

I have no idea why Pascal came whispering in my ear this holiday season. I promise I have three (three!) other stories started for the Yule page, and none of them featured him. And none of them were going anywhere, either. (Stupid muse!)

Then, Pascal came stumbling right in. And since he almost never raises his voice, I had to lean in very closely to hear what he had to say.

He told me he wanted a little story of his own, and in it, he had to be the hero. That Vincent could be there (of course,) but that that this was going to be mostly his show. And that it was going to be a Winterfest story, and that he was in the mood to receive a happy miracle of his own, as sweet as any Vincent and Catherine ever got.

Different, mind you, but just as sweet.

And all of that was kind of a tall order for a short guy. (Armin Shimerman is 5'6. I looked it up.) But, well, you know. He has every right to make demands. He's a good sort.

So I began to wonder about him. We know he's devoted to his pipes. And we know that Pascal is not the type to leave that Pipe Chamber of his.

Well, some things may be about to change...

“Merry Christmas”

By Cindy Rae



For The Yule Page on Treasure Chambers, 2022. Merry Christmas to all.



Chapter One

A Message in the Stillness

Pascal had excused himself from the Great Hall, as was his custom, even at Winterfest; perhaps even especially at Winterfest.

“Somebody has to mind the store,” he told himself comfortably, as he settled down in his well-worn chair. The pipes were mostly quiet. There would be a good reason for that.

Below him, in the Great Hall, revelry ruled. The Hall was full to bursting, and Sebastian the street magician was pulling quarters from the ears of children. William was tapping several large kegs of ale. Vincent was dancing with his Catherine, and Father was telling some of the youngsters the story of Ebenezer Scrooge. Mary was waltzing with Eli. Mouse was (mostly) chasing Arthur, who was (mostly) trying to steal a bread roll off Laura’s plate. Rebecca was modestly accepting the praise that was her due, for the Winterfest candles. All that, and more, as Tunnel folk and longtime Helpers shared in the fellowship that was the Tunnel World at Winterfest.

And that meant almost no one was sending or receiving any messages; because they were (mostly) all in the same room, down Below.

Pascal sighed, the soft sound of relaxation in the gesture. He loved the Pipe Chamber at Winterfest. It was almost never like this at any other time. The calm peace of it washed over him like a balm. There was nothing to do and no one to send a message to. His family was happy. All was well. His home was... good. His home was good.

My home is good, he thought, enjoying the unusual solitude, on the pipes.

Then:

Merry Christmas.

Pascal sat up, as the holiday greeting softly tittered its way into the room, on one of the many pipes.

He stood up and looked around. The message had been so soft as to almost not have been there at all. Still, he knew it for what it was: A Christmas greeting, in a code so old that he remembered his father teaching it to him when he was barely more than a boy.

Merry Christmas, the message came in again.

Pascal took out his stethoscope and placed it on the nearest pipe. There was no vibration on it. The greeting had come from one of the other master pipes. Or one of the smaller ones.

The message came across again. More faintly, this time.

He looked instinctively toward the far wall, home to a set of pipes that were almost never used. They connected to one of the oldest parts of Queens, and by extension, one of the least reputable areas in the city. None of the current Helpers lived there, and hadn't, for years. Most of the buildings in the area were either slated for demolition or close to becoming so. His people never went there, without good reason.

Merry Christmas, said the normally quiet pipe. Pascal ran to it and set his stethoscope upon it just as the last 's' fell into silence.

This one, he thought, taking out his sticks.

Merry Christmas, he messaged back, copying the old code. He reasoned that using the new one might not be understood by the sender.

For a long moment... silence. And then:

Merry Christmas Merry Christmas Merry Christmas!

The tapping was louder, a staccato blur of excitement, as if the sender was trying frantically to get the message through. It came through fast, as if he/she felt urgent, and the last few letters were a little garbled.

Pascal paused. *Who is this?* he asked on the pipes. It was polite to identify oneself when using Tunnel code. And usually necessary, considering.

There was a slight pause.

Merry Christmas.

Another pause. Then again, *Merry Christmas.*

Pascal stared at the pipe, trying to solve a puzzle he didn't have enough clues for.

There's someone there. Someone in a bad part of town. Someone who knows Tunnel code, and knows how to send a message on the pipes. But... why don't they answer me?

Again, he set his sticks to the pipes, trying to send his message slowly, in case the receiver was having trouble understanding him.

Pascal. This is Pascal. Do you need something? Do you want me to give your message to someone? Who? Who can I say it's from?

At first, nothing. Then:

Merry Christmas... Merry Christmas, came the reply.

The sender tapped more slowly, also, as if copying his much slower pace.

Merry Christmas, the pipe said again, sedately.

By the last, Pascal couldn't help but sense a kind of sorrow in the sound.

Perhaps it's the only Tunnel Code he knows, Pascal mused. As unlikely as that was, it seemed that was the case.

Pascal put his hands on the pipe. The cold metal felt as ancient as it actually was. It felt cold, and lonely. When he pulled his hand away, his palm was streaked with dust. It was long unused. Years long, perhaps. Pascal couldn't remember the last time this particular pipe had rattled to life. And that was saying something.

Merry Christmas, he tapped back, one more time, at his customary tempo.

Merry Christmas, came the reply.

"You're trying to reach out to someone," Pascal said to the pipe.

Over his shoulder, one of the main pipes chattered with an incoming message. It was from Michael. He was coming down for Winterfest. He was late, but he was coming. Pascal answered that the festivities were already underway, in the Great Hall.

Then, he returned to the lonely little pipe.

Are you all right? He asked, in Tunnel code. *Do you need my help?*

He feared he knew what the reply would be, and he was right:

Merry Christmas.

"Queens. You're in Queens. Past the old part of town. Near where... near where my father once lived, or so he told me. Before he ever came down. If you keep talking to me, I bet I'll be able to find you," he said to the pipe.

Merry Christmas, he tapped back, again, trying to maintain what little contact there was, between them.

Merry Christmas, came the reply. If a tunnel message on the pipes could sound relieved, this one did.

Before he could talk himself out of it or think about all the reasons this might not be a good idea, Pascal slung a loose bag of tools over his shoulder, tucked his sticks into the deep pockets of his vest, and headed out.

“Keep talking. I’m on my way,” he said, knowing it would be useless to tap the message out, since the receiver didn’t seem to understand anything but the greeting they were sending.

Merry Christmas, whoever you are, he thought, the sound of the tapped message still echoing, inside his balding head.



Chapter Two

Going Up



“And you’re sure it came from this direction?” Vincent asked Pascal, as the two men wound their way through the tunnels together.

“I’m positive. Listen,” Pascal instructed, stopping along the way.

Merry Christmas, he tapped.

