

*Author's note: In "Song of Orpheus" (and by extension, in fan fiction) Margaret's father is often portrayed, at least indirectly, as something of a villain of the piece, when it comes to the annulment. But to be fair, that description might have gotten too convenient, too pat, over the years.*

*What if he wasn't the villain everyone thinks? What if what happened was just the tragedy that it was? What if there's more to the story, as there almost invariably is? What if Jacob Wells was, very simply, caught up in overwhelming forces no one could have controlled, one way or the other? (Because when it comes to this period in history, no one good did control it. For a long time. When a country gets scared, it does things. Not always good ones.)*

*As I started writing, I (unintentionally) realized that the story was taking shape without actually featuring Jacob Wells, in any one scene. I found that delightfully odd, then continued with it, on purpose.*

*To that end, this is still very much Jacob's story, but it's being told through the eyes of the people around him, rather than through his own.*

*I like how that kept the story's focus on Margaret, her father, Lou, Grace, and the various people and elements swirling around them all, the elements that eventually led to episodes like "Song of Orpheus," and by extension, even, "Promises of Someday." It all starts here. It just does.*

*You'll see Jacob at the end, which for this story, is right where he belongs. I hope you agree that this was the right choice, or at least, stylistically, it was an interesting one.*

*So, without further ado,*

# The Fast, Hard fall of Dr. Jacob Wells

✱✱

By Cindy Rae

*For the September 25<sup>th</sup> Celebration, on Treasure Chambers, 2023.*

*Our light still continues.*



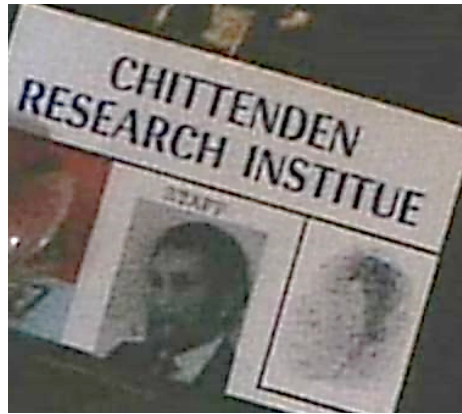
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*With many thanks to Angie, for her constant support.*

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prologue

## Chittenden



*November, 1951*

"Jean. Get a messenger up here. Make sure this gets sent to Jacob Wells. Right now," Dale Chittenden ordered, handing a long legal envelope to his secretary. He mopped a sweaty forehead with an immaculate white handkerchief. His grey hair was slightly askew. It was not a common thing, for him.

*Not a good sign for eight-thirty in the morning,* Jean thought. The envelope was fairly heavy. And it would need to be signed for, personally.

"Dr. Wells?" Jean Fielding asked. She checked the company schedule, always open on her desk blotter. "I think he's due in after nine, he was scheduled to go into the lab after—"

"No. No lab. No office. Nothing. Absolutely nothing." The older man's hand sliced the air.

Chittenden's tone was severe. It was the voice he saved for contentious board meetings, Senate budget hearings, and... firings. Of the first magnitude.

This was clearly the latter.

“His badge has been revoked, his security clearance is suspended,” Jean’s boss continued.

*Must have been one helluva ... something.* Jean thought.

Chittenden looked almost... nervous, Jean realized. It was a very unexpected look on him. Whatever this was about, it was big. Jean took a self-conscious swipe at her salt and pepper brunette hair, making sure her tight bun was in place. It was. She adjusted her bifocals up her long nose.

“Revoked and suspended. Got it,” Jean replied. That would generate a memo or two.

Chittenden returned the handkerchief to his pocket. “Security has been instructed to make sure he doesn’t so much as get out of his car, if he makes it to the parking lot,” her boss said, pacing a bit. He was worrying the knot in his tie.

*Nervous. Definitely nervous,* Jean thought. *What in the world...?*

Jean set the envelope down on her desk and picked up the phone, knowing better than to ask.

“Messenger. To Mr. Chittenden’s office. Right away,” she ordered, in the crisp tones of someone who was used to being obeyed. She hung up the phone.

“Send it to his home?” Jean asked, wondering what in the world Jacob Wells had done to so agitate her employer. She’s always thought that the dapper research doctor with the slight accent was a polite, methodical sort. Certainly not the type to cause this... trouble. Whatever “this trouble” was.

“Yes, yes. His home. Make sure it gets there, Jean. Call me when you know it has.” Chittenden was clearly upset.

“Yes, sir,” she said, knowing that whatever messenger they sent up, he’d better hot-foot it, big time.

“And get on the phone with Public Relations,” Chittenden added, thinking on his feet. “We need to issue a statement. One that announces Wells’ termination. And denies *any* validity of his research.”

*We’re not just firing him. We’re disavowing him*, Jean realized. The former sometimes happened. The latter rarely did.

She made a note, in secretarial short hand. “Yes, sir,” she repeated, knowing it was going to be a busy day.

“And no phone calls. Make sure any inquiries from the press are referred straight to our Legal Division. No one is to make any statement about his work, or answer any questions, who isn’t a lawyer.”

He turned his back to her, saving Jean from having to say “Yes, sir,” one more time.

Chittenden strode quickly into his inner office, and closed the door behind him. Hard.

As the messenger stepped off the elevator, Jean had a moment to wonder if Chittenden’s bad mood had arrived with the morning mail, a large batch she’d sorted, herself.

Among the usual items, *The Washington Examiner*, various lab test schedules, stock market reports, memos and business correspondence, there had been one very official-looking government envelope, the likes of which Jean Fielding, Executive Secretary to Dale Chittenden, had never remembered seeing, before.

It had a government seal. A very large one. It was from the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Jean had set it on Dale Chittenden's desk, personally.

Jean didn't really know Jacob Wells all that much. She'd seen him only a few times, a thing that wasn't odd, considering that her position rarely intersected with his. She remembered that he walked with the use of a cane. That he seemed keenly intelligent, a common trait of the scientists who worked for the firm, and that he was, by reputation, considered a hard worker and a good researcher. He was pleasant enough, though formal, the few times Jean had ever talked to him on the phone.

And that was about it, as far as Jean was concerned. For her part, what little she did know about Dr. Wells meant that she'd liked him, okay.

Jean had the feeling she wouldn't be seeing him again.

She addressed the young man before her. "This needs to reach the address within the next thirty minutes. After it's delivered, find the nearest payphone, and call in," Jean instructed, handing Jacob's termination papers over.

"Yes, ma'am," the ruddy-cheeked messenger said, tucking the first implosion of Jacob Wells' life into a canvas bag. He slung it over his shoulder.

There was no time to chat, nor any reason to. The elevator was still waiting for him. He left the room as quickly as he'd entered it.

They both knew he would deliver the envelope on time.

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## Chapter One

Meg



*June, 1952*

"Papa, thank you for seeing me. Your secretary said you have a lot to do this afternoon. I probably should have called ahead," Margaret said, entering her father's oak paneled office.

"Never apologize for coming to see me, Meg." Preston Chase smiled the reply, as he rounded the corner of a teak desk so large it had taken three grown men to move it into his office. The desk had come all the way from India. On the first steamer Chase had ever owned.

He was a big, bald man, and he held his arms wide, for his customary embrace. A touch on the portly side, (thanks to his love of actual Port) he hid it well, beneath a sharp vest and an impeccably tailored suit.

Margaret recognized the Saville Row tailoring. She'd been raised to. Her own elegantly matched blue outfit echoed his good taste.

"Papa." She went into his arms, grateful to be there. At well over six feet tall, her father was a towering, formidable figure of a man. He always had been, and he used that advantage, in business. He radiated competency, and strength. And Margaret knew she'd need that strength, now.

"You look good in blue. As always," Preston said, both of them knowing it was his favorite color.

As they embraced, a dozen thoughts passed through the patriarch's mind. She wasn't his little girl, anymore, but a grown (though still young) woman. She was even a bride, now, and technically still on her honeymoon. Preston missed the days when she was "His Little Meg" or even more Irish-sounding, "Peg O' My Heart."

Meg, Maggie, Peg, Madge, he had half a dozen different pet names for her, often joking that "I wanted ten children, but we only had the one. So I gave her ten names, instead."

Only Preston's son-in-law consistently called her by her Christian name, "Margaret." Well, only Jacob and Margaret's long-deceased mother, Anne, who'd used the name full she'd chosen for their only child without exception.

Margaret wrapped her arms around her father's strong form and gave him a tight, familiar squeeze. It felt good to be in his arms. Every cell in her body acknowledged it.



When her weight dropped against him, more than just slightly, that was how Preston knew she was in trouble.

It was the thing she'd done in childhood, when cook was mad that she'd taken extra cookies without asking, or committed some other pre-meal transgression. It was the thing she'd done when her tutors were cross with her, or when the dog had disappeared. She'd embrace him. Then she'd sag against him, allowing him to take on the weight of her little world, or at least the weight of her problems.

The communication was subconscious, on Margaret's part, but that didn't make it less effective.

"Trouble, Maggie?" Preston asked, gently disengaging them. Beneath her stylish blue hat, Margaret's blue-grey eyes looked worried.

"I'm afraid so," she said, glad they didn't have to beat around the bush. She picked her fingers clear of their white gloves.

Preston was his usual, self-assured self. Solving problems, to one degree or another, was how he made his living.

"Nothing that can't be handled, surely? Is the new place not working out?"

Preston had thought the Park Avenue apartment he'd purchased for the lovebirds was ideal, but perhaps her doctor husband favored something more... bucolic.

