

*Catherine struggles mightily to reach Vincent for a New Year's Eve celebration
on the last day of the year.*

Written for the Yule Celebration on Treasure Chambers.

Planes, Trains, and Auld Lang Syne

By Cindy Rae



Chapter One

The Journey of a Thousand Miles ...

DELAYED

DELAYED

DELAYED

The list of words, all the same, ran down the length of the “Departing Flights” board, and Catherine paced the airport terminal, praying for the word to change.

Then it did.

“Delayed” flipped to “Cancelled” as one by one, the list changed from the one word to the other.

“No. No, no, no, no, no!” Catherine said, as the flight to Atlanta hit the “cancelled” category, followed by the one to Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, and Los Angeles. By the time “New York” flipped to the “you’re not going anywhere” category, she knew it was coming, and bemoaned it just the same. Phoenix and Washington DC followed, and the entire terminal was a chorus of complaining (and very stuck) passengers.

It was December 31st. And every morning flight out of Sacramento Metropolitan Airport had just been given the boot.

“Due to weather conditions,” the now familiar intercom voice began, “all flights have been temporarily cancelled. Please see the ticket desk

for either refunds or information about flights leaving tomorrow. Repeat: Due to weather conditions, all flights have been..."

"Temporarily cancelled. Temporarily cancelled," Catherine mocked, knowing she would need to go and reclaim her single bag and find out some information from the service desk. "What does that even mean, 'temporarily cancelled?' Either a thing is cancelled or it isn't."

Her audible complaint was overheard by a fellow passenger. "In Airport-speak, I'm afraid that means we're all spending New Year's Eve in Sacramento," a pleasant looking man in a business suit said, as he fell in step beside her. "Looks like the morning fog isn't going anywhere."

"Is it always like this?" Catherine asked, knowing very little about the vagaries of running the Sacramento airport. She was more than just inconvenienced. Her worry showed on her face.



"Pretty much, in December," he replied, exchanging his ticket and boarding pass for a voucher and a luggage slip. Catherine did the same.

They could both see the weather event that was keeping them on the ground. As the sun rose higher, a thick bank of swirling mist was locking every airplane on the ground. No forecast had that getting any better. And some even pegged it to get worse.

She followed the man as he made his way to the baggage carousel. "I guess there's no use hoping it will burn off in a few hours?" Catherine asked, knowing full well there wasn't. Her heart was sinking, even as she was trying to formulate a plan. Could she rent a car and drive to the closest city? One that, hopefully, wasn't wrapped in mist so heavy it was leaving streaks of running moisture on the windows?

"Not an ounce," her companion replied, waiting for his luggage to come down. They had a lot of company in that.

Catherine's heart sank further. She was supposed to be back in New York before noon. She'd done her job, and now she was free to go home. She had plans with Vincent. She wanted to be back in time to unpack, bathe, and look her very best for a special evening together. They were planning to have a quiet, early dinner, then look in on Father and some of his tunnel family, then enjoy an evening in the Concert Chamber, bundled up against the chill as they listened to Sibelius. Then after that... New Year's Eve. The ball would drop in Times Square, and they'd be able to hear the distant multitude, from her balcony.

She'd had plans of perhaps stealing a New Year's Eve kiss as the final gasp of the 1980's breathed its last. 1989 was giving way to 1990. And she had promises to keep.

"I promised someone I'd be back in New York for New Year's Eve," Catherine worried, as her single bag came down. She'd only been in Sacramento for two days. A case she and Joe had been a part of had

been extradited here, and she'd come to give her deposition, then had to wait to hear the judge's ruling. That had been yesterday, the last day any court business had been done at all. There'd been no flight out to New York that night, so she'd had to wait until this morning.

Now, she was free to return home. If she could get there.

"Planning on watching the ball drop, huh?" her companion asked, fishing his own luggage off the moving belt. A smart black leather valise joined a matching Hartman tote.

"Something like that," Catherine said, hefting her belongings. "I know I don't want to stay here, that's for sure," she said, watching as other passengers milled about, stood in line for the pay phones, or harassed the sky caps for a taxi.

"You've got a long way to go. And time's not really on your side. It's already ten o'clock in New York," he replied.

Catherine knew as much.

"But there's a way to get out of Dodge, here, if you're determined," he added, making his way toward the glass double doors that led onto the street.

Catherine followed him, interestedly. "What will you do?" she asked, sensing this man had no more of an intention of staying here than she did. "Rent a car? Drive?"

He shook his head. "Not in this pea soup. The roads will be as bad as the airport, for travelling. First pileup and you're stuck." He dropped his voice, as if he were sharing a confidence. "There's an Amtrak line that runs right through here. Train goes to Salt Lake City, if we can get

to the station before 8:00 am. Three and a half hours from there, and we'll be in a different airport. One with no fog,"

Catherine's eyes lit up. "Really?"

He gave her a smile, and it gave his soft brown eyes a mischievous glimmer. "This isn't my first rodeo. I figured it out one time when I nearly got trapped for my fifth wedding anniversary. It's hell doing business between here and Tucson."

Catherine eyed the mob, all of whom were trying to sort out what to do. "Do you really think we can make it?" she asked.

He gave her a knowing nod as he shouldered his way to the curb and gave a whistle for a cab. "Most of these people will be trying to figure out how to get a hotel for the night, or maybe rent a car or get to the bus station. Nobody travels by train anymore. It's why the whole business is almost always in bankruptcy court." He whistled a second time at a yellow taxi and used his height to wave it over.

"Care to split a cab?" he asked, as the driver hustled to open the passenger door.

She had no time to plan, and less to think. But she knew if she stayed where she was that there was no way she'd reach New York before nightfall.

"You're on," she said, sliding into the cab with him.

"Amtrak station, and make it fast," the man said, to the driver, ducking his head as he entered the vehicle. He had a long, rangy build, and a suntanned complexion. Brown hair that had a bit of a stubborn wave was parted on the side, and he looked very much at home in his crisply tailored tan suit. His wedding ring gleamed on his left hand and his class ring on his right. Stanford.

“Stanford?” Catherine asked, eyeing the ring. He followed her gaze. “Class of 77,” he replied, making him a few years older than she was. “I’m Bill Faraday, by the way.” He extended the hand with the class ring. Catherine didn’t wear one.

“Cathy Chandler. Radcliffe, then Columbia.”

“Well, well. You a business major?” he asked politely.

“Worse. I’m afraid I’m a lawyer,” she replied. He chuckled at her jest and Catherine thought he had a nice laugh. She found that she liked him, immediately.

“Right with you, in the popularity department,” he replied, loosening his tie. “I’m an accountant.”

“People don’t dislike accountants,” she returned, watching for a red light she could barely see until they were right on top of the intersection. For all of Bill’s instructions to hurry, there was really no way to do that. Traffic was at a crawl, in deference to the weather.

“They do when you work for the IRS,” he deadpanned, seeing the same deteriorating conditions she was. Now it was Catherine’s turn to chuckle.

“Take Bloomington,” he instructed the cab driver. “It winds around more, but there’s fewer lights.” The cabbie nodded, and turned the wheel.

“If it was any colder, there’d be blowing snow,” the driver said, navigating the taxi skillfully.

“That’s what I’m trying to avoid,” Bill replied. “Ice on the tracks might get us stuck here after all,” he told Catherine.

Catherine grimaced at that news. *No. No, I need to get home. I promised Vincent. We've been... it's been hard, lately, and we haven't been connecting. I promised I would be there. I will be.*

"We'll just have to hope for the best," she said.

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Chapter Two

The Early Hours

Vincent chose his clothing carefully, wondering if he could beg Mary to press his white shirt, just a little. The linen tended to wrinkle, folded up in his wardrobe. It was a thing he rarely minded when he was heading for a work detail or a normal day of teaching, but today was special, and he was hoping that tonight would be more so. Catherine was returning from a long journey, and he wanted to take care with his attire. He knew she liked the brown vest and creamy shirt he'd worn the first time he'd danced with her at Winterfest. And the high neck helped keep him warm against winter's chill, a thing he suspected he might need, this evening.

He shook out the shirt and realized it looked fine. Asking Mary to spend time on such a thing would be inconsiderate. And he well knew that Catherine wasn't in love with him thanks to his wardrobe.

Still...

Things between them had felt... difficult of late, thanks to situations neither one of them seemed able to control. She'd attended Winterfest, but then been utterly absent from him, tending her friend

Jenny as she suffered through a bout of flu. Then Joe Maxwell had called with the instructions regarding the trip to Sacramento. Before that, life had hardly been peaceful, on any score.

1989 had been a hard year for them, one that seemed determined to test their resolve to remain a couple. A band of vagrants had invaded the tunnels, triggering death and mayhem. A pair of rich boys who killed for the psychotic pleasure of it had crossed Vincent's path; more death had ensued. Paracelsus had impersonated Jacob, trying to goad Vincent into releasing the darkness inside him. But for Catherine's steadfast care of him, it might have worked. Charles Chandler had passed away. Other things, as well, both minor and major.

They'd been pushed, and hard. And those were the days when Vincent didn't feel as if forces were pulling him – and them – apart.

At times, it felt as if they were each being pulled in different directions. Vincent knew they were both craving some sense of normalcy between them, and more time, together. Peaceful time.

Like with so much this year, "time together" was at a premium. He lived and worked in the world Below, just as she lived and worked in the world Above. Many days, their separate obligations made it impossible to be together. Things just seemed to keep happening. Fate, it seemed, was conspiring to keep them not just apart, but Apart. Her friend had needed her. Her boss had needed her. Her job had taken her to the other side of the continent. – Again.

At least this time she isn't in danger. I don't think, Vincent qualified that thought, knowing that even though he'd recovered from the illness that had recently gripped him, the bond was not what it had been, between them. It was "there," but... fainter. He could still sense when she was in any real danger. But there was not so much more.

Patience. Like everything else, that will come back in time, he told himself, and not for the first time.

Vincent hoped that the New Year might usher in a peaceful new beginning for them, and one where they somehow had more time for each other, more time to simply be in love with each other, absent some of the extraordinary stresses that had marked the past year, the past few months, especially. He knew that Catherine felt the same.

I love you, Catherine. And I know that you love me. He thought it as he inspected the cuffs on the shirt. They were fine.



They'd tried to make that time; tried to steal more moments than they had been. But something always seemed to interfere. Whether it was his world's demands or hers, it seemed that they were fighting a foe neither of them could best, and sometimes couldn't even identify, or anticipate. For her part, her friends visited more often, now that the holidays were upon them, and that was prior to Jenny Aaronson's bout with the flu. For his part, the pipes froze more often, now that it was winter. The repairs seemed endless, and then there was the necessity of making sure they were well concealed, come a night

when it seemed like half of New York was standing right on top of their heads.

It seemed that something was either vying for her attention or demanding his. And it didn't just "seem" that way. It was that way.

Tonight, he hoped, they could turn the page on their disappointments, and begin fresh with each other. Mark the difficult time as "passed," and talk about hopes for a brighter future. Not all of the year had been bad. Indeed, much of it had been wonderful. Vincent knew that there was much good they could build on.

If we ever find the time to, he amended mentally, giving the left cuff a second look. Was one of the buttons coming loose? Surely not. He gave it a second look and let it drop. He knew he was worrying needlessly. And to a certain extent, that was the problem; a problem that was affecting Catherine, as well. They both had cause for their concerns. But since his illness, she'd been very solicitous of him – but also very 'careful.' He could put it no better way than that.

It has been a hard year, Catherine. Yet one I would never trade, thanks to having you. Was it all... too much? Did we spend too much of our strength torn between your world and mine? Is that why our bond has grown so quiet?

He brushed a work-roughened hand down the brown vest, not really seeing it.

We're still... vital to each other... aren't we?

The fact that he even had to ask the question, mentally, was a tribute to how hard things had been, for them. She was his touchstone, and he loved her with all his heart. But their stolen moments were

becoming fewer and farther between. And the peaceful ones sometimes felt like they were becoming fewer than that.

He hoped she'd forgive him for planning a very private dinner, then skipping the visit she thought they were going to have with Jacob, Mary, Mouse, and his other tunnel family. He wanted this night to be almost wholly about them, and spent in each other's company, exclusively. He was in a mood to be a bit selfish with her, a thing that was perhaps uncharacteristic, but one even she had mentioned for herself, once, when Michael's kiss had happened.

"Sometimes... I envy Father. And others in your life who receive your love and care every day."

He knew the feeling. But for Jenny Aaronson's 102-degree fever, he'd have gladly traded places with her, last week.

He tugged the belt he wanted from the drawer in his wardrobe. *It will do me no good to envy a woman who was too ill to stand*, he thought, knowing that description had fit him for several days as well, after Paracelsus' death.

At least that is past us. Time, perhaps, to hope for better things. A new start for a new year. And for that matter, a new decade.

He knew Catherine would enjoy the concert, and he was planning on settling several wide quilts in the Concert Chamber, against December's wintry chill. Rebecca's Winterfest gift to him had been a special pillar candle, one he planned on bringing to Catherine's balcony, after the concert. The white wax was infused with rose petals, the blooms having come from her very own rose bush. It sat on his writing table, now, awaiting the night.

Patience, he chided himself again. *Night will fall soon enough.*

He eyed the shirt again, critically. *Perhaps just a little pressing...*

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Train ticket in hand Catherine stood near Bill as he called his wife in Tucson on a pay phone.

"No. Honey, no. Just a delay. Fog socked in Sacramento so I'm taking the train to Salt Lake and picking up a connecting flight from there... Love you... Yes. No, don't give up on me. Keep the champagne on ice, I'll get there, just a little later, is all... Yes. Yes. You betcha. Yeah. We got a family to start, yeah? Worried? Nah. Come on, Trish, it's going to be our best year, yet!... Okay, Honey. I'll call... yes. I'll call you from Salt Lake with an ETA... If there's no flight to Tucson? Then I'll just keep moving in your direction 'til I make it! Yes... Love you. 'Bye, Honey."

