

In this little Christmas present, It's been more than a year since at least some of the events of 'Though Lover's Be Lost.' There's no cave in this one, and no baby, but at least some of the rest of it happened.

Stick to the end to find out how much.

I won't say more, lest I spoil the opening of this small, yet sincere Yuletide gift. Merry Christmas, friends.



The Lost Christmas Eve

By Cindy Rae



For the Yule Page on Treasure Chambers, 2021.

With an afterword, by the Author.



*And because the notion of Elliot and Vincent talking about Catherine
always appealed to me...*



Last night had been long and the day even longer, Vincent felt, as he stared at the slow-setting sun. He hadn't slept well. Now, the shadowy quality of a New York winter was having a greying effect on everything, the buildings, the sky, even the people who hurried, head down and collars up, through the park. The icy sunset, if it could be called that, was no different, in its "grey" effect. The late December sky changed from a soft pewter to a deeper shade of that, as the whitish, 93-million-mile-away ball continued its pathetic descent, looking much smaller and weaker than it actually was.

Vincent knew the feeling. Both of "descent" and feeling small. And weak.

I think the sun gave no warmth, today, Vincent thought. And barely any light.

That too, was a familiar feeling.

Catherine was gone. Forever. The emptiness of that feeling... persisted.

Cold swept into the drainage culvert, pushed by a wind that lifted and swirled. Trash from the park pushed in after it: a scrap of newspaper, a print ad from a magazine, a few crushed and scattered leaves, the leftover wrapper from a candy bar. The city's detritus caught against one side of the wall and settled, looking as uncomfortable to be there as Vincent felt.

Detritus. Another word for garbage. Another word for refuse, for a thing that is all used up – or perhaps had never had much use to begin with.

He knew that feeling, too.

I'm feeling old, he thought, wondering at the sensation. It wasn't one he was accustomed to. Sad, yes, that was a feeling he understood, for sometimes, it felt as if sorrow was his constant companion, these days. But old? No, not really. Old was Father. Old was Elizabeth, painting pictures of Lena's child, a toddler named for Catherine, on the walls of his home.

Lena's daughter. Catherine's name. Irony, there, Vincent thought. *Well, perhaps not.*

Maybe it was fitting that a lost pregnant woman Catherine had saved had named her blonde-haired little girl after the fierce, sandy-haired attorney. After all, deceased Catherine would now never have children of her own. At least this was a way for her noble name to continue. The legacy was a fitting one, and there were less likely scenarios in life than a prostitute naming her child after the woman who had rescued her, Vincent knew.

Like Catherine and I ever finding each other... ever happening at all, he mused.

He also knew that one day, someone would have to tell Little Cathy about Adult Catherine, about how brave she'd been, about the many things she'd done to help people less fortunate than her own, privileged self. After all, there were some wonderful stories to tell.

And for the first time, Vincent had the feeling that it might not be him, telling those tales.

What is there to tell? I loved her? I loved her, and it all came to naught? That I'm ... empty inside, and the world is too cold, too full of winter, and I cannot sleep, for dreaming of Catherine? Or not dreaming of her, and I can't tell which is worse?

Someone was singing Christmas carols in the park, as Vincent turned to go inside. The newspaper scrap tumbled over. It showed the date.

December 24th. He realized the significance of the date. Christmas Eve. It's Christmas Eve.

Vincent sighed deeply. He could see his breath, as it fumed out, before him. *Christmas Eve, and here I am.*

He remembered happier times. Ones where he'd brought Catherine her first Winterfest candle, ones where he'd sat with her on her balcony reading "A Christmas Carol" to her, bundled up against the cold.

He knew those days would never come again.

The shadowy, grey quality of the culvert deepened.

It's going to be another long night, he thought, shrugging against the dropping temperature.



All bad ideas have a beginning. Vincent knew that was true. He'd learned it early, with Devin, and consolidated that notion with Mitch Denton. All bad ideas have a beginning. They just do.

Vincent stood in front of Elliot's penthouse balcony door, not remembering exactly how this one had started, but here he was, knowing he was about to see it to its fruition.

You loved her. You miss her, too. Perhaps of everyone in the world, you are the one who understands, Vincent thought, raising a gloved hand to rap on the glass.

The light inside the luxury apartment came on, and Elliot came to the door. It wasn't the first time Vincent had come to Elliot this way,

though the occasions had been few and far between. And mostly, over a year ago. Back when they both still had hope – and then lost it. The dark wood, heavily paned doors swung open. “You miss her too.” Elliot said it as a statement and not a question, and Vincent blessed the fact that he didn’t have to explain.

