

If Wishes Were Horses

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*“Don’t walk in front of me... I may not follow
Don’t walk behind me... I may not lead
Walk beside me... just be my friend...”*

~ Albert Camus

Catherine sat huddled on her bed, her arms wrapped tightly around her upraised knees. With her face buried against her

folded forearms, she listened to the singing outside her door with a heavy heart. But she could not bring herself to move. Not yet. It hurt too much to move...

"A ray of hope flickers in the sky, a tiny star lights up way up high, all across the land, dawns a brand new morn, this comes to pass when a child is born..."

Christmas carols were being sung once more in her building by a dedicated group of singers who came every year, moving steadily upwards floor by floor. And every year she would hurry to open her door and welcome them, contributing generously to their chosen charity.

But not this year...not when her father was no longer with her to enjoy the festive season. They had been a great team. Together they had made Christmas very special. More so since Catherine's mother had died, leaving them with only each other to depend on.

Catherine was sure she could handle it, her first festive season as an orphan. And she had been doing okay. The morning had begun well enough, but by the afternoon, when the carol singers arrived, the pain hit her anew. And now, even going to the trouble of putting up a tree or making festive cheer seemed beyond her ability to make the effort. Christmas cards had piled up on her dining table, unopened and unanswered. There was an envelope

with New Zealand stamps on it, but even that didn't pique her interest enough to open it.

"It's all a dream, an illusion now, it must come true, sometime soon, somehow, all across the land, dawns a brand new morn, this comes to pass when a child is born..."

"Oh, Dad..." Catherine's breath hitched on a shattered sob. "I do miss you so much..."

She loved the song being sung outside her door; it had been one of her father's favourites. He loved to sing it to her, even though he didn't possess the best of voices. He sang it to make her laugh and cry by turns, becoming righteously indignant whenever she had the audacity to openly criticize his singing voice. He'd sung the song because he knew it was special for the pair of them. They had made it their own song.

"If it comes from the heart, it can't be all bad..." Charles Chandler grinned as he spread his arms theatrically. "I mean, you're my daughter. You're supposed to support me."

"I'll always support you, Dad. You know that." Catherine shook her head. "But face it. When the cat is forced to get up and leave the room, you know you're in trouble."

"Well, that cat of yours never liked me," Charles complained. "Maybe it's time I bought you a new one."

“Don’t you dare!” Catherine threw a cushion at him. “Milo just has good taste.”

“Expensive taste, you mean!” Her father grimaced. “I paid last month’s food bills. Remember, young lady?”

“Okay, okay...” Catherine leaned down to gather the thrown cushion before relaxing back on the couch. “So you have a dedicated audience of one.” She raised both hands in mock surrender. “Sing it again for me, Charles...”

Catherine sat up now to wipe shaky fingers across her wet cheeks. Her father would have scolded her, told her to move on. Get up and make the best of it. *Life goes on, my darling girl, right?* How she wished he were here right now...

She glanced across at the balcony doors. How she wished Vincent was here right now, as well. But the afternoon sunlight streamed in through the glass, making a visit from her beloved impossible until nightfall. Unless she made the effort to get off the bed and go down into the basement to meet him at the threshold. She knew he would appear the moment she wished it to be so...

“But good company I am not.” She sighed, deciding that deciding what to wear was also too much of an effort. Her grey sweats were old, well worn, and comfortable, but certainly not fit to be seen outside her apartment. She would just have to make the

best of it for now, until dusk. “Besides, I’ve got to learn to stand on my own two feet sometime. Right, Dad?”

Outside her door the singing faded as the group moved on in search of a more receptive audience. Catherine shook her head. Her sense of duty told her she needed to get up and go after them. Apologise to them for her tardiness and offer her usual contribution. But she remained sitting on the bed, staring into the middle distance. Long minutes ticked by as she sank further into a morass of conflicting emotions.

The sound of someone knocking on her door made her jump. Guilt galvanised her cramped limbs. Surely it was the singers, back again for one last attempt at securing some much needed funds. She scrambled off her bed, snatching up her purse as she hurried to open the door. But it was not a hopeful group of singers on her doorstep...

“*Devin!*” Catherine fell back in shocked surprise.

“Hey, Chandler...” Vincent’s brother surveyed her critically. “Geeze, you look awful. You okay? Did I catch you at a bad time? Since it’s Saturday, I thought you might be getting ready for Christmas at the gym. Guess I was wrong.”