He clicked the lever down, disconnecting the call, then offered the receiver to Catherine. "You want to call your guy and let him know?" Bill asked, figuring that she did. They were anticipating the arrival of the train any minute.

"No, thanks. He's... he's away from a phone right now. I'll have to call him later," Catherine lied smoothly, realizing how good she was getting at doing that, where Vincent was concerned.

It was a skill she wasn't entirely comfortable with. Her father had been a stickler for honest dealings with other people, and so had she been, for the most part.

Vincent's arrival in her life had altered that, some. Mostly, she simply deflected questions about her love life, as she'd often done with Jenny Aaronson or Joe Maxwell. She had to. She didn't like to lie, openly, but knew that there was no other option, considering.

“Not a desk jockey, then,” Bill concluded. “Lucky.” He hung up the phone and collected his bags, just as the noisy train pulled in, slightly early.

“Good thing we made it,” Bill said, shouldering his way through the boarding crowd. The station was fairly busy, and the holiday atmosphere was a bubbly one.

“It looks like rumors of bankruptcy are fairly exaggerated,” Catherine commented, recognizing at least one other person from the airport who clearly had the same idea.

“Holiday travel. This place is like a ghost town, mid-year,” Bill commented. “One of my first corporate jobs was trying to sort out the financials of a southern US rail line. You’d rather have your teeth drilled,” he opined, settling them in adjoining seats.

Catherine knew she was closer to reaching New York just by boarding. But she also knew that this avenue of travel was glacially slow compared to how she’d originally intended to get home. There was no help for it. The trip to Salt Lake alone would take almost four hours. She knew she’d need to find a quick flight to New York to have a chance of making dinner on time, and look her best.

Still, when the train pulled away from the station, she was glad she didn’t try to drive inland, as others around her at the airport had suggested doing. The fog that held Sacramento in its grip did indeed seem to be growing worse, not better, and the train lurched forward into a grey, enveloping mist, with the sun just a lighter spot of haze amid the damp gloom.



“Quite the day we’re havin’ here,” said a balding, elderly gentleman as he escorted his wife to her seat. The couple looked to be in their seventies, and he seemed like the more spry of the two, being not particularly tall, but able to walk steadily, and unaided. His wife had no such advantage, as she carefully settled herself across from Catherine, and tucked a walking cane beneath her seat.

“That it is,” Bill replied cheerfully, clearly happy to have more company to pass the time with.

“Evie, did you remember to pack your pills?” the old gentleman asked his wife, who nodded. A pair of wire-rimmed glasses slid down his long nose as he checked her bag for them, just to be sure. Satisfied, he pushed the glasses back up and seated himself across from Bill.

“I’m Bertie and this here is Evie.” He settled in and extended his hand to Bill, and then Catherine, in turn. His wife did the same.

“Pleasure. I’m Bill, and this is Cathy,” Bill introduced.

“Nice to meet you,” Catherine replied.

“Indeed,” Evie smiled at both of them. There was a happy sparkle in her blue eyes, and heavy pearls were clipped to her ears. Though her face was lined, Catherine had the impression that she’d once been a beauty, and in her way, still was.

Bertie was cheerful. “Ah, here we are, then. And nothing like a train ride in the fog, right Evie?” Bertie asked, helping her drape a sweater around her shoulders.

She nodded again, the motion shifting gray hair that was in a soft, face-framing cut. Her smile was genuine as she addressed her husband. “Bertrand Johnson. You’d say there’s nothing like a train ride no matter what the weather was,” she teased, then addressed Bill and Catherine. “My Bertie. Always loving trains. Thirty years with Northern Pacific, he was,” she said proudly, and patted his knee.

“Nothing like a good strong engine pulling you along.” He smiled at her in return, the years spent together and in love an obvious thing, between them. “Much better than driving. Gives a fella a chance to steal a kiss from his sweetheart,” he teased her, giving her a peck on the cheek. She blushed.

“Bertie. You’ll embarrass this nice couple,” Evie chided him.

Catherine gently corrected their misconception. “Oh, we’re not... that is, we’re not a couple. We’re just travelling together as far a Salt Lake,” she said, clearing that up.

“That is, we’re not a couple with each other,” Bill added, showing his wedding ring. Catherine wore none. “We’re both trying to get back to our significant others before midnight. You?”

“Same, a bit,” Bertie replied. “We’re meeting our son and his wife in Salt Lake. We’ll have a nice lunch there, then settle in with the

grandkids. Our Liam, he's an Elder in the Church. I doubt we'll still be awake come eleven, but you know how it is. Once the ball drops the whole house will be in an uproar." Bertie chuckled, taking out his wallet and proudly showing a picture of his son, his daughter in law, and four smiling grandchildren.

"That's quite the handsome family," Bill said, reaching for his own wallet.

"Liam married himself a Mormon girl. Sweetest thing in all of Utah. She says they'll stop when they hit ten. Don't know if Liam's quite up for that, though." They all chuckled at that.

"This is my Trish," Bill introduced. "She manages a telecom office. And me, when I'm not behaving," Bill replied, showing a picture of a lovely brunette with smiling blue eyes. "No kids, yet. This year... well, we're hoping."

Bertie and Evie smiled indulgently at that. "She's a lovely girl," Evie complimented.

Three sets of eyes turned toward Catherine.

Catherine was aware that she could make no such gesture. That there were no pictures she could share of Vincent, and that again, she was going to have to lie about that.

"I left my pictures at home," she said lamely, as Evie wished Bill all the best on starting a family.

Catherine leaned back in the seat as they discussed whether or not it was easier to raise girls or boys. *And there it is again...* she thought. *The life I can never share, with anyone. Simple conversations I can't really have, without lying to strangers. And everyone else. It's a little thing. But somehow... it isn't. Somehow, it keeps adding up.*

She knew she didn't want Vincent to sense her level of disappointment, at that. She mentally "checked" her emotions, and smiled at Bertie.

"Ah. I'm sure your fella is a handsome devil, to charm such a lovely girl," Bertie complimented gallantly.

Catherine smiled. "He has his strengths," she replied vaguely.

"Not sure I caught his name?" Bill prompted, just being sociable.

For a moment, Catherine considered lying about that, as well. But there were people who knew Vincent's name. Nancy Tucker, for one. And... what could it hurt? She was very unlikely to see any of these people again.

"Vincent. His name is Vincent." It felt good to be able to say at least that much.

"You're ah... not married yet, dear?" Evie prompted, looking at Catherine's bare ring finger.

"Now, Mother. Mustn't be all nosy. Young people these days do things differently, you know," Bertie scolded, gently, thanks to catching Catherine's rather flustered expression.

"We're um... taking things slowly," Catherine said, not sure why she should feel so uncomfortable at having to try to describe her life to strangers. "But... we're very ... devoted to each other," she added. "It's why I'm trying so hard to get home."

Bertie clearly approved of that. "Ahh, true love, and taking it slow. Best way. Evie and I were courting for nearly two years before I worked up the nerve to ask her to marry me. Of course, World War Two got in the way a bit," Bertie said, patting his wife's knee, in turn.

“World War Two and that hussy, Sheila Miller,” Evie retorted gamely. Bertie’s smile of innocence and “hands up” gesture let Bill and Catherine know this was an old tale, between them.

“Now, Evie. You know you’re the only girl for me.”

Evie clearly did, but she couldn’t resist teasing him about it a bit more, and the conversation settled into what near-strangers usually talk about when they know they have to pass a good bit of time together: the weather, how long it might take to reach Salt Lake City, descriptions of pets, and houses lived in, places travelled to, and plans for the New Year.

Catherine contributed, some, but mostly, she sat back and watched the misty landscape roll past. The fog sometimes lifted enough for her to be able to make out the silhouette of distant farmhouses, or a line of telephone poles.

Conversation ebbed and flowed between them, and she joined in when it seemed appropriate, but just as often, she leaned back and enjoyed the rhythmic ride. Snatches of conversation from other nearby passengers came to her, and it all seemed a bit like the swirling voices she and Vincent sometimes heard in the Chamber of the Winds.

“... should be getting there just about on time.”

“Never did like my brother-in-law, but he’s married to my sister, so what can you say?”

“... dining car looks full. Might have to wait.”

As she sat, she found out that Bertie had been a mechanic for the railroad, and could tell almost any kind of engine (and what was wrong with it) just by the sound. That Evie had been a secretary for a

while, but had mostly raised their three children, and loved to paint landscapes. Bertie insisted she was marvelous at both, while Evie took credit for the former, but politely denied being anything more than an amateur at the latter. She thought how Mouse would probably love to talk with Bertie, and how much Elizabeth had in common with Evie. Again, they were thoughts she couldn't share.

Catherine told them she was an attorney, born and raised in New York, in Sacramento as part of her job. Bill said he and Trish had been married for five years, and had decided that this would be the year they would try to welcome a child into their little family. That she was nervous about it, but he was steady. And again, Catherine realized she had very little in the way of advice about that. She could hardly bring up why it was unlikely that she'd ever become a mother, or the questions that raised, for her.

It was another part of her life that was unsettled, thanks to the love she had for Vincent – a love she knew she'd never trade for anything.

Conversation and a crossword puzzle book Evie produced from her bag helped to pass the time. After a while, the older woman said she needed to get up and stretch her legs, lest an arthritic knee tend to act up. Bill similarly felt a need to stretch, and gallantly offered to accompany her to the dining car, to check out their prospects for a bite.

After the third time Catherine glanced at her watch, Bertie reached over and patted her arm. "Just about the one thing you can't rush, little lady, is a train. They go at a steady pace, and don't vary, much. We'll be there when we get there. Near as I can tell, we're running on time." He nodded toward the clearing landscape. Having come

through the mountains seemed to make a big difference in the weather.

Catherine looked out the window, now able to see a rocky, picturesque countryside. They were indeed clear of the fog. It gave her hope for the next leg of her journey.

"It's just... I'm really hoping to get back to New York on time. If my plane from Sacramento had worked out, I'd be there by now," she said, feeling the great distance between herself and New York.

"And if you're a day late... what? The world caves in?" Bertie prompted, adjusting his reading glasses up his long nose. His white hair was thin on top, but his kind blue eyes were sharp.

"I... no, I just... well, maybe. Something like that," she allowed, unable to explain how important it felt that she be back in New York on time to spend the evening with Vincent. "My... my boyfriend," she stumbled over the word, "we have plans for the evening. Dinner, and time with his family. A concert in the park."

It all sounded so normal, when she said it that way. She knew it was anything but.

"That sounds very nice," Bertie said.

"I'm sure it will be," Catherine replied, hoping that saying it would happen would make it so. "It's just... I'm fighting the time change. It's already later, in New York."

Bertie chuckled at her concern. "Tell me. Trains run the same way planes do, just slower. You lose time in one direction, then pick it back up, coming home. Crazy."

Catherine nodded that it would be.

“The course of true love ne’er did run smooth.” He quoted Shakespeare. Just the words reminded her of Vincent.

“That it doesn’t,” she agreed.

Bertie caught a touch of awareness in Catherine’s green eyes, and knew she was thinking of all the ways the line from A Midsummer Night’s Dream had been true for her, lately. She checked her wristwatch again. Habit.

“If he loves you, it will be alright,” Bertie soothed, as Evie and Bill came back from checking out the dining car. They came bearing canned soda and wrapped sandwiches.

“It’s a zoo in there. No tables available. We figured you two might be hungry,” Bill offered Catherine a choice. “Tuna on rye or ham and cheese?” he asked, handing her a can of ginger ale to go with it.

It’s not about whether he loves me, Catherine thought, reviewing Bertie’s comment as she settled the can in a cup holder in the arm of the chair. *It’s about... I don’t even know what it’s about. I’m afraid we’re drifting... no, not drifting... like things are driving us apart, by degrees. I need to get home. I just... need to. To be there, like I said I would. To not let anything get in the way of that, the way it has been, lately.*

“Ham, please,” Catherine said, grateful for the offering. “And thank you.”

“We chatted up some people in the dining car. Most agree that we’re making good time,” Bill said, watching the way Catherine kept glancing out the window, then at her wristwatch.

She knew he would pretty much echo Bertie’s sentiment: *Relax. Things are going as planned. And we’ll be there when we get there.*

Catherine gave him a weak smile. "I'm sure we are," she said.

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"Catherine promised me she'd be back in time for dinner," Vincent said to William, not quite sure what time that might be. Though he knew she was still distant, he also knew that their bond had been... confusing him, of late. She felt more distant from him, somehow, even as both of them swore they were more committed to each other than ever. Be that as it may, it was often true now that he could barely sense her; that she seemed, by degrees, increasingly... apart from him.

Whether the cause of the sensation was intentional (like when she'd withheld herself from him the time Paracelsus had taken her) or simply a phase they were going through as their bond evolved (*would this be "devolved?"*), he sometimes thought but couldn't say.

He knew he lacked the courage to tell her that there were times when he could barely feel her; times when he wasn't even sure she was coming down, and then there she'd be, walking through the tunnel toward him.

It had been that way since he'd awoken from a collapse on a cavern floor. At times, things felt better. At times, they were worse.

His answer, when people asked how he was, had become standard: "I am well." And for the most part, that was true. Physically, he was fully recovered. It was the bond that seemed to change.

It was a thing that worried him, even as he tried not to read too much into it. *I'm healing. We both are.* It was a thing he thought with almost daily regularity, though he wasn't sure if he wasn't trying to simply convince himself of that very fact.