Merry Christmas, came the response. It was almost immediate.

Vincent listened, as bemused as his friend was. “That code is so old, I barely remember ever hearing it,” Vincent said. “What little I know, I believe you taught to me.”

Pascal nodded, as he put away his sticks. "They don't know our shortcuts. It's like they... like they were down here when my father was still using parts of his old Navy Morse code. They don't know how to identify themselves, or say who the message is for. Other than that... you know everything I do."

Vincent considered the puzzle of it. "Do we know someone who lives in this area?" he asked.

Pascal shook his head. "In Queens, sure, but not this part of it. At least, I don't think so. Most of the old apartments are gone, but there are still some. You go Above. What's it like in that part of town?"

Vincent slowed his steps. He did know the area, at least somewhat. He knew enough to avoid it.

"The area we're going to is... not a safe one, Pascal. There are desperate people on the streets, when there is anyone at all ... No one in the buildings, at least no one you'd want to meet. It's the kind of place Rolley might stay in, for a night or two. Before the police or the gangs made him move on," Vincent warned.

Merry Christmas, the thin pipe they were following said.

"It's like they're trying to make sure we're still here," Pascal reasoned. He pulled his sticks back out and answered in kind.

"You've tried talking to him? Asking things of him?" Vincent asked.

Pascal nodded. "Yes. First in old code. Then in new. It's like I told you when I came to get you. Nothing works. He just keeps tapping this out."

Vincent thought about that. "I... It feels as if we're being called by someone. But I don't know why," Vincent said, putting his fingers to the pipe much the same way Pascal had.

“Same,” Pascal agreed. “At first, the sound was so faint... I doubt I would have heard it over normal pipe traffic,” he said. “It was only because everyone was at Winterfest that I was able to pick it up.”

“It seems you have a Winterfest gift, then,” Vincent replied. The two men resumed walking.

“Winterfest or Christmas,” Pascal replied. The message’s sender had not mentioned “Winterfest.”

Vincent agreed with that. “This is one of the few years that Winterfest has been held on Christmas Eve,” he observed, quickening his pace. Whatever this was, he wanted to find out about it and resolve it, so he could return to his Catherine.

“Could just be a kid playing a prank,” Pascal offered, by way of explanation.

“In old Tunnel Code? Your father stopped using it when you were a child. Everyone did. This code... it must be more than thirty years old,” Vincent reasoned.

“Closer to thirty-five,” Pascal acknowledged. “But who would be trying to message us from that time?”

Vincent shrugged that he didn’t know, and the two men continued on their way.

The friends passed through the hub and veered toward the passageway that would take them away from Manhattan and into Queensborough. After a while, they both heard the clickety-clack of the subway trains. Half a mile more, and even those began to grow silent.

“We’re reaching the outskirts of town,” Vincent reasoned, knowing that the silence over their heads wasn’t necessarily a good thing.

When industry left, it left places that fell into poverty. Then it razed them... eventually.

In the mean time, the slow process of decay and unsavory elements tended to move in.

Vincent eyed a ladder before them. One that led to a manhole cover.



Pascal stalled, as he looked up at it. “Look, Vincent, I... maybe we should just go back. Hammering out ‘Merry Christmas’ seems harmless enough, especially tonight, and I answered them back...”

“But we still don’t know who you were speaking to. Or why that’s the only message they are sending,” Vincent reasoned. “Have faith, Pascal. Perhaps someone from long ago wanted to come down for Winterfest, but was unable. Perhaps we can help.”

“It could be a trap of some kind.”

“Or it could be a sincere wish, and a call for companionship,” Vincent countered. “We won’t know until we investigate further.”

As if to punctuate Vincent’s statement, *Merry Christmas* rattled to life again, on the pipe near his hand.

It's... it's not a trap. It's a message. Someone's trying to call us. I just can't shake that feeling... Pascal thought.

"Okay," Pascal replied, tapping out what was by now his only reply.

Pascal finished with the chore, then held a lantern high, while Vincent climbed the old ladder. "According to the map, you're going to open up into a back alley. Be careful, Vincent. We don't know what is--"

The rest of his words were lost to the scraping of heavy metal on asphalt, as Vincent's mighty arms moved the cover over.

"It's clear. Come up," Vincent instructed, pushing the cover aside further and disappearing, up the ladder.

I guess if someone like Vincent can go up there, I can, Pascal reasoned, still not liking it, as he bolstered his courage.

Pascal set the lantern down and placed an unsteady hand on the cold metal rung. It wasn't that he was unused to the feel of metal beneath his hands; he very much was. He was even used to climbing. He just wasn't used to going above the ground.

For as long as he could remember, the tunnels, even the most distant and remote parts of those, were home. Though not tunnel born, strictly speaking, he might as well have been. This Tunnel World contained all that he knew, and all that he loved.

The Pipe Chamber was the epitome of that, as dozens of conversations filled his wide ears, daily. People "talked" to him all day. He never felt alone, and he didn't consider himself either a lonely or a solitary man, even though others might. He was simply a man who was comfortable, within a certain, self-imposed set of limits. He never felt threatened, or useless, or unappreciated, not when he was where he considered "home."

But Above...

Above was different. Above was what his father had rescued them both from, when his mother and sister had died. Above had no use for a rather squat, somewhat homely little man; one who couldn't drive a car, or flash a credit card, or speak comfortably to a pretty woman. It just didn't.

"Pascal?" He heard Vincent's voice, above him. "It's deserted. If anything happens, just run back to this place. I'll watch out for you."

"Shouldn't it be me watching out for you?" Pascal asked, spurred into climbing.

Vincent's gentle voice was reassuring. "We will care for each other, then," Vincent replied, extending his hand to help Pascal clear the hole.

It was late December cold, and the temperature bit Pascal's sensitive -- and overly large -- earlobes. He tugged his scarf up higher.

"It's cold," he said, as if it was news to him that this was so.

"It is," Vincent said, adjusting the shoulders of his cape.

"And... deserted," Pascal added, looking up and down the shadowy alleyway. "I admit I wasn't expecting that,"

Vincent was also checking the safety of their surroundings, peering into the shadows with his sharp, blue eyes. "It's Christmas Eve for them, too," was all he said, by way of explanation. "And soon there will be snow," he predicted.

"Which way, Pascal? Do you know?"

Pascal looked around, then produced a chart from inside his tool bag.

"The map says the pipe originates down the alley, over one block, and

to the left, just around the corner. Whatever's there, that's the building the message came from."

The two men set off together.

Pascal discovered that the icy temperature wasn't the only thing he didn't like about being above the ground. The smell of car exhaust, dumpster contents, oil on the street, and the buzzing of unreliable street lamps all combined to assault his senses. A stray cat hissed at them, protecting the contents of a garbage can. On the street at the end of the alleyway, a lone car ambled along, looking almost lost, as its yellow headlights searched out the easiest path, on the brickwork street.