"The apartment is fine," she replied. "As is the car, the very generous allowance Jacob won't touch, and... well, all the rest of it. It isn't about money, Papa. Though I admit I'm hoping that perhaps that will solve it."

Preston tugged up his slacks at the thighs and sat on the edge of his desk, bringing his height down so that he was more eye-to-eye with his daughter.

“You know what I have is at your disposal. Hell, it’s all going to *be* yours one day, Meg. Which reminds me, I really want Jacob to start reading *The Wall Street Journal*, more. I’ll get you a subscription. Have it delivered.”

“Thank you.” Margaret was too well bred to say anything else.

“Though... I’m not sure he’ll have time. This work at hospital, after they forced him to leave Chittenden...” her voice trailed away, and in between her lovely eyes, a soft furrow was forming. Margaret was worried about something. There was no denying it.

“Chittenden didn’t know what they had. New job keeping my son-in-law away? Well that won’t do, Margie. Won’t do at all,” Preston said.

“Now, I know he’s a prideful one, and wants to make his own way. And truth to tell, I admire that about him, more than a little. But when it comes to my little girl – oops, I mean, my daughter and only child,” he corrected himself, catching her look. “I just won’t stand for anything that makes you unhappy.”

Margaret drew the white gloves between her hands. “He’s in trouble, Papa. Maybe big trouble,” Margaret blurted without preamble.

Preston cocked his head to one side and raised a salt and pepper eyebrow. Clean shaven and bald since his forties, it was the only visible hair on his head, and the brown shade in it was several tones darker than Margaret’s own, blonder locks.

“Trouble? What kind of trouble?” Preston’s quick mind leapt to the worst. *Has Jacob been unfaithful? Gotten some tart of a girl in*

*trouble? Good Lord, being forced to leave the Chittenden Institute wasn't bad enough?*

Margaret looked down at the white fabric in her hands. She worried the lace of her summertime gloves. Her fingertips looked uncharacteristically un-manicured. She'd chewed a couple of her nails down. It was something she only did when she was very concerned about something. And it was a habit at least three governesses had tried to break, in childhood.

"He's... we got a letter the other day... From the government," Margaret said, still concerned but suddenly feeling that everything was going to be all right. Her father would know what to do. And when it came to the government, Preston practically owned that, as far as Margaret was concerned.

Preston let loose a short little laugh. "From the government? What did poor Jacob do? Short the amount on his taxes? I swear to you Meg, you can't trust the IRS." He rose from his perch and moved through the spacious office. "Bunch of Democrats," he tacked on.

Relieved that it wasn't something more serious, Preston went to his credenza, where a crystal water pitcher and several matching glasses sat. He drank coffee in the morning, water in the afternoon, Port after a meal, and hard liquor, never. He turned over two glasses, and began filling them.

"It's not the IRS. It's..." Margaret struggled a moment to remember the official-looking letterhead that had arrived by special messenger. "The... UnAmerican Commission, or something."

Preston froze in mid pour, while his daughter's voice continued, over his shoulder.

"I'm worried, Papa. Jacob still has a touch of his British accent. Technically, he's *not* American. You don't think--"

"Was it the House Un-American Activities Committee?" he interrupted. It was a thing he almost never did, to Margaret.

She blinked at him. "I- I..." she stammered, trying to recall. That sounded right.

Preston tried to keep his tone even. "I need you to think hard, Meg. Need you to remember." He turned, and smoothly offered her a glass of water, years of playing poker – not with cards, but with millions – belaying his sudden concern.

Margaret accepted his offering, his easy smile disguising any further apprehension.

"I, why yes. I think that's what it was," she replied. "I know they've been in the news. Something about weeding out the Communists. But Jacob isn't a Communist, Papa. Even if you haven't quite made him a Republican, yet."

Preston watched his daughter drink from the glass, and his mind spun with the quickness that had made him a fortune. Make that several of those.

*I need to call a lawyer. Eli Coolidge should do. Get him over here right away, and nip whatever this is in the bud. Friends in high places. We'll see what can be done.*

"What did the letter say, Meg? Do you recall?" Preston asked, in an easy tone.

Margaret knew the answer to that one. "He... he has to go into an office, next month. Has to give a sworn statement. I had to get his best suit pressed."

*A summons. They sent him a summons.*

Preston sipped from his own glass, feigning a lack of concern. "To make a statement. But not to testify? They're not calling him in front of the Committee, are they?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Margaret replied.

"Perhaps they just... they're wondering about someone else, and they want him to give information. Tell what he's heard," Preston soothed. He knew the House Un-American Committee was very busy collecting statements. It was a thing that often turned co-workers, or even friends and neighbors against each other.

Margaret shook her head. "I don't think so. It looks like Jacob's research took a particular turn. They want to know about some things he wrote, in a paper. Isn't that odd?"

*Very. And not in a way that means anything good. Sounds like they want to take his statement, formally. Like a deposition.*

"I'm sure it's nothing," Preston breezed. You know bureaucrats. They're not happy unless they're fussing about something. Got to justify all those tax dollars they're spending."

Just then, the intercom buzzed. It was Preston's secretary.

"Mr. Chase... I know you're busy. I just wanted to let you know that your two o'clock is coming up from the lobby," came the tinny voice of Ellen Barnes. She'd been with Preston for years.

Preston mashed down a button, impatience in the gesture. His daughter and her husband were in trouble. Obviously more than Margaret realized, at this moment.

"Ellen, cancel—"

“Don’t you dare. Not on my account,” Margaret blithely replied, happy that the problem was now in her father’s hands, rather than her own, or even Jacob’s. She tugged on her gloves.

“I’ve got some shopping to do, and Jacob’s suit to pick up.” She crossed the room, returned the glass to the credenza, and came over to place a loving kiss on her father’s cheek. “Love you,” she said, satisfied that whatever this was, her father would now handle it.

The elder Chase lifted his finger off the intercom for a moment, and returned Margaret's quick “good-bye” hug.

“Love you,” he replied, as she brushed at her skirt and adjusted her purse on her shoulder.

“Come to dinner. Maybe next Thursday?” Margaret invited. They both doubted he would. For all the love he bore for Margaret, Preston was a busy man. He rarely dined with his family, outside his mansion. And he knew that Margaret was a terrible cook.

“I’ll check my calendar,” he replied. It was the standard response.

When the heavy paneled doors closed behind her, Preston picked up the phone to buzz his secretary privately, not wanting their conversation to be heard by anyone now in the outer office, including Margaret.

His tone was terse. It was the kind he saved for multi-million dollar business deals and disasters.

“Ellen... place a call to the attorneys. Get me Eli Coolidge on the phone. Coolidge and Hughes... Tell him it’s important. And clear my schedule... No, not just the two o’clock. For the rest of the day.”

He hung up the phone.

*Good God, Jacob. What have you gotten yourself into?* Preston wondered.

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## Chapter Two

Coolidge and Hughes



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Elijah Calvin Montrose Coolidge had known Preston Forbes Chase since the two were in prep school, together. Their families were similarly fixed, when it came to wealth, and similarly opinionated, when it came to the world at large, and their very lofty place in it.

Eli's law firm had drawn up the first articles of incorporation for Preston's first... and second, and third, company. Coolidge knew the contents of Preston's will. It was a simple document, really, for such a massive fortune.

He knew that Preston had adored his wife, and by extension, treasured his daughter. He knew that the wealthy tycoon had given up cigars the day Margaret had been born, and a good game of chess,

never. He knew that the other man's mind was one that was always looking for a way to turn a profit, and that Eli didn't consider that a bad thing; it had increased the two men's fortunes, after all.

It was why the shorter, mustachioed attorney with the prominent nose knew to be just a little worried, now.

Preston, seated in the chair opposite him, was trying to act unconcerned. But the trick that worked so well on his daughter was ineffective, on a sharp lawyer.

Elijah, who had both criminal and civil trial experience, knew a man who was afraid of what might happen, when he saw one.

"So, it's just a letter, really. One requesting Jacob's appearance," Preston said.

"In which jurisdiction?" Eli asked, taking out his silver pen. He was already jotting notes.

"I'm not sure. New York, I suppose. Margaret says he has to appear in their office, downtown."

"Date?"

"Early next month. The 8<sup>th</sup>."

Eli wrote while he spoke.

"Under no circumstances is Jacob to go in there without representation, Preston. Make him promise."

Chase leaned back in the leather wing chair that faced Elijah's desk.

"You think this is serious, then?" he asked, hoping against hope that it wasn't.



The lawyer stopped writing, for a moment. He looked up. "I think the man who enters a legal proceeding without an attorney is a fool," Elijah stated. "These are... unusual times, Preston."

Preston knew they were. "This whole thing is... it gets bigger every year. The government is looking for Communist sympathizers under every bush. The "red menace" is everywhere." He gestured to the expanse of the room, then let his hands fall.

Elijah knew better than to make light of something that was affecting lives. Legally.

"It's a serious thing, to many. Traitors to democracy are no small matter, to Hoover." Eli made another note on the paper and stabbed a dotted i.

Preston knew that was true. But still...

"Eli, Jacob isn't political! He barely has time to even read the newspaper, busy as he is! He even works at the free clinic two days a week!" Preston stood up for his son in law, as he stood up from the chair that could no longer contain him.

Eli tilted his head, in a considering gesture. "And if I'm the HUAC, I say that proves he's got Communist sympathies. Who does he treat, at that clinic? Poor people. People who can't pay. A *normal* doctor would charge for his services, like any decent capitalist," Eli replied. He rose from behind the desk, and came around it.