“Yes,” Vincent answered simply, as Elliot grabbed a nearby Italian leather bomber jacket and a bottle. He wouldn’t invite Vincent inside. Apart from the first night they’d met, he never had.

That had also been over a year ago. A year, and a lifetime, for both of them.

“Drink?” Elliot offered, stepping outside and holding up a very good bottle of brandy.

Vincent said nothing, as the other man shut the door and poured a deep amber liquid into a pair of snifters, sitting on a nearby tray. “You were expecting someone?” Vincent asked, taking a seat opposite the millionaire.

Elliot shook his head. “I always keep glasses out here. I never know when I’ll want to get drunk. And throw myself off the edge,” Elliot replied. They both knew he was only partly joking.

I feel much the same. Perhaps I need a balcony, as well. A... balcony...

Vincent hurled the word away from him as far as he could throw it, mentally. The word “balcony” belonged with words like “roses” and “crystal.” They were words he associated with Catherine; too much, sometimes. There were times when he could bear to think of them.

Then, there were others.

He sought desperately for a different topic of conversation, and his mind fell upon the last bit of information about Elliot he knew.

“Father says your fortune has been restored to you. That the damage... he did...” – neither one of them would say the name “Gabriel” – “has been undone.”

A dark eyebrow went up, and for a moment, Elliot regarded Vincent almost quizzically. “Father reads the Wall Street Journal? You’ll have to introduce us, sometime,” Elliot replied, knowing it was unlikely to happen. He swirled the brandy in his glass and took a long swallow.

Vincent sniffed at his own drink and took a small sip. It numbed his tongue, and burned, going down. The liquor helped to ward off the cold. In that sense, it felt almost good. Almost.

Elliot eyed the label. “Hmph. The year this was bottled, Queen Victoria was an Empress, the United States was barely a century old, and... and Cathy Chandler’s great grandfather was probably courting her great grandmother, somewhere. She wasn’t even a twinkle in anybody’s eye, yet. Irony.” Elliot took another sip.

The day seems to abound with those, Vincent thought.

“Yes. Irony,” Vincent softly agreed, joining his host in considering his drink. He took a deeper swallow.

The alcohol burned another trail of fire down his esophagus, and Vincent had to admit it was the warmest he’d felt in...

Well. He didn’t actually want to remember that time. Like so many other memories, it involved Catherine. Too much.

“Yes, business is back,” Elliot stated, addressing Vincent’s earlier comment. “Money’s coming back in. Money. Contracts. There’s even an empty lot in Midtown, waiting for me to build something on it,” he observed, referring again to his corporation, the one that had been decimated, financially, only fifteen months ago. “I suppose I should be happy about that.”

They both knew why he wasn't.

"What will you build?" Vincent asked, only mildly curious. One more – or less – megastructure in Manhattan hardly held any real interest for him. And it wasn't lost on him that he'd nearly lost Catherine to Elliot over one of those – years ago.

Elliot toyed with his glass, and swirled the liquid a little, watching it swish around the mouth blown receptacle. His pause was a long one.

"I don't know that I actually give a damn," he replied.

He stopped the motion of his hand, let the liquid settle, took a sip, then drained the glass. He reached for the bottle and poured himself another.

Vincent remained fixed on Elliot's answer. *You don't give a damn? You? You who live to build – and destroy? You don't care about the only thing – besides Catherine – that you ever cared about? That you ever... loved? Now that, that, Elliot, is an irony.*

Then, another thought chased that one.

I know exactly how you feel. I don't think I care about very many things anymore, either.

"Catherine's loss is... pervasive," Vincent offered, by way of commentary. He felt he had to make one.

"Catherine's loss is your fault... and mine," Elliot charged, leaning back with his now replenished drink. "And John Moreno's and Patrick Hanlon's, and... well. I guess the whole world is responsible." He glared at the generous portion he'd poured himself. He was about to get drunk, tonight, apparently. It was a thing he did, sometimes.

He traced a well-manicured finger around the snifter's rim. "I'll probably erect some... megalithic structure. Something that costs a

fortune and exceeds all expectations. Something to appease my ego, and grab a lot of headlines. Something Cathy would have ... well, come to think of it, something Cathy would have hated." He gave his expensive drink a rueful glance.

"I never could please that woman, come to think of it," he admitted.

No. No, you couldn't.

His line of thought then became more charitable. And perhaps more honest. *Perhaps neither of us were very good at that.*

Elliot drank again, then set the glass down and zipped up his jacket, against the cold. Then, Elliot he something Vincent did not expect. Which was to say he said something else that did that:

"They say he has cancer. That he's dying."