Vincent seemed almost at home here, as he stayed near the walls, and kept them well inside the shadows. His long, silent stride chewed up the ground. But Pascal was still far from comfortable, even as they neared the building they were searching for.

But he bit his tongue, rather than suggest they give up, again.

In for a penny...

"We're getting close," Pascal whispered. "If it's an apartment building, we might have a hard time figuring out which tenant sent the message," he reasoned.

So then maybe we can go home quickly after all, he hoped silently.

Vincent was more than aware of his friend's near-agoraphobic nature. He was about to offer a soothing bit of comfort, when the two men rounded the designated corner and beheld the wreck of a building, in front of them.

It had indeed once been an apartment building. Once.

Signs that warned “Danger!” or “Keep Out!” were posted everywhere, around the perimeter.

“I don’t think too many people living in the building will hinder us,” Vincent answered, staring up at what had once been a fairly small (for New York) apartment complex. It was now roughly six stories worth of empty, decrepit ruin.

Upper floor windows were broken. All of the lower floor windows were boarded up, and bright yellow caution tape criss-crossed the heavy-looking doors that marked the entrance. A sturdy padlock and chain held the set of double doors firmly closed. Graffiti artists had tagged the brickwork, some time between “recently” and “decades ago.” Bits of fallen masonry littered the area. Sections of the roof cornice had fallen away completely, leaving piles of shattered brickwork on the December ground.

“Structure unstable!” and “Keep away from perimeter!” screamed half a dozen more signs. A large placard revealed that it was slated for demolition, come mid-January.

“Someone... someone said “Merry Christmas?... From in there?” Pascal asked incredulously.

The entire building seemed to be sagging, from the window casings to shattered roof. What had once been a modest (if not downright poor) place to live had clearly passed all hopes of usefulness.

“You’re sure this is the place?” Vincent asked, clearly also in doubt. *If someone tried to contact us from in there...*

Pascal nodded. “It’s the oldest building in the district. Obviously. That’s why the old pipe leads to it.”

He glanced up again. “It makes no sense, Vincent. You can tell this place is completely aband—“

He stopped speaking just as both men saw it. A faint light, probably from a flashlight beam, barely revealed a shadowy figure, up in one of the third floor apartments.

Vincent watched the light move, then dim down, again.

“Such places sometimes become shelter for those in need. Sometimes... people like Rolley,” Vincent said, carefully advancing on the building, nonetheless.

“I don’t think... I’m not sure even the drug addicts would want to take shelter in *this* place,” Pascal observed. “Besides, it’s padlocked.”

You’d be surprised what desperate people will do, Vincent thought, but didn’t say. But even he had to admit that Pascal had a point.

But Vincent knew a bit more about this patch of ground than Pascal did. “Yet someone found a way in,” Vincent reasoned, training his sharp blue eyes on the structure. After a few moments, he saw it. “Look there.” He pointed with a gloved hand.

Pascal watched as Vincent walked up to a bottom floor window, and nudged a wide, un-nailed board aside. Someone had taken a crowbar to it, used the wide hole as an entrance, then leaned it back against the window casing, disguising the trespass.

Any glass that had once been in the window was clearly long gone.

The rectangular hole before him looked dark, and forlornly dangerous, to Pascal.

“My father once said that living in Queens was the best argument he knew for leaving it. Vincent, maybe we shouldn’t. I mean, what if it’s someone... you know, someone evil?” Pascal asked.

Vincent was already running his gloved hand along the sill to clear it, just in case any shards of glass remained left behind. None were.

“Someone who tapped out ‘Merry Christmas,’ in old Tunnel code?” he asked. He shook his head. “It may be a Helper, someone we lost a long time ago. Someone who left and then came back, but can’t find their way down,” Vincent reasoned. “The ways change. They’ve been trying to reach us, Pascal,” Vincent said. He dusted off his hands, indicating he was ready to go in.

“Besides. I sense nothing... evil, in this place,” Vincent continued. “If anything, I only sense ... sorrow. Loss. Desperation, perhaps. Someone is lost, Pascal. And it’s Christmas Eve.” Vincent pulled himself up and through the window.

“If it’s an old Helper, why don’t they talk to us? Tell us who they are? Even in old Tunnel Code?” Pascal asked, not wanting to follow Vincent inside, but knowing he was going to.

“I don’t know,” Vincent answered back. “When we meet them, we will ask.”

He extended his hand, and Pascal handed over his tool bag. In a moment, he was in, as well.





Chapter Three

Lottie

They were standing inside what would have been a downstairs apartment, probably what was once a very small living room that looked straight into what had once been a tiny kitchen. The spot for the refrigerator and stove, now barren, revealed themselves on the stained, peeling linoleum. The sink had already been pulled out, and copper had been stripped out of the bare wires, hanging from the ceiling.

“They’ve gutted it. Probably every room is like this,” Pascal murmured.

Vincent produced a small flashlight from his pocket, and handed it to his friend.

“Keep the beam down, and stay behind me. Watch out for the damage to the floor,” Vincent said, making his way through the abandoned apartment. Its door was off, giving the two men easy

access to a downstairs hallway. As he looked around, Vincent realized that was true of all the doors. The old doorknobs had been removed, leaving nothing but a useless hole, behind. The hinges had been stripped off the door frames, as well.

Pascal knew that most of the metal could be sold for scrap if it wasn't re-used for something else.

"It's like they're stripping it for parts," Pascal observed.

"The last act... before demolition," Vincent agreed.

The two men made their way, unimpeded, into a deserted hallway.

So far, so good, Pascal comforted himself, treading forward carefully.

"There will be a stairwell at the end of the hall," Vincent said, in a low voice. "I don't think places like this ever had a working elevator."

To their left, a family of rats skittered across a pile of left-behind refuse.

"Third floor," Pascal reminded Vincent. The shorter man had lived in the tunnels too long to be bothered by four-legged vermin. It was the two-legged kind that worried him more.

Vincent took in the layout of the place. "Six doors in each hallway," he observed. "Six apartments to each floor. The one we want is near the middle," Vincent said, nodding.

The two men moved down the narrow hallway. Each apartment they looked inside was much like the one they'd entered through. Vincent seemed unsurprised to find the stairwell door unlocked.

"When we find him, you will have to speak for us," Vincent instructed, as they climbed, and reached the entrance to the third floor.

I will? Of course I will. It's not like Vincent can...

“What should I say?” Pascal asked.

“Whatever you wish. I will stay back, but close enough to help you, if there is any danger. Tell him... tell him ‘Merry Christmas.’ That you received the message, and you’re here to help,” Vincent said. “If this person knows of the tunnels, and if they wish to come down with you, I will simply go out ahead of you.”

