chamber was dim, but even that could not disguise the disorganized disaster that it had become. Furniture that had once been 'battered' was now fully broken, sitting in pieces here and there, looking like refuse no one had bothered to discard. Astonishingly, most of the books were gone, though Catherine had no idea why. What was left was either haphazardly shelved or left on the floor, to topple over.

Perhaps he gave them to others, Catherine thought, stepping just inside the doorway.

Her eyes searched hungrily for the one person she sought. He was here.

Vincent sat down at the canting table with his brother, his cape on, against the chill in the room, but the hood down. His noble features were in shadowy profile. It was the beloved face that Catherine would know anywhere. Even in the low light, he was still an incredible, handsome figure of a being.

The table wobbled as he set his gloved hand upon it. Two chessmen toppled over on their board, making a game difficult, though the board was in its customary place. Three large books held up one of the table legs, struggling to make it more level. Catherine recognized Great Expectations on the bottom of the pile. It was an ignominious fate, for the book that had meant so much to them.

You aren't here, and they can't see you, Catherine reminded herself, so the spirit of her mother wouldn't have to.

But Devin clearly was here. He was leaning back in a spindly chair, looking quietly at his brother.

"Devin! Devin came back! Vincent must be so happy!" Catherine declared mentally. She felt almost like the intruder she was, as she looked at Jacob Wells' two sons.

"Happy. No. Not happy," her mother said. She sounded more tired. Still like Caroline Chandler, but closer to when disease had weakened her, than the sweet, sometimes solemn soul Catherine had been journeying with.

"You were reading my mind," Catherine said.

"Since you made the wish," Caroline replied.

Vincent was speaking. His voice sounded nearly as weary as Caroline's. "We have had hard times before, Devin." Vincent told his brother.

Catherine wished Vincent could see her, though she realized he couldn't.

Devin raked his hair back, and held it. The gesture made the familiar scar on his cheek seem more stark, less... healed, somehow, though Catherine knew that was just her imagination. The scars on Devin's face had had nothing to do with Catherine, one way or the other. So of course, it would be the same. It was the lines of care on his face that made the scars look more pronounced, not the scars themselves.

Devin's reply sounded like a concession to defeat. "Not like this," he answered. "Not like this, Vincent. We need to face the facts. The children are starving, and that's the ones who aren't sick, as well. There are too many of them, and too few of us."

He stood, and stepped away from the table. There was loss in every line of his lean frame. He folded his leather jacket-clad arms across his chest.

"It's done, Vincent." His voice was utter despair. "Tomorrow, I'll start to take them up. At least if they're in foster care, they'll eat, by nightfall."

"No!" Vincent's gloved hand slammed the table as he rose. Chess pieces rattled and continued to topple. In spite of the denial, Catherine could see the resignation in his frame. Resignation that words alone could not convey.

They're going through a difficult time. Vincent will hold them together. He will. They'll get through it, Catherine thought, watching.

"They'll have to tell where they've been," Devin continued. There was a world of sorrow in his voice, as he said it. "The little ones likely will, anyway. The case workers, the cops, the psychiatrists... they'll keep asking the children until one of them finally tells it."

The implications, for Vincent, were clear. He dropped his great head, and simply nodded, as he looked down.

"Devin..."

"You need to go, Vincent. Go down. Go deep." Devin Wells' face was a study in pain.

Vincent's beloved voice was soft. "Devin, surely there is a way..."

"Don't you think I've tried?" There were tears in the scarred man's voice.

"Vincent, I can cheat my way through to supporting Charles, barely, and only as long as I can manage to keep Eddie off our necks. I can figure out a way to get food to you, from time to time, but we both know it isn't enough. They need more to eat. They need a doctor, and they need medicine."

Devin picked up one of the fallen books off the floor. Rather than put it back on a shelf, Catherine watched as he tossed it unexpectedly into the brazier, cover open.

The books. Dear God, they were burning the books just to stay alive. It seemed like blasphemy, to Catherine, as she knew it must, to Vincent.