Vincent's blue eyes flickered with interest, probably for the first time in their conversation. "Is he? I didn't know."

Elliot shrugged. "I thought maybe it was why you came over."

"No."

The broad shoulders under the heavy black leather coat lifted again.

"Well. That's what I hear. May it be slow, incredibly painful, and... brutal, in some way." He picked his glass back up and sipped from it.

Vincent glanced out toward the city. Out toward its lights. Out toward the thousands of lights. One of which he'd lost Catherine in.

"That is a dark wish, for Christmas Eve," Vincent said, after a time.

It was a mistake to come here. It always is.

"Would you like to make a ... kinder one? He took her from you as much as he took her from anyone," Elliot rejoined.

More. He took her from me far more than he took her from you, took her from anyone. I lost my reason, and my faith. Then I lost our bond. I lost my love. I lost my purpose, my hope, my... I lost so much more than all of you.

Vincent drew his gaze back in from the lights and eyed the contents of his own glass, much the same way Elliot had done before he'd downed it. He knew he wouldn't do that. But he did take a long swallow, while Elliot waited for his reply about whether or not he would make a kinder wish, for Gabriel.

"No," Vincent said flatly, as he set the glass down on the table.

Elliot sighed at that, and watched his breath drift away. "Sorry. I should be better company," the millionaire stated. It was the closest thing to an apology Vincent knew he was going to get from the other man. And, it was unnecessary.

"You should be nothing but what you are," Vincent replied, reaching for the bottle and refilling his glass. The trip home meant he didn't dare drink too much of the expensive brandy. But he very much wished he could.

What a luxury that would be. To drink. To forget. Just for a few hours, or a night. To be able to just... set aside this deep pain and... laugh, again. Even if it is a false laugh. Even that. What... decadence that would be.

"I tried to drink enough to forget her. It doesn't really work," Elliot said, intuiting the direction of Vincent's thoughts, as he took another swallow. He set down his glass and motioned with his fingers for Vincent to pour him another.

Vincent considered the other man's declaration. "I never want to forget her. Just the... the pain of losing her," Vincent replied, pouring some more for the other man, as well.

"I take it this is... rare," Vincent said.

Elliot gave a small bark of laughter. "Let's just say I think we're supposed to be savoring it, rather than guzzling it down. Cathy would have known what to do with it," Elliot replied, sliding the stem between his fingers so that the glass settled in his palm.

"Yes. She would have," Vincent agreed.

His eyes darted a little, and Elliot knew the big beast was remembering something. Something about Catherine, and some other time that Catherine had known exactly what to do – and had looked stunning, probably, while doing it. He knew without asking that she was never far from Vincent's thoughts.

"To Cathy Chandler," Elliot said, holding up his glass.

Vincent did the same. "To Catherine," he corrected softly. Vincent never called her "Cathy." Never. Others did, even Father had, at times. But it was the longer, more formal, more romantic version of Catherine's name he preferred. The glasses touched, and rang a little, in the night.

Elliot took a sip of brandy as he eyed his companion over the rim of the glass. *I can't believe I'm getting drunk with the only other man in the world who loved Catherine Chandler, who knew what she really was,* Elliot thought. *What a hell of a year it's been.*

"My mother would have told you she's in a better place. Safe from hate. Safe from harm," Elliot replied, saluting Vincent with his fresh drink.

“Do you believe that?” Vincent asked. It was a thought he tried to entertain. It was the only thing that helped with the feeling of desolation, if “helped” was the right word for it.

“Let’s just say the image of Cathy Chandler sitting on a cloud wearing a halo makes me smile, even if I don’t think it’s true. Oh, and her gown better be a Dior. Cathy never dressed cheap.”

Vincent shrugged at that. Though he knew it was true, the cost of Catherine’s wardrobe had never been a thing that had been a point of interest, between them. He cared that she had a warm coat for winter, and gloves for her beautiful hands, when it got cold. There was not so much more for him to know. Still...

Vincent settled himself back in the chair. “She was a ... a vision, sometimes... wasn’t she?” Vincent asked it almost idly, as he pictured her dancing with him, at Winterfest. She’d been luminous, in a white gown and pearls. And he, Vincent, had danced with her. For hours, and long after everyone else had left the hall.

The room was still warm, even after the candles had died down. The doors were closed, and the musicians were long gone. Still... I swear we both heard music...

He let the memory own him for a moment, then he glanced back at his host. At his host, who sometimes saw too much. Vincent knew the other man had his own memories of Catherine. For a moment, a jab of jealousy pierced him.