“Should be no problem, then,” William answered, bringing Vincent back to present concerns, as he added a bit of salt to the pot he was fussing over. Vincent knew that the comment was about the meal, rather than his current situation with his love. Still...

Is there truly no problem? If our bond seems... weaker, does that mean something? Does it mean we no longer need it, so much? Or does it mean... something else? Are we... losing each other?

The last was a thought too hideous to be borne.

Stop borrowing trouble. There are things she must do, necessary things. She has a life to live and so have I. We’ve had... quiet times, before, he chided himself. And he knew that they had. Yet, he also knew he was feeling the distance of her, and in more ways than geographically. He wasn’t sure if it was a thing she was doing intentionally. In his now-limited perception, it just seemed to be something that was happening, with them.

“I’ll set some aside, and you can bring back the dishes later,” William said, tugging down two bowls. “Never could abide New Year’s Eve. Too many drunks on the road, not to mention on the street. Half of them drunk on champagne and no dinner,” he added, extolling the virtues of a good beef stew.

I think I will be so glad to be with her when midnight comes, no matter what, Vincent thought, ready to bid the old year good-bye.

“I’ll ladle stew into an earthenware serving bowl. One with a lid. That should keep it nice and warm, until you’re ready,” William said, wiping out the wicker picnic basket he planned to use.

“Thank you, William. It is much appreciated,” Vincent replied. “You may have no love for this night. But I am very much looking forward to it.”

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Chapter Three

Halfway Mark

“Ma’am, if it was any other place, maybe. But New York? Those flights were all booked days ago, if not weeks. We even added extra flights, because, you know, New Year’s Eve. People want to go to Times Square to see –”

“To see the ball drop. Yes. Yes, I know,” Catherine told the young woman with dismay. “Please. Please, can you check again? Make sure there hasn’t been a cancellation?”

The line behind her was long, and growing a touch restless. Salt Lake City International Airport hummed with the busy traffic of those who were trying to get someplace on the last day of the year, as well as those who were very much in Catherine’s shoes. The Sacramento flight wasn’t the only one that had been cancelled, in the west.

Blue blazer-clad shoulders gave a grim shrug, though the clerk still clicked her keyboard and scanned her screen. “Some days, maybe. But today? With a bunch of Pacific Coast flights cancelling, thanks to the weather?” Catherine watched the harried woman’s brown eyes scan one flight list after another. She checked again and shook her head. “I’m sorry miss. There just isn’t anything to New York from here.”

“Boston? D.C, even?” Catherine asked, already willing to rent a car if she could just get close.

The red head shook her head again, her pearl and diamond earrings winking in the incandescent overhead light.

"Everything East Coast is booked. People want to be where the New Year starts first. And it's the end of the holidays. People getting back home from Christmas."

Catherine's heart sank as Bill stood beside her, his ticket for Tucson firmly in hand. It seemed that getting north or south of here was much easier than trying to get farther east.

"Sorry, Cathy," he commiserated, using his tall body to keep some of the restless customers from crowding them.

"What's the farthest east you can get her?" he asked, looking up at the departure board.

The ticket attendant couldn't quite believe they were having this conversation.

"Let's see... Dallas, but that doesn't leave until eleven tonight. Denver in twenty minutes, but that's just kind of getting you north. Um... There's Kansas City, Kansas. One seat left. The plane leaves, well, right now, if you can get there. That's the best I can do."

Catherine looked up at her unexpected friend.

"I bet Bertie would say if it's true love, you should go for it," Bill told her. "You can try to get closer from there. Lots of smaller carriers in Midwest airports."

Catherine had to make a decision, and she had no time to reflect on it.

"Book it," Catherine said, knowing the immediate departure worked in her favor, even if only making it halfway home didn't. "If I can get close enough, I'll rent a car and drive the rest of the way, if I have to."

"Atta girl," he said, liking her spunk.

"If a flight from Kansas City can get me as far as Newark, I'll be fine. Even Philly," she said, thinking aloud as yanked out her charge card. "If I can just get a few hours' drive away... I'll miss dinner but maybe make it in time for the concert." It was nearly noon where she was. That meant it was already well after lunchtime, in New York.

"Gate seven." The clerk handed her a freshly minted ticket envelope. "I'll tell them to hold it, but you'll have to run!" she said, picking up the phone. The line of travelers behind Catherine heaved an audible sigh.

"Ready for a sprint?" Bill offered, collecting Catherine's bag.

She offered him a game smile. "You're sweet to help me," she said, as they covered the distance across the concourse.

"Yeah, well. True love. And I'm kind of a sucker," he said, maneuvering them through escalator traffic that led to gates four through nine.

"You're sure you'll make your flight?" Catherine asked, having to slow down once the congestion on the escalator was too much to move through. She looked up at the departure board on the wall. The flight to Kansas City was already listed as "Departing." *Wait for me. Wait for me, please. I need to get home.*

"Tucson doesn't leave for two hours. I'll be fine. It's you I'm worried about. You might get stuck in Kansas, Catherine." They hit the bottom of the moving stairs and took off.

I won't. I'll figure something out. "If I do, I do," she replied, already trying to figure out how to proceed. Without being in Kansas and asking questions, she had no way to know.

They hit the baggage counter, the seating area just past it already devoid of passengers. Everyone was clearly already on the plane. Past the metal detector, a flight attendant was standing at the boarding tube, clearly waiting for Catherine.

Bill slung her bag onto the conveyer belt, as Catherine set down her purse. "I owe you," Catherine said, realizing she wished she had her purse back so she could at least offer him some cash for his efforts.

"Not a bit," his smile was a winning one. "We're fellow travelers."

This was as far as he could go, as Catherine was about to step through the metal detector. "Bill, thank you. I'd still be stuck in Sacramento without your help. Tell Trish... tell her I said she's a lucky woman," Catherine said, pausing to give him a heartfelt hug.

"Vincent, too," Bill said, giving her a squeeze, then releasing her. "Happy New Year, Radcliffe," he said, sounding so much like Joe Maxwell her heart gave a homesick squeeze.

"You too, Stanford," she replied, stepping through the machine. The security guard watched the results, and the woman x-raying her belongings gave her a frown for holding things up.

"We're delaying the flight for you," the sour-faced woman scolded, handing Catherine back her brief case. "And you're lucky we allow for two carry-ons. Some airlines are switching to one."

Chastised but still hopeful, Catherine collected her things and raced down the boarding tube to a flight destined for Kansas City.

It wasn't "home." But at least it was half way there.

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Chapter Four

Newlywed Dreams

Some of the flight's passengers frowned at her for keeping them on the ground, but most seemed oblivious to the fact that the petite, harried attorney was part of the reason why they'd still not taken off. Airplanes were airplanes, most figured. They left when they did.

Her spot in coach was three seats across, the first two already taken up by a young couple; ones who were holding hands, as Catherine hastily stowed her belongings and strapped herself in. The jet engines revved up a bit, and the big machine pulled away from the building.

"It's okay Mina. They're supposed to do that." The sandy-haired gentleman holding hands with his brunette companion said. He had a military style crew cut, while her hair fell in lovely waves.

Mina smiled nervously. "And how would you know what a jet engine is supposed to do, Robert Carl?" she asked.

Robert simply smiled. "Been on a couple more than you. And if the sound was wrong, the stewardesses would be panicking," he replied simply. He raised her hand for a reassuring kiss, and it was then that Catherine noticed the engagement ring on the young woman's finger.

"Besides. Ain't nothing going to happen to us on our wedding day. You just wait 'til we hit the folks' place. Kansas City barbecue and a proper weddin' will put you to rights."

Catherine smiled at both notions.

The plane taxied down the runway, and the steady hum of the engines increased in pitch, until the plane tore across the ground and lifted into the sky.

Goodbye, Bill, Catherine thought. *Thank you for everything, and I hope the year works out for you.* She also spared a thought for Evie and Bertie, wondering if they were sitting down to lunch right now, talking about their train trip. Such kind people. Ones she'd never see again, more than likely.

The talk in Catherine's immediate vicinity grew silent as the plane banked slightly, and they were a bit longer in the air before the "fasten seat belts" sign went off, and they were told it was now permitted to move about the cabin. Few chose to do so. But several dropped their tray tables, indicating they could use a drink.

Nervous fliers, Catherine thought, knowing she wasn't one.

"You want some champagne, honey?" Robert asked his bride to be, gently rubbing his thumb across the back of her hand.

"I better not," she answered, raising his hand to hers for a kiss of her own. "Don't want my daddy sayin' you had to liquor me up to get me to say 'I do,'" she replied.

Catherine was charmed. "You two are getting married? Today?" she asked, smiling at them. Their return gazes were beatific. "Yes ma'am. I'm Robert Shipley. And this is my beautiful fiancée, Mina Boudreaux. Soon to be Shipley. In... about twelve hours from now," he said, introducing them.

"Catherine Chandler," she said, shaking hands with both of them. "I'm not trying to be nosy, but... isn't it bad luck for the bride and groom to

see each other the day of the wedding? Not that I believe in superstitions,” she hastened to add.

Mina’s grin broadened further. “That’s why we’re having the ceremony late tonight. I get my kiss at midnight. So on the paper, it says December 31st. But at the ceremony, January 1st.”

“We’ll have two anniversaries,” Robert added. “Our whole family is getting the church ready. Mina’s uncle is pastoring, and it will be a big to-do. You fixing to stay in Kansas City?” Robert asked. Catherine got the feeling she was about to be invited to a wedding.

“Just passing through, quickly.” *I hope*, Catherine explained. “I’m trying to get back to New York before midnight,” she added, feeling the miles slip beneath her. This felt better than being on the train. It felt faster, like she was finally making some progress.

“Oh. Well. I was fixing to say, if you didn’t have anything to do, stop by First Presbyterian come eleven thirty tonight, and just slip into a pew.”

Mina nodded her agreement at that, and Catherine could see by the look on her face she was so in love she could barely stand it. Everyone seemed like a welcome friend, in that moment, and the whole world seemed absolutely perfect. The young couple positively radiated happiness.

“Robert just finished basic training. I wanted to fly out to meet him, and visit with his granddaddy. Not to mention make sure he came back with me!” she giggled. “Can’t have my groom changing his mind!”

The look he gave her was an adoring one. “Wild horses couldn’t keep me from you, Angel.” He gave her a soft, quick kiss on the lips.

Catherine got the feeling that if she hadn't been sitting there, the kiss would have lingered.

Mina adored her love with her soft brown eyes, then resumed speaking to Catherine. "I had my bouquet made in Salt Lake and didn't trust it to the luggage, so I put it in my carry on. Would you like to see?" Mina asked, clearly wanting to share her joy.

"Sure," Catherine agreed, finding it impossible to be anything but happy for them.

They all stood, and Mina tugged down a sturdy white box from the overhead compartment, and gently lifted the lid. Inside, a mixed bouquet gleamed, full of yellow roses, purple pansies, and blue morning glories. White satin ribbon trailed down, and tiny forget-me-nots were gently attached to it. It was full of color and fragrance.



"The flowers are from my grandmother's garden in Salt Lake, rest her soul," Robert explained. "My grandad told Mina to go in there and gather everything that seemed right. So we did, and she took it to a shop. It's a way for them to be with us, even though she's gone, and he's too ill to travel," Robert explained. Catherine was touched by the lovely thought.

"It's very beautiful," she said, feeling the poignancy of the family gesture, and the gift.

How amazing it must be to be able to share this day with everyone you know, everyone you love. Even to share it with a stranger, she thought, knowing that if such a day were to come for her and Vincent, there would be no such ability on her part, to share it with those she loved. None of her friends knew about Vincent, or the tunnels, and honestly, they likely never would. His was not a secret that was given up lightly. Too many people's lives depended on it.

Mina carefully put the bouquet back in the overhead compartment, and the three of them sat together and chatted a bit more. As the flight wore on, Catherine remained the outside aisle seat, while Robert and Mina sat with their heads together, whispering to each other about the plans they had, and the life they intended to lead, as man and wife.

Catherine gladly shared in their happiness. But she had to admit that she also felt a touch of envy for them. She brushed the feeling aside.

The stewardess brought them each a soft drink, and Robert disengaged his hand from Mina's so he could help her with her tray table.

"So. How about you?" Mina asked, in that "I'm-in-love-therefore-everyone-must-be-in-love" kind of way. "Is there a special guy waiting back for you in New York? That why you're in a hurry to get back? To get a New Year's kiss?" Mina nudged Catherine a little.

Catherine looked down, modestly. "There is," she confessed. "And... I don't know about the kiss. Maybe," she said, touching her fingers to warm cheeks. She was blushing at the thought of Vincent kissing her,

come midnight. It felt good. She noticed the other couple waiting politely for a more complete answer.

"He's... cautious," she said, not knowing another way to explain Vincent to anyone, even though she also knew that wasn't really a word that described him. For a person confined by many limits, he was actually quite bold in his undertakings.

"Oh! I love it when they're shy!" Mina enthused, translating Catherine's word to one she related to. "Robert was shy, once!" she asserted, reaching over to give his bicep a squeeze.

Catherine wasn't sure that the word "shy" applied to Vincent, either. If anything, he loved the opportunity to meet and interact with other people. "Reserved," might describe him, owing to his differences and his awareness of those, but shy? Catherine pondered the word.

"Was not," Robert argued gamely.

"Pull the other one. You barely managed to ask me to dance, that first time."

He chuckled at her memory. "Look me up about 12:30 am, and see if that's still the case," he boasted, brushing her soft cheek with the back of his fingers. They seemed perfect for each other. And brightly new, with the promise of an entire lifetime, before them.

What an amazing feeling that must be, Catherine thought, realizing how different it was from Bertie and Evie, yet how wonderful, in its own way.