“No, it’s fine. I just...I wasn’t expecting company...” Catherine swiped at her cheeks, tried to do something about her hair, licked at her dry lips, and then gave up. Her shoulders slumped. *What’s*

the use? He'd already seen the damage. Her face warmed as she stood back. "Come on in. It's good to see you again."

"During daylight hours, you get stuck with the other Wells boy..." Devin shrugged as he crossed the threshold and shut the door behind him. He dropped the large bag he was carrying beside the door. "I'm sorry if I disappoint you, but I'm sure Vincent won't mind." He looked around the apartment as he removed his leather jacket. "You haven't got him stashed in here, by any chance?"

"No, he's not here." Catherine shook her head. "And I am glad to see you again. I...when did you get in?" She led the way into the kitchen. "Have you seen Father yet?"

"No, not yet. Charles and I have just flown in from New Zealand. We've spent over a year down in Queenstown in the South Island. It's a great city with truly fabulous scenery. But the place was crawling with tourists desperate to be entertained. So while Charles busied himself keeping house and his hand firmly on the purse strings, I tried my luck at making a go of an adventure tourism venture. I soon discovered the more ways you can find to scare the pants off your customers, the more they want to pay you for the privilege."

He lightly traced the parallel scars marking his left cheek, shook his head and smiled. "And these came in for some great attention. Everyone likes a good story. And I did pretty well for

myself in the end. I sold it all up for a really nice profit only last week. So that's when we decided it was way past time we came home for a Christmas visit with the folks. Charles is back at the hotel, making good use of room service, now that we're filthy rich. Or so he thinks. He told me I had to come and see you, make sure you're okay."

He laughed. "So you're my first social call. Guess you could call it checking out the lay of the land. Have I been forgiven yet, down at the D.A.'s office?"

"Of course." Catherine compressed her lips. "Well, whenever Joe's having a bad day, he still talks about you and shakes his head. I think he expects you to walk back in one day and take up again where you left off. But he's really glad Eringer won't see the outside of a prison cell for quite a few years, thanks to you. He did say your brief was good work. After I tidied it up a bit."

"I was a good fraud, wasn't I?" Devin threw his arms wide. "Maybe I should drop by one day and see him for old time's sake."

"Oh, no," Catherine replied hastily. "I don't think that would be such a good idea. Joe doesn't like too many surprises."

"Fair enough." Devin shrugged. "The offer's there. So, what about you? I thought if you're not too busy, it might be a nice idea if you joined me on some family visiting. If you're feeling up to it, that

is.” He scanned her pale face closely. “I know Vincent would be here for you, if he could be. So, do you want to talk to me about it?”

“Coffee...?” Catherine avoided his concerned gaze, indicating the machine.

“Black, no sugar, thanks.” Devin frowned at her. “Come on, Chandler. You can tell me.” He stood by the table, sorting through the Christmas cards. “I see you got mine.” He held it up with his eyebrows raised. “I did give you a return address, you know. You’re supposed to reply.”

“Well, yes. I...just haven’t got around to answering them all yet.”

“Five days to Christmas. I’d say you’re leaving your run a bit late. Or are you planning on hand delivering them? It’s quite a hike all the way down to New Zealand. You might want to get started right away.” He dropped the card back onto the pile. “Come on, Cathy, level with me. What’s wrong?”

Catherine pulled out a chair at the table and slumped into it. She sat with her coffee mug cradled between her palms. “Okay. It’s my Dad.” She shrugged one shoulder in apology. “It’s just that he died nearly nine months ago now. I know I should move on, but sometimes, when I think of him, it gets pretty heavy going. Especially now, since Dad loved Christmas. Dressing up as

Santa when I was little and giving out the presents. It made his whole year, to see me so happy. We were a team...”

“I see. And now there’s just you...” Devin pulled out a chair and straddled it, ignoring his own coffee. “So to honour his memory, you decided to sit around here and be miserable.” He sighed. “I know that sounds harsh, but why aren’t you Below with those who love and care about you? Vincent would look after you. He must be going nuts right now, not being able to get up to see you, sensing that you’re stuck in all this pain. My little brother loves you very much. I wish I had what you two have found together.”

“I know...” Catherine released a rough sigh. “And I did go down to him when Dad died. But it just hit me again this morning – that I’m never going to see my father again and this will be my first Christmas without him here to make me laugh. To command me to sit and listen to his dubious attempts at singing.” She made a half-hearted attempt to wipe away fresh tears, her shoulders sagging with misery.