"Preston, we're not going to let anything happen to your son-in-law." Eli placed a comforting hand on his long-time associate's shoulder.

"I have every confidence in you," Preston returned, meaning it. Eli Coolidge was a good lawyer. Better than.

Eli was content with that. "Whatever this is about, I'll advise Jacob, personally. If he's... discovered something the government doesn't like the sound of, we'll fix it. These things *can* be fixed, you know."

Preston didn't bother to hide his relief. "You're sure you can do that?"

Eli was. "It's not even the first time I've have," he soothed. "I've been to three of these things, so far, on behalf of other clients. This is just a... like a formal interview. They'll tell him their concerns, then they'll take his statement. Which I assure you will put them all at ease, with my coaching."

"You'll have to be careful, with Jacob. He doesn't like to be told what to do," Preston stated.

Eli was unconcerned. He knew how to handle prickly clients. He'd been doing it all his professional life.

"Whatever it is they don't like, Jacob will just say he made a mistake, or that the results are subject to interpretation. It's what all my clients have done."

"Jacob can be stubborn," the millionaire warned. "He won't touch a penny of Margaret's money."

"Stubborn is one thing. Foolhardy is another. No man wants to go to jail, Preston," Eli reasoned.

Preston's brown eyes flickered. "Do you really think it could come to that? He's just a doctor, Eli. A scientist."

Eli shrugged the shoulders inside his single needle tailored suit coat. There was no sense lying to anyone, but especially not Preston Chase.

"It could come to worse. He could be black-listed, so he can't make a living. Have his medical license revoked. Jailed. Hard time. They still have chain gangs, in the south. At best, he could simply be deported."

"I would never see Margaret again!" Preston threw up his hands and paced the room. "Not in the US, at least."

Eli knew when it was time to defuse the seriousness of the situation.

"Your grandchildren will be raised drinking tea and calling the trunk of the car the boot." Eli jibed. "It's not going to happen, Preston. I'll see to it."

Preston knew Eli's sardonic sense of humor. Also, that the other man was brilliant.

"You... you're *sure* this is... manageable?" Preston asked.

Eli nodded, a motion that barely moved the wavy, dark hair on his head. "At this stage, very much so. This is the "discovery" portion of the program, for them, it's not the big guns, not the Committee Hearings. Most of what goes on at the area offices goes straight into the trash."

*Straight in the trash. Good.*

"See that this does that." Preston's voice was firm.

Eli looked both competent and unconcerned.

"Jacob will go to his meeting. He'll smooth whatever feathers he's ruffled. A month from now, we'll forget it all happened. I know what I'm doing, Preston. All Jacob has to do is listen to my counsel."

"How will you know what to advise him? You have no idea what they're about to say to him, to ask him," Preston observed.

Eli shrugged, as if that was an unimportant detail. "No, but I know how he's going to *answer* them. We will confer, after each question. I'll tell him what to say so that he doesn't incriminate himself, or say something... foolish."

Preston let out a slow, controlled breath, trying to let some of his tension go. "Any chance you could get ahold of their questions? So you can prepare him in advance?" Preston asked, not sure if what he was asking for was legal. And not necessarily caring, if it wasn't.

Eli shook his head. "None. But before we walk in there, I promise I'll know everything about every man scheduled to sit across from him," the attorney vowed. Such knowledge should give him an advantage, during questioning. And "advantages" were what Eli was trained to press.

"Spend whatever you need to make this go away, Eli," Preston ordered.

Eli took out a pair of reading glasses from his breast pocket and put them on his large nose. He went back behind his desk, to work on his notes.

"I always do, Preston. I always do," he replied.

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### Chapter Three

#### Links and Ties



*July, 1952*

The grey suit was a tweedy thing, and it was one of Jacob's best. It had been tailored by a spry old gentleman on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and it fit Jacob to perfection. It emphasized the nice breadth of his shoulders, without making him look too heavy.

At least that's what Margaret had always thought about it.

It had a hat that Jacob often wore with it, and a tan raincoat he often wore over it, if the weather was bad. The suit looked good with either a light blue shirt or a white one, though Margaret didn't favor pairing it with any of the off-white shades. Off-white made Jacob look just a bit sallow, in Margaret's opinion, so she tended to avoid it, for him. Besides, off-white could stray into the beige tones, and with a grey suit, that wouldn't match at all.

These were the things Margaret Chase-Wells knew about. So these were the things she considered, as she prepared Jacob's clothes for the the interview he'd been summoned to.

The suit was hanging on the back of the bedroom door, still in its shrink wrap from the cleaners. Jacob's good leather shoes had already been picked up from the shine shop, and Margaret was eyeing his small selection of cuff links, wondering which ones would make the correct statement, for his legal appearance.

*Gold. Gold is always good,* Margaret mused, looking at the very expensive set Preston had presented Jacob with, at their engagement party. The gleaming, precious, hammered gold squares shone, in their black velvet case.

*Gold is expensive. It lets them know that Jacob is well connected; that he's a man of means,* Margaret thought, eyeing the pair.

*But what if it makes him look too aristocratic? Government men might think he's a snob if he wears those. They might not like him.*

The longest finger on Margaret's right hand went almost reflexively into her mouth. She set her teeth against the nail.

*The tiger eye ones, then. They're not as ostentatious, and there's some grey, mixed with the brown. The stone goes with the suit nicely, and Jacob let me get them for him on our honeymoon, in Hawaii. Maybe they'll bring him luck. So...*

Her free hand went over to reach for the pair, but even as she did, she knew he likely wouldn't wear them. Jacob considered the tiger eye set to be a special gift, and wore them for Margaret's birthday, or their anniversary, and for his interview, the day he accepted the job at Chittenden, but he rarely took them out of their white case, and he was unlikely to do so, now.

He didn't consider what was going to happen in the day after tomorrow as a "good" thing, or a special one. He simply considered it a necessary one, and was hopeful that he would be allowed to talk to someone who understood the science behind what he insisted were very important findings.

With a resigned sigh, Margaret liberated a pair of simple, silver-colored ovals from their box. They were the only other pair of cuff links Jacob owned, they went with just about everything, and they were plain enough to be considered not showy, while they still did the job of holding his cuffs closed, on his good white dress shirt.

*These. These will do the trick.*

In a way, Margaret knew full well what she was doing, that this was far more than just picking out what Jacob would wear, to give his statement. She was focusing all her efforts on the things she *could* control, in abeyance of those she couldn't.

*Dark grey socks with black shoes and grey pants,* Margaret thought. Socks were easy. She went to the drawer and fished them out, tossing them onto the bed.

*It will be all right. Daddy will take care of things.* She soothed her rattled nerves. As sentences went, that one had never failed to calm her.

She turned to Jacob's rack of neckties. Like the cufflinks, she still wanted to find just the right one. The one that might make a difference.

*Patterned or solid?* She mused, fingering the silk A black and white one, with gradient shades of grey caught her eye.

*Shades of grey. Perfect.*

From the living room, Margaret heard the apartment door open and close, and the familiar tap of Jacob's cane, on the hardwood floor.

"In here, Darling," she called from the bedroom. "I'm just going through your ties."

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#### Chapter Four

The Last honest man In New York



Preston Forbes Chase was not a happy man. "What can we do? Eli, you told me this was *not* going to happen. Not just "told." You *assured* me—"

"I assured you that all would be well if Jacob did as I *instructed*, Preston. He did no such thing." Eli threw his hands up.

The lawyer sighed in frustration as Preston paced.

"What an utter failure," the wealthy businessman spat.



Eli allowed him his anger, even as he tried to explain that Jacob was now going to be scheduled for a Congressional Hearing, through no fault of Eli's.

Jacob hadn't simply been "summoned." Not this time. He'd been subpoenaed.

The attorney sighed, knowing the explanation he was about to give would do no one any good, but feeling he had to relate it all, anyway.

"Preston, I can tell you everything about every man at that deposition table. I can tell you the man who sat in the middle is a straight shooter, a linear thinker, and he has the highest percentage of sending cases up, that if we got him to agree with us, we probably would have won the day. I can tell you that the man on his left is an Army vet, a sergeant, who spent six months in a Japanese POW camp in World War II, that he has nothing against the British, that his own cousin lives in London, that he'd likely side with *any* proposition that mentioned saving soldier's lives... as long as it didn't do that by defaming or defying the actions of the US military."

"But none of that helped... did it?" Preston fumed.

Eli wouldn't be bullied. "I can tell you the man on the right is a lifelong bureaucrat, a dyed in the wool pencil-pusher. That he likes baseball and rye whiskey. A little too much of the latter. That he's never bucked any decision the other two felt comfortable with. And I swear I could use *all* of that to present a statement for Jacob... and *from* Jacob... that would get him walking right the hell out of that damn interview room, without nary a backward glance."

"So why isn't Jacob sipping champagne with my daughter, this evening, if you're so clever?" Preston asked, pressing the other man.

Eli sighed again, and held out his hands in a placating gesture. "All he had to do was recant... or at least *re-frame* the things he said. Say the research is inconclusive. Say it's outright wrong. Say it needs more time to be studied. Anything. *Anything* they could hang their hats on... so they don't hang him." He picked up his pen, from its holder on the desk.

"Chittenden forced him to retire from the company for refusing to do that!" Preston shouted.