Sure. Simple, Pascal thought. This is crazy, Vincent. You know that, right? But he said nothing more.

Vincent pushed the door open with his shoulder, and looked down a long hallway, before him. Fading wallpaper hung in peeling tatters. What had once been a dark red rug was now bald, in spots, and heavily stained, in others.

“Careful,” Vincent warned. “The floor feels... unstable.”

The two men proceeded with caution, and Pascal noticed the wallpaper. It was ancient and gold-colored, with a twining leaf pattern.

For no reason he could name, it almost awakened a memory. One he tried to dismiss, but couldn’t, quite.

I’ve... I’ve been here before? But that’s not possible...

“Not exactly the kind of place you’d want to play ‘Patty-cake’ in,” Pascal commented.

A few steps more and both men heard it. Someone was tapping on a metal pipe. And they were tapping “Merry Christmas.”

The most heavily stained area of the rug was in the middle of the hall, a patch of carpet ruined not just by age and dirt, but by something darker, as well. Pascal felt the floor under his feet give, a little.

Fire. Or a big leak. There's water damage, here. The floor is rotten with it.

Vincent's weight creaked the rotted timbers, beneath a hallway rug that was probably missing its floor, in spots. He paused. Pascal could see him considering what to do. It was dangerous to continue. And while this whole adventure had been something of a strange lark, it hadn't actually gotten dangerous until just now.

From inside the apartment, both men heard it. A voice. A desperate one.

"Come on. Come *on*... Answer me back! *Please* answer me back!" A woman's voice begged, through an open doorway. "Don't... don't go away. Please don't... don't *leave* me..."

There was pain and sorrow in the voice, and a kind of loneliness that Pascal, for all his singular ways, could only guess at. Vincent had been right. Someone *did* need their help. Or at least their offer of companionship.

"Please..." the voice continued.

Pascal realized that they hadn't been able to return her message since they'd left the Tunnels, and that she'd probably been tapping out the message again... and again. That she probably thought they'd simply abandoned her.

"He's a she," Pascal whispered. The knowledge boosted his courage a little bit. In his experience, women were often less prone to violence than men were.

"So it would seem," Vincent replied, *sotto voce*.

They both took another step forward. Beneath their weight, the floor creaked. Dangerously.

“Stay back. You weigh too much,” Pascal instructed, stepping carefully forward, as he pressed himself against the wall. The floor was more stable, there, and of the two of them, he was the much smaller man.

Behind him for the first time, Vincent silently did as he was told.

Pascal cleared the doorway and saw the shape of a woman, crouched next to an old radiator. Her dim flashlight was sitting on the floor, providing some scant illumination to the scene.

She was hitting the pipe that led to the radiator with a crowbar, and talking as she went. A faded raincoat obscured most of her form, and a stocking cap covered her head. A cheap pair of loafers encased her feet, little protection against the cold, a hole in one toe revealing a pair of white socks, underneath. Wisps of brown hair stuck out of the cap. Her gloves were as holey as Pascal’s own, only not by design, but by overuse.

She looked as shabby and poor as he was. Poorer, if that was possible.

“‘Merry Christmas.’ It means ‘Merry Christmas,’” the woman addressed the pipe. “‘Merry Christmas!’ Mama said!”

She banged it out again, loudly. “Merry Christmas! A message for Papa. Sent it over and over! Somebody... somebody said it back! I *know* somebody said it back! Somebody... please...*please* be there...”

But when no answer was forthcoming on the now-silent pipe, she gave up the banging, and let the heavy bar fall to her side.

“Please...,” she whispered hoarsely.

Both men could hear the sorrow and the desperation in her voice.

“I said it back,” Pascal said softly, trying not to frighten her.

She yelped in fright and stood erect, holding the crowbar like a weapon, backing away from him.

"I... don't hurt me! I... you... *you* said it back?" she asked, processing what he'd told her, even as she backed away from him. The sudden shot of adrenaline made her careless. She bumped the flashlight, and its rolling beam revealed her features, further.

Her deep set eyes were brown. Her nose, large. Her careworn face was lined, and a little sallow. Short-cropped hair stuck out from beneath the edge of her cap. She looked to be in her forties. Grey wisps of hair were scattered among her uneven brown bangs.

Pascal shone his flashlight up briefly, on his own face, then held out his other hand in a placating gesture. "I said it back. And I would never hurt you. Or anyone. I promise."

"Y-you... you promise?" she asked, struggling to regain her composure.

Pascal nodded. "I just... I heard your message. I..." He pocketed the flashlight and picked up a fallen piece of the ceiling, then tapped out 'Merry Christmas' to her, on the nearest wall.

"Like that? See?" he asked.

She lowered the bar, her expression a study in amazed curiosity.

"How... how did you know my Papa's tapping words?" she asked.

Confused, Pascal stepped closer to her, allowing her to see him better.

"They were... they were *my* Papa's tapping words, as well," he said, wondering at her.

She reached down to pick up her flashlight. Her light shone toward him, and he let it blind him for a moment, before his raised hands silently asked her to lower the beam.

With shaking hands, she set the flashlight on the radiator, then blinked at him, and staggered. For a moment, he was afraid she was going to fall.

"You... *you* answered me. You... you were the... the tapping on the pipes."

"I was the tapping on the pipes," he agreed. *You have no idea how true that is, how well that describes me,* he thought.

Her brown eyes were soft, and unblinking. She was plain in a way that had probably never known real beauty. The right side of her neck bore a deep red mass of scar tissue, the kind usually associated with a bad burn. When she took off her stocking cap, wide ears that were utterly familiar to Pascal stuck out.

They were identical to his own.

"Ben? God, I'm going mad. *Ben?* It's not... it's not *you*... is it?" she asked.

She covered her mouth with her hands and she stared. And for Pascal, the unstable floor felt as if it had dropped out from under him.

I... the wall paper. I ... I do recognize the wall paper, he thought, as if that was the important thing. *Up high. Carried over someone's shoulder.*

Tears streaked down the woman's weathered cheeks. "I used to live here. Before. A long time ago," she said. "Years. Decades. Ben? Are you Ben? I had a brother named 'Ben,'" she clarified.

Not exactly the kind of place you'd want to play 'Patty-cake' in. Pascal remembered saying it to Vincent, when they'd entered the hall.

Suddenly, Pascal knew why he'd made that particular reference. A childhood voice came back to him. A girl's voice. Older than him by a

good few years. Playing, in a sing-song rhyme. The kind you would play with an infant, or a toddler.