Devin was morose. "In three days these tunnels are going to be crawling with cops and DCF, and all the rest of it. They'll seal these passageways with concrete and dynamite, if they have to. I'm so sorry, Vincent. It's done."

Vincent sat back down, defeated.

"If only Father were here," he said.

"Father died in prison. I'm doing the best I can," Devin replied.

Catherine was shocked at the revelation.

"I'm not accusing you, Devin," Vincent said tiredly. "Please... don't think that I am."

This was torture for Devin. There was desperation, in his dark eyes. "Look. I'll get a van. Maybe I can sneak you out..."

Vincent shook his head. "To go where? That is no life for you. No life for either of us."

Catherine was too shocked for tears. "What happened?" she asked her guide. "Where are the others?" She realized now that there were no other adults mulling their way through the tunnels. That was part of what had felt so different.

"Gone," Caroline answered. "Scattered. Dead outright," her mother's voice informed her.

"How?" Catherine was horrified.

The green eyes were not without sympathy. "Alain Taggert's men found Lisa, when she sought the world Below. He was an arms dealer, remember," Caroline reminded.

An arms dealer. Loose in an enclosed space. Oh, my God...

"It was quick, for the most part. His men were very ... efficient."

Catherine's mind was trying to process the level of devastation around her. *Efficient. What a horrible word to use, now.* Catherine realized that the blackened areas on the walls she'd taken as dim shadows were really scorch marks. She looked back out into the hallway. The blast pattern was clear, once you looked for it.

Grenades? Dear god, they'd thrown grenades, down here? Bullet marks strafed the walls.

No. "Nooooo," Catherine moaned, aloud, shaking her head.

"The one you call Pascal was the first to fall." Caroline recounted. "They found him in the Pipe Chamber. There was no warning. The girl you called Jaime... died fighting. Her epitaph is in the catacombs... Peter Alcott.... they made an example of him."

The words were too chilling to translate.

"But Vincent. Vincent survived," Catherine said, struggling with all she was learning.

Caroline nodded. "He got word to Devin, after it happened. Devin returned. But there are too few of them, now, to care for the children. The helpers are terrified, since Taggert's men made sure they were threatened. Some resisted. They died, too."

Catherine could not believe the destruction her eyes took in, in the dimlight.

"But Vincent. He survived it." Catherine repeated, watching her love as he struggled.

"Yes. with the children he was teaching, when they came down," Caroline said. "Of course, there was a price."

Catherine thought she referred simply to the decimation around her, then realized, horribly, that there was more.

Vincent turned away from Devin, and the face that had been in profile now turned toward Catherine and revealed its other side.

Dear God. He's been burned.

One eye was scarred shut, sightless. His now-hairless cheek was pink, and puckered. Some of his mane had burned to the skin, and there was a bare patch that revealed a now-misshapen ear. His neck was scarred, and his shoulder drooped. His left hand was ... simply gone. A stump, below the wrist.

"Have pity," Catherine moaned, not sure if she was asking it of a deity or of her mother.

The answering voice was as gentle as it was tragic. "I'm so sorry, Catherine. Pity is the gift of a loving heart. For these people ... Alain Taggert had none."

Catherine's breath caught, and choked on a sob. Vincent's physical splendor, his unique and special beauty, was shattered forever, by fate and fire. She realized his lip on one side was slack, and that he favored his left leg. It was as if one entire side of his body had been hit by a flame thrower, or taken a blast.

While Catherine stared, she heard the sound of running feet, in the hall.

"Vincent!" A familiar young voice called from the doorway, "We're going to go hit the dumpsters, for food!" Kipper's slender form stood alongside Brooke's.

Vincent turned so that his "good" ear was toward the door. "Be careful," Vincent told them. "If... if there is any extra, or if you find medicine ..."

"We'll bring it back for the rest of them. I know," Brooke said. "Topsiders have started to chase us off, from nearby. We'll just have to go farther. Try and find some wood, maybe." Brooke knew how much it hurt Vincent's heart to have to burn the books.

"Wood is heavy, and makes you slow. Just food and medicine, Brooke," Devin advised. There were too few older children left, to risk losing any more.