"A fact I had to go to great lengths to ameliorate, and could have even used, if Jacob had been the least bit cooperative. Chittenden's opinion that he's wrong was introduced in their opening statements. The government doesn't like what Jacob said back when he worked for Chittenden. And they like it even less, now, Preston, I assure you."

"You couldn't get him to even... *imply* he might be wrong?" Preston asked. He knew next to nothing about atomic energy, other than almost every other American knew: It had helped the Allies end World War II.

Eli tossed his silver pen across his desk, the first real indication of frustration he'd given in what had turned out to be a very long day. He didn't like losing, and he knew in this case, he'd done just that. Dr. Jacob Wells had now graduated from the deposition phase to the Formal Hearing phase. He'd been formally subpoenaed by the HUAC.

No one in the room thought it would go well for him, there.

"Jacob insisted his research is sound. That the effects of the radiation on the human body are catastrophic, and that the testing they're doing in Nevada is endangering our own troops." Eli shrugged his shoulders in a "what do you expect me to do about it?" gesture.

“He’s accusing the United States Government of being a party to making soldiers sick!” Preston raged. “Do you know what they’ll do to him, if he doesn’t back down?”

Eli did. They’d now gone from the “manageable” stage of things to the unmanageable one. The HUAC hearings were legendary, for their punitive outcomes.

“If he goes in front of the Committee and rescinds his story...” Eli offered.

Preston shot his lawyer a long look.

“He’d better,” Preston said, the hard-nosed business man in him coming to the fore. Preston’s reputation as a robber baron wasn’t entirely undeserved. He was a bluntly practical man, when he had to be.

“When you think about it, Jacob really doesn’t have any other choice.”

Eli plucked his handkerchief from his breast pocket, and thoughtfully began polishing his reading glasses.

“Choice or no... You may as well know that Jacob wants to replace me. I’m afraid he didn’t much care for the advice I gave him. He says he’s going to give Alan Taft a call. That Alan is a friend of Margaret’s. And his.”

“Alan has no experience of this kind! He isn’t even a trial lawyer!” Preston’s voice continued to rise.

“No, but he’s an honest man, he’s been in practice for a few years, and he’s been a good friend to the two of them. I believe Jacob feels he needs an honest friend, right now.”

“This is utter nonsense. Alan will do him no good,” Preston fumed.

Eli placed his glasses back on his nose.

“Preston... not that this makes any real difference to the upcoming hearing, mind you, but... what if Jacob is right? About the science, I mean,” Eli asked.

Preston considered the question.

*The government is doing tests. Jacob says those test will make US soldiers very sick, maybe even eventually kill them. That would make the government liable for... what? Murder? Involuntary manslaughter? Gross negligence, at the least? Of our own troops?*

Preston Chase had worked with – and occasionally toppled – too many governments to know what that meant, for his son-in-law.

There were enemies a man could make. And then there were enemies he couldn't make. And *then* there was the government. Any government. You couldn't make an enemy of them. They had all the power. No matter which government it was.

“If he's right... then they'll still crucify him, Eli, the government will.”

Eli nodded that he understood.

“They'd be liable, for damages,” Preston continued. “Can you imagine the furor such a thing would cause, in the papers? They'd *hate* him for being right. And they'd destroy him for it.”

“So, he loses either way,” Eli's sharp mind concluded, aware that it was true. Recant, and Jacob would know himself to be a liar, to be complicit in what was happening. Tell what Jacob was certain was the truth, and he stood to lose everything.

“As you say, it makes no difference to the hearing,” Preston said.

Eli Coolidge rubbed a tired hand across a jaw that was now sporting a five-o'clock shadow.

"If that happens, you may have a decision to make, Preston," Eli said.

Preston, normally quick to envision alternative courses of action, had no idea what Eli was implying. Hadn't they both just concluded that Jacob's current course of action was definitely the wrong one?

"What's that?" Preston asked.

Eli leaned forward in his chair. "If Jacob won't recant... if we *cannot* save *Jacob*... " The attorney let his voice trail away.

"Yes?" Preston asked.

"We may have to start considering ways to save Margaret."

Eli let the sentence lay where it was, like an unexploded bomb, in the room.

*Margaret. Of course. We have to save Margaret. How?* Preston's dark eyes flickered. "What ways?"

Eli retrieved his pen and passed it thoughtfully between his fingers.

"Well... to spare her from being hit with the brush Jacob will be hit with, to ... untie her fortunes from his, to protect Margaret's inheritance ... we would have to end their marri--"

Preston's hand sliced the air in front of him, in a negating gesture.

"There hasn't been a divorce in the Chase family in... ever," he warned. "It'd be ... Margaret would be swapping one terrible scandal for another. I see no "protection" in that."

Eli did what good lawyers do. He thought fast, then presented his client with options.

"If divorce is out of the question... annulment isn't," Eli stated factually.

It was what the lawyer in him was trained to do, to give the man paying his salary all the facts. What Preston decided to do with those facts was up to him.

Preston's salt-and-pepper eyebrows went skyward. "An annulment? The marriage has been consummated. The wedding was over almost two years ago, Eli."

Like many people, Preston assumed the word "annulment" meant something it didn't actually mean, legally.

"Yes, but they have no children, which is good, and when it comes to annulments, there's a provision regarding fraud. It's usually used when a man commits bigamy. Or when he... *misrepresents* himself in some material way." Eli stressed the word on purpose.

"Misrepresents himself? As in "lies?" Jacob won't even lie to save his own skin. How can we convince anyone —"

"In this day and age, Jacob being accused of being a Communist, or a Communist sympathizer would be enough of a misrepresentation, I think," Eli said, sure of his position. The mood in the country would definitely allow for the legal maneuver he was proposing. In other times, it might not be enough. But now?

"Annulment." Preston rolled the word around in his mouth, as he did it in his brain. "I've... barely even heard of such a thing," Preston said.

"An annulment would be as if the marriage never happened, legally. We could keep it out of the papers. It would be... an erasure, of sorts. Like it legally never existed. Your daughter could even remarry – in the church – if she ever chose to, at some later date."

Preston didn't like where this conversation was going. Mostly because he was coming to suspect that such an action might be necessary, for Margaret's sake. She wasn't necessarily a fragile young woman. But Preston knew there was no way she was ready to deal with the incredible storm that was likely to be unleashed, on Jacob.

"Margaret would never forgive me if I did such a thing," Preston said.

Eli leaned back. "It's your choice. And Margaret's of course," Eli said, knowing that the latter part of the statement was only partly true.

Margaret would do whatever Preston told her to, especially if things got bad. Preston was who Margaret had always leaned on, for advice. It was why she'd told him about the summons, to begin with.

Eli knew that if Jacob's testimony essentially destroyed the physician's life, that he'd likely become a felon. That he'd be stripped of his medical license. That after he got out of jail, the couple would have to live off of Preston's largesse, at least for a while, and Eli already knew enough of Jacob to know he'd never agree to that.

"Preston, to be frank, we both know your money has helped get more than one judge appointed to the bench. It might be time to call in a favor or two, if it comes to that. We'd like someone who would agree to keep all this...quiet. For Margaret's sake."

And there it was. The understanding that Preston's money might not be able to buy Jacob a way out of this disaster, but that it would probably be able to buy Margaret one.

"If it... comes to that," Preston echoed.

Preston had been right about one thing, Eli mused. The good doctor Wells was stubborn to his teeth. One day spent with him at the deposition had already told Eli all he needed to know, on that score.

Now it was Preston who rubbed a tired hand across his jaw.

*Annulment.* He didn't like the idea.

"He's a good man, Eli. Not necessarily what I would have chosen for her, but a good man, just the same."

Eli nodded his agreement. Yes, Jacob was a good man. That was actually beside the point, right now.

"He can be the last honest man in New York, if he wants to be. But the fact that he's a good man is why he's probably about to lose everything, and end up in jail," Eli observed, as dispassionately as he was able. There was no malice in the statement. Just the cruelty of the facts they now all faced, laid before them: Jacob wasn't about to lose everything because he was a liar, or because he was guilty of some transgression. He was about to lose everything because he was, essentially, innocent.

"Preston, I don't know how long they'll lock him up for. But when he gets out... he'll have to practice medicine in another country, if he does it at all. There's no way he can ever be a doctor again, in the United States," Eli added.

*And Margaret... Margaret will go with him. If she's still his wife.*

Preston's mind went exactly where Eli intended it to go.

The specter of his only child... and any future grandchildren... never knowing a life in America, never living here to see how he ran the business they would one day inherit, now seemed all but intolerable, to Preston.

Preston Forbes Chase, who never drank, sorely wanted the oblivion a good bottle of Scotch might bring, right now. He pinched the bridge of



his nose with tired fingers. He had to make a decision. A thing he normally always did very easily, now felt impossible hard.

*Damn you, Jacob. Damn you for bringing us all to this pass. Damn you for bringing Margaret to it.*

"Annulment... what would such a thing involve?" Preston dared to ask.

Eli tugged his legal pad over. "Proper documents would need to be filed... we get it in front of a judge you know, handle it all in his chambers... it's not a regular court case per se, there'd be no jury, no press. It helps that they were married in Hawaii..." He flipped open the pad and began making notes, with the silver pen.

Preston watched the attorney... dismantle Jacob's connection to Margaret, on paper. A yellow legal pad was serving as a "to-do" list for it.

"We'll need a writ," Eli mused. "A few of those. Revisions to Margaret's trust, invalidate the pre-nup..."