One is the beginning of love. The other... when it's been there for years. How amazing. She turned her head toward the aisle, looking at nothing in particular. She shifted in her seat, feeling its confines. *I swear we'll have that, Vincent. I just... I need to get home. Need to tell*

you. We need a fresh start, one where my life or yours aren't always... getting in the way, somehow.

She turned back to look at the excited couple. "I wish you many happy years," Catherine said, feeling their contagious pleasure.

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Chapter Five

Preparations

In the Tunnels, most of the detritus of the winter holidays had been put away, or was about to be. Christmas presents had been gratefully accepted and either put to good use or stored. Any decorations put up (Mary usually hung a wreath on a coat rack in her room, while Olivia loved the look of a tinsel garland draped around her dresser.) had been taken down and stowed. Mostly.

There were always a few holdouts who waited for the day after New Year's, and Peter Alcott usually brought down some small treats celebrating Epiphany, on the sixth of January. But for the most part, the tunnels were coming out of the rather frenetic activity usually associated with the month of December. Winterfest had passed, and Christmas, and Rebecca was melting down the colorful candle stubs from the former into one large vat, from which she would make softly tinted pillars. The food for the feast had been recycled into leftovers, by William, hence the leftover roast was being made into beef stew. Vincent knew that by tomorrow, they'd all be eating some sort of casserole made with whatever else was on hand, and that would be that.

It was a quiet time, most of the tunnel residents enjoying a good book acquired over the holiday, or some other, low-energy past time. Work

crews were suspended, barring any emergencies, and it was generally considered a somnolent week, that week between Christmas and New Year's.

The world Below was keenly aware of the commotion over their heads. They just generally didn't participate in it, overmuch.

Some of the younger couples might stay up and listen to the bedlam in Times Square via the nearest tunnel, or stay tucked inside their chambers sipping some of William's leftover Winterfest ale, but for the most part, the last day of the year was one spent in quiet reflection. It was a way to get ready for the year to come, when normal work and duties would start up, again.



Vincent listened to the gentle tapping on the pipes, the soft sound feeling familiar, and homey. But even pipe traffic was quieter, right now. Vincent knew that would change some, as the evening progressed, and Helpers came down to rap out a New Year's greeting

on the pipes, but for the most part, the mid-afternoon was devoid of any real activity.

Vincent wasn't sure if he was grateful for the respite. He very much wanted something to do with his hands, if not his mind. He wanted something to keep himself occupied, while he waited for Catherine to arrive.

He knew she was coming closer, and that their reunion this evening would be a glad one. It would be good to put the sometimes transcendently wonderful, sometimes tragically terrible year behind them. The last few months had been hard ones. Too hard. Vincent knew it.

The frat boys had forced him to kill a young man, and to confront the ugliness of those who killed simply for sport. The Outsiders had been a wholesale massacre, one where Vincent had actually had to cut himself off from Catherine, for a time, as he struggled to process all that had meant, and to bring the Dark Spirit inside himself back under control. Then, there'd been Paracelsus, and a reporter with pictures of him; both were dead, now.

Vincent knew that he'd fed in the darkness too much, and had been lost there, too often. He wanted the turning of the year to mean something for himself and Catherine. A chance to put such things behind them and face the future with something akin to hope. He prayed for a New Year that contained something positive, for them. Something... kind, was the only word he could think of, at the moment.

He wanted to do something more to prepare for Catherine's coming, but there was really so little to do. William was handling the cooking, as he always did, and though Vincent sometimes brought Catherine a

wild rose from the park, winter's bitter chill meant none of those were to be had. Nor would there be, until spring.

He prayed for an early one of those. He wanted its warmth.

Dry heat from his braziers made the rooms feel uncomfortable, but banking them turned the rooms chill. His rooms felt... uncomfortable. That spurred him out of them.

His feet took him in the direction of the Concert Chamber, knowing that he and Catherine would sit there with each other, tonight.

The low, round, tunnel entranceway gave way to the rough-cut, sandy room. Icicles dripped down from the metal grate over his head, and though they dripped, Vincent knew they would freeze again before nightfall. An Arctic blast of air had arrived last week, left, and was about to be replaced by another.

It had snowed once, just a smattering of powder that had delighted those hoping for a white Christmas. It had dismayed out-of-town drivers, but the temperature had plunged hard after that, leaving the ground crunchy and dirt-swept. Icy mud lined the streets and it was alternately either too dry to snow or too cold for it.

Vincent stood in the chilly space, a cloudless, icy blue vault of a sky over his head, showing in squares beneath the crosshatched grate. He remained well back from the center of the room, staying near the entrance tunnel, looking forward to the evening to come, in spite of the chill.

I'll turn the sand over so it's dry, he thought, looking at where the dripping icicles pooled their moisture.

And bring extra blankets down, he thought, knowing that those Above who dared brave the cold would be well bundled up in heavy coats

and lap blankets, as well. The clear, cold night would carry the notes of music far. In spite of the frosty temperature, it should be a beautiful night for a winter concert.

Tiny droplets of water continued to fall from the grate. Vincent remembered a very different concert, one where they'd both been caught in a sudden, evening cloudburst. Catherine had knelt joyfully in the downpour, and when he'd offered her his cloak she'd refused, simply laughing, as the rain had made her a land-locked mermaid, complete with soaked skin and pearls. They'd embraced, damply, and joyfully, and he remembered it as a night of wonderment.

And then he'd found Rolley. Then lost him, again.

In a way, it seemed as if the entire year had gone very much that way. Poignantly gorgeous moments were invariably interspersed with almost heart-breakingly sorrowful ones. Ones marked by waste, or loss. Deep loss, sometimes. Catherine had buried her father not so long ago. This would be her first New Year's Eve without him.

Vincent wondered how much that would affect her mood, tonight. Perhaps she'd like to return to her apartment and share old memories of her father with him. Perhaps she'd want to pull down some photo albums and reminisce, and cry a little. It was all right if she did. He'd hold her through it.

The rock walls of the concert chamber looked stark, and not especially comfortable, regardless of their acoustic capabilities. There was a way to fix that.

Pillows. Perhaps some cushions for her back, Vincent thought, knowing he'd go and collect some from his room. The stone walls would hold winter's icy chill. Cushions would be better. He made a mental note of it.

He could sense Catherine, if he tried. She was travelling fast, and getting closer, though he still felt the extreme distance of her. Doubtless, she was on a plane. He wondered what that must feel like, and tried to sense it, through her. She was tense, and ... a bit worried. Then... vaguely happy. Perhaps that's what flying felt like. He had no way to know.

He eyed the stony space again, anticipating that she'd touch down in New York, soon. Doubtless her mood would change, then, though perhaps not considerably. If she deplaned in Newark, she'd have a fairly long taxi ride ahead of her, then she'd need time to unpack, and likely, to change. He wondered what sumptuous, heavy winter gown she'd choose to wear for their evening together. He'd have to remind her to bring her gloves. Or perhaps he'd just keep her hands tucked warmly in his, while they listened to the music.

He was starting to look forward to the concert more and more.

After I bring the cushions and blankets I'll go and check in with William, again. And I need to see Rebecca. She said something about a special candle for this evening. So kind of her.

He wanted the meal, the music, everything... to be as perfect as he could make it. *This is a good night for new beginnings*, he thought.

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Chapter Six

Shuffle off to Buffalo

Touchdown in Kansas City was a smooth process, and the bright blue sky and clear weather gave Catherine reason to hope that the rest of

her journey would be a smooth one. As they all deplaned, Robert and Mina were met by a cluster of waiting friends and family, all of whom swallowed up the couple in loving embraces. Catherine saw a willowy brunette sporting a “Best Bridesmaid!” tee shirt, and two other girls who looked so much like Mina they were clearly related.

Catherine smiled at them as Robert called back to her. “First Presbyterian Church! You get stuck, you be there, y’hear?” Catherine grinned at his ebullience then watched a huge man pick him up in a bear hug.

“I don’t think I’ll be there,” she called back. “But good luck, Robert!”

“Hey. Nothing like true love!” Robert gasped as the life was half squeezed out of him. “Easy, Bro!” he chided.

There surely isn’t, Catherine thought. *Once, I thought I had to settle for less. Now I know better.* She watched Robert’s brother’s antics.

It must be nice to have such a large family, Catherine mused, and not for the first time. Charles’ passing had left her painfully aware how alone she was, sometimes.

Not that “aloneness” was a feeling she indulged in, often. Having grown up an only child, Catherine had always been fairly independent in her pursuits, and she had many social acquaintances she spent time with, and a few close friends. And of course there was Vincent’s unique family, people she felt increasingly close to.

It’s going to be a good year, she swore internally, as if thinking it could make it so. *We just need to start it out right, then keep going.*

She made her way down the concourse to address the matter at hand. The “Departing Flights” board ran a green list of ON TIME

pronouncements, and she made her way to the ticket counter, hope in her green eyes.

Ten minutes later, “hope” was replaced by something else.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am. Last flight to New York City left twenty minutes ago. Won’t be another one until tomorrow, this time.”

“No. No, that can’t be! I need to reach New York. Do you have anything close? Vermont? Connecticut?”

The young woman scanned the list on her computer screen. “There’s Boston in an hour, but that’s totally booked.”

“Oh, please. I just need to get anywhere near the Eastern Seaboard. It’s very important,” she said, feeling her chance at an early dinner with Vincent slip away. It was nearly two o’clock, now. That meant it was already nearly three, in New York.

Deep brown eyes looked again. “There’s Toronto, but that doesn’t leave until six. Do you have a passport?”

Catherine’s heart fell. “Not with me. I started out this day in Sacramento. At six a.m. Anything else? And I do mean anything...” the desperate tone in her voice was obvious.

The curly brown hair of the clerk shook regretfully. “Albany’s gone. Nothing to Connecticut or Vermont until tomorrow. It is New Year’s Eve, after all. Most everybody who travelled wanted an early flight.” The young woman sounded regretful, but clearly there was nothing she could do.

“Please look again. Isn’t there anything you can do?” Catherine asked.

"There's a flight to Rochester in an hour. But it's booked solid. I'm sorry, Miss. Our last flight out with open seats is a flight to Detroit. It leaves at nine fifteen tonight."

"Detroit! But that's in Michigan!" Catherine knew her voice was rising. The woman looked sympathetic, but Catherine could tell she had no way to help her.

"I'm sorry, Miss. If you'd like to look at the departing flight list, perhaps that can help you." Catherine was clearly being told to move along.

"Damn it!" Catherine swore under her breath, moving away from the counter. "It's so unfair!"

She stepped away from the service area, knowing other people were waiting their turn. She looked back up at the flight board. Detroit. Chicago. Spokane, back the wrong way. The Toronto flight, and two for Florida. Atlanta. Dallas. Detroit wasn't leaving until late and Rochester was booked.

Unexpectedly, tears welled up in Catherine's green eyes, and she willed them away. It was ridiculous to cry about what couldn't be helped, and this entire adventure had been something of a long shot to begin with. She'd tried. If she'd done nothing at all, she'd still be back in Sacramento.

I might as well be, she thought glumly, wondering how far she'd get if she just rented a car and floored it. How far to the next major city with a different airport? Or for that matter, clean to New York?

No. The distance was just too far. Even driving nonstop, she knew she wouldn't make it until tomorrow.

She dashed the tears aside, but then thinking about Vincent sitting in the Concert Chamber without her made them well up again.

I don't want to disappoint you. I'm so sorry. Then she pulled herself up short, mentally. She refused to send him feelings of desperation, or despair. *He doesn't need to feel my disappointment,* she told herself. *He's had enough to handle.*

Catherine turned to face out the huge airport windows, toward the departing planes. Loud engines rattled the panes, and she very much wished she could be on one, going east. And she knew that wasn't going to happen.

I'm so sorry. I tried.

"Excuse me? Miss?" an utterly unknown male voice came from over her left shoulder.

Catherine turned around to see a dapper, middle-aged man in a long wool overcoat, a turtleneck, and dark, casual slacks. "Are, um... are you all right?" he asked solicitously. "I ah, I couldn't help but overhear." He offered her his handkerchief.

Catherine took it gratefully, and dabbed her bright eyes. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was getting loud," she said, his kind gesture making her want to cry, too. The grey hair at his temples reminded her a bit of her father. A thing that made her want to cry all the more.

"You weren't loud." His voice was gentle. "Just... insistent is all. Kind of like my sister, when she's on a tear."

Catherine sniffed. "I... I didn't mean to sound rude. It's just..." Her sigh was world's deep. "I just ... took a chance. Tried to make it home before midnight. I... I really needed to see someone," she explained limply, realizing she'd better start trying to find a hotel for the night.

"He must be quite the lucky guy," the man said, watching her twist his cotton handkerchief between her unsteady fingers.

Lucky? Was that what Vincent was? What they were? At the moment, Catherine felt no word could describe either of them less.

She shook her head, rue in the gesture. "It's just... my flight got cancelled, back in Sacramento. I was supposed to be there by now, supposed to be getting ready. I thought I'd have plenty of time."

"I take it you have a special evening planned?" he asked. She looked down and noticed he had a wedding ring. He probably had one of those planned, as well.

"You know how it is. Dinner. A concert. Not going to Times Square or anything, just... staying in. Waiting for the year to change." *Needing it to.*

"Been a tough one, has it?" he asked in a friendly tone as she handed back his handkerchief.

Catherine nodded her reply. *Yes. Yes it has. Worlds tough.* "I wanted... we've... we've just been kind of missing each other a lot, lately. My work. His work. We... I promised I'd be back in time. So we made plans."

The man nodded in understanding, and looked out at the departing flights. "I know how that is. When the work gets in the way. When you think you'll have all the time in the world, but sometimes... It doesn't work out that way."