"Stay near an entrance. A tunnel entrance." Vincent added. He stayed where he was, but held out his one good hand, asking for an embrace that it now pained him to walk over and get. Catherine stepped aside as Brooke came into the haphazard room. She looked careworn beyond her few years, as she returned the embrace warmly. "We'll be careful," she promised.

Catherine saw Vincent close his one good eye over his decision. "Brooke ... tell Samantha... and the others... They should pack. Tomorrow they will eat better," Vincent said.

Devin turned his back, not wanting the young girl to see his expression.

"Where are we going?" Kipper asked, thinking a helper perhaps had relented, and was inviting them all to a meal.

"We'll discuss it in the morning. Tell them, Brooke. Then be careful. Stay safe."

"This can't be happening." Catherine was aghast. "One man could not do this. I've seen Vincent take on half a dozen men, armed ones, deadly ones."

Caroline's voice was full of regret. "Those men were not an army. They did not have flame throwers." Andrea told her. "Alain Taggert was not a ... forgiving man."

"Did he kill Lisa?" *At least*, she thought bitterly.

"Oh, no," the spirit answered. "She is well, and beautiful as ever. She even dances, when he lets her out of the house that serves as her prison. She tries hard to forget the moment they burned Mary, in front of her."

Catherine fell to the stones, weeping. Her heart was utterly breaking, inside her chest.

"I can't have been the... the reason this didn't happen."

Her mother knelt on the stones next to her. Caroline's hand rested on Catherine's shoulder. "You convinced Lisa to testify against Alain. Helped her find the courage to come forth. You saved Jacob from prison, when Margaret's attorney framed him. Their outcomes were all different, with you not there."

"No!" Catherine shook her sobbing head. "I can't... have b-b-been the... the difference between l-li-life and death, for these people," Catherine continued to shake her head in denial.

Caroline embraced Catherine's back. "Catherine, we are *all* the difference between life and death, for someone." Caroline stated. "We just realize it, so seldom."

Catherine pushed the storm of sorrow inside her back, and raised a sorrowful head.

"You didn't want to show me this."

"It's a thing no one should ever see," Caroline said. Catherine could only agree.

"Vincent. What will happen to him?" Catherine asked.

Caroline's voice was a mournful whisper. "After tomorrow, he will go deeper Below. Past the catacombs, past the Nameless River." The white spirit closed

her eyes on tragedy. "Devin won't know how he dies, when it happens. There will just be a time when he is found, no more."

"How?" Catherine asked. She had to know.

Now it was Caroline who had a tears. "Many causes. Starvation. Wounds that cannot heal. A fall, stumbling around in the dark when the light is no more... mostly, I think he simply... wills it." Caroline said. "Please... let's go. No more of this..."

"He can't... it can't happen this way." Catherine denied, sitting back on her heels. "Margaret's money alone would have--" she began, before realization struck.

Jacob died in prison. There would have been no reunion with Margaret.

"Henry Dutton has it," Caroline said. "It's gone. To the man who destroyed Alan Taft. You were not *there*, Catherine," her mother was forced to state it again. "Not for any of them. Peter tried to help, but you know what happens, there. They lose *help*, Catherine. They lose *hope*. John Pater thrives, selling poison. He's killed thousands, though he's too clever to be caught. The deaf woman, Laura. She dies on the street, found and shot to death, by a corrupt policeman."

Catherine rubbed tears away as Vincent returned to stand next to his chair. He grabbed the back, for support. "Does no one escape this... torment?" Catherine asked.

The sad vision before her shrugged her white-clad shoulders.

"Michael was Above, when it happened. Saul. Maria. Eli. Winslow lived until the invasion, as he did not die saving you from Paracelsus," she listed. "Ellie and Eric never came down, so they still live. But I will not lie and tell you either one is... happy, or well. Lena still sells her body, and loses a little more of herself each day. Her baby is in foster care. Kanin was getting supplies, but Olivia... well. She was here. With Luke."

Catherine couldn't bear to ask.