He wrote fast, and it was then that Preston realized that Eli was far ahead of him, in his thinking. While Preston had been raging about the events of the day, Eli had already been thinking about what they all might have to do next. The dark-haired attorney was a smart man, and in spite of the failure of the day, a very good lawyer. It was what Preston paid him to be.

Eli continued speaking, as he wrote: "Have all the fresh documents drawn up and ready to file the day the Committee makes its decision. Oh. And I'll have my secretary check the airlines," he made another note.

"Airlines? Why?" Preston asked.

Eli was still writing. His head was down, as he spoke. "We don't want Margaret here. Or anywhere near here, if the worst happens."

He glanced up. "Europe would be good. A first class flight, something trans-Atlantic. Someplace where they don't concern themselves with the US daily papers. A few months abroad should do it."

*Europe. Somewhere far from here. Someplace where Joe McCarthy and his ilk isn't in charge. Ah. I see.*

Eli went back to his list. "Someplace where she can take the time to let all of this die down. The American press won't be able to get to her on the other side of the world. Rome, maybe. Or Paris. Someplace the gossip rags will leave her alone." The pen continued to fly.

*While I've been doing nothing but worry and blame, you've been staying on top of things, mentally. For a man who backed both sides of a war, I'm losing my touch,* Preston thought.

Eli continued to scribble rapid notes, then stopped to check them.

"We'll have to change some deeds, a few titles... the stock options..."

Eli continued the list while Preston watched. Margaret stood to inherit all of Preston's fortune. As such, her name was on everything. Certain changes had been made after her marriage.

It looked like those were about to be changed back.

"... change her name back, redo her passport..."

*Pretend it never happened. Pretend the last two years of Margaret's life, the one where she fell in love, became a bride... didn't happen. God, what we're all being pushed to. And all for an innocent man.*

After a long moment, Preston asked, "Eli... are we doing the right thing?"

Eli stopped writing. In mid-sentence. He set the pen down.

*Are we doing the right thing?*

That was a different question from “What *can* we do?” and that made it different from the questions Eli usually had to wrangle with. As a lawyer, he lived his life bound by the law. Within that framework, there were the things he *could* do, and the things he *couldn't* do, for a client.

For the most part, that was usually all there was to his actions, or lack of those. He didn't consider himself a philosopher, so much as he considered himself a mechanic: a man who pushed certain levers of power, to make the law work to his client's advantage. He did not consider those actions either evil or good. He considered them either effective, or ineffective, and left it at that.

“If you want to know right from wrong, you should consult a priest,” Eli said shortly. He was one of the few men on the planet who could talk to Preston that way, and get away with it.

“I'm not asking a priest. I'm asking you,” Preston pushed back.

Eli thought for a long moment, giving the question its due.

Elijah Coolidge thought of his own family. He and his wife had two children already, a strapping teenager named Jay and a much younger daughter, Beatrice. Eli knew he'd do anything to protect either of his children from harm, but that when it came to his daughter, that instinct to protect was ratcheted up to almost impossible levels. Jay was bright, polished, and probably, with Eli's guidance, headed for a career in law. But Bea...

She was precious, his special little baby girl. Eli suspected he would always think of her just that way. He more than just loved her, he

adored her. It was just something about the relationship between fathers and daughters. It just was.

He knew that Preston's relationship with Margaret was similar.

"Neither one of us can stop what's going to happen to your son-in-law, Preston," Eli observed. He asked a question of his own: "Is the HUAC doing the "right" thing? Or are they just doing something because they can do it, because they have the *power* to?" Eli asked.

Preston didn't answer him. He didn't need to. His silence grew heavy, in the room.

Eli linked his hands behind his head. "Fine. I don't know that we *are* doing the right thing," the bespectacled attorney admitted. "But I know if it was *my* daughter in this situation, I'd want a way *out* for her, if there was one." He unlinked his hands and gestured to his notes.

"This is one. This is a way out. For Margaret."

"No matter how badly it hurts her?" Preston pressed.

Eli gave his employer and friend a sad look. His logic was undeniable: "She's going to be hurt either way, Preston. This is just a way to avoid the scandal for her. She has to be able to *live*, in our society. She's... more Margaret Chase, than she was ever going to be Margaret Wells, you know that. She always will be. Your position... assures that."

Preston knew it was true. All of it. Unfortunately.

"She... loves him." Preston knew it was a useless thing to say; that it didn't *change* anything, even if it was true. And it *was* true.

Eli shrugged, acknowledging the sentence, but, like Preston, knowing it didn't mean anything, here.

"Margaret can either fight, or she can run. If she fights, she won't win. But if she runs..." Eli lied.

Preston exchanged a long look with his attorney.

"Call Judge Carson. Draw up the annulment paperwork. But... keep it on file. Just in case... in case there's no other choice," Preston instructed.

"I will. And... for what it's worth... I'm sorry this is happening, Preston."

"So am I, Eli. So am I."

--

### Chapter Five

#### *Just A Touch of Grace*



*March, 1953*

The broom made a soft sound, as it swept the barber shop floor. The woman pushing it had wielded many others, in her thirty-one years of life. It was a fact that showed in the subtle lines of her face, even as she knew it kept her figure trim.

On the floor, brown, human hair went into the dustpan. So did beard clippings.

“That was a nice looking fella you had in here,” Grace said, continuing to help out Lou, in his shop. Lou had introduced her to the man seated in the chair by name, but Grace knew that as the help, she’d been all but invisible, to Lou’s customer.

Well, that and the fact that he’d spent much of his time in the chair with his face wrapped in a towel.

He’d told her “Good afternoon,” and she’d liked the sound of his voice. She’d replied in kind, then continued working. Nothing else had passed, between them.

“Jacob?” Lou asked. “Yeah, he’s nice enough. Went to school with Doctor Alcott, back in the day. Married, though,” Lou warned, as he soaked his scissors in blue Barbicide.

“Peter? Huh. I saw the ring. And I’m not interested,” Grace replied, not missing a swipe of the broom. “He was worrying with his ring the whole time you was trimming his hair,” she noted, her less-than-perfect grammar revealing her humble upbringing.

“Yeah,” Lou answered noncommittally.

Outside his window, cars that had been made in the 1940’s and early ‘50’s, sped busily down the New York street. Horns honked. Regularly.

“Seemed like a man with a lot on his mind. How’s your back, today?” Grace asked, changing subjects as she continued to clean the floor. Grace had come up to help out at Lou’s Barber Shop thanks to a pulled muscle in Lou’s lower back. It had been bothering him for about a week.

“Better than yesterday. But not much,” he admitted. “I can stand well enough to wait on the customers. It’s the bending over that kills me,”

Lou replied. "Thanks for coming up, Grace. But you really didn't need to."

Grace tossed a thick, brown braid over her shoulder and took the refuse to the garbage can. She gave Lou a nice smile.

"And have Anna fuss at me 'til sundown? No thank you, my friend."

She set aside the broom and dust pan, and produced a clean dust rag from her apron pocket. She began wiping down the long counter in front of Lou's big mirror. Like sweeping the floor, it was the motion of a woman who had spent a lot of time wiping down furniture. Her movements were economical, and thorough.

Over her head and just outside the thick glass door, Lou's barber pole spun, cheerfully. Grace liked the barber pole. It and ones like it had fascinated her since childhood. She stopped to admire it a moment, ignoring the bustle of the busy street as much as she could.

Over her shoulder, Lou groaned a little, as he turned around, placing a hand on his right hip. "Just a twinge," he said.

"Doc Alcott should give you a prescription for that back," Grace commented, pocketing the dust rag and setting his combs back in their right place. "Why don't you sit down, Lou? I'll finish tidying up."

Lou gratefully did as she bid him, taking a seat in his own barber's chair.

"Flip the sign, will you? I close in ten minutes, anyway."

Grace did as she was asked, pulling a long shade down over the door of the shop, as he continued to talk.

"Doc's still out of town. I'll sleep with a hot water bottle tonight," he promised. "That will help. Don't know whatever possessed me to try and haul in that new washer in all by myself."

He picked up a magazine off the top of the stack. It was the same one Jacob had been looking at, before.

"Baseball," Grace observed, as he flipped the pages. **Spring Training Issue!** Screamed the cover. "You boys and your games," she said.

"Yeah. You ever go to a game, Grace? Go see Jackie Robinson? Ebbets Field is good." Lou replied. He and Jacob had discussed a recent Dodgers game, while he'd been trimming Jacob's beard.

Grace shook her head, and smiled the crooked smile of someone who kept her teeth clean, but had needed braces, as a child.

"Me and Brooklyn don't exactly get along. And the only thing I see when I look at a stadium is a whole lot of toilets to clean, and 'No thank you, Gracie,'" Grace said, straightening the rest of the magazines.

Lou chuckled, at that.

She then picked up the towel that had covered Jacob's neck, protecting his clothes. Not surprisingly, it contained more than a trace amount of his cologne.

It was a masculine smell, something woodsy and expensive. Grace had caught a whiff of it even as Lou had been finishing Jacob's hair.

Without thinking about it, Grace held up the towel up to her nose and inhaled the fine scent. It smelled wonderful, and made her smile, just a bit.

"Mmm. Rich man's cologne. I used to smell that a lot, back when I worked at the hotel," Grace said, gathering up the rest of the used towels and putting them in a basket.

"Yeah. He's in some kind of trouble, though," Lou said, still flipping the pages of his magazine.



“What kind?” Grace asked, curious.

Lou shrugged his white-clad shoulders. “The kind that needs a haircut and a good trim, right before you go in front of a judge, or something,” the barber replied, not certain of the particulars.