“Hey, come on, Chandler. Lighten up on yourself.” Devin reached to clasp her hands between his. “You’ve had it rough; I can see that. You and Vincent have been through so much together. So why on earth are you trying to tackle it alone now, when you know where to go?”

“I guess I was doing okay. Making it work for me.” Catherine shrugged. “But just now...the carol singers... They brought it all

back – how much I miss Dad and how I wish he was here with me right now. And then I was wishing Vincent could be here, just before you arrived.”

“Ah, I see. So instead of my little brother, you’re stuck with me.” Devin shook his head. “Thanks for the ringing endorsement. I’ll put it on my resume. Right next to ‘*can do better.*’ I guess I have some ground to make up then.”

Catherine pressed her fingers to her lips in shock. “Oh, no, Devin. I didn’t mean...”

“Kidding, Cathy. I thought I might make you smile.” Devin grimaced. “Guess I’m out of practice on that front as well. Come on, get dressed and grab your coat.” He stood and came around the table to her side. “I’ve decided you’re coming out with me. And you’ll need to wear trousers.”

“Oh, I don’t think—”

“Now that’s your problem right there.” Devin leaned down to tap the end of her nose with a warning forefinger. “Too much thinking. Stop it right now. Come on.” He drew her up from the table. “Get back into that bedroom and make yourself pretty. Don’t make me come in there to help you see sense. I’ve had a fair amount of practice, you know.”

“Since you put it so nicely...” Catherine retreated to her bedroom, shutting the doors behind her. “I won’t be long.”

“Now I wonder what your father would have said to that,” Devin called in reply. He paused and then asked, “Hey, do you mind if I use your telephone while I wait? I need to make a few calls.”

“Go ahead.” Catherine pushed open her wardrobe doors, frowning at the selection.

She sighed as she whispered, “Dad would have said it was a likely story. He’d figure it would take more than an hour...” She changed in record time. “I would have told him that was the old Cathy...”

“What was that?” Devin demanded to know, as he paused his telephone conversation in the other room.

“Nothing that bears repeating,” Catherine replied. “Just remembering something from another time.”

“Thinking again, Chandler...” Devin rattled the door. “Stop it and come out of there. We’re going to be late. Don’t forget your coat.”

“Late for what?” Catherine opened the door. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see. It’s a surprise.” Devin took her hand. “Just trust in me for a while. I promise you won’t be disappointed. I’m going to give you a few hours of magic and illusion, Devin style. You just have to believe.”

“Now you’re scaring me.” Catherine laughed uncertainly, as they left the apartment together.

Central Park was bathed in late afternoon sunshine. There were traces of a recent snowfall, but nothing to hinder their progress. However the air was cold, and Catherine was glad of her coat. Hand in hand, she and Devin traversed the park, heading towards the carousel.

“What are you planning?” She demanded to know, after they’d walked in silence for some time.

“When I was a child and I needed to be cheered up, I always came to the carousel. Don’t tell me you didn’t feel the same.”

“I always wanted to climb the trees.” Catherine looked around. “After my mother died, Dad used to bring me here every Saturday. And every year I would try to go higher and higher. I know he was terrified for me, praying I wouldn’t fall. But he never tried to stop me, and I never came to any harm. Much to his relief, I finally discovered.”

“Then that’s the Cathy Chandler fearlessness we need to find again now.” Devin squeezed her hand. “We’re going to make your Dad proud.”

Catherine stared at him with suspicion. “My tree climbing days are over.”

“Hey, I bet if I challenged you to a race to the top of the nearest tree, you’d knock me down just to get ahead of me.” Devin grinned. “Don’t try and tell me you’ve lost the competitive spirit. You’re too good a lawyer. You hunger to keep your edge sharp, so you can go for the win.”

“Hey, I thought you were supposed to be cheering me up.”

“Fair point.” Devin tugged at her hand. “Come on...”

They came to a halt before the carousel, watching the children’s delight as the machinery turned slowly. Devin slung a companionable arm around Catherine’s shoulders.

“That night at the carousel, when Vincent and I nearly got caught by the mounted patrol...” He pointed to a vacant white horse as it passed them, its fore-hooves pawing the air, its neck bent gracefully with mane flying. “That’s the one Vincent was riding that night. I’ll never forget the look on his face. You’d think I’d just given him the whole world.”

“Perhaps you did...” Catherine watched the prancing horse circle out of sight and waited for it to reappear. She could imagine a much younger Vincent enjoying the illicit pleasure of the ride, laughing and carefree for one magic night free from the suffocating fear of discovery...