He looked at his wedding ring, and Catherine got a feeling she knew what he was going to say before he said it.

"I'm a widower. Wouldn't have traded my Jenny for anything in the world. But sometimes... sometimes I think I asked her to put up with just a little too much, a little too often."

He took in her forlorn form and reached inside his coat pocket. "But more to the point...I met a beautiful woman this last week. We hit it off and... and I'm supposed to leave for home." He withdrew an envelope. "I have a one way ticket to Rochester. And it leaves in... forty five minutes."

Catherine's eyes lit up. "You'd sell it to me?" she asked.

His eyes contained a bit of a smile. "Sure. It means I won't be able to leave, today. That I'll have to take her out to dinner tonight and maybe... who knows? One day shouldn't make a difference, but then again..."

She could see the man was willing to take a chance.

We're both gamblers, she thought.

"Of course, it means I won't be able to leave until tomorrow. Can you throw in the price of a cheap hotel? I already checked out of my other one," he asked.

She reached for his proffered ticket, and read it. His name was Martin Clay, and he was indeed scheduled to leave for Rochester within the hour. "I'll get you a suite. And an invitation to a great wedding at the First Presbyterian Church!" she said, grabbing him by the elbow.

He reminded of her father more and more. This was just the kind of gallant gesture Charles might have made. Catherine deeply regretted that she was going to have almost no time to get to know her incredibly kind benefactor, or find out how things worked out for him with the woman he was now intrigued by.

"Are you sure you don't mind this? Not that I'm going to talk you out of it," she asked, getting back into the line so they could put her name on his ticket.

"I have a taste for Kansas City barbecue and I needed an excuse to stay, so no, I don't mind." He was clearly as pleased with himself as Catherine was. "You're still going to be over 300 miles away, you know. Do you promise this is for true love?"

She raised an eyebrow at the romantic question.

"I am. You?"

He gave her a shrug. "I'm not sure. But I think I want it to be, if that makes sense," he said.

It did make sense. At least it did, to Catherine. "I swear it does," she replied. She did some rough calculations in her head. She had a few hours of driving in front of her, and that was even after the time it would take her to get to Rochester. "And I'm going to miss dinner and probably the concert. But if I lay on the gas, I think I'll make it home before midnight," Catherine smiled, determined to do just that.

--

Chapter Seven

The Waning Day

Vincent sat staring at the picnic basket, knowing it contained the contents of their dinner. He also knew that dinner was getting cold. Four o'clock had turned to five, and then to five thirty. She said she'd be early, that she'd have plenty of time to get ready and come down. That they'd eat, then visit with his family, then go to the concert.

Something had happened. He didn't know what, but he still sensed she was moving, still travelling. He didn't know how far away she was, but he could tell she wasn't in the city.

It doesn't matter. She'll be here as soon as she can be, Vincent thought, taking comfort from the knowledge that she wasn't injured or in danger, just delayed.

Perhaps she'll still arrive in time for the concert, he hoped, knowing it was time he gave up on the notion that they would share the meal together. He lifted the hamper lid.

Stoneware bowls sat in the basket, along with the promised lidded serving one. There was bread and some sliced apples. It was a lovely, simple repast. One he'd looked forward to sharing with Catherine.

His appetite was nonexistent. It had been, all day. Without Catherine here, food was just food. He'd eat when she came. Perhaps after the music was done, and they'd shared time together in the Concert Chamber.

We can still have dinner together. Just a late one, rather than an early one, he thought, figuring she'd be hungry after travelling.

There was tension along their bond, but little else. For lack of any better description he'd spent the day with a sort of static hum in his head, as Catherine had negotiated her way across the country. He wasn't sure exactly what was going on. But he knew that whatever it was, it was causing her to be late.

If I had a telephone, perhaps she could call. Or if we'd thought ahead of time, perhaps she could have gotten some sort of message delivered through Peter Alcott, or Henry Pei, Vincent thought, flipping the lid on the basket closed. But it did no good to wish for a

telephone, or for that matter, any of the things he didn't have that she used. Not now, or any other time. He wasn't even sure if Peter was still in the city, right now. He often went to go visit his daughter for New Year's.

As for getting some sort of message via someone else, they hadn't thought that far ahead. Catherine's need to leave for Sacramento had come up fairly suddenly, and like the last time she'd gone to California, they'd had just enough time to say goodbye, before she'd left for the airport.

She should be home. She should be home by now. The thought had been thrumming through Vincent's sensitive mind since early afternoon. *Even accounting for the time change, she should be home.* He knew it was true.

Vincent chafed at the waning day. Owing to the time of year, it was already getting dark. He wondered if he should go wait for her on her balcony, or in the Concert Chamber, as they'd previously planned.

Opting for the Concert Chamber, he left the hamper where it was, and went to make sure they'd have enough protection against the oncoming chill.

Come home to me Catherine, he thought. *I miss you.*

**



“Lady, considering you’re standin’ here after five thirty on New Year’s Eve, I’d say you’re lucky we’ve got anything at all,” the man at the car rental counter said, in Rochester. The name badge pinned to his blue shirt identified him as “Dave.”

A grey subcompact sat forlornly in the parking lot, looking like an orphan no one wanted. Which it was.

“Are you sure it’s reliable?” Catherine said.

“I’m sure it’s got half a tank of gas and a warranty, if that’s what you’re asking,” the man said, still dangling the keys. “Look, I want to close up, just like everybody else on the concourse. It’s New Year’s. The whole place is shuttin’ down early. Do you want it, or...”

“I’ll take it,” Catherine replied, signing the forms without reading them. As a lawyer, she knew better. As someone in a hurry however...

“Fine. The last customer said the heater worked, but it was dodgy. I gotta tell you that, because we ain’t had time to get it maintenanced. That’s why it’s still sittin’ here.”

“I’ll still take it. I’m desperate.”

“Kinda got that feelin’. Cash or charge?”

Catherine dove for her wallet (again, that day) and pulled out her charge card. This cross-country jaunt was putting quite a dent in her checking account. But it would be worth it to be in Vincent’s arms, come midnight.

She no longer had any illusions that she would make the concert. A five to six hour drive loomed before her, and it was already getting

late. She'd need to shave some time off wherever she could, and knew she'd be pushing the speed limit, some.

"Charge," she said. "And there's an extra ten in it for you if top off the tank, and hurry."

**

Chapter Eight

Concert Solo



The music was beautiful. Halfway through, it even started to snow, much to the gasping delight of every concertgoer in attendance. Soft strains of a wistful violin drifted down to a shimmering, snowflake-filled accompaniment. It was perfect.

Except for one person.

Vincent sat in the stone room where he'd previously known so much contentment, and even outright joy, leaned against the cushioned

wall, and simply watched it all unfold, barely hearing it. He'd emptied the hamper of the cold soup, but brought it in for the apples, thinking she'd be starving when she arrived late.

As the concert opened, he still had hope for her arrival, still sat there, trying to sense where she was as the orchestra cued up for *Tapiola*. It was useless. Wherever she was, she was both struggling and trying not to send him that feeling. Like when she was being held by Paracelsus, he now had no true sense of her location. Only that she was "out there" somewhere.

Snowflakes drifted in through the open grate, timidly at first, and then with more fellows. It fell through the rectangular holes over his head, and Vincent closed his eyes, picturing Catherine, face up, head back, catching glittering bits of winter on the end of her perfect nose.

The orchestra kept playing, tucked inside the Naumberg Bandshell, and the audience gasped and even clapped a little, mid-movement, as more snow came down. It was the perfect holiday concert.

For everyone but him.

Halfway through, he suspected that Catherine might only make the last song. And by the end, he knew even that hope was in vain.

When the audience left, he listened to the departing chatter, the happy anticipation for the night to come, the deep sense of companionship shared among strangers, and the delighted chatter of families, as they scurried home. Children talked excitedly, their high, young voices filling the air above Vincent's head. Couples lingered amid soft whispers. The older people, slower than the others, were usually the last to go. And then... silence.



There was peace in the stillness, then, just as there had often been. Peace... and just a touch of melancholy, for Vincent. He couldn't help it. He had wanted this, for them. Wanted it, and wanted it badly.

I miss you, Catherine. Not just now, but... other times. Times when I ... feel you so little.

The Dark Time we passed through. The... extensions of that... I seem to keep feeling it. When I felt myself struggling, I cut myself off from you. And then... have you cut yourself off from me? Where are you? Why are you not here? I know you did not forget. I know you wouldn't. But send me what you are feeling, and why. Help me know. I'm not so weak a thing I should not be able to feel you. Is that why you protect me? Because you think I'm no longer... strong? It isn't true. I swear it isn't.

He closed his eyes against the vow and let the cold serenity of the Music Chamber fill him. The peace-in-stillness feeling drifted down to him a little more, and he leaned his head forward a moment, drawing strength from its calm.

I'm here for you, my love. I ... am... here.

**

Being back in the Eastern Time Zone was a bit jarring. Catherine's internal clock, the one that had arisen in Sacramento, wanted it to be evening, at best.

But it wasn't.

Full dark enveloped the land, highway streetlamps and car headlights being the only two things that pushed back the darkness. And as the night wore on, there were increasingly few of those.

It's New Year's Eve. Everyone who's "out" is trying to get "in," Catherine reasoned, knowing a good deal about that.

In a way, it helped her travel faster. A less congested Interstate meant she could go more quickly, even push the speed limit some, when she dared.

There was only so much of that. Catherine knew the Highway Patrol would be out in force.

Still, by about the time Vincent was listening to the ending strains of Sibelius, Catherine congratulated herself that she was making good time. At 8:00 pm, she passed the 200-mile marker. She was driving hard. If her luck held, she'd make her midnight rendezvous with Vincent. Barely.

Keeping the accelerator down between 60 and 65 miles per hour, Catherine knew she was courting a speeding ticket. Also that the word "dodgy" was a polite one, for the car's heater. It barely worked. That was all right. Her coat and gloves kept her warm enough, and a Styrofoam cup of coffee had kept her company since Rochester.

I'm going to make it, she thought, congratulating herself for her determination. *I'm going to make it, and we're going to start out the*

year the way we should. Holding each other. Knowing we've turned a corner. Knowing that things are going to be better, going to be okay.

The phrase “turning a corner” reminded Catherine that she’d need to pull off, soon. The full tank of gas she’d begged from the attendant was half-gone. She’d need to find an exit with a gas station and a close on ramp, so she could resume travelling. She knew the traffic and congestion would pick up, the closer she got to New York. It always did. She didn’t want to get stuck in bridge traffic, running on empty.

Wait for me, Vincent. I'm almost there, she said, deciding to skip this exit and push it a bit farther, before she filled up at the next one. Smaller towns tended to be less crowded than big ones. She wanted to keep moving, and moving fast.

Almost home. Almost home, she thought, pushing the gas a little harder. The increased speed made the windows in the grey compact rattle. She let up on the gas, just a little. *I'll make it,* she thought. *But not if I have an accident. Easy, girl. The math is on your side. Barely, but it's there.*

She switched on the car radio and dialed it to a classical station. A Bach Oratorio. *Not Sibelius, but not bad. Wait for me, Vincent. People have been helping me get to you all day, asking if this was true love. I told them it was. It is. I'm coming. I have such a story to tell you about the people I've met. Old, young, in between. They all believe. We all believe. We'll make it.*

**

The foot traffic through the park had been increasing all evening, and the streets were actually mobbed. The crowd was building, even two hours before midnight. The boisterous, rowdy mob was a panorama

of silly glasses, tall hats, wild scarves, and drinking. Out with the old, in with the new. Excitement charged the cold December air.

Vincent knew it was a night to stay Below. Even travelling by rooftop could be risky. Many people (who would normally have been indoors against either the increasingly late hour or the chill) had rooftop parties, ones which usually faced in the general direction of Times Square, or some other New York landmark. Most of the skyscrapers were lit up, and as a general rule, a cheerful kind of bedlam reigned. New York Mounted Police were everywhere. It was New Year's Eve in New York City. Camera crews were everywhere, especially near the giant, bulb-covered ball that would descend as the clock struck midnight. The world was watching.



The tunnel world was shut firmly against intruders, and the drainage culvert was locked up tight. Vincent stood at the ladder which led to Catherine's basement, looking up.

He'd brought a book and a lantern against boredom, and the hope that he would see her before the year changed. The cacophony of riotous souls over his head lent itself to the other "noise" inside his sensitive mind. He could tell she was still trying to reach him. He couldn't tell much more than that.

The tapping on the pipes assured him that the hour was growing later.

We still have time. Come to me, Catherine. I love you. I love you so much.

**

Chapter Nine

So Close, and Yet...

Catherine had begun the day nearly three thousand miles from home. Near the last one hundred of those, her journey abruptly came to a sudden and grinding halt.

She never knew for sure what it was she'd run over. Whether it was some stray piece of metal left over from an accident on the Interstate, or a nail picked up at the small-town gas station she'd just left five miles back. It might have been that the tires on the decrepit rental were just worn, and that the left rear one decided to give up the ghost right before she merged back onto the on ramp.

But whatever it was, and with a little more than an hour to go, a pop (not unlike the sound of a champagne cork bursting free) and a bang and a sudden drop in the rear of the car let her know she was going no further.

"No! No, no, no, no!" Catherine wailed, and not for the first time that day.

Rumbling and lurching, the little grey rental ambled drunkenly to the side of the road, Catherine trying in vain to turn around and head back toward the gas station she'd just left five minutes before. When the rim began grinding on the asphalt, she knew she had to stop. She could simply push the car no further.

"No. No, please!" Catherine begged, hitting the steering wheel of the car as the car radio played Franz Liszt. "Please!"

She felt her heart sink as she felt her chances for getting home slip away. "I don't believe this!"

She wanted to swear. Ripely.