Caroline held her daughter's shoulders, trying to give what cold comfort she could. "Your friend Jenny is well, and Nancy. They even try to see your father,

when they can, though it's because their parents knew Charles, not because they knew you." Caroline's embrace on the stones was a filled with pity.

"The magic is in you. You touched lives, Catherine. By far for the better, than for the worst."

Catherine looked toward her desperate, doomed love. His one blue eye seemed to be looking right at her, though she knew he was just looking at the doorway through which Brooke had gone.

"Being with me. It's so hard for him, sometimes." She knew it was true. She wasn't the only one who faced the difficulties of what they were.

Now it was Caroline's turn to shake her head. "Not being with you destroyed him from the beginning," she replied. "Had Alain Taggert not ... happened, his fate would have been little better. Loneliness was killing him long before fire ever tried. In other fates, he dies long before this."

Vincent turned and limped over to where Devin stood, near the brazier. Devin tossed another book in.

Catherine wiped her eyes, and stood up, holding Caroline's hands, as she did so. "There are other fates?" she asked. Caroline nodded, and tugged her back out into the passageway, simply wanting to put distance between them and the terrible scene.

"Some," Caroline qualified. "In one, he's held in a cage by two men from the university. Dead within the month. In another, John Pater simply... succeeds."

"Are there none where he is simply... happy? Fulfilled?" Catherine asked, looking back toward the doorway. Brooke and Kipper were coming down the passageway, heading out with Zach, each carrying a basket, for whatever they managed to scavenge. Zach continued to cough, but went with them. "Is there no scenario where he finds... joy, in this life?"

Caroline continued to keep a firm hand her daughter. "Catherine. Before you found him. Were you happy? Were you fulfilled? Did you truly know joy?" Caroline asked her, as the children passed by them.

Tears streaked down her face, and Catherine knew the answer to that.

I've lived in luxury most people could never imagine. But I can't remember a time when I've ever felt as good or complete as I do right now.

She'd said it to Vincent. Not far from this spot, as a matter of fact. He'd been walking her home, after they'd saved Eric and Ellie.

"It's all right, honey. It's hard to understand how important we are to each other, sometimes. Sometimes we feel replaceable, or just unimportant. Like everything will go on just as it was, without us. But that simply isn't true."

Catherine knew her mother was right. That no one had ever replaced Caroline, in Catherine's heart. Just like no one could ever replace Vincent, or even crusty old Jacob, or Jenny, or Joe.

"I miss you." Catherine replied simply. "I miss you so much, Mother."

The gentle presence warmed, and Caroline hugged her again, as she guided her daughter to a three-way intersection. "As I have missed you," she answered. Caroline stood back and held Catherine's hands, tightly.

"Is time calling us forward, again?" Catherine asked sadly, wanting to see no more.

Caroline looked at the intersection, and its many choices. It was a wonderful representation of life. Turn left, and you'd deal with whatever that path handed you. Go straight, and your life would be different.

"Not just time. Choices. The past, the present, the future. What was, and is, and could never be. The girl you were. The woman you became. The older woman you might have been, someday. We're at a crossroads." She looked up. Catherine followed her gaze.

Yes we are, Catherine thought, knowing her mother could hear her.

"This place. Does it have a name?" Caroline asked.

"Not really," Catherine replied. "It's just one of the main intersections. I use it often. That way leads to the entrance from the park." She nodded to the one on her left. "Then there's the one we just came through, that leads to Father's chambers," she said.

She tilted her head to the right. "The one that goes near the Music Chamber. We passed it, coming in. Follow the other one, and you'll be in Vincent's chambers before you know it. Keep going, and you'll find the path that leads to my apartment. It all interconnects. Well. Most of it does. It's easy to get lost."

"I know," Caroline smiled. "In life, too. So many paths. Some which seem wrong, at the time, but later turn out to be right. You have to travel all of these, honey. All of these, and so many more."

"I know I do," Catherine replied simply. "I love you."

"I love you, too, my beautiful daughter. You can only take with you what you give away. Stand at a crossroads and remember love. Remember love and make a wish, Catherine. Make a wish, and believe in the magic."