“That she was,” Elliot answered, shaking his head. Then, after a long pause:

“All for a stupid book. Such a waste. For both of us. All of us.” Elliot said.

“Yes,” Vincent agreed.

“Huh. Which one of us do you think she would have ended up with? In the long run?” Elliot asked. He cradled the snifter with his palm and took a long swallow.

Me. She would have chosen me. A thousand times, she would have chosen me. Vincent thought. Elliot turned his head to look out at the same lights Vincent had been studying. His rakishly handsome face was in profile, as his throat worked the liquor down. He had everything. And, in a way... nothing. The same “nothing” that Vincent now had.

She would have chosen me. Except for the few times she chose you. Except for those. Vincent admitted mentally.

Elliot turned his gaze back to Vincent, waiting for an answer.

“The lucky one,” Vincent replied diplomatically, rising from the chair. He set his glass on the table. It was time to go home. He wondered if Elliot would pour the contents of his glass back into the bottle, or just drink from the half-full snifter. Then, he wondered why he wondered. Like so many things, it was something that didn’t matter, really.

I wonder if anything matters. I wonder if anything ever will, again, Vincent thought, aware how morose his inner dialogue was.

“Tomorrow will be Christmas. Will you go to her grave?” Elliot asked, rising with the man he’d never called “friend,” but now knew was something more. He didn’t have a word for what they were to each other. Partners in grief, maybe.

“No,” Vincent shook his great head, subtly. “Peter may. Her friend Jenny usually does. It’s a day I can’t see her – can’t... go there,” Vincent corrected himself. No matter where he was, he couldn’t “see” Catherine. No one could. They all knew that.

"It's an empty hole in the ground, Vincent. Nothing of Cathy is really there. My mother's death taught me that. Not to mention my father's," Elliot said.

Vincent simply nodded, then pulled his hood up so that it covered his features. It was time to leave.

"Careful on the way home. Come back once the weather gets warmer. It won't be such a hard trip for you, then," Elliot advised.

Was that you expressing concern for me? Vincent wondered.
Catherine was right about you, king-in-her-world. You have changed.

"I'll be fine. You too, Elliot. Be well."

Elliot's expression told Vincent he doubted as much. "Oh, I don't think any of us are going to be that, Vincent. But I'll do as well as I can. I'm thinking of... relocating, actually. Maybe Europe. Someplace where... someplace where my heart didn't get broken, quite so thoroughly. After this next project is done."

The declaration stopped Vincent's departure, for a moment.

I envy you your ability to travel. But then, I suppose I always did.

"The project you don't care about," Vincent confirmed.

"I really don't," Elliot acknowledged. "You know, it's strange. I once told Cathy I hated sleep, because it was a waste of precious time. And I didn't have friends, because they were inconvenient. And I know we aren't friends. But whatever we are... I'm glad it happened, Vincent. Thank you for trying to find her with me. Even if it damn near got us both killed."

Vincent inclined his great head. "I could do no less. Thank you for trying to help me. I just wish... things could have been different."

They both knew Elliot felt the same.

"If I break ground next month, I'll still be here most of the year. Probably," Elliot said. He was back to talking business.

Because it's a safe subject for you. Safer than anything else, anyway, Vincent realized.

"Then I should visit before you leave, perhaps. Just to say 'good-bye.'"

"Just to say good-bye," Elliot echoed, extending his bare hand to Vincent's gloved one.

The two loves of Catherine's life shook on it, a promise made, between them.

Elliot returned to his drink as Vincent climbed over the wall.



Vincent descended the building halfway, then leapt over to the closest rooftop. From there, he knew he was a fire escape ladder and a swift jaunt to the safety of the tree-lined park. He moved in silence and shadow, as more Christmas carols wafted up from the street, below.

The fire escape ladder's metal was cold, beneath his hands, the frozen steel bit through his gloves.

The temperature is dropping fast, Vincent noted, glad for the warmth of the alcohol in his system, as he descended.

He dropped to the ground and made his way by stealth, to the park. Night sounds assailed his ears. Sounds of the late night traffic, of the Broadway crowd emptying the theaters and bistros, of carolers, some drunk and off-key, some almost operatic, in quality, belting out Christmas songs on the streets.

It was loud, even at this late hour. New York. There was no other place like it, not really. Especially at Christmas time.

Vincent veered away from the traffic-filled edge of the park and wound his way inward. He made his way past the statue of the falconer and veered off toward the Naumberg Band shell. An earlier holiday concert had left the grass in front of the structure littered with stray music programs, and other mementos. Vincent glanced at the listings. They'd played Handel, and selections from Tchaikovsky.