But Catherine hadn't given up on the notion of making it home in time yet, and she knew she couldn't, now. With a will fueled by adrenaline and desperation, she slammed out of the driver's side door, picked her way through the dirty ridge of ice and snow that edged the road, and opened the squeaky trunk, checking for the spare. It was a small car. If there was a decent jack in there, perhaps she could figure this out.

"They do this on TV all the time. Maybe it will only take a couple of minutes," Catherine thought, tugging the cover that concealed the spare tire and other things she needed. Cold air bit at her slender frame.

"What's this?" Catherine wondered, having never seen a donut spare before. It was a thinner tire than normal, and clearly not built to go very far. It was an emergency measure, meant to get the driver to a garage or service station, not a means of long distance travel.

Cathy tugged it out and wondered if 'long distance' was roughly a hundred and ten miles. *Surely not. Surely they meant something more like—*

Blue lights flashed, and Catherine knew a surge of hope as a county police cruiser pulled up beside her.

Thank you. Oh, thank you. Catherine knew that with any luck, she could get the officer to help her fix the flat, then send her on her way.

"You having trouble ma'am?" the officer asked through his rolled-down window, leaving the cruiser lights flashing. He had a hooked nose, a thin mouth, and a serious expression.

"Yes! Yes, oh Officer, I'm so glad you stopped! I'm trying to get to New York and..."

"Trying to get yourself killed sounds more like it," he replied, tossing the cruiser into park, emerging and making his way to the driver's side of her car. Reaching in, he turned on her hazard lights, and the yellow beacons began blinking. "It's darker than you think on these county access roads. And a lot of folks have been drinking."

Catherine felt like a fool for not thinking of turning on her emergency lights sooner, but she also didn't feel like being lectured. She simply didn't have time for it.

"I'm sorry. My name is Catherine Chan..."

"License and registration, Ma'am," the officer asked, in a business-like manner.

Catherine's green eyes conveyed her surprise at the request. "Look, Deputy... Smith," she said, trying to calm her tone, "I have a flat tire and I—"

“Ma’am, we’re going to do this my way or we’re going to do it in Central Booking. License and registration. Please.”

Catherine shot him a levelling look and felt time ticking off the clock. “I haven’t been drinking. I’ve been driving. And travelling, starting at seven o’clock this morning. From California,” she said, not quite able to keep the sound of the debutante out of her voice. She reached in the glove box for the rental information and in her wallet for her ID. “Here,” she said, somewhat ungraciously, still hoping he’d help her.

“No offense intended. I like to know who I have in front of me at ten thirty at night,” he said, going back to his squad car to call in her identification.

Catherine waited, then waited some more. Then couldn’t quite stop herself from letting a tear roll down her lovely face.

“I promise I don’t have a warrant out for my arrest. And I promise I’ll owe you forever if you’ll just help me put the spare on this car,” her tone was both meek and desperate.

“I know better than by ‘owe me’ you’re not offering some kind of bribe,” the officer said smoothly, waiting to hear back from dispatch.

Catherine wiped the tear, checked her watch, and shuffled her feet in the side-of-the-road snow. *Come on*, she thought. *I’m not John Dillinger*.

Dispatch came back with a clear ID, and the officer hung up the com device.

“Okay, Catherine Chandler, let’s see if we can get you on your way,” the officer said, content that he wasn’t contending with a wanted criminal.

Catherine knew he was being kind to offer to change the tire himself. He could have just as easily called for a tow truck.

"I... please hurry. I know this is an inconvenience, but I'm trying to get back to Manhattan as soon as —"

"Not on this," the officer said, bouncing the donut spare.

"It's got air," Catherine replied.

"Yeah. And dry rot. No telling how long that things been in there, but the leak in the trunk has rotted the spare. No way I'm letting you back on the interstate on this thing. You'll kill yourself. And likely somebody else."

"No!" Catherine exploded, unable to hold her anger in. "I can't believe this! I paid money to—"

"Hey, hey. Simmer down," the officer warned. "We'll get you there."

He left the spare where it was and went around to his cruiser again.

"Dispatch, this is three-four-nine on County Line Road. I got a disabled vehicle. Get me Jim Percy on the line... Jimmy? Smitty. Get your keys and get your ass out here to about mile marker 29 on County Line Road. Yeah... About five miles past the Citgo. I got a New Yorker needs a spare tire... Nope... It's a donut, and it's crap. No kidding it's New Year's. Tell my sister she married an idiot and get movin'... Because you got the contract for tow service on holidays, that's why. See ya."

Deputy Smith clicked off the radio again and set up emergency cones near Catherine's car, giving other drivers notice to give them a wide berth.

"Do you think he'll take long to get here?" Catherine asked, knowing she was truly stretching her ability to make it home on time.

Smitty shrugged. "Depends on whether or not my brother-in-law is in a mood to make me happy," he replied. "Which usually depends on how well he's getting' along with my sister, Connie."

Catherine opened up her wallet and pulled out a hundred dollar bill.

"Would you call back Jimmy and tell him there's a large tip in it for him if I'm back on the road in the next ten minutes?"

Deputy Smith shook his head. "Miss Chandler, Jim Percy lives maybe fifteen, twenty minutes from here, and that's in good weather when he's dressed for work, not ten... ten thirty at night when he thinks he's in for New Year's Eve. He's got a full service tow truck and he's bringing the tire you need." He eyed her open wallet, and saw the ID she used for work. "And you're an ADA. Why didn't you say somethin'?" he asked.

Catherine looked down at her professional identification. "Would it get my tire changed any faster?" she asked.

Deputy Smith shook his head. "Nope. But it might have me thinkin' I got a working stiff in front of me, 'stead of a rich debutante. One who's a little on the spoiled side."

Catherine bristled at his description of her and snapped her wallet shut.

"No offense intended, Ma'am," he apologized, in a professional tone. "Just the only kind of people who pull hundreds out of their wallets are either drug dealers or rich people in a hurry. And you don't strike me as a drug dealer."

"I figured we settled that when you ran a background check on me!" Catherine snapped, letting him feel an anger she was no longer trying to hide.

“Lady, you ever have a sixteen year old girl stick a screwdriver in your side because you thought she was okay, without running her numbers, and it’ll teach you caution,” the officer replied levelly, holding open his passenger door for her. “I got one good kidney left. I aim to hang onto it. Get in. My heater’s better than yours, I’m bettin’.”

It was, and Catherine was immediately contrite. Of course he’d had to run her identification. It was any seasoned veteran would do.

Air. Warm air, blasted through the vents of the heater in his squad car and warmed toes that had been cold since she’d stopped for gas. Cold since a hundred miles out of Rochester, if Catherine was being honest about it. The boots were well made. It’s just that the temperature plunge had been sudden, since around eight o’clock.

“Thank you,” she said, meaning it. “And... I’m sorry. It’s just... I’ve been trying to get back home in time all day... and it just doesn’t look like I’m going to make it,” she replied, grappling with that distinct possibility.

“No problem,” he said easily, reaching for a thermos of coffee. “My dime store philosopher of a third ex-wife used to say that life is what’s happening to you while you’re making plans.” He offered her the plastic cup. “Go on. I can get more at the diner,” he prompted.

She sipped its steamy warmth. It was black, but laced heavily with sugar. And felt wonderful, going down.

“You called me a debutante,” she said. “I didn’t know we were that obvious.” Her grin was a wry one. And she knew that every minute that ticked past doomed her chances.

"Address on your license gave you away before anything else did," he replied smoothly. "Plus I used to be married to one. From Boston, no less." He gave no further details.

"I take that wasn't the philosopher," Catherine ventured.

"Nope. That was the hopeless idealist with a thing for Prada. Wife number one. We made it a couple years. She's mother to my boys."

"You have children?" Catherine asked.

"Got four of 'em. Two with Amanda and two daughters with Jenny Ann. That's the philosopher. I skipped it with number two. I think we kinda knew it was better that way."

Catherine took in the information. So this rough, gruff man was a father of four and had been grievously hurt on his job by a tough kid. *Interesting.*

"You?" he asked. Catherine wasn't sure if this was his way of interrogating her or if he was just making conversation.

"I don't have kids. Or a husband," she replied. "It's kind of why I ended up going across the country the week between Christmas and New Year's. My boss is single too, but his Mom had a gall bladder attack and needed surgery," Catherine answered. "She's fine, but ... no lifting. Joe's staying with her for a few days and asked me to field this one for him."

Deputy Smith raised a dark eyebrow in her direction, letting her know his estimation of her might be about to rise, a little.

"He threaten to fire you if you didn't?" the deputy asked.

Catherine shook her head. "No. No need. His dad was a cop. Shot when he was young. Joe is all his Mom has."

"Joe... Maxwell?" Smith asked.

Now it was Catherine's turn to look surprised. "You know him?"

The man shook his head. "I did a stint with the NYPD for a couple years before I came to my senses. People talk. I know of him. And his dad. We have to deal with some of your... exports, from time to time. Maxwell seems like a good man. His rep is solid."

"He is a good man," Catherine defended her boss loyally. "One of the best."

He opened the door and stood up, both of them having seen yellow flashing lights on a huge truck headed their way. Catherine checked her watch. Not bad. Maybe if he hurried, she could still make it. Barely.

The big, lumbering vehicle pulled up to a squeaky stop, the driver's side door opening almost immediately, and a big man wearing a thick jacket and a Dodgers baseball cap jumped down into the snow.

"Evenin,' Smitty. Connie says 'hey,'" the man said, extending his hand to Catherine. "This our damsel in distress? I'm Jim."

"Catherine Chandler." She shook his hand, hoping to move things along. "My tire went flat and the spare is no good. Can you get me moving? Quickly?"

Jim nodded his head. "That's the business I'm in." He shone a huge flashlight in the general direction of her rental. "Let me get it jacked up and trade your old tire for a... oh. Uh-oh," he said, looking at the tire.

"Don't say it," Smitty instructed.

"Rim's cracked. Clean through," Jim said, showing Smitty and Catherine the damage.

"What does that mean? Does it mean you can't change the tire?" Catherine asked.

Jim shook his head. "Means it don't matter if I do. You drive on this and the rim is likely to buckle. Tire won't hold."

Catherine watched the two men exchange looks.

"Can you put a different spare on?" she asked.

Jim shrugged. "I can stick another donut on it if you're close to home, yeah," Jim said.

"Define 'close,'" Catherine said.

"Not New York City and over bridge traffic," Deputy Smith supplied. Jim began hauling the bad tire to his truck. "Gonna take it to Jeff's Garage?" the officer asked. Jim nodded that he was.

"Take it there, swap it out, bring it back. Try and get back with time to spare before the ball drops. Let Jeff know I'm coming, and I need a fifteen-inch rim with fresh rubber. Sorry ma'am, but this is gonna take a bit longer."

Catherine closed her eyes over the news, already expecting that there was no longer any way this night was going to work out in her and Vincent's favor.

I'm sorry Vincent. I tried. I tried so hard.

"Jimmy, hold up. Put it in my trunk. We'll go get it together, then come back. I can get us there just a bit faster," Deputy Smith said, opening his trunk for his brother-in-law.

Jim Percy grinned. "Softie."

"Shut up."

Catherine wasn't quite sure what was happening.

"Buckle up," Smitty instructed, as Jim stowed the tire and slid in the back seat.

No sooner was her seat belt fastened than the big cruiser all but leapt away from the curb.

Deputy Smith seemed to be doing just about everything at once, and doing it well. He called ahead to a man named Jeff. Wheeled the vehicle around and set the red and blue flashers on top of the sherriff's car to blazing. After a second, the siren even came on.

Catherine was amazed. "Is this legal?" she asked over the din.

"I can't hear you. I'm doing somethin' slightly illegal," he said, weaving through what thin traffic there was.

She smiled. She couldn't help it. People were still trying to help her get home on time. It was heart-warming. "Thank you," she said, loud enough so that she hoped he could hear.

**

Chapter Ten

Optimists and Pessimists

They got there and back in what Jim Percy declared to be record time. While Jim's hands flew, putting on the new tire and rim, Deputy Smith poured Catherine another cup of coffee from his thermos and settled a plastic lid over the paper cup.

"Your heater's still cause for a lawsuit. Take this," he offered, as Catherine glanced nervously at her watch. Even pushing the speed limit, she'd be hard pressed to make it on time. The clock was now running against her.

"Thank you again," Catherine said, watching one lug nut after another get firmly snugged into place. "You have no idea what this means to me."

The officer shrugged. "Maybe I do. I tore up a road or two in my time, trying to get home."

Catherine smiled at that. Considering how fast he'd driven her to the garage where they'd picked up her fresh tire and rim, she could believe that.

"Will you try again?" Catherine asked. "I mean marriage ... I understand if you won't. Married life is hard for cops."

Deputy Smith shrugged. "I'm due at the altar come March 18th. Maybe fourth time's the charm." He gave Catherine an inscrutable look. "We'll do New Year's Eve when I finish my shift. And I figure married life is hard for anybody."

"You're quite the optimist, then," Catherine said candidly. "What's your secret?"

He shrugged his uniformed shoulders again. "I don't consider any of my marriages an outright failure, in spite of how they turned out. I'd have missed becoming a father without my... optimism," he replied, nodding as Jim let the car down. The new tire held.

"Night Jim. Say 'Happy New Year' to Connie for me," Smitty said.

The tow truck driver waved away the cash Catherine tried to force into his hand. "Will do. It's my job, Miss. Drive careful." He waved to both of them and climbed back in his huge vehicle, then pulled away from the curb.

Deputy Smith held Catherine's door open for her. "Get in, buckle up, and follow me to 'til we're out of my jurisdiction," he instructed. "And try to keep up."