Lou had been cutting Jacob’s hair since the day Peter Alcott had brought him into the shop. Lou and Jacob sometimes shared particulars. But Jacob could also be a private man, especially when he was worried about something. And he was worried about something, now.

Grace shrugged, herself, and carried the basket of towels over to the small, heavy washing machine, set up behind a well-placed curtain. It was brand new, and Grace was still fascinated that it didn’t have a wringer.

*What will they think of, next?*

“I’ll put these in for you. Don’t you bend down to get them out, now. I’ll come up tomorrow and hang them out, again. You got enough towels to last you?” she asked, loading the machine.

“Sure. Thanks again, Grace. You’re a great help.” Lou set down the magazine and got up out of the chair. Gingerly.

“You help us, we help you. Don’t mention it,” she replied, once more catching the fragrance of Jacob’s cologne, as she loaded the towels into the top of the machine. She added detergent and pulled a long knob, wishing laundry down in the Tunnels was this easy.

“Well, that does it for me. I’m going to go for a walk in the Park, before I go back down. See you tomorrow?” she asked.

“Sure. Tomorrow,” Lou replied.

## Chapter Five

### The Wretched and the Meek



==

*Reporter: What do you make of the committee's findings?*

*Jacob: I've said all I wanted to say at the hearing. I've nothing further to add.*

The park bench was a hard thing, its wooden slats supportive, but less-than-comfortable, for a long time spent there. And Jacob realized, as the afternoon sun tracked westward, that he had been there for three hours, at least.

*How quiet it is.*

It had definitely *not* been quiet, earlier. Alan had hustled him into a taxi, outside the courtroom, the flash of photographer's bulbs and the high pitched chatter of the newsmen a raucous punctuation mark to what Jacob was slowly starting to realize was his old life.

This, now, was his new one.

*How very quiet.*

His old life had had a television in it, and often, a radio playing, set to a news station, or when there was a ballgame on, sports. His old life had had patients in it, and the hurly-burly of a busy hospital, or even more raucous, the free clinic.

He was now forbidden to go to either medical facility. His license to practice had been suspended. Immediately. And indefinitely. They had that power.

*How can... how can they do that?* Jacob thought.

This had been no malpractice case. Malpractice was often the reason a medical license was lost, indeed, it was the *usual* way that happened. There were steps you usually had to go through, before you took a man's living away from him.

But Jacob knew that he'd hurt no one. He'd harmed no patients, nor through inaction, neglected them. He'd caused no harm to come to anybody.

If anything that was something the government was doing, as far as Jacob was concerned.

*Wasn't that "malpractice?" Shouldn't it be they who were paying, and not me?* It was an idea he couldn't quite shake.

And now, he had all the time in the world to consider it. Well, that, and everything else he still had to consider.

There wasn't much.

At first, he'd thought to go home. Then, he'd thought the better of that, as well. He knew the reporters would be camped out there. His

address was part of public record. He wanted to avoid another public confrontation. He wanted to avoid... everybody.

Remarkably, (or perhaps not so remarkably) It was Alan Taft who had handed him the letter from Margaret. Alan, who, unaware of its contents, had given him the awful, and now, Jacob realized, inevitable letter.

It was a letter that meant Jacob didn't need to worry about going home, later. Because that was one of the things he no longer had, as well. A home.

Oh, he could *go* there, to be sure. His key would still fit the lock. His belongings would still be hanging there, in the closet. Preston Chase was, after all, not a cruel man.

Just a very, very practical one, as it turned out.

And it was thanks to that practicality, that businessman's streak, that Jacob also lacked one other thing he'd had this morning.

Jacob Wells no longer had a wife. It was a thing he was still processing, as he sat.

*They'll be stalking the apartment. I'm glad you're not there, Margaret,* he thought.

Then: *Paris. Hmph.*

The bench got a little harder, and Jacob stretched out his legs, rubbing his bad knee, absently.

Idly, and not for the first time in the last three hours, he recalled the only exchange he'd permitted himself with the press, when they'd emerged from the courtroom:

*“What do you make of the committee’s findings?” the reporter nearest the door had asked.*

*The retort was quick. “I’ve said all I wanted to say at the hearing. I’ve nothing further to add.”*

So he hadn’t.

*Nothing further to add.*

Jacob was starting to realize just how thoroughly true that was. That there really was “nothing more to add” to this unbridled disaster of a day. He’d lost everything. Absolutely everything. And suddenly, so suddenly, that it had taken him the last three hours on a park bench to realize the utter... *completeness* of it all, to absorb it, and to internalize it.

There was another reason that Jacob Wells had no real intention of going back to his apartment to collect his things.

He had the distinct feeling he wouldn’t be needing any of those, any longer.

No need to grab his plaid jacket, the one he liked to wear out to dinner. No need for his brown loafers, his beard comb, or the cologne he’d splashed on, this morning. No need to get his magazines, a mix between the Journal of American Medicine, Sports Illustrated, Newsweek, and The New Yorker, there. No need to get the cuff links Margaret had bought for him in Hawaii. No need to retrieve his good pen from the desk drawer, or his checkbook, the rectangular thing that swore he still had some money, somewhere.

What would he buy? And where would he buy it from, prior to a few days from now, when he was supposed to show up for sentencing?

And could he even do that, go to a store someplace, just walk in and buy something, and pay for it with a check?

Or, like everything else, had they taken away his access to his own money, too?

He suspected they had.

*Gone. It's all gone.*

Alan had told him to buck up, in the taxi, that there was a chance that, at sentencing, they'd let him off with a hefty fine, and probation.

But Jacob had stared into the mean eyes of every man on the HUAC panel. Their eyes were dark, and scared. They were the worst possible combination of humanity, in that they were both powerful and frightened. Frightened of Communism, of differences, of the destruction of the country, from within.

And in his case, frightened of the truth. Frightened of him.

Jacob knew what that fear was going to translate into.

*"Let me out here. I want to walk,"* Jacob remembered saying, as the cab had pulled up to the curb, the driver obeying him, instantly. They were near Central Park.

Alan had resisted the notion at first, but to be fair, what more could he do? Jacob was a grown man. He didn't need his attorney/friend's permission to exit a taxi.

Alan had offered to come with him, not knowing the contents of Margaret's letter. Jacob, for his part, had read the short, damning missive -- and then re-read it -- somewhere between 28<sup>th</sup> street and 35<sup>th</sup>. It hadn't taken long. The cab had even made most of the lights.

The park had looked ... greenly inviting. It had looked like “shelter,” and like the opposite of all the offices and courtrooms he’d been sitting in, the last few months.

Like an animal being run to ground, Jacob had made straight for the verdant, springtime park.

He’d wound his way down the paths until the foot traffic had grown lighter, and the shade deeper. He knew he wanted to be alone. When he’d found the wooden bench he’d settled onto it, grateful for the sense of seclusion the place offered, and glad to be off his feet. His dress shoes were not made for long walks.

Jacob stretched his bad leg again and thought about Margaret’s letter. The tragedy of it was inscribed on his heart, just as the words had been inscribed with Margaret’s fountain pen.

*The wreck of my memories...*

He shook his head at that.

*For an entire year, I waited for you to get out of a cab. How...*

*symmetrical that I lost you in one,* Jacob mused, scratching the end of his cane in the dirt. He drew some small shapes. The simple shapes of childhood.

*Triangle, circle, square...*

It was something to do, while his mind worked out something else.

He wasn’t worried about where his next meal was coming from, or where he might sleep that night. He doubted he’d need either a good supper or a bed.

He was contemplating a sleep much more eternal.

At first, that had surprised him.

Then, it actually didn't.

Jacob was a man of reason. And as such, he *needed* those. He needed those reasons. Reasons to get out of bed, to eat a balanced breakfast, to go to work, to study his research, to do good in the world. To be a part of something important. To be part of a family, albeit a very small one...

All those reasons were gone, now. So the fact that he was contemplating utter darkness wasn't as shocking to him as he thought it might be.

Perhaps that was simply because he'd been absorbing shocks for months on end, now; ever since his termination from Chittenden. Today was just the capper.

He scratched through the shapes that he'd drawn, and started again. *Triangle, circle, square. Rectangle.* The last reminded him of the checkbook, again.

In the great distance, a car backfired. It sounded like a gun.

Jacob knew that he didn't own a gun, and never had. Too many hours spent in the war, not to mention the ER, seeing what a bullet could do to a body, had disabused him of the notion of ever owning one.

He knew he didn't need one. He had a much better, much quieter way to dispatch himself.

With his free hand, he reached into his coat pocket and fondled a familiar, orange cylinder. The cap was ridged, and he knew it was white. There was a bottle of pills in his left coat pocket. He rolled it around in his fingers, then let it settle, again. It was riding low, sharing the space with a couple of silver certificates and with a baseball ticket stub for a Dodger's game.



*Ebbets Field.*

He knew he'd never see it again.

He withdrew his hand but considered the pills. They were strong pain killers, and a prescription he'd had for years. He rarely used them. But he'd suspected that he'd be on his feet a good bit, today, and handling flights of stairs. Out of habit, he always knew to carry them, as a precaution against pain.

*Pain killers. How... fitting,* he thought, considering how much pain he was in, right now. Not the physical kind.

One or two of the pills would take the edge off a hard ache, or even a steady throb, when the knee acted up, or when he twisted it, accidentally. The medicine helped with that. Just one or two, to be taken with food, and no more than two doses, in a twenty four hour period, to avoid accidentally ingesting too much.