*“Patty-cake, patty-cake, baker’s man.
Bake me a cake as fast as you can!
Roll it, and pat it, and mark it with ‘B,’
And put it in the oven for Benny and me!”*

“L-Lottie?” Pascal whispered, hardly daring to believe what his eyes were telling him. In some ways, she was his older, female counterpart.

But it can’t be. Papa said. Lottie and Mama died in a—

“There was a fire. I... Mama died. They took me to the hospital,” she said.

Pascal shook. “Papa said you *both* died. That they took the bodies away in an ambulance. He *saw* it. They told him...”

“I... I did. I think I did. But... they brought me back. I don’t know how. I was in a coma for a while. Then... it was months, inside a hospital room, healing from the burns.”

Her hands dropped from her mouth and the plaintive wail of an abandoned child issued forth from her:

“No one ever came back for me!”

Months. In a coma, and then... months. Because by then, we were down Below. He never came back up. I never came back up...

“Lottie? Is your name Lottie?” Pascal put his hand to his chest. “Yes, I’m Ben. Benjamin Blaise Pascal. But no one calls me that. To everyone I’m just ‘Pascal.’ The same as our father was.”

The woman staggered again, and Pascal stepped forward and took her in his arms, feeling her slight weight, as it sagged against him, and her tears, as they fell against his shoulder. Her hair felt soft, against his cheek. They were almost the same height.

“Sh—Charlotte. My name is Charlotte,” she hiccupped. “O-Only you ever called me ‘L-Lottie.’”

“Because I couldn’t say your name, when I was a baby. Papa told me. He loved you, Lottie. I swear he did. It was... it was all a mistake. A terrible mistake.”

Sheltered in his arms, Lottie could only nod, on a sob.

He looked at the faded wall, where the paper hung in tatters. “I... we... we used to live here.” He didn’t actually remember it, but he *felt* it enough so that he knew it was true.

Lottie tried to compose herself. “Y- you were just a baby. Barely more than a toddler,” Lottie said.

Pascal knew that out in the hallway, Vincent was getting an earful.

“What... what happened? Do you know?” he asked.

Head still on his shoulder, Lottie nodded.

“Papa took you with him, one day. He was going to the downtown mission, trying to find us all coats.”

Pascal sighed, but held her all the more firmly. “I don’t remember, Lottie. I’m sorry. I just don’t,” Pascal confessed. He’d simply been too young. Much too young.

“He told Mama that he might know of a place for us, but he wasn’t sure. It was December, and we were all cold. We didn’t have money for the electric. Mama turned on an old oil lantern for light, and what little heat it had. It... it tipped over.”

“Papa said you both died in that fire,” Pascal told her.

“Mama... Mama did. But I didn’t! After I got well enough... they couldn’t find Papa. They tried. But it was like he... like he disappeared!”

I think I know how that happened, Pascal thought, realizing what a horrible error had been made.

“They... they put me in foster care after a while, since no one came for me,” she said, shaking, with the memory of it.

“God, Lottie. I’m so... I’m so sorry!” Pascal said.

Lottie sniffed, trying to comfort him just as much as he was comforting her. Instinct. The older sister’s instinct to protect her younger brother, from pain. She separated from him, a little.

“Not your fault. And... and it... it wasn’t all bad.” She tried to smile, but couldn’t quite. “I got an older couple who took good care of me. They were kind. But I missed you so much!” She squeezed his middle. Hard. He returned the pressure.

Sister. I’m holding my older sister.

His mind spun, with the knowledge.

“Papa?” she asked, already sensing the answer.

“Gone. Twenty years ago. More. I’m sorry, Lottie.”

She sniffed again, and studied a nose that was very much like her own.

"I thought maybe that was so. He was older. And bald." She gave him a half-hearted grin, as she inspected his bald pate. Tears still streamed down her face. She wiped them away, bravely.

"I started losing my hair in my twenties," was all he could think to say to that.

Lottie dried her tears again, surreptitiously took in his disreputable clothing, and assessed him to be no better off financially than she was. She squared her big sister shoulders, and began to take charge.

"Listen. I have an apartment in the Bronx. It's small, and it's ugly, and the neighborhood isn't the best, and the heat barely works. But... but you have to come home with me. You just have to."

Her brown eyes were looking earnestly into his.

"Now, I don't have much," she warned. "But... but I can make you some tea and we'll use the stove to stay warm while we figure things out. Okay, Benny?" she asked, cajoling him as if he was still a small child.

Pascal knew he was never leaving her side, again. And that they weren't going back to her ugly apartment in the Bronx.

"Lottie, I... I have a home. A wonderful home. It's warm there, and we have everything we need. It's... it's a little different. But everyone there is kind, and they accept you, no matter what. If you... if you stay with me, I'll make sure you're never lonely again. Okay?"

She slid her hand down his arm and gave his fingers a squeeze. "Oh, Benny. Are you sure?" she asked, clearly relieved.

He brought her back in for another hug and held her tightly, as he announced over his shoulder, a touch loudly, "You're coming home with me. And I won't hear a word against it."

From the hallway, he could swear he felt Vincent smile.

After a few more minutes, he asked her the question that had been bothering him.

“Lottie, how did you know Tunnel code? But you couldn’t answer any question I asked you?” he asked.

“‘Tunnel code?’ What’s that?” she asked, adjusting her thin coat over a bulky sweater. They were getting ready to go.

He looked at her quizzically. “It’s the pattern you were tapping out on the radiator. You know it means ‘Merry Christmas,’” he explained.

“Oh, that. Well, the news said the building was coming down, so I decided to come back here. I... Mama was tapping it out, one time. I just listened.”

“You heard our mother do this?” Pascal asked, amazed.

Lottie nodded. “She and Papa would do that, sometimes. We didn’t have a phone. So she’d tap on the radiator to him. After a while, he’d tap back. It’s like they were talking. Isn’t that funny?” she asked.

You have no idea, he thought.

“Funny,” he agreed, knowing that wasn’t quite the word.

“Well, one Christmas, he had to go out,” Lottie explained. “And it got really late, so Mama sat up and tapped “Merry Christmas” out on the radiator, over and over, like a song, until he finally tapped it back. She said it meant she knew he was all right.”

So you heard her tap out ‘Merry Christmas’ over and over again... just waiting for some kind of reply...

“I heard it oh, so many times. It’s like a tune. You just tap out the rhythm, again and again.”

So... you don't know where one letter starts and the other ends. You don't know anything other than what you were repeating. The only Tunnel code you know is 'Merry Christmas.' And you came up here because... because you knew they were going to tear this place down. And that's how your message found its way to me. Oh, Lottie!

"You didn't... you didn't expect anyone to actually answer you. Did you?" Pascal asked. Before him, he heard Vincent slipping out the stairwell door.

Lottie, fixated only on him, gave him the only answer she could. She shook her head.