Her smile widened. "Do you think I'll make it to New York on time?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I doubt it. But it don't pay to lose your sense of optimism over it now, does it?" he asked rhetorically.

He got in, started the engine, pulled in front of Catherine's car, hit the lights and sirens again, and escorted her back to the on ramp doing near eighty miles an hour. Catherine stayed close and flew, noting he didn't pull off and leave her until she'd crossed the hundred-mile mark. The watch on her wrist told her she'd probably make it to Manhattan after midnight, but that she might be close.

She edged up on the gas, and raced for home.

Wait for me, Vincent. I'll only be a little late. But I'll be there. I swear we'll celebrate this night together.

In thirty minutes, she began to see skyscrapers. She knew they were still distant, but that it meant she was nearing home.

**

In forty-five minutes, she was looking at the same skyscrapers. And they didn't look much closer.

There was a reason for that.

It took the reality of the New Year's Eve traffic jam for Catherine to realize how badly she'd miscalculated. It looked as if the entire world was trying to wedge its way into the city in time to see the ball drop, while on the other hand, it looked like those already "in" were trying to get "out."

The incredible mob in Times Square was driving, it seemed, all over New York State. Leaving the City, changing one New York borough for another, and just in general filling every lane of Interstate highway. People who had celebrated outside of Manhattan were now returning home – or trying to. According to the radio in her car, every bridge was a logjam, and The Big Apple had several of those. There was simply no way to move the mass of humanity that was trying to make it into the city – or out of it – easily. It was a problem time would cure, but that was the very thing Catherine was running out of.

Catherine watched the long line of red lights in front of her creep and crawl, and then, heart-breakingly, come to a stop. Accidents and overheated cars littered the shoulder of the roadway, and EMS vehicles occasionally rolled through. Sirens flashed, and Catherine was helpless to do much more than say "No!" again.

Precious minutes ticked past. She changed radio stations, trying to find one with a traffic update. It all seemed like so much unhelpful noise.

Then the radio in her car counted down to midnight, and played "Auld Lang Syne." Car horns blared around her. People rolled down their car windows and yelled "Happy New Year!" The radio continued to play the familiar song as tears gathered once more in her eyes.

Catherine's heart sank, utterly. She knew she was still nearly a thirty-minute drive from her apartment on a good night. And this was not one of those.

Wiping her eyes, she reached down for the determination that had gotten her this far.

She could either take an off-ramp and try to reach New York City by way of New Jersey, - likely encountering much the same problem as she tried to use the Holland Tunnel, - or she could stay where she was.

The radio was almost no help. It was too busy blasting half-drunk DJ's wishing everyone a 'Happy New Year' and gabbing about the year to come, or Countdown Lists playing the year's top songs. The band Chicago was playing "Look Away" on several stations. It was touted as the number one song for the year. She didn't care.

Catherine sat in her idling car, which was now effectively parked on the Interstate. She wept, arms crossed over the steering wheel, as horns continued to blast intermittently all around her, drivers beeping either in frustration or in celebration of the New Year. Out with the old. In with the new. With twenty-five miles left to go, she was moving at perhaps five miles an hour. Sometimes.



I didn't make it. After everything. After everyone. I didn't make it. I tried so hard, and I just... couldn't. She gripped the wheel and let her head rest there, knowing that looking up through the string of red taillights that dominated her windshield was an exercise in futility. She felt defeated. She *was* defeated. It was a bitter reality to finally have to accept. The journey that had probably been ill advised to begin with now turned out to be an exercise in futility.

Hours of driving on nearly empty roads had convinced her that she could sail into The City That Never Slept like it wasn't a city famous for its traffic jams. Or famous for its New Year's Eves.

Now she knew she couldn't do that. At least... not tonight.

The watch on her wrist mocked her as ten stuck minutes turned into twenty. A white stretch limousine pulled up beside her and a stunning blonde in an evening dress stood up and stuck her head out of the moon roof and toasted the crowd, then sat back down. A few appreciative horns beeped at her.

At times, the long line of traffic seemed to ease up and move some, but at others, Catherine knew she was at a standstill. Again, she toyed with the idea of easing over to the nearest exit, and trying to enter New York from another direction. Making it home in time for midnight was now no longer a consideration. She just wanted to get home, even if she had to drive out of her way to do it.

At quarter to one she took that option, knowing that she was now increasing the distance she'd have to travel, while hoping to get out of the hopeless snarl of cars that barely seemed to crawl. She knew this was no longer about being able to see Vincent. It was just about being able to get home.

As gambles went, it perhaps wasn't a terrible one. Catherine's rental car went from "barely crawling" to "actually crawling" – at least for the next five miles.

Then, as if some invisible wizard had waved some magic wand, Catherine found herself heading to New Jersey with the traffic noticeably thinner. People (like her) were finally finding their way home, getting off the roads and into their own driveways. She was driving some twenty miles out of her way. But at least she was driving again, albeit well under the speed limit.

One fifteen. One thirty. Two a.m. She finally made it back to New York. But not in time to spend any of New Year's Eve with Vincent. Or anyone else, for that matter.

**

Chapter Eleven

"We'll Measure Time Another Way"

By the time Catherine pulled the grey car into the parking garage of her building, she felt exhaustedly numb, punch drunk, and hand-sore, from having had the steering wheel in a death grip for so long. Like most New Yorkers, Catherine took taxis or walked more than she drove. And while she did drive from time to time, the travel conditions of the last few hours had hardly been relaxing.

Tomorrow. I'll have to take the car to the airport and turn it in, tomorrow. –Today- she amended the thought. Maybe I'll just keep it another day. Or pay somebody else to do it for me, she mused

realizing that for all her exhaustion and expense, the decision to leave California and make a bid for home wasn't done costing her yet.

She looked at her wristwatch. The same one that had been mocking her all day and night.

If I'd just have stayed where I was I'd have spent a relaxing day in California, had a good night's sleep, and be getting up in a few hours to go to the airport. For a nice, leisurely flight home, Catherine thought, too tired to move quickly.

It felt like everyone she'd met today had made it to their destination on time, but her. Like everyone from Bill in Accounting for the IRS to Evie and Bert to the now-married Robert and Mina, to... well, everybody. They'd all set out to be with those they loved – or might love - and had achieved that. It was a fact that actually seemed to make what was already a bad situation worse, for Catherine.

It all seemed so unfair. Time had been her enemy all day, and in the end, there she was, sitting in a last-one-on-the-lot rental car, two hours and change into the New Year. Beyond tired. *Jet lagged. Train lagged. Could you get train lagged? Or car lagged?* Catherine wasn't sure if there was such a thing, other than the fact she felt it in her bones.

She climbed slowly out, locked up the car, and grabbed her belongings. There was nothing for it but to go up to her apartment, collapse in her bed, get up as soon as she could, and make her way down to Vincent with her apologies, as soon as the hour was decent. He'd doubtless gone to bed hours ago, having long since given up on seeing her. She'd missed dinner, the concert, and even New Year's Eve, and she'd missed all of them by a wide margin.

Sometimes it seems like no matter how hard we try... She didn't finish the thought, not liking where the sentence might lead.

It seemed impossible to believe that she once thought she'd be able to spend the entire evening with him; have a nice dinner, spend time with his people, listen to Sibelius with him, wait with happy anticipation as the old year slid into the new, perhaps give and receive a quiet kiss that was more than just a kiss... She thought it all could happen. Just through sheer force of will, a little luck and pluck, and a willingness to spend any sum she had to to get there, she thought she could make it be true.

Sometimes there's just no way for something to happen, no matter how much you want it, she mourned.

It was a sobering thought for the first few hours of a new decade. A sobering thought for a woman who was trying to keep a challenging relationship on an even keel. Or at least trying to return it to one.

She leaned on the elevator button. Feeling a good bit older than she was, Catherine rode the empty car up, and struggled into her apartment. She shouldered her carry-on bag through the door, not even bothering to glance at the small clock that graced her mantle. She knew what it said.

It says you're out of luck and in the doorway past the time you said you'd be, that's what it says, she thought uncharitably. *Go to bed. Tomorrow is time enough to deal with whatever the next new disaster is.*

She knew that the thought was an uncharacteristically bleak one. Also that "uncharacteristically bleak" seemed about just the right description for the way things had been for her and Vincent, lately.

Maybe that's not an aberration. Maybe it's just the way it's going to be. Catherine struggled not to take the disappointing evening to its extremes. And failed. *Maybe it's the good times that are the odd ones. Maybe tough times are mostly what we're going to get.* Go to bed, she instructed herself again. *There will be more problems, tomorrow.*

She set down her things. *That feels good at least,* she moped. She shrugged out of her coat. Her blouse was untucked, she'd been in the same clothes for four time zones, and she felt like the mess she was.

The light on her answering machine was blinking furiously. Out of sheer reflex, she hit the button. A message from her dentist, about scheduling an appointment, likely there the day she'd flown out to Sacramento. One from Marian, her father's old secretary, wishing her a belated Merry Christmas. One from Joe, thanking her again for taking the cross-country assignment, telling her how much he appreciated her, and that his mother was on the mend. One from Jenny, recorded just a few hours ago, a wish for a Happy New Year. One from the Tuckers, much the same. It sounded like they were having a party. Several people shouted to her over the phone. Catherine recognized many of the voices, including those of Nancy's children. Everyone sounded... ebullient.

Catherine raked a hand through her already disheveled hair. *They're having a great time. They made it, and they're having a great time. Good for them. So many different kinds of love in the world. I swear mine is real. I just wish ...*

"Catherine?"

She heard her name as a muffled thing, through the glass of her balcony doors.

He was there.

With no time to finish the thought of “what did she wish for,” Catherine half-ran and half-stumbled to the person she knew she wished for most of all. Vincent. He was there. There, and standing on her balcony, moving his feet against the cold.

“Vincent?” The amazement in her voice was obvious, as was her state of dishabille. “I can’t believe you’re here! Come in! It’s freezing!” she said, yanking open the doors.

He came into the room, the hard winter night chasing him in on his heels, the balcony door swinging shut behind him. The fabric of his cape was full of icy air, it having settled firmly into the thick fibers. He’d been out there a while.

And now he was all around her, arms up, to pull her in close. Solid. Real. Strong, and full of his love for her. She felt the cold air on him as he embraced her. His powerful arms gave her a “welcome home” squeeze.

“It’s after two in the morning! How long have you been out there?” she asked.

“Closer to three,” he said, holding her close. “And it doesn’t matter.”

He brushed his lips across the top of her head in the most welcome kiss she ever remembered receiving from him, not that there were so many to measure it by.

Catherine felt she had to explain. “I tried... so hard. I’ve been travelling all day.”

He could feel that she had, and that she’d literally beaten herself half to death in the effort.

"They cancelled my flight." The words were muffled against his vest.

"Shhhh. You're here now. That's all that matters." *Did she honestly think she had to explain this day? That her tardiness meant so much?*

She squeezed him hard, and tried to send him whatever scant warmth she had. He returned the welcome pressure, more gently.

Her words were a soft litany, over his chest. "I tried everything to make it. It seemed like I couldn't possibly, but then I'd meet someone who was trying to help me to it. Some stranger. Strangers. Some friend."

She felt him plant another welcome kiss on her forehead.

"Someone who understood how badly I wanted to get home to you," she continued. "I took a train, I flew, I drove... anything to get me here. They all helped. Even when I knew... it wasn't possible, they helped." She laid her head against his chest just for the pleasure of hearing his heartbeat.

His voice was a soft rumble, against her ear. "Then I will hope that they all have a very Happy New Year, Catherine. And bless them that they helped bring you home to me."

She lifted her head and shook it, regret in the gesture. "But I didn't make it. I wanted to, so badly. I missed having dinner with you." Her voice held a world of sorrow. "And then I missed the concert." The same voice dropped even lower. "And then... I missed it when the year changed. I wanted to be with you. I wanted it so much, Vincent."

He could feel that she had, and for his part, he knew he couldn't pretend he hadn't felt very much the same.

"I know," he answered softly.

"It's j-just..." Her voice began to tremble. She breathed in, and started again. "It's just that things have been so... so ..."

"So hard for us, lately. I know. I do know, Catherine." He pulled her in for another close embrace. "I... felt you, all day. Not like it used to be, but some."

He asked a question he hadn't dared ask, before she left: "Catherine... are you... holding things back from me? Consciously? The way you did before?"

Yes and no. Then, I was willing myself not to feel. Now... I'm just trying to keep those feelings, those negative feelings... away from you. Haven't you struggled enough with what you're feeling, without the burden of what I am? Especially when I'm full of frustration? And worry? And... fear?

"Sometimes," she said, not able to explain more, at the moment. "It's just that... there are things I don't want to burden you w—"

"You must never think that," he interrupted, brushing his blonde cheek across the top of her head. "What you feel... what you are... It is never a burden to me. It's a blessing. All of it. All," he insisted, refusing to let her take as much as a step back. She rubbed her cheek against his vest.

"I was frustrated and annoyed. Struggling. Failing," she admitted. "I don't want to send that to you. I'm so sorry about tonight. I wanted so much more for us."

Because you think there was so little, before? He thought, but didn't say. He let her talk. Letting her get it out of her system was helping to restore the balance of the bond between them. For all her fatigue, all her disgust and frustration at the moment, she was talking to him,

telling him how she felt, how she really felt, without trying to “filter” that for him.

This felt good. This felt right.

Ahh. There you are, he thought, knowing that he was not just seeing and feeling her with his eyes and arms, but inside his sensitive mind, as well. *There is our bond. Welcome home.*

“It’s just... I don’t want to send you negative things,” she explained.