Catherine would have loved it, Vincent thought.

The ground was frozen, and a decent layer of snow had stuck. Even so, a hundred or so yards in front of him, he saw the grate. The one that he and Catherine had sat under, one late, stormy night.

They'd been playing Schubert. And Catherine's honey hair had dripped with rain.

Vincent closed his eyes on the memory. It still pierced his heart, to think of it.

You were... luminous. Incandescent. Your hair, your pearls... everything about you. You were drenched with rainwater, and the lightning made you look even more beautiful, more strange, more rare. Thunder rumbled over your head, and you stood on your knees, hands up to it. God. I was there. I saw it. I offered you my cape, and you declined. Your smile was... ethereal.

I should have told you then how in love with you I was. Should have quoted Byron to you, aloud. I should have kissed the water off your skin or ... proposed, or... something. I should have found a reason for you to stay with me, more. I should have.

But he hadn't. And later that night, Rolley had staggered back into their lives. And after that, something else had. Or someone else had.

It seemed like there was always something, always some reason, some... distraction, that kept him in his world and her in hers. It was the way with them. It just was.

I love you, Catherine. I will always love you, He thought, looking at the snow-lined, rectangular scrap of metal, before him.

A distant clock struck twelve. It blended with the notes from the *Unfinished Symphony*, in his head.

Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas, my love. Be at peace.

He drew his cape tighter around his huge form, as the December wind picked at the edges of the fabric.

It will freeze, hard, before morning. And tomorrow, there will be skaters on the pond, and icicles in the branches of the trees. It will look like a fantasy land, and the sun on the snow will be so bright it will be blinding, he fancied, seeing it in his mind's eye.

The children will be sledding and they'll all be wearing the new things they got for Christmas. Long scarves and warm coats and woolen mittens and boots. It will be beautiful, and special... For them.

He knew he couldn't say the same, for himself.

Vincent looked out at the imagined scene until his ankles began to stiffen inside his heavy work boots. The cold from the pavement was creeping upward. He knew he had to get home.

The sensation of listening to Shubert and watching skaters drifted away on the nighttime wind.

Snow crunched under his boots, an icy top indicating yet another hard frost in a steady series of those. The light breeze made the air feel that much colder, and he knew enough to be grateful for the thermal shirt he wore beneath his vest.

At least I have a home to go to. Many are not so fortunate. He tried to console himself.

It was a thing he told himself often, these days, as he tried – mostly in vain- to be grateful for all he still had, rather than being despondent over all he'd lost.

It will be good to get warm, again, he encouraged himself, tracking a gibbous moon with his blue eyes, as he walked.



The cold kept miscreants inside, for the most part, and travel was an easy thing, once he approached the drainage culvert. The slim ribbon of water the culvert always exuded was frozen, and Vincent kept his head down, careful not to slip on its slick surface. He straddled the ice until he made his way inside the round hole, grateful to be out of the wind, at least. The temperature was still dropping. It was growing bitter.

Go in. Get warm. Sleep. Tomorrow – today – is Christmas. It will come as it will. I'm tired. Perhaps that means I won't dream of—

But Vincent had no time to finish the thought of what he might or might not dream of, as the woman he'd been dreaming of constantly, detached herself from the far shadows of the wall.

“Vincent?” she asked. The voice was low, and a little breathy. And soul-shakingly familiar.

He stood still. Dead still, and warred with himself, as he took in the form of Catherine Chandler.

Mad. This is it. I'm finally going mad. How... strange it feels. I think I hear you. I just now realized how long it's been since I actually heard your voice.

There was an army surplus duffel bag at her feet, and it held very little. She was dressed in a stocking cap and heavy jeans, and low boots that were run down at the heel. They'd seen better days. As had the plaid shirt she had thrown on over a turtleneck sweater. It was missing the bottom button.

No. You're not real. Catherine Chandler never wore a plaid work shirt with a button gone a day in her life.

“Vincent?” She repeated, tugging the knit cap off her head. Her hair was longer than he remembered, and a few shades darker. It had

grown out of its chic cut, and her wispy bangs were close to getting in her eyes.

“You’re not... real,” Vincent said, taking a step back. Something told him if he tried to touch her, she would vanish.



Sorrow owned her expression. She knew what she’d put him through, what the events of the last year had put them both through.

“I’m as real as you. And I’m... freezing.” She chafed her arms. “I’m not supposed to be here. Anywhere but here. Please.”