"Of course not. I just... it was just my way of saying good-bye. Of saying "Merry Christmas" to the past. To Mama, and Papa... and you. Of course, you. I never dreamed..." She let the sentence trail off.

"That someone would actually answer you back." *Thank you Pipe Chamber. I owe you one.*

They moved carefully against the wall, down the ruined hallway.

"But you did," she said, still amazed that it had happened at all.

"I did," he said, opening the stairwell door for her.

They both kept on their flashlights, as they made their way down the steps.

"Benny, it's the best Christmas present! Ever!" she enthused.

It was. And he had a lot to tell her about where he was taking her.

Might as well start now, he reasoned.

"Well. Where we're going, it's like Christmas every day, in a way. Not so much with the gifts of course, but... with the spirit of it, the way

people take care of each other,” he said, trying to match her enthusiasm, as they emerged into the downstairs hallway.

“That... that sounds better than Christmas. Better than anything.” She stayed close to him. He liked it that she did.

Sister. I have a sister. What an amazing night this turned out to be.

“Most people just call me Pascal,” he said. “Just so you know.”

It’s a tradition, back home, he thought. There’s always been a Pascal on the pipes.

“Okay,” she answered, knowing she would probably never call him that.

He found that he was trying to cajole her, now. “You’ll like it there, Lottie. I’ll... I’ll show you where I work, and we’ll get you all settled. We can go back to your apartment to pick up your things in a couple of days, if you want,” he said, a little worried about that. What if, after seeing how he lived, she decided she preferred Topside life, even with all its drawbacks? She’d hardly be the first person to conclude that.

Please want to stay. Please want to stay there with me. Because I don’t think I can go Above and live with you, he thought.

“I don’t have much,” she warned. “Just some clothes and a couple pots and pans. It’s been... I mean, I’ve been kind of on my own, since... well. Since I got too old to stay in the system, I guess. My foster folks passed away years ago. I don’t... I really don’t think I want to go back to the Bronx, Benny. Not unless you’re with me,” she added.

That suited him just fine.

“Whatever you want. And I mean that, Lottie.”

Her shy smile was all the reward he needed.

He led her carefully through the gutted apartment and over to the now-wide-open window she'd crawled in through.

"I thought I left that so it looked like it was still nailed to the wall," Lottie said, climbing gingerly over the casement. Pascal knew full well who had left the way open for them.

"I must have left it off when I climbed in," Pascal lied smoothly. He knew he was going to have a lot to explain to her. Not the least of which would be about Vincent, eventually.

"Ben, how did you even hear me, banging on that pipe? How did you know to come and find me?" she asked. "I was just doing something Mama had done. Just... trying to honor my ghosts," she explained, following him out into the open air.

Pascal knew that Vincent was not far ahead of them, and that he was keeping watch.

"I... that message you sent, that greeting... It's like what Papa was doing with Mama. It *is* a way of communicating, Lottie. Across farther distances than you know. Sound travels down the pipes. I... spend my days, listening to those messages."

Her deep brow furrowed. "Listening? On pipes? Where? How far... how far away were you, Ben?" she asked, looking around. Clearly, she thought his apartment must be close by, for him to have heard her.

"Manhattan. *Under* Manhattan, he emphasized, trying to prepare her for the entrance down the manhole cover. "It's a secret place, Lottie. And... it's a secret you have to keep. You *have* to."

Her soft voice grew very serious. "If it means I get to stay with you, I'll keep any secret you want me to, Ben," she vowed.

That's good enough for me, he thought.

"Come on, then," he urged.

"To under Manhattan?" she asked still following him closely.

"Yes. I'll explain it as we go. Look! It's starting to snow," he realized.

It was definitely starting to snow, and he waited, as Lottie pulled her stocking cap back on again.

"Brrr!" It's chilly out here!" she said gamely.

He took off his scarf and wrapped it around her neck. She tried to protest.

"No, no, Ben. You need it! Besides. I'm the oldest."

"And the coldest," he said, tying the scarf that much more firmly.

"One of our only rules is that you have to offer help, whenever it's needed, and accept it, whenever it's offered," he said, liking how the deep red scarf looked on her. It gave her a bright touch of color.

"I'll try to remember," she promised, liking it as well.

"I'm going to take care of you. I'm going to take care of you, just as much as you take care of me, okay?" he asked.

"Okay," she replied softly, clearly not used to anyone doing that for her.

"Sometimes... it won't always be easy. Where we're going... they don't have a lot in the way of luxuries, Lottie," he warned.

She grabbed the hand that still held the scarf. "You think I've had luxuries, that I need that, or that I'd even trade that, for being with you? I've lived in some pretty rough places. And I'm not letting you go again, Benny. Hard or easy, I'll follow you to under Manhattan, or anyplace else you want to take me. All right?"

"All right," he agreed. Her conviction made him happy.

He knew that right now, Vincent was probably making sure the way to the manhole cover was clear, and then racing to tell his family what had transpired, this evening.

Bet that'll be a story for the Great Hall, he thought.

The snow came down softly, and as it fell, he tried to tell her more about his home, about how important their own father had been to it, and how he himself had continued that work. By the time she reached the manhole cover, she was as braced as anyone could be, considering the short amount of time she'd had to prepare for it.

Still, she eyed the odd entrance to his home. "You want us to go down *there*?" she asked.

"I promise it's safe," he replied. "Besides, I'm going to need your help to pull the cover back over. I can't move it by myself."

"How did you get it off in the first place?" she asked, curious.

Uh-oh. This was new territory for Pascal.

"I uh... I have a friend. Vincent. You'll meet him, later."

Lottie looked down into the hole, then back the way they came. The snow was starting to cover everything, disguising the depressed area in a gentle layer of white.

"Your friend... He... he came with you?" she asked cannily.

Pascal nodded. "He did. I... uh... Lottie, he's kind of special. You'll see. When both of you are ready."

Lottie smiled again, and Pascal liked how it looked on her. It made her look younger. And a little more like the mother he only vaguely remembered.

"If he helped you to find me, then I can only say I owe him a debt I can never hope to repay," she replied. She then climbed down the ladder like an old pro, and the two of them, together, tugged the manhole cover back in place.

"A debt *we* can't repay," Pascal corrected, liking the sound of the plural pronoun. "That happens a lot with Vincent," he added, smiling in return. They both climbed down the tunnel ladder.

"You look handsome when you smile," Lottie said.

Pascal knew there was not a thing in the world that could make that be true. But he liked that she said it, and meant it.

"And you look pretty," he replied, meaning it, as well.

He walked a few feet away from her and began to tap out a message, on the nearest pipe. Almost immediately, there was a reply.

"What did you tell him?" Lottie asked, looking around with keen interest at her new surroundings. She shone her flashlight on the walls.