“Was there a full moon that night?” She turned to Devin.

He looked surprised. “You know, I believe there was.”

“Vincent once told me that he could even remember the first time he saw the moon.” Catherine looked up at the blue arc of the sky. “I was surprised, until I realised what he was trying to tell me.”

The carousel slowed to a stop and all the children dismounted their steeds. Devin turned to Catherine, flourishing an ushering hand before her. “Up you get.”

“I beg your pardon...” Catherine stared at him.

“A fine steed for a princess...” Devin offered his arm. “Don’t tell me you don’t want to.”

“Oh, no...now, come on...” Catherine backed up, her hands held up defensively in front of her. “I’m too old to ride the carousel...”

“Chickening out on me already, Chandler?” Devin’s dark eyes glowed with mischief. “Or would you rather go for the tree

climbing challenge?" He took a grip on her hand, not allowing her to escape.

"I'm going to get you for this..." Catherine surrendered huffily, allowing him to assist her up onto the platform. But the white horse beckoned, and she didn't hesitate to climb onto its back. Devin took the horse beside hers.

The music began again and the carousel started to pick up speed. Soon Catherine was flying along, eyes closed, as she tried to visualise Vincent's euphoria at the glorious treat that long ago night. She sent all her love and enjoyment across her bond with Vincent, hoping he would be able to rest now that his big brother had forcibly pulled her from her pit of misery.

All too soon the ride came to an end. For a moment she toyed with the idea of remaining where she was and taking the next ride. But out of the corner of her eye, she saw Devin looking at his watch. Obviously he had other things to do, other people to visit.

But once again she appeared to be wrong. He looked thoughtful, glanced up, saw her watching him and smiled. "I've got a great idea. You look like you could use an ice cream."

Catherine blinked. "Oh, okay..." The day was becoming more surreal by the minute, but she decided to suspend her disbelief, allowing him to take her hand again and lead her onwards. She'd

realised it was pointless to argue. Devin didn't seem to know how to take no for an answer.

The ice cream he bought her was cold, yet delicious. They consumed them as they watched the sun dip towards the horizon. In no time, it seemed Devin was looking at his watch again. He seemed to have settled something in his mind this time.

"Sorry about this." Devin shrugged his apology. "I just realised we need to go back up to your apartment. I forgot to pick up my damn bag. It's full of Christmas presents from Down Under for the folks Below. Then we can go down to the tunnels through your basement entrance and visit my brother and Father. You okay with that?"

"Of course. The fresh air will do me good."

"Great, then let's go." Devin offered his arm in courtly style. They left the park and returned to Catherine's apartment building.

As they left the elevator and approached her door, Devin took the keys from her hand. "I remember now. I dropped my bag just inside the door. I'll grab it and we can be on our way. So how about you sit down here for a sec." He pushed her onto the chair beside her door.

"Oh, all right, but..." Catherine shrugged.

Devin opened the door, cast a cautioning look back at her and disappeared inside, closing the door behind him. Catherine frowned at her own front door, not sure what she should do next. *What's going on?* She leaned forward, straining to hear. She could swear there were voices in her apartment. *Was Devin on the phone again?*

This is ridiculous! She was about to get up when Devin reappeared. He spread his hands in apology. "Sorry about that. I was talking to your super...seems you have a water leak in your place. He asked what you wanted to do about it?"

"Do...?" Catherine shot up from the chair in agitation. "How bad is it?"

"Don't know..." Devin shrugged. "You'd better talk to him."

"Of all days..." Catherine fumed, hurrying to her apartment. "I don't need this right now."

"Poor guy's only trying to do his job..." Devin trailed after her into the apartment. "He didn't want to ruin your Christmas..."

As she entered, Catherine was confronted with her home being in almost total darkness. "So now I suppose the electricity has gone out as well? This day just gets better and better." She reached for the light switch beside the door, flicking it on.

"Surprise!" Mouse suddenly popped up in front of her startled eyes. "Hey, we got you good, Catherine!"

"Mouse!" Catherine blinked at the tinker. "What are you doing here?"

"But we're all here." Mouse swept an arm around the room. It was suddenly filled with people coming out of their hiding places. "Okay great! Neat, eh?"

"I must be dreaming..." Catherine looked around the room, her expression reflecting her shock. It was filled with many people from Vincent's world. Looking beyond them she could see William supervising her kitchen appliances with deft skill. She prayed they would survive the shock of suddenly being put to such expert use.