She stopped rubbing her arms and held out her small, lovely hand. “I love you. I couldn’t stay away. I missed you so mu--!!”

The last digraph never left her mouth as Vincent rushed forward and took her off her feet, in a wild embrace.

Much. You missed me so much. Catherine. My Catherine. You're here. You're alive!

"Catherine!?" He rained kisses across her face as she tried to explain something about Witness Protection and being found by Joe Maxwell. She was supposed to be in the wilds of Canada. In hiding. She was forbid to be in New York, or anywhere in the US for that matter, but her heart simply wouldn't let her stay away, any longer.

He didn't care. About any of it. Whatever act of God or fate had spared her and brought her back to him, he blessed it. It was all he knew. It was all he needed to know.

"My Catherine. My beautiful, beautiful Catherine." His voice was a low, hoarse rumble against her skin. He pulled his cape around her, trying to share the warmth of his body with her.

"Not so beautiful, now," she demurred, stepping back a pace. She'd lost weight. She was winter pale, and more than that. It was clear she'd been ill, and was recovering.

"I was in a hospital up until a few months ago. And I'm... I'm... scared. I left my coat behind... afraid to go back for it. I just... left. Got on a bus and... left." She looked up at him. "I'm worried about what will happen if I'm caught and...And I guess that means I'm on the run. And broke. I'm dead broke, Vincent. All my money's gone."

Vincent shook his head as he continued to stare at her. "Peter Alcott executed your will. He spends the money to help the children get what they need, but most of it is—"

She shook her head, and the motion sent her soft hair flying. She took another step back, and his cape fell away. "No. I can't get it back. I can't go back, Vincent. I can't go back to being who I was. I'm... I'm supposed to be dead. Dead, or a thousand miles away from here.

When my handler finds out I'm gone there's going to be hell to pay. I'm supposed to stay hidden."

Vincent tried to reassure her. "The man who hurt you, who took you... he's dying, Catherine," he said. Perhaps soon, this nightmare would truly be over. For all of them.

Catherine shook her head again, denial in every cell of her body. "Joe says that's not enough. He got me out – in a coma. He planned my funeral, planned... all of it. To keep me safe. Because we didn't know John Moreno was dirty. We still don't know who else Gabriel turned, or who might be watching. He... broke... so many people."

Elliot. He almost broke Elliot. But he didn't. Vincent realized.

"Catherine – "

"Joe is digging. He risked his life for me. He never rests, but he says it might take years..." There were tears in her eyes at the mention of the word "years." She batted them away. "I just... I couldn't. Not for that long."

Joe. So Joe Maxwell knew she was alive. Joe, who was utterly not attached to the tunnels, or to him, in any way.

No one else knew. No one.

Vincent realized that was all to keep Catherine safe. And that it had – for now.

But... your life. It waits for you.

Then, another thought. A far more insistent one. *But I wait for you more. Me. It has to be me, this time.*

"Catherine--"

"I... I came to ask you. To beg you, really," she interrupted. "I can't live in New York. It's beyond dangerous, for me, here. People know me. People... see."

For a moment, Vincent's heart fell. *You cannot stay in New York?*

Catherine saw the look in his eyes. "I can't stay in New York. So I... I was hoping maybe... you'd let me stay under it?" Her green eyes were pools of hope. Hope mixed with uncertainty.

Vincent reached out his hands, took hers, and tugged her forward. He put his forehead against hers, blessing her for her strength, and for all that they were.

"You will marry me. And it may be ... months, before I even let you out of my sight, out of my – our – Chambers," he replied.

Catherine sighed, as relief and love poured through her. "It's dangerous."

"It always is," he replied simply. *Dangerous is not having you. Dangerous is feeling at one with my aloneness, again. Dangerous is owning nothing but my despair. Dangerous is understanding when Elliot Burch thinks of throwing himself from a high place, or moving to the other side of the world, knowing what it is that drives him. That's what danger, real danger is, Catherine.*

"If anything happened to you..." she was frightened, and she let the sentence trail.

"Something already did happen to me," he replied, letting the sentence stand for the totality of it.

She dropped her head so that it fell against his chest. "I love you so much. I couldn't bear it, knowing what this was doing to you. To us. I know I was supposed to stay away. I just... I couldn't. Couldn't take it

anymore.” Her arms went around his huge neck, and she lifted her head and stood up on tiptoe, planted soft kisses across his cheeks.

Nor could I. Nor could I, my love, he thought, not wanting to interrupt her ministrations with the words.

Into the tunnel, there came soft voices of Christmas carols, ushered in by the breeze. *“Angels We Have Heard On High”* wafted over them.