"Them. I told them. That I'm bringing my sister home. That there are still miracles in the world, and that I finally got one," Pascal answered, loving how wonderful and strange the word "sister" felt in his mouth.

"You'll have to teach me," she said. "So that... so that we can always talk to each other, no matter where we are. So that I can never lose you again, Ben," she said, just a touch of worry passing over her brown eyes.

"I will," he promised, extinguishing his flashlight and lifting up the lantern.

"Don't be afraid. It's not going to spill," he reassured.

“Oh, I’m not. What happened to me... it was just bad luck. I’ve lived in more than one apartment lit by candles and heated by kerosene,” she answered. *Especially when I couldn’t afford to pay the electric bill.*

“I kind of like candles,” she confided.

If you like candlelight, you’re going to love this place, he thought.

“I’ll teach you code, and how to find your way around. I’ll teach you how to not get lost, down here, which pipes to follow to get you back to the Main Tunnels. In time, you’ll know everything I do. I promise,” he told her.

“And you’ll always be able to find me. Everyone can. Wait until you see the Pipe Chamber!” he enthused, leading her down the passageway.

And wait until you see the Hub, he thought, excited to be taking her closer to the Home Tunnels.

“Can I... can I send them a message, too?” she asked unexpectedly.

“Of course,” he answered, handing her his sticks.

“I only know the one thing to say,” she hesitated.

His fingerless-gloved hand touched her cheek, gently.

“I think that’s the perfect thing to say to everyone,” he said.

Gingerly, Lottie set the sticks against the pipes, and then rattled out the message that had been, for her, like an often-repeated tune. One from her childhood. One her younger brother – and possibly only her younger brother- could have recognized. It was the message that had brought him to her.

Merry Christmas, she tapped out. Again, a soft tear trailed down her cheek. *Merry Christmas,* she repeated.

Pascal took the sticks from her and added her name to the message: "From Lottie," he said it aloud as he added it, wanting everyone to know.

A moment had hardly passed before the sturdy pipe over their heads all but roared to life.

Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas Merry Christmas Merry Christmas Merry Christmas! over and over again, as if dozens of hands were all tapping the same message all at once, in reply.

Lottie's smile grew huge, and she put her hands to her cheeks, in amazement.

"They're... they're all saying it back! They're all saying it back! They're wishing us a Merry Christmas!" she said, amazed.

"Yes," Pascal agreed over the sudden din. "They're wishing *us* a Merry Christmas." He emphasized the pronoun, much to her delight.

The sudden burst of pipe traffic quieted down.

"How... how big is this family you say you're a part of?" she asked, just a touch of trepidation in her voice.

Pascal's grin was delighted. "Huge. Marvelous. Different, and every one a treasure," he said, banging back his enthusiastic thanks.

He pocketed the sticks and had taken a few steps away before he realized that Lottie was no longer following him on his heels.

"Lottie?" he asked, turning back for her.

She was standing back near the pipe, her ill-fitting, rumped coat looking like it was about to swallow her. His red scarf was still tied around her neck.

"Huge? H-how... how huge, Benny?" she asked.

Pascal, still smiling from the explosion of Christmas well-wishes, began to sense that something might be wrong, here.

“Huge. Big. Kids, old people, married couples... a lot of people need a safe place to be, Lottie,” he explained.

“Huge... I... I thought that when you said you lived with some people, that it was... oh, I don’t know. Maybe four or five?”

Four or five? That wouldn’t even cover the council, he thought.

“Ah... no. There’s a lot more than four or five. And they’re all going to love meeting y—“

“So many people. That must cost a lot of money. Are you... are you sure there’s room for one more mouth to feed?” she asked. Clearly, something was bothering her. It was also clear that she didn’t know what she was going to do if he said ‘No.’”

But he didn’t.

“We don’t use money, or we barely do,” he reassured her. But he had a feeling that her sudden and unexpected sense of caution wasn’t exactly about money. He was right.

“Benny... I don’t... I don’t go around other people, much. I don’t like crowds. A few at a time, okay, maybe, but... but not more than that. I... I got scars.”

She untied his scarf and carefully tugged down on the collar of her sweater. Pascal could see that the red, puckered, angry flesh that marked her neck grew even more severe, as it went further down, and that it spread in the direction of her shoulder.

Burned. You were burned. Badly. That’s part of why they thought you were dead, he realized.

"It's on my arms, too. It's all over, Ben," she said unsteadily. She took off her gloves, revealing the damage on her hands, as well. The skin there looked mottled pink, and shriveled. Her gloves, for all they lacked, had covered up a good bit of skin.

"I cover myself as best I can, but... but people stare. You say there's kids, down here. Kids ask questions. I understand. But sometimes... sometimes they're cruel. Sometimes, the grown-ups act scared, like they think I'm contagious. I don't... I don't blame them," she hesitated to add, "It's just that... well. It's hard to be different. *This* kind of different. It's just that with that many people...

Her voice trailed off, and touch of desperation was setting in. She began to shuffle her feet.

Pascal's dark eyes were twin pools of sympathy. *I see. It's all right, Lottie. I swear it is. And... you're going to love Vincent.*

"I think we have something in common," he said calmly. "I ... I like people. But I'm not much for big crowds either," he admitted, realizing that it was a trait they shared. It was also part of why he only stayed so long, at Winterfest.

"But... you live with one," she said.

He did. But for the most part, they were often fairly spread out. But that probably wasn't the important thing, when it came to his sister. Not when she'd just heard dozens of people hammer out "Merry Christmas" to her, on the pipes. She was feeling overwhelmed by the idea of meeting so many strangers.

It was a feeling he understood.

"Lottie... no one is cruel, here. Not ever," he insisted, willing her to believe him. How could she understand a world she'd never experienced, for herself?

“Not the children... and not the adults, he added. “No one. It’s not who we are.”

“It’s just... the scars run deep, Ben.” He knew she meant that in more ways than one.

His voice remained firm and comforting. “Where I’m from... *no one* will judge you for that. I promise. They ... we... *all* have scars of one kind or another. Many are deep. Some are just... some are just... well, they’re just on the inside, that’s all. It’s okay.”

“You... you’re sure?” she asked, half in disbelief. She looked down and pulled her gloves back on. “I can... I mean... I didn’t think I was going to, but... but I can still go back to my apartment, if I have to. It doesn’t mean we can’t see each other ...”

She didn’t like the idea. He could tell she didn’t. But that didn’t mean she wasn’t considering it.

“You’re scared of crowds?” he asked.

As if she were confessing some great sin, she simply kept her head down and nodded. “I just... I just always have been, I guess,” she admitted.

You’re as shy as I am. More so, he realized.

“We’ll take it slow, then. Let you meet them one or two at a time. However you say,” he replied.