There were over thirty pills in the bottle.

Sound interrupted his thoughts, but it wasn't a backfiring car, this time. A woman came, pushing a stroller down the sidewalk. She rattled her way along the path, her infant child sleeping, in the buggy. She passed directly in front of him, and gave him a small smile, judging the well-dressed man in the fedora and good suit to be no threat. He nodded back. Part of the game.

*Act normal, so no one suspects.*

He did, and nothing in the woman's expression told him that she knew what he'd been contemplating, or that he'd been recognized, by her. Recognized as a traitor, a disgrace to the country, a Communist, a rebel, an insurrectionist. A bad person. A very bad person.

New York was a big city. Jacob reasoned that most people were simply busy, living their lives. The stroller clattered on, and after the woman turned a distant corner, all became quiet, again.

Even the birds in the trees seemed still, as if the world was holding its breath, waiting to know what Doctor... make that Mister, now, Mister Jacob Wells, would do next.

He checked the pill bottle again, with his fingers. Then went back to drawing in the dirt.

*Triangle, circle... Where to do it?*

There was indeed a rub to that. Jacob knew that shortly after ingesting the pills he would become sleepy. That, being opiates, he might have some hallucinations, but that for the most part, he'd simply fall unconscious somewhere, and then his heart would just... stop.

*My heart will stop. What a blessing that will be,* he thought, tired of the incredible ache that had been in his chest all day.

*Hearts really do break.*

If he ever thought he needed proof of that, he didn't, any longer.

*Margaret. I miss you. I miss you already.*

And he knew he did, but he also knew that there was more to the hard, steady ache in his chest than that. That he didn't just miss Margaret, no matter how important she'd been to him. And that it wasn't the apartment, or the television, or the creature comforts he missed, that he no longer had access to.

He missed... himself.

He missed the man he'd been last year, or even just yesterday. He missed the sense of purpose that had filled him, and mourned its absence. He missed being a doctor. Very, very much.

He realized, perhaps for the first time, just how much of his identity, how much he thought of *himself* was tied up in that one word: "Doctor." It wasn't just what he did. It was who he was.

There were other important things to miss, of course. He missed when the truth still counted for something, and that when a principled man, a medical doctor and researcher, stood up and gave evidence of his findings, that that man was *listened* to. And *respected*. He missed that, too.

*Gone. It's all gone.*

Jacob missed when the truth mattered, in life. And he couldn't find a way to fix that, no matter what he did.

So it seemed that there was just nothing left to do.

Nothing, save figure out the location of his demise.

He looked around. The park was fine for it, as a matter of fact this very bench would do, but...

*But I don't want to be found by someone like the young woman who just strolled by. And worse, what if a child...!*

He knew that a dead body was not a pleasant thing to see.

He sighed. Deeply.

*Triangle, circle, square, rectangle. Hexagon.* It was hard to draw an octagon, in the dirt.

For a moment, he considered abandoning the idea of the pills and simply taking himself down to the subway, and throwing himself in

front of a train. As ideas went, it wasn't without merit. He could also just leap from one of the bridges, and into the water. Perhaps the tide would simply carry him out to sea.

*Carry me out to sea. That would be nice.*

Or, If he waited a day or two, he could possibly sneak back into his apartment, unbothered by the press, and do it there.

*No.*

He knew he was never going back there. Not back to where the mail still sat on the table, as if nothing had happened, and all of his old life, old photographs, old memories, sat lurking, in every corner.

If Margaret wasn't there, nothing of any import was.

*The wreck of my memories...* he mused again.

*Triangle, circle, square. Star. Infinity.*

The afternoon shadows were getting longer. It would be evening, soon.

Jacob scratched the dirt clear, and started again, still considering his mortality.

*Triangle, circle, star. Infinity. Cross.*

"That's the second time you drew the number eight laying on its side," came a feminine voice, from behind him. "Why did you?"

A dark haired woman came around the bench and sat down as if she'd been invited. A thing she clearly had not been. For a moment, Jacob had no idea who she was.

"We met yesterday," Grace said, holding out her hand to be shook.

He accepted her proffered hand, feeling the callouses, there. Her nails were cut short, and her long fingers were work-roughened.

"I... I remember," Jacob said, surprised that he did. *Lou's. Lou's barber shop. You were ... you were sweeping the floor.*

For a moment, he was going to rise. Just get up and leave the bench, leave her, even though it was rude. Mumble something about needing to be on his way, or something.

But he didn't. Mostly because he knew he had nowhere to go, and partly because he hadn't yet settled on a place to dispatch himself. The park was a big place. The direction he would head off in mattered. He didn't know what that was, yet.

So, he sat.

Grace inhaled, deeply. "My name is Grace. And yours is Jacob. Your cologne smells good. And you're a friend of Lou's," Grace said, telling him almost everything she'd learned about him, yesterday.

"Yes," he replied simply. Perhaps it would have been a good idea to get up after all, if she was going to chat.

But she didn't chat. She let a long silence spin out, between them. The sun continued to sink, and he wondered that she didn't seem to need to get home, somewhere.

He glanced down at her long skirt. It looked homemade, with patchwork pockets, in the front.

She crossed her legs at the ankles, revealing a pair of cheap black slip on shoes, the toe thoroughly scuffed, on the right one. She folded her hands in her lap, and her brown eyes looked straight ahead.

"So?" she asked, after what felt like a long time. Clearly, she had patience.

"So... what?" he asked, not really curious.

"So... how come you made shapes, but no numbers, and the only number you *did* make is laying on its side?" Grace asked.

Jacob had no idea how long she'd been back there, watching him. Probably only a few minutes.

"It isn't a number. It's a symbol," he said.

"Oh," she replied.

He felt like a heel for making her wait for it: "It means... infinity. The eight laying on its side. It's the infinite loop. No beginning... no end. One side just... leads into its twin. And back again."

"Oh," she said, again, considering his words. "Infinity. Like... like space?" she asked.

*Yes. Yes, infinity, like space. Like the rockets they're building and the space they'll explore. Like... heartache, and regret. And other things that go on forever.*

"Yes," he answered. "Eternity, if you will." *Like eternal peace, for instance.*

"Like... forever?" she asked. "Not a lot of things last forever," she tacked on, before he could reply.

*That ... is an understatement, Jacob thought, recalling his marriage vows. So much for better or worse.*

"No. They certainly do not," Jacob confirmed.

*The river. The river might be the thing. I could go to the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge, and just...fall.*

"Sorrow doesn't last forever either, Jacob," Grace said smoothly. "But those pills in your pocket... that thing you're thinking of... that's a "forever" thing."

She kept looking straight ahead, with her deep brown eyes, as if the stand of spruce in front of them was of more interest than the fact that she'd just called him out.

The woman Jacob thought of as a simple laborer rose rapidly, in his estimation.

"How did you...?"

She glanced over at him. "Your hand checked your pocket twice, in the last five minutes. I heard the rattle. I know that sound."

*You... heard the sound.*

"I made that sound myself, once," she confided. "Of course, they were in the big pocket of my apron, then. Not a fine suit jacket, like that."

He was just a bit amazed by her.

"Would it surprise you to know that this fine suit jacket is almost all I have left in the world?" he asked.

She reached down beside the bench and picked up a stick of her own, and joined him, in drawing in the dirt. She made the infinity symbol as well. Awkwardly, at first. Then she got the hang of it.

"No. It wouldn't surprise me. Life can be hard, sometimes," she replied, as if they were old friends.

Jacob watched her draw.

*Circle. Archway. Spiral.* Her shapes were different than his.

Then, something she'd said before, bothered him. Something about the pills.

"If I... if I asked you why you had pills in your apron pocket, would you tell me?" he asked, curious as to why she'd once considered ending it all.

She frowned a little at that. "Maybe. We'd have to be better acquainted, though." She drew the shape of a small house.

"There was a fire," she said, then scratched her drawings clean.

It was his turn to reply in the monosyllable.

"Oh."

They sat together a bit longer.

*Circle. Infinity. Circle. House.* She scratched through it, again.

"You have a fire?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

*Yes. Yes, I had a fire. My whole life burned down. And I almost don't know why. I told the truth. Nothing but the truth. So help me God.*

"In a way," he replied, drawing a large rectangle/building of his own. It was the courthouse. He scratched through it, as well.

She let the silence spool out, between them. In a moment, evening crickets began to chirp.

Grace gave a small sigh. One full of memory. "I gave my pills to a woman. A very kind woman. Her name is Anna. She's making soup, right now." Her stick continued to draw.

*Circle, archway, spiral.* Her shapes were back to normal.

Then: *Heart. Star.* A large zigzag that might have been a map legend symbol for "Mountains." The star she'd drawn was beaming over them.

"I like the mountains," she confirmed. "I worked in the Poconos, once. Big hotel. Before the fire. Before... everything," she said.

Then: "Do you like to travel, Jacob?"



Jacob shrugged at the odd, non-sequitur of a question. He had travelled, in his life. He'd seen several other countries. He was even from one. But it was a thing he'd often *had* to do, not one he necessarily *liked* to do.

"I've done it. When I had to. Books took me farther, I suppose."

She considered that, but clearly couldn't relate to it. "Books are okay. Where I live... we have some," she ventured.

"Listen, er, Grace, I really don't—"

"I know you don't. We can have soup, if you like." Grace interrupted him. "Anna's a good cook," she tacked on.

Grace knew the decision she'd just made was one she'd been heading toward since she'd walked up behind him.