Catherine heard the sound. “Is it... is it really Christmas?” she asked. “I wasn’t sure. I started travelling... days ago.”

She’d clearly lost track of the time. Much as he had, earlier.

“It really is,” he intoned. “Christmas, and only a few hours old. It’s the Season of Miracles.”

“I suppose it is,” she answered, letting a happy tear fall.

‘Merry Christmas, Catherine.’ He said it so gently she thought her heart would break.

“Merry Christmas, Vincent,” she whispered.

“I love you. And I will never stop saying it,” he vowed.

She slid down. He felt her smile against his neck.

“Never?”

“Never. Ever.”

She stepped back again, seeing the love – and conviction, in his blue eyes.

“Your Chambers, then?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied simply, tugging her toward the tunnel entrance.

“I seem to remember being held in your Chambers once before,” she recalled, loving him all the more.

He pulled the edge of his cape over her shoulders, again. "Yes. For ten days in April. We began there."

She nodded. "You fed me soup and read me 'Great Expectations.' And our bond. It was born, then. I think." She remembered it with him.

Yes. Our bond. Our bond was born, then. Born in these tunnels. As was my love for you. Vincent could already feel both of those things, stirring within him. Joy coursed along his veins, warming him like nothing else could have.

Lay in my bed, Catherine. Lay and be warm. Read with me. Be with me. Let us both feel our bond being reborn, again. It's a night for births, and miracles. Surely we have one more left in us.

"There are people we need to tell," Vincent said, thinking about Elliot.

Catherine shook her head. "No one outside the tunnels. I'm... I'm not even sure about that. I'm afraid I'm putting you all at risk."

"Glo – ooooo –ooooo-ooooo-ria... in Excelsis deo..." The sound grew stronger.

"You should be nowhere else," Vincent replied, stooping down to pick up her lightweight bag as he swept her up off her feet.

"You're sure? I'm still afraid, Vincent." They stopped before the entrance to his world.

She was, and he could see the fear in her. He set the question of when to tell Elliot aside, for now.

"We live to overcome our fears. We will overcome yours. You'll see." He stepped closer to the gate.

“Do you still remember how?” He asked, confronting her with the lock. Catherine reached up for the hidden lever. A spring clicked.

“Vincent... I might... I might never be able to go back to being Cathy Chandler,” she confessed. She wanted him to know what they might both be in for. “Even when it’s safe. I think... that is, I’ve had a lot of *time* to think... and I think I may not want to. Does that sound... so wrong?”

After all they’d endured he understood. More than anyone. More than anyone could, probably.

The gate creaked open and the inner door slid back.

“Be who you wish. Be what you wish,” he said, as warm air spilled out, over them. “It’s what my world is about. What it’s always been about, when you think about it,” he replied.

Be who you wish. Be what you wish. Yes, yes, that was right, Catherine realized.

She sagged with relief, against him. “I think... I think I’d like that,” she answered, smiling, just a little, for the first time. *I wish to be with you. More than anything. More than anything. That’s what I know. That’s what I’ll build my life on. So many days... just to bring me to that one realization.*

“Safe. You’re safe, now,” he swore, bearing her into their refuge, and now, their home.

Her smile deepened. “That’s what... that’s what you told me the first time. The first time I ever woke up. In your bed.”

“Did I?” he asked, setting her down in one of the safe places of his world, while he tugged the gate closed, behind them. He pressed the latch that controlled the inner door, and they both watched it close.

"You did," she replied, feeling the sense of security his home so often provided. "Maybe I always knew this was the only way I'd be truly safe," she answered.

Perhaps you did. Perhaps we both did. Perhaps... who knows, on a night as miraculous as this one? Vincent thought. He realized he had no answer for that. Possibly because no answer was needed.

A particular answer was, however.

He set down her bag, turned to her, and brushed a loving kiss across the top of her forehead. "Your safety may depend on something else. You haven't accepted me, yet."

Catherine looked confused. *Haven't accepted? But of course I—*

"You didn't say 'yes,' Catherine," he prompted.

How can you think my answer would be anything but 'yes?'

She framed his face with her small hands. Hands he'd always adored.

"Yes, Vincent. With all my heart and no matter what comes next for us, yes."

He held her hands with his and gave her the kiss they'd both been longing for. His strange, utterly unique lips moved across hers, sparking a barely familiar sensation, between them.

It left Vincent with a warm and tingling feeling, not unlike Elliot's fine brandy. And then...

The warmth became enveloping, and the bond burst across his consciousness just as it burst across hers.