Then: “I was scared too, tonight. I was scared to come up above the ground.”

She looked back up. “You were?” she asked, trying to believe that.

Maybe if you can overcome your fears, I can, too.

He nodded. "It's safe, down here. After a while... well, after a while, you get sort of used to that."

Her soft eyes begged him to continue further.

"I wanted to find out who was sending that message," he said. "But... for a moment, here and there... well. My fears were kind of getting in the way."

"But you overcame them?" she asked.

I had a little help, he admitted internally.

"I did. And I'm so glad I did, Lottie," he said.

"I'm... I'm glad you did that, Ben. So glad," she said, looking back down. She stilled her feet, and looked as if she was studying her stocking clad big toe. As if to confirm that, she gave it a little wiggle.

I'm just not sure I can overcome mine, she thought. *What will you do if I end up terrified of this place? Terrified of your family? All those eyes. All those eyes looking at me...*

With the quiet patience Pascal was known for, he set down the lantern, walked back to her, and gently took her hands in his. With all that was in his heart, he tried to tell her about the wonder that was his Tunnel home, and the people who lived there:

"I know if you just... if you just let yourself meet them... you'll start to understand. We don't have money. But we're... we're rich. Rich in a way most people never achieve. Rich in our hearts. You'll see. Wait until you meet them. They're all different from each other, but they all understand. Don't be afraid of how many there are. That's a strength for us, not a weakness."

"But... How can that be?" she asked. *How, with so many mouths to feed?*

Pascal simply smiled again, as he decided to list just some of his Tunnel family for her:

“Who we are... who we *all* are... that’s part of what makes us *what* we are, he said, perhaps only realizing it himself, for the first time.

“William cooks all day, and never seems to get tired of it, and he bakes the best bread you’ve ever tasted. Rebecca makes all the candles, and right now, they’re having a party we call “Winterfest,” to celebrate the light. Father is our doctor, and a wiser man I think I barely ever met. He knew Papa. He’ll tell you stories, if you want to hear them. Then there’s Mouse.”

“You live with someone named ‘Mouse?’” she asked, obviously bewildered, just a little.

Pascal nodded. “He’s is a whirlwind, and he’s always making something, and half of what he cobbles together actually works, even if the other half doesn’t. And then there’s Jamie. Jamie is fierce, and a more loyal friend you’ll never have. Mary’s a midwife, and kind as she is steady. Elizabeth is an artist, and she paints our stories on the wall, so we never, ever lose them. She’ll paint you, one day, if you want. But only if you want.” His brown eyes were deeply sincere.

“Paint me?” Lottie asked. “I... I don’t know about that, Benny. Paintings are for... well, they’re for prettier folk than me.”

Pascal gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze and leaned in close.

“Better nobody but you ever say that to me. And I’m hoping one day that you won’t, either,” he said.

She blushed at his compliment, and cleared her throat.

“So uh, William and Mouse, and Jamie and Mary, and Rebecca makes the candles...” she deflected.

And me. And me. I'm a part of it, too. And one day... one day, I hope you'll be. I hope you'll feel that way.

"There are more. Dozens more," he added, wanting to prepare her. He knew it would be no good to lie to her.

"It... all those people? Down here? *Living*, down here?" she asked. The expression in her brown eyes told him that she was clearly struggling with the scope of all he implied.

Pascal nodded again. "Living. Working. *Thriving*. Helping each other. The people from Above who help us? We call them "Helpers." It's our only word for them."

"Helpers," she repeated. Now and then in her life, she had known those. Not everyone had been unkind.

"And then there's Vincent. And his Catherine." Pascal's deep voice held a touch of awe.

"She's his wife?" Lottie asked.

Pascal chuckled a little, at that. "Not yet. But he's working on it," Pascal answered vaguely.

How to begin to explain Vincent and Catherine to someone who didn't know them?

"Catherine... she's a Helper too. But she's more than that, to us. You'll see. And when the two of them are together..."

Now it was his voice that trailed off, a little. If it was hard to describe the tunnel world, describing Vincent and Catherine was a whole 'nother level of that.

"It's just...you can't help... you can't help but believe in miracles, when you look at them together, Lottie," he began.

Lottie's brown eyes remained fixed, on his. It prompted him to continue:

"You can't help but believe in true love, and forever. In the honor of a promise, and the... the sheer power in taking a chance. In story books and fairy tales, and... and in happily-ever-afters."

He closed his eyes and leaned forward, touching his broad forehead to hers.

"In always together, and never apart," he said, meaning it for them as much as he meant it for Vincent and Catherine, though in an entirely different way.

"That would... that would be amazing," she breathed, trying to picture it.

"You can't help but believe in it. You can't help but let that belief, well, ... let it change you, and give you strength," he concluded.

He hoped that was enough to convince her that there was a place for her here, a good place. A place for her with him, and with his very extended family, if she could only convince herself it was possible.

Words that felt foreign to her tumbled out of her. "Love and honor. Promises and fairy tales. It's... it's been a long time since I actually believed in any of those things," she confessed.

He didn't doubt it. Scarred, poor and plain, and most of all alone... he didn't doubt it one bit.

I love you, he thought, feeling the warm, vibrant sensation seep into his bones. *I love you, Lottie. Then: You're going to stay. You're going to meet Vincent, and all the rest of them, and you're going to stay with me. We'll be together.*

You and I...We'll be a family. A family like you never had. And... like I never had, either. Welcome home, big sister.

He reeled her back in for a warm, comforting embrace, and he smiled, then gently whispered near her stocking-cap covered ear.

"I love you, Lottie." He gave her the precious words.

"I want you to take a leap of faith with me," he asked. "Can you do that? I promise you won't regret it, if you do."

"Oh, Benny, I love you too! And... and... I'll try," she answered hesitantly.

You'll try. That's all I ask. I know you can make it. Vincent will help. And I'll be right here with you, every step of the way.

"Trust me. Trust your younger brother," he soothed. "Give this place a chance. Give it a couple of days. Maybe a week."

"I... I can do that," she said, gathering her resolve.

"Then a month... then two," he continued. "I think that by the time Winterfest rolls around again... by about this time next year... I think maybe you'll believe in those things again ... in *all* of them, again," he told her gently.

To Lottie, it all sounded too good to be true. And like something she'd waited her entire life for.

She found she wanted that. She *wanted* to believe in it. She wanted it very much.

"Love and magic. Fairy tales, and the strength inside a wish... ," she said almost wistfully. She sighed against him.

Take me home. Take me home, little brother, she thought.

"You can believe in all of it. More. I know you can," Pascal comforted.

"You do?" she asked.

"I truly do," he replied sincerely. "Just give me the year. Maybe less."

--

And by the time the year had passed (maybe less), he was right.



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