“And I want you to be able to live your life without worrying about what is ... ‘sent,’” he stated. “Be who you are, Catherine. Live that life. I’ve felt your fears and worries since you were recovering from your attack. But I’ve also felt your courage, felt your love.” His blue eyes were as earnest as she’d ever seen them. “Don’t... don’t think those are things I need protection from. Any of them. We... none of us are just one thing. And I want to feel all of you.”

It was a provocative statement. And a lovely one, for the new decade. Catherine gratefully accepted the promise of it.

She kept her arms around him and eased back, then dropped her forehead so that it touched his vest. She was dead on her feet, and drawing strength from him. He felt it. He had no idea if that was something the bond did, or if it was just something couples in love did, as one naturally bolstered the other. He suspected it was the latter, but couldn’t discount the former. *There. There you are. Take it. Take all I have to give. I swear I’ll always be there for you.*

“It’s been such a hard year,” she mumbled. “I think I just wanted to wish it good-bye, with you, and share our hopes for the next one. It seemed important that we start this out right, considering.”

“Yet... there were moments in it I wouldn’t trade for anything,” Vincent swore, not pretending to discount what she was saying.

It had been a hard year. Very. And in many ways, it had been an almost transcendently gracious one. There couldn’t seem to have the one without the other. Perhaps it was often going to be that way for them. Vincent didn’t pretend to know.

“I won’t pretend there’s not a dinner gone cold sitting near the ladder of your basement entrance, or that the musicians in the park have all put their instruments away,” Vincent said. “Or that there’s a candle Rebecca made for us, meant to light our way, come midnight.” He felt the weight of it swing against his thigh.

“But I will tell you that I’d sit through every disappointment, endure every dark moment of this year, again, if I had to, if it meant I could be here with you, right now.”

She felt his words, and knew the honesty wrapped inside them. He would. It was a thing he would do, if he had to. Perhaps he knew no other way. Perhaps neither one of them did.

“You have to know I feel the same,” she said, twin tears of love – and regret, still, for the aborted evening – trailing down her winter pale cheeks.

She did, and he felt her feel it, feel the resolve of it, as he gathered her in close, once again. Her sorrow, her apology, her toughness, her sense of hope, still all there, underneath her surface. There was a courage inside her that made getting on a train headed for Salt Lake City seem like a wise thing, rather than the long-shot chance it was. The easy way would have been to give up, and just stay put. But he knew without asking that she’d never considered such a course of

action. For good or ill, he knew she was done taking the easy way. That person was no longer a part of her.

There was power in her resolve, and a willingness to take a long-shot chance, and push the limits. It was the same kind of strength that made loving him possible, when they both knew there was an easier way for her to live.

Vincent wrapped the feeling of her determination around his heart, and let it empower him, as well. She wasn't the only one who could draw strength, here.

Her power had a beautiful, a feminine flavor. Yet there was a grittiness to it, as well. He sensed the stubborn streak she'd likely been born with (or at least raised with, as a New York socialite), and a hard-nosed toughness to her that she'd honed since the day she'd first left his world for hers, endured her surgeries, found Isaac Stubbs, and then Joe Maxwell and the District Attorney's Office. It was a strength and determination that assured him of what he already knew: She'd never give up. On anything. Ever. Especially not on them.

He knew that was part of why it stung her so badly, now, that she'd been beaten by the clock. His Catherine was very good at pushing through difficulties. But she was a bit less poised when her most earnest efforts were met with failure. It was a thing Joe Maxwell knew about her, when she worked her cases. She sometimes had a temper when things didn't go her way.

Her inner strength was a thing her father had discovered about her, once she'd left Chandler and Coolidge; and a thing Vincent had known about her, always.

There is strength in you. I feel it. Always, he comforted himself as he comforted her. It felt so good to be able to feel... everything from her again. Including that.

His love could be a very determined woman. And she did not like to lose.

“When our losses seem to... pile up... like the traffic in New York...I want you no further than this,” he said, meaning it.

He knew that the years in front of them would bring both their blessings and their sorrows; and that few years would be as difficult for her as this one had been. It was not every year she would lose her beloved father – though he knew that some year, they’d have to face the loss of his.

There would be other things to face, of course. Moments both harsh and gentle, good and bad, likely ranging from the desperate to the sublime. He could do nothing, right now, about any of those. They would come when they did, one and all.

But perhaps he could do something to fix the thing that was bothering her right now.

Gently disengaging them, he stepped over to her mantle clock and opened the glass that protected the face.

“What are you doing?” she asked, watching him as he moved the hands backward, with a long-nailed finger.

“Your clock is incorrect. It needs... resetting,” he said, pushing the hands back so that it read ten minutes to midnight. He fished Rebecca’s candle out of his pocket and set it near, lighting the soft white pillar with a match meant for her fireplace.

“There,” he said, declaring the scene to be correct.

Catherine knew what he was trying to do. And that it was quite impossible. It wasn’t really ten minutes to midnight. It was really ten to three. Changing the face on her clock wasn’t going to fix her disaster of a day, or make it so they could have the time back.

“Vincent, it’s all right. You don’t have to—”

“The year is about to change,” he declared. “And Rebecca sent us a gift. Will you come to see it?” He held out his hand to her.

She stepped closer to him, her apartment illuminated by the soft, solitary glow of the single pillar candle. It looked lovely. And like something was encased inside the wax. Soft streaks of red tinged the white, here and there.

“What’s in it?” she asked, watching the shimmering candle flame illuminate the face of her crystal clock.

“Rose petals. From your bush. They are more difficult to see, but the white ones are in there, as well,” he said, knowing the same bush was deadheaded now, and waiting for a distant spring.

Catherine’s eyes grew wide as she stepped closer, wanting to inspect Rebecca’s thoughtful gift; one she knew had come from Vincent, as well. It wasn’t terribly difficult to figure out who had given Rebecca the rose petals.

It was beautiful. And in another minute, the scent of roses, their roses, began to fill the air. The fragrance was warm, and subtle. Like the promise of a spring morning.

“It’s our bush. Not just mine,” she declared, placing a gentle finger against the base of the candle. She then eyed the sweeping second

hand on her clock, not quite comfortable with accepting the lie of it. It wasn't really close to midnight. It was far past that. She had the miles on her body to prove it, today.

His low voice was thoughtful. "I told you once that we would have to learn to measure time in a different way," he recalled, reminding her of the night Henry Pei had married Lin. "Do that with me, Catherine." He stepped up behind her and embraced her slight form, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and watching the beautiful timepiece with her.

"Should we?" she asked, still unsteady about what he'd just done. Could they do that? Just... lie about what was true, when they needed to? Was that right? Catherine, more than other people, knew how very dangerous self-deception could be. In a way, that's what had kept her at Chandler and Coolidge: the ability to self-deceive.

"You can believe the rest of the world," he said, sensing the direction of her thoughts. "Or you can believe me."

Catherine watched the second hand sweep past the twelve. Believe him? In him? There was no easier task in all the world, nor one she'd rather do. "Well... I suppose it actually is just before midnight. Somewhere in the world... Like, in Sacramento, come to think of it," she said, letting herself relax against his long frame. "So... technically... I sort of did make it. It's almost midnight in the time zone I woke up in."

That's it. That's how you do it. Dream with me, Catherine. Never let yourself get too tired, too beaten to remember how.

"It's six minutes to midnight. You still have time to make a resolution, if you want to," he whispered.

She leaned her head back, and thought about why she'd been so disappointed about not being here when the year changed. When the roar from Times Square could be heard all over the city, and tinny strains of Auld Lang Syne blasted out from every radio and television, being sung by people in their apartments and at their parties, with glasses raised, full of champagne. Thought about it, then tried to push it aside, on instinct, the urge to protect him from her feelings of disquiet having become a habit, since the week he'd been ill.

Stop that, she thought, knowing it was a habit she'd have to break.

She let him feel her earlier disappointment, even as she let him feel her current peace. He closed his eyes over both, contentment filling his long body. *Yes. Tell me.*

"I just... I wanted a way to mark the end of hard times, and embrace a new beginning. To stand with you after a night of good music, and... remember the good times we had this year, and put away the bad."

He shifted his weight and turned her so that she was facing him, still letting her speak. She did so. "I wanted to listen to you read to me on the balcony, some, in spite of the cold. Wait for it all to happen. Steal a New Year's kiss when this clock chimed midnight," she said with a slight blush.

I love you so much, he thought it, for not the first time, this evening. Midnight was fast approaching.

"I resolve to do everything in my power to make this year a happy one for you, Catherine," he said. "And there is no vow I've ever given more freely."

"And I resolve to... to believe you, even when the rest of the world is telling me something else," she smiled.

Maybe that's how we succeed. We make our own truth. Measure time another way, measure... everything in another way, she thought.

Live a sometimes impossible dream, knowing it is the very best kind of dream to have, he mused, sensing her inner capitulation to the idea.

"It felt important that we start the year out right," she said.

"With Auld Lang Syne?" he asked.

She nodded and stepped over to her radio and turned it on. She fiddled with the setting until she found a station that was counting down the New Year in California. She knew they'd play the song, when it was time.

"Is it so wrong to want things to be perfect? Sometimes?" she asked.

"You know it isn't," he replied.

"Today wasn't," she declared, positive it was true.

He tilted his head to one side. "Are you so certain? Did you not... meet others, as you say, who were trying to help you reach home?"

She had to smile at that. "Got on a train with a nice man who talked me into taking the train, then ran my luggage across the airport. Met an old couple who'd been married for years, and one just starting out. I rode in a squad car. He turned on the lights and sirens, because I needed to fix a flat tire."

Vincent listened, fascinated.

"People kept asking me 'So this is true love?' Like something from Princess Bride. I kept assuring everybody that it was."

He smiled with her, and felt her warmth at the memories. He felt the other memories of the day in there, also. Memories of the young

couple and the old one. Of the man taking a chance on love with a woman he'd barely just met, and all the rest. The memories were warming her.

"I'm sure you have a wonderful story," he observed. "Will you tell me, later?"

Her smile broadened, and the clock began to chime. "Later next year," she replied, playing along with his ruse. "If the world says one thing and you say another... I'll always believe you, Vincent," she said, stepping into his warm embrace.

He lowered his head to hers as the ninth chime became the tenth, the tenth the eleventh, and the eleventh tinkling chime became the twelfth. His gentle, questing lips closed sweetly over hers.

Voices from her radio called out the wish: "Happy New Year!" After all, it *was* the first second of the year... someplace.

The kiss lingered through the first minute of 1990 – somewhere in the world, -- and Catherine knew she'd never change the clock back. It could stay three hours slow for all she cared, for the rest of her life. She was measuring time in a different way, and perfectly content to do so.

At the moment, lost in his kiss, Catherine felt a small eternity spinning out between them. What need had she of a mundane timepiece that told the correct time? After all, there were newlyweds in Kansas City who were probably just now cutting their cake, a nice man in Tucson who was perhaps making a baby with his wife, a longtime married couple in Salt Lake City probably long in bed, resting happily next to each other, a man hoping to begin a new romance with someone he'd just met, and a cop in a diner waiting for his shift to close out so he

could make his way home to his fourth fiancée. They were all success stories, in their way. All believers in “true love.”

What need had any of them for a clock, watch, or any other way to keep the time, telling them they hadn’t “made it?” Especially when all of them so clearly had?

The kiss ended as gently as it had begun, each of them letting go on an indrawn sigh. “Bring the blankets while I get the candle,” Vincent requested, determined to make at least some of her New Year’s Eve dreams come true, even if he couldn’t make all of them do that.

Catherine went to do as he bid her. He knew she was on her second or third wind, and that she’d likely fall asleep tucked warmly against his shoulder, as he read to her. That was all right. As a matter of fact, it was just perfect.

“I really did meet some of the most wonderful people, today,” she said, feeling the New Year start. Why had she ever been upset? Clearly it was going to be a magnificent year.

As she emerged on the chilly balcony with him, a distant radio where they were tracking the change of the year all across the country still played strains of Auld Lang Syne.

“I look forward to hearing you tell me of them,” he said, gently placing their candle nearby. The captured blossoms peeked out at him through their veil of wax, promising him that they’d return, come spring.

‘If winter comes, can spring be far behind?’ he quoted Percy Bysshe Shelley mentally, as she spread out a thick quilt and bundled them into it, tugging a blanket over their laps.

The January (for it was definitely now January) air felt brisk, and to Catherine, Vincent felt like warmth and safety. The feeling she'd always received from him since the first.

"You're safe. You're safe, now." The first words he'd ever spoken to her rang in her ears like a New Year's bell, as he tugged out the slim volume of poetry he'd brought her.

"Tennyson?" she asked, eying the author's faded name on the binding, wondering if it was something from Idylls of the King.

"Mm. Poetry. Do you know which one?" he asked, loving the feeling of her nestling against him.

She considered, a moment. "I think I do. Timeless, in spite of how long ago it was written. But I want to hear you read it to me," she said, knowing she did.

He brushed another soft kiss atop her fair, beloved head.

"As you wish. Happy New Year, Catherine."

"Happy New Year, Vincent."



Ring Out Wild Bells

Written by Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

Published in 1850.

(If you can imagine this poem read by Ron Perlman, much the same way he read from the "Of Love and Hope" album, it will give you delightful shivers.)

*Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light;
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.*

*Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.*

*Ring out the grief that saps the mind,
For those that here we see no more,
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.*

*Ring out a slowly dying cause,
And ancient forms of party strife;
Ring in the nobler modes of life,
With sweeter manners, purer laws.*

*Ring out the want, the care the sin,
The faithless coldness of the times;
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes,
But ring the fuller minstrel in.*

*Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.*

*Ring out old shapes of foul disease,
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.*

*Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.*



No matter where you are when you ring out the old and ring in the new, I wish you love. ~ Cindy

Written for New Year's 2017-2018.

May your year be full of wonder.

Pacem Muros

(Peace Between Walls)