Yes. Yes. There you are. There is my love. Missing, for so long. And now... restored to me. Oh, Catherine!

He felt Catherine move across his soul, even as he felt as if she was a part of it. Music he shouldn't have been able to hear rang in his ears, as his one, true love rang in his heart.

I love you. I love you. I love you. I will always love you. And there will never be another parting from you. I couldn't bear it. And neither, I think, could you.

Neither was sure which one of them thought it first, or loudest, or thought it most, but they both knew at least one of them had.

"It seems that more than one gift has been returned to us," Vincent said, momentarily breathless, as he felt their newly restored bond settle itself, between them.

He felt her agreeing with him, inside his sensitive mind. And so much more.

You are frightened about the past, and concerned for the future. You're worried. And still cold. Don't be, Catherine. Don't be. We can fix the one, and we can fix the others. We can fix everything, now.

"Our bond?" Catherine asked, knowing what she – what they both – were feeling.

He nodded, and proved to her that it was so. "You are tired, and yet not tired. Energized. Cold. Frightened, and... free," Vincent said, describing her emotions exactly.

Catherine nodded.

"You are safe, here, now. Forever safe, here. My love," he said.

Catherine blushed. He'd never called her that aloud, before. She lifted her head for another kiss, feeling that she was starving for it, starving for him. He gave her what she asked for, and they both felt the kiss deepen and strengthen, even as their bond did the same.

Catherine felt his warmth course through her. She felt as if she would never be cold, again.

Vincent... You're warm and you're in love with me. I feel it. I feel it all! Oh!

"Will you read me 'Great Expectations' again?" she asked breathlessly, when he let her come up for air.

"Every word. All but the last chapter. That is for you to do," he replied, adoring her all the more. *It will be like last time*, he thought.

Of course. Just like I did before, she remembered.

"No shadow of another parting from you." She paraphrased the last line of Dickens' great epic. There were tears in her eyes, again. She let them fall freely. *Oh, Vincent. How I love you.*

"None." He brushed her tears away, then shouldered her bag and took her into the home she'd found by accident, years ago. One that would now be hers, for as long as she wanted it.

He knew that she might, one day, choose to leave, again. Or even that she might have to. That she might one day step back into the world as Catherine Chandler. The thought didn't bother him. For he knew now, and without a doubt, that she'd always return here, return home. To him.

And that he would always be waiting for her.

We are a family, now. Not two separate people. A couple. A family. My family. It is a night for celebrating those. Glory to God in the highest. And on Earth, peace. And good will toward men.

"No shadow of another parting from you," he echoed, as she moved beside him.

And there wasn't.



Gloria In Excelsis Deo

Glory to God in the Highest, and on Earth, peace, and good will toward men.

No matter where you are on your own holiday journey, I wish you love.

~ Cindy



Merry
Christmas
AND HAPPY NEW YEAR

Author's note:

Dear Friends,

It's been a hard year. A hard and long one, and make that "another" one of those, for all of us. The pandemic has cost us much, and altered

much, and I know that many of us stand divided. These are serious times.

And you might feel that it's impossible to dream a dream, in these serious times, that what good is "Once Upon a Time" and "Happily Ever After" and Beauty and the Beast, and fanfiction in general, when such sad days are upon us? Don't those things feel out of place? Childish, and silly, even, considering?

And you'd be right to say so. You truly would. For everyone whose muse has grown quieter in these turbulent, uncertain, often frightening times, I understand. I understand, and I empathize. I too have asked those questions, and felt that way. I almost didn't write "Lost Christmas Eve" because of it.

But then I also thought "Perhaps these are the times when we need our "Once Upon a Times" more, not less. Perhaps these are the days when "Happily Ever After" must be invited into our lives. The muse, (bedraggled though she is) still needs to be listened to, and encouraged, for whatever little scraps she brings."

It's been a hard year. But not lighting a candle only allows the darkness to deepen. It doesn't send it away. And I think we all need our "candles," now.

So, I leave this little offering here, fully aware that the world is a bit insane, that families are fighting with each other, that friendships have been damaged, that lives have been lost, or forever changed, and that harsh words have been said, sometimes. I get it. I do. The things that hold us together seem and feel less stable than ever before. Division seems to rule... well, everything.

I want you to know I'm not unaware of it all. Indeed, it's because I'm so aware of it all I pushed this little ficlet out of me. It isn't anything

much. But it's given with a full heart, in hopes that it gives you a little something to cheer you. That's all.

It's all I can do. So I will.

Merry Christmas, my dear and distant friends. You are part of my heart's neighborhood, and I love you all.

Much love as always,

Cindy