Jacob felt unsure. Both of going with her and of leaving his plans behind.

"Well, that is, I wouldn't want to impose on--"

"It's potatoes and onions, and a little bit of carrots. There's no meat in it. But you're welcome to it."

Then, she sighed, again. And revealed what she knew.

"I... you're in the evening paper, Jacob. It's okay. Lou asked me to come look for you."

*Lou? But how did Lou know I'd be in the p-- Alan. Alan must have called him.*

"And I'd like it if you gave me the pills," she continued. "But you can keep them if you want. I won't tell," There was a world of understanding in her words.

"Then... you know what's happened to me." He didn't want her pity. Even if part of him knew he needed some, right now.

Surprisingly, she shook her head. "No, I don't. I only know what the paper *said*. But what really *happened*... well. There's always more to it than that. Isn't there? Like when I say 'There was a fire.' That's just a part of it."

*Yes. Yes, the paper is just a part of it. And it's the wrong part. The important part is, I told the truth. I only wanted to help to save people, and I told the truth. The paper isn't even mentioning that.*

Jacob got the feeling that the woman sitting beside him understood that. That she understood what it was to be damned, through no fault of her own, by nothing bad, nothing evil she'd done.

He took in her form, again. Her clothes screamed "poor." Her fingers were ringless. She wore no jewelry at all. Perhaps she was born into her obvious poverty. Or perhaps, like with so many other people, it had just... happened to her. Perhaps many things had. A fire, for one.

Slowly, Jacob pulled the pill bottle from his pocket.

"What if I ask for these back?" he asked, holding them aloft.

Grace shrugged as if the request was of little import. Even though they both knew it wasn't.

"They're yours. You get them back. Any time."

Silently, he handed the bottle over. Remarkably, it felt like they had weighed a literal ton, inside his pocket. It felt good to no longer have them. Well, not "good." But "better," certainly.

"I have the stub of a baseball ticket in my pocket. If I give you that, you'll have just about everything," he said, rising. Suddenly, the

promise of a bowl of potato soup sounded like a good, even a life-saving thing.

“You can keep that,” she replied, She dropped the pills into the pocket of the patchwork skirt. She kept the stick in one hand, even as he steadied himself, on his cane.

“Have dinner with us. If you decide you still want to end it... it’s not like you can’t make that happen one way or another. New York has a lot of tall buildings in it. Though... not where we’re going,” she cautioned, linking her arm up with his.

The dapper ex-physician and the plain, braided woman in her homemade clothes were an odd-looking pair. They began to walk.

“Us? You and Anna?” Jacob asked, as if that detail was somehow important.

Grace’s voice grew tentative. “Anna, me. John, Anna’s husband ... a few others. People who... lost something. Then... found something. You’ll see. If you give us a try.”

They walked past another woman pushing a different stroller. This time, she did turn and look at Jacob’s face, which was half cast in twilight. He tugged his hat down. He had the distinct feeling he’d been recognized.

“Grace... if I... if I go there. I don’t think I can come back out, again. I don’t think I even want to,” he said, picturing a mission of some kind, or perhaps a homeless shelter.

*I want to stay where the truth matters. That isn’t this place.*

“If you don’t want to, you don’t want to. No one will make you do anything you don’t want to, Jacob. Especially not go Above,” she answered.

*Go above?* Jacob thought. *Above what?*

But she didn't tell him, and after a long stroll, it became clear that she was heading him down toward a drainage culvert. Springtime rains had left the ground in front of it damp.

*Circle. Archway. Spiral*, Jacob recalled, wondering what awaited him. He hesitated at the incline, using the cane more than ever. He didn't want to fall.

Grace mistook his hesitation for something else.

"It's all right. It's home. Maybe not... maybe not home like *you're* used to. But it *is* home," Grace urged.

Jacob climbed down gingerly, behind her. The stone culvert was before them.

Grace looked behind them, to make sure they were alone. Then, she ducked down, leading him all the way inside. They came to a gate. A big one.

Jacob thought it looked very old.

Her hand moved along the stones. Something clicked. She swung the metal gate open, and an interior doorway slid back. Jacob could see only a little ways inside. The railing of a spiral staircase beckoned.

*Circle. Archway. Spiral. I see.*

"This... this is home?" Jacob asked, wondering.

"It is," she nodded. The gesture caused her dark brown braid to move, over her shoulder. "A secret home. Very secret. No matter what... you can never tell," she instructed.

Jacob tallied his losses. If there was one thing he didn't want to do any more of, it was tell the truth to people who wouldn't listen to him.

“There isn’t even anybody left for me to tell anything to,” he replied.

Grace knew that much was true. In a way, everyone who lived Below had reached that same pass, to one degree or another.

Her voice became uncharacteristically gentle. “You can be a doctor in there. If you want,” Grace said simply.

Jacob blinked. Not from the dim light of the tunnel before him, but with revelation. *A doctor? I can be a doctor? Again? Just like that? Help people? Maybe even... Well.*

*Perhaps I haven’t lost everything after all,* Jacob thought.

“I... I think I might like that,” Jacob replied, aware of how good it felt to have that one, small piece of his life back. He took a tentative step forward. Warm, torch lit air rushed forward to greet him. Smells of dust, lamp oil, candlewax, and, distantly, potato soup, greeted his nose.

“We share. And we take care of each other. It’s our world, down here,” Grace said, reaching to close the big gate. Jacob realized how momentous the gesture was. She was showing him something precious. And something very, very important, to her.

*And... maybe to me? One day?*

Once the gate closed, he would be a part of it. A part of this secret. A part of this place. A part of this... world. This world beneath the world. Jacob paused, weighing the momentousness of this decision.

He knew he could simply walk back out, again, if he got tired of living here, or for that fact, just tired of living. But deep down, a part of him doubted that he would.

He looked back toward the spiral staircase. It led down. Far down, perhaps. He liked the idea of that.

*Safe. I'm safe, here.*

He looked back toward Grace, and decided. Reaching out, he put his hand on the gate, just above hers. He would help her close it. And in so doing, he would show her that he understood that there was commitment, here. Commitment by him.

"Then I'll share whatever I can, with all of you. And I'll help take care of the people who need me," he promised, letting the heavy gate swing shut, on its ancient hinges. He stepped back, and watched the inner door close. It blocked all sight of the world Above.

*Good. That's good.*

The metal door clanged, just a bit. Jacob knew it was a sound he would never forget.

--

The sound echoed, for a moment, in the long drainage tunnel. Then... silence.

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--Epilogue--

Chase



*May, 1953*

Preston Chase looked out over the New York City skyline, and tossed yet another disappointing folder across his cluttered desk.

*Another Private Investigator, another bust*, Preston thought. It had been weeks. Weeks. Several of those. They were starting to add up to months.

Jacob Wells was nowhere to be found. He'd climbed out of a taxi and stepped onto a New York street and... and the city had swallowed him whole, apparently.

He wasn't in the morgue. His body hadn't washed up, anywhere. He wasn't any of the John Does in the city hospitals, and outside of a woman who'd thought she might have seen him in Central Park, the day he'd gone missing, there had been no word. The lead had gone nowhere. They weren't even sure if it was Jacob, at all. It had been twilight, and his face had been half-hidden.

And there had been a woman with him. A plain woman no one seemed to know. That didn't sound right. And it definitely didn't sound like Jacob.

Jacob had not tried to contact Margaret. Or Alan Taft, or Eli Coolidge. Or him. Or anyone else he knew. He'd not tried to access his bank account, not gone back to the apartment to retrieve his credit cards, not written anyone, wired anyone, or... anything.

Preston had meant to get Jacob out of Margaret's life, and he'd meant to do that quite thoroughly, in the legal sense of that word. But he'd not meant to cut him off without a cent, and no support. Preston knew he could be an exacting man. But he didn't consider himself a vicious one.

The businessman had planned to settle a sizable sum on his stiff-lipped son-in-law. Then make sure he got set up somewhere else. Somewhere Margaret would never go.

There were conditions to Preston's largesse. Conditions he could no longer enforce, since Jacob hadn't taken any money.

*And now... he's missing. What will Margaret say, when she finds out?* Preston wondered, knowing the rift between him and his child might be irreparable, thanks to this.

"Damn it!" Preston swore, hurling a sharpened pencil across the desk. It symbolized the fact that he was throwing good money after bad, trying to track Jacob down. And he knew it.

And what was worse, he'd lost control of the situation. Utterly. It was a feeling he very much didn't like.

Preston rose from the desk and went over to the large bank of windows that covered one wall. Before him, New York City spread out like the huge, concrete metropolis that it was.

*Jacob could be anywhere, in there. Perhaps he wasn't even in New York, anymore.*



"I don't know where you are, but I hope you're happy, Jacob," Preston said, meaning it with a certain degree of spite, but a certain degree of sincerity, as well. "I just hope you're happy," he repeated, knowing that Margaret, for her part, definitely wasn't.

Her maid phoned him daily. His daughter had begun to eat a little something. But she was still in tears, often.

"Margaret isn't. But... I hope you are." He tried to mean it. He really did.

He shoved his hands in his pockets. There was simply nothing more to do, nothing more to say.

--

*Meanwhile...*



Far below the city streets, hiding his face from strangers, safe from hate, safe from harm, Jacob Wells was learning to live a new life.

He was a few years away, yet, from the January 12<sup>th</sup> night that would change his life, forever.

And he was not "happy." Not yet. That was too strong a word for it. But he was learning that he could be.

--

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