Make a wish. I should just make a wish?

Catherine struggled to find her voice. "I wish this was all just a terrible dream. That I was back on my sofa, and it was the day I lost the Plessy case. I want to be back where I was, before I saw you again."

She looked around, and the marred tunnels remained the same.

"There's more," Caroline prompted.

Catherine held her mother's loving gaze. "I wish I remembered how strong love is, when I get tired, or afraid," she said. "I wish that knowledge was a part of me. I need its strength, sometimes."

Caroline smiled with motherly approval. "The universe is listening, baby. I love you."

The vision shimmered, and became engulfed by a light so bright that Catherine had to close her eyes, against it. She felt Caroline's hands let go of hers, and she raised her arms to protect her sight. She felt the expected "push" all over her body, this time, as she was thrown... somewhere.

Catherine found herself scrunched into the corner of her sofa, her head resting on her arms. Her neck was stiff. A half empty glass of Chablis sat on the table. And the room was just as she'd left it.

She bolted up and checked the calendar. It was still December. She hadn't missed Christmas, or Vincent's birthday. She hadn't missed anything.

She said it wasn't a dream. But it was a dream! Surely...

Catherine sniffed. The very faint scent of honeysuckle drifted by, through the slightly open balcony door.



Epilogue

Dream, nightmare, or incredible vision sent at the behest of a heavenly spirit, it didn't matter. Catherine knew where she wanted to be, right now.

She didn't walk, she ran. Grabbing her boots out of the corner, she was half barefoot and shoving her foot into the left one as she jammed the elevator button. She hit it so hard and so repeatedly as to be imprudent, then tugged the right boot on her foot as the car made its way down. She barely checked to see if she was spotted as she threw the discards in her basement aside, so she could move the boxes and go Below.

Vincent. Vincent. I have to get to Vincent. It was a mantra, in her frantic brain.

She leaped off the ladder, two rungs shy of the floor. The tunnel air was cool, as it always was, but not the frigid cold of a heat-less winter.

Catherine hadn't stopped long enough to even consider bringing a jacket. It barely mattered. She was running through places she usually walked, gingerly. She took the gap between her world and his at a hurdler's leap, and barreled through the secret hallways that made up his domain, daring herself to fall.

When she turned the corner, she knew he would be there, and he was. Catherine all but launched her small form at Vincent's huge body.

She felt his left hand, the one that was still there, as it cradled her back. Still, she had to see his beautiful face. She had to know.

Vincent watched her lovely eyes as she scanned his features, studying them. "Vincent. You're all right," she breathed her relief, as she utterly forgot their earlier fight. His feet squished inside his boots, as he shifted his weight, holding her.

"I am all right. And you?" his eyes were full of concern, and it was then she remembered her ugly words of the evening.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. So very, very sorry, Vincent." Her tears came fast, and from a deep place. "I lost my case. A man who killed a woman is still free, right now, because I wasn't a good enough attorney to get a conviction. But... there's so much more."

"Catherine," he held her close, and his low voice rumbled against her ear, as it was pressed to his adored chest. "Now it is I who am sorry. I felt your disappointment, earlier, today. And you tried to tell me. I just... there was no time."

His feet continued to squelch, as he stepped back. "We just got done with the repairs. I was going to come to you. I'm so sorry about what happened today."

Catherine shook her head. "It's... it doesn't matter. Joe will handle it, somehow. I just... oh, Vincent. I love you, so much."

She hugged him hard, and Vincent could feel the desperation in her embrace.

"It does matter," he corrected. "Everything matters. And I love you, as well."

"I was feeling... bad. A lot of stuff came up, and I swear I said things I didn't mean. I was questioning everything, and felt... incompetent. Worthless."

Vincent's low voice deepened further, and he held her all the tighter. "You must never feel that way. Never." He brushed a kiss across the top of her head.

"Catherine... you mean so much. To all of us, to but especially to me. I don't even want to think about what my life would be like, without you."

Neither do I, she thought.