"So much for a water leak then?" She glanced over her shoulder at Devin, shaking her head. "You truly are an excellent fraud."

"Can you blame me?" He grinned, pushing her gently into the room with one hand in the small of her back. "We just needed a little ruse to get you in here. But did I not promise you an afternoon of magic and illusion?"

"Yes, but I didn't expect anything like this." Everywhere she looked, there were Christmas decorations. There was even a

hastily erected Christmas tree. Her neglected cards had been opened and hung along the mantle piece.

“But how did you all get here? And so fast...”

Devin shrugged. “That was the easy part. I phoned Peter while you were changing, and he did the rest. Slipped down to his basement and sent a message to Pascal. Then he went over to the hotel to look after Charles for me.” Devin pulled Mouse close. “And Mouse took care of the Below arrangements. Sorted out those who could make it up here in time. Simple.”

“But it’s all just amazing. You’re all amazing. I don’t know what else to say.”

“We used the elevator. It came down. We all got in. Came up. Easy.” Mouse bobbed his head, accepting his due. “Anyone who looked or asked. Party at Catherine’s. Fancy dress. Exclusive, invitation only.” He winked conspiratorially. “Good secret, and it worked.”

“We know this year has been hard on you, dear.” Mary came up through the throng of chattering people to take Catherine’s hand. “We all wish you the very best for the season. And our love.”

“Thanks, Mary.” Catherine hugged her tightly.

“And we get to do this all again soon! In the Great Hall!” Mouse clapped his hands. “I love Christmas! You’ll be there too, Catherine?”

“Yes, Mouse, I will be there.” Catherine smiled, the weight of sad memories lifting from her shoulders to be replaced by happy ones.

She pressed a hand over her heart. *I am going to be all right, Dad. You’ll see...I love you so much...*

A new sense of warmth moved slowly through her whole body. To Mouse’s embarrassment she hugged him, kissing his cheek soundly. “You’re okay, Mouse,” she assured him.

“Okay good, okay fine...” Mouse shuffled out of reach, his cheeks bright with colour.

Catherine smiled as she glanced around the room...knowing there was something...or someone...missing. She scanned the crowd, looking for that one person who would make her impromptu party complete. Of course, it was still too light for Vincent to come Above. *She would just have to be patient...*

“Oh, I almost forgot. You have a present waiting for you outside on the balcony.” Devin pushed Catherine gently towards the French doors. “It was delivered while we were down in the park. Mouse had to reassemble it out there. It’s too big to fit in here.”

“What on earth...?” Looking back at him dubiously, Catherine allowed herself to be pushed out into the cold. With a soft laugh of triumph, Devin shut the doors behind her, closing the curtains tight before he rejoined the party.

“Catherine...” Her name echoed from the shadows.

“Vincent...?” Catherine turned, her hand going to her throat. She began to cry as she stumbled across the tiles, hurrying into his arms. “Oh, Vincent, I have missed you so much today.”

“And I you...” Vincent folded her in his embrace, laying his cheek against the top of her head. He rocked her gently, kissing her hair.

“But how did you get here?” Catherine finally pulled back to look up at him.

“I, too, was given a festive role to play...” Vincent shrugged as he indicated a folded Santa cape complete with hood and full white beard lying across a nearby chair. “Mouse was most insistent. He said it was for a good cause.” He stroked her damp cheek with one fingertip. “And he was right.”

“And Devin knew I needed you so much...” Catherine sighed. “I wanted to be strong, as you have taught me to be, but it was especially hard today, Vincent. My first Christmas without Dad.”

“I know. I felt it in you.” Vincent caressed the length of her back. “Your father would have been proud of you today. I know he is watching us and smiling.”

“Yes, I feel him too. And Devin wouldn’t let me wallow in self-pity.” Catherine laughed softly. “He was determined to drag me out to enjoy myself. He took me to the carousel...” Catherine shook her head. “I rode your horse, Vincent. The white one.”

“If wishes were horses...” Vincent sighed roughly. “I felt you; your love and compassion reached out to me. I knew you were in good hands, even though I longed to come to you, comfort you. I could tell that you enjoyed it.”

“More than anything. And I am glad I could share it with you. Merry Christmas, Vincent.” She reached up to kiss him softly.

Vincent brought up his hands to cup her face. “Merry Christmas, my love.” He brushed his lips gently across hers, back and forth, tempting and teasing her into responding in kind...

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