She kissed him then, and sincerely, he returned it. Gently, and for a long, sweet time. He felt her impassioned response, and when the kiss broke, her next words surprised him.

"We have to go see Jaime. And Father. And Mary, and Mouse. We have to go see all of them, Vincent." She was tugging him along the passageway.

He wondered if she realized she was here in little more than a tailored blouse and a work skirt, and a pair of boots that were designed more for fashion, than for warmth. His own feet were still squishing, thanks to spending the last two hours standing in water. He wondered if she was going to slow down long enough to let him change his shoes, and then realized it probably didn't matter. If she did, she did.

"Father is in his chambers," Vincent supplied. "Mary is reading to the children. I'm not sure where Mouse, is..." Whatever this was, there was obviously no denying her as she marched down the passageway.

"We have to find him. Find them. Tell Pascal to ... to ask everyone to meet in the Dining Chamber. Pascal! And that's another one, Vincent. Please let's stop and look in on Pascal, for a moment. I have to tell him how much he means to me."

Astonished, Vincent did as she wished, the brisk walk giving her time to sort herself out a bit better. "And my dad. I have to call him as soon as I go back up, no matter what time it is," she declared. "I'll leave a message on his machine. Tell him that unless New York blows up, I want to have lunch with him, tomorrow," she vowed, as they approached the Pipe Chamber.

She entered the amazing room, where a labyrinth of pipes carried almost every message the tunnel world received. She clasped the balding little pipemaster as if he were her dearest friend, or her long lost brother. They chatted for several minutes.

"I don't think I ever properly thanked you for the time you came with Vincent to rescue me," she told him, hugging him hard, a second time.

"I thought you did," he answered. "Not that I'm complaining, mind you," Pascal assured her. He exchanged a look with Vincent, over Catherine's shoulder. Vincent's expression told him he had no idea what this was about, either.

Catherine held him fast. "You were so brave. No one could have asked for a truer friend," she complimented. "Come Winterfest, please save at least one dance for me?"

Pascal blushed a becoming shade of pink. "Okay. Sure. I just... well. Someone will have to teach me how to dance, first."

Catherine kissed his pale cheek. "I'd be honored, if you'd let it be me."

The blush deepened, and he nodded, both flustered and charmed by her.

Vincent sensed her happiness, even as he sensed her pleasure.

"You... you still want me to call everybody to a meeting, Catherine?" he asked.

Catherine squeezed his hands as Vincent looked on. She'd had time to calm down, some, though Vincent could still feel the excitement, inside her. She inhaled deeply, and looked up at the amazing room. Vincent could feel her gathering peace, inside herself. She exhaled, and he could see her contentment in her beautiful eyes.

"No, no, don't interrupt their evening. They're warm, and safe, and well, and I'll visit them myself, tonight. Just... would you please tap out a message to all of them for me, Pascal?"

"Of course. What should I say?" He produced the two sticks he was never without, and held them at the ready.

"Tell them... just tell them that Catherine Chandler wishes them a magnificent holiday, and that my life would be so much less, if they were not in it. All right?"

"I think I can manage that," Pascal replied, still bemused by her obvious enthusiasm.

Pascal began tapping out her holiday message to his tunnel family. A family that was rapidly becoming Catherine's own.

Vincent settled his warm, heavy cape over her shoulders, keeping the chill of the cavernous Pipe Chamber at bay. The cape was full of his scent. And more. It felt full of all the wondrous possibilities the life before them carried. His great hands settled on her shoulders.

"It's a good life, after all, isn't it, Catherine?" Vincent whispered near her ear.

"Vincent, it is a wonderful life," she replied, smiling as her Christmas message was sent.

**

All you can take with you is that which you've given away. – From "It's a Wonderful Life"



Tell them... just tell them that Catherine Chandler wishes them a magnificent holiday, and that my life would be so much less, if they were not in it. ~ Catherine Chandler's Christmas message. And Cindy Rae's.

**

Many thanks to Judi, whose picture of "Caroline" in white helped inspire me.

**

No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~ Cindy

