

Snowflakes

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



Vincent put down the well-loved volume of *A Christmas Carol*, got up from his chair and calmly walked across the chamber. His quiet enjoyment was interrupted by the mewling sound coming from the crib. His face lit up with a smile when he saw the small, rosy face of the guilty party, and his hands reached for the crying baby, covered by a cosy blanket.

“I’m here, Jacob.” Vincent’s quiet and warm voice soothed the child almost immediately, as it felt the nearness of its father, who gently cradled it.

Vincent turned around, and his eyes fell on the bed, significantly larger than the one in which he used to sleep for most of his life. Layers of thick blankets moved, revealing the sleepy but lovely face of a young woman. She looked at him through her tousled hair.

“Just sleep, Catherine,” he spoke softly. “I have him.”

Catherine released a small sigh, which was immediately followed by a genuine smile.

“I used to hate alarm clocks. They mostly woke me up in the middle of a nice dream.” She raised herself and leaned against a plump, old cushion. “*This* alarm clock, I can very much tolerate. Even though I’m dreading the teething phase.”

Vincent chuckled and joined her by sitting down on the side of their bed. The child's mother tenderly caressed its now relaxed forehead, then lovingly watched it play with her thumb.

"That should start very soon," Vincent remarked, with an amused smile. "He's six months old."

Catherine suddenly knitted her brows, wondering. "I'm actually curious whose teeth he will have."

Their eyes met – Vincent's betrayed mild anxiety, Catherine's a sparkle of amusement.

"Don't worry," she chuckled. "I will love him just the same, with sharp incisors or without."

It was the first time she mentioned directly anything referring to his physique, but seeing the honest truth in her gaze and the beaming smile on her face, the tension in Vincent's muscles eased, and he allowed himself a quiet laugh. Then he sighed.

"I know you will, Catherine," he said, looking down at his son in his arms. The boy's blue eyes were wide open, studying his father's striking yet in many ways gentle features. "I know everyone in the Tunnels will... But I can't help and wonder sometimes, if he was different..."

The mother of their child focused on his face for a moment. Vincent's confidence in his human side had grown immensely since he had met Catherine, but the fear and pain of his early life experiences had left scars on his soul, which sometimes showed through tiny cracks.

Her hand reached for his chin and slowly turned it towards her.

"He *is* different," she said softly. "He is the child born of a love that no one would ever have expected." A smile chased away the frown from her forehead. "And he will be loved all the more for it, like every child deserves to be loved."

Vincent's lips curled into a smile. His son mirrored his expression, causing another ripple of joy to surge through his heart. "Yes," the father said in his characteristic, slow way. "Like *every* child deserves to be loved..."

Seeing the melancholy in his eyes, Catherine didn't doubt his memory brought him back to the time when he was himself a babe, wrapped in rags and awaiting his certain end behind St Vincent's Hospital on that freezing January night almost thirty-seven years ago. Back then, someone else thought too, that every child deserved to be loved – even those with the face and claws of a lion and body covered in long hair...

"I don't think this child will go to sleep any time soon," Catherine remarked.

Vincent took a moment to answer. "Is it still snowing Above, Catherine?" he asked, his eyes not leaving the face of his son.

"I think so. Children said at dinner that it didn't look like stopping tonight. Why?"

Vincent's lips curled again. "I think you'd better wrap up warm."

That was all he said, but the woman by his side understood immediately, not needing to wait for him to stand up - the baby still in his arms - and moving to an antique dresser, where little Jacob's clothes were neatly stored. He dressed his son with gentleness and the precision of someone who had been doing it all their life. The boy followed his father's every move, wide-eyed, intrigued by the movement. He looked very much awake indeed, just as his mother suggested.

"Are you ready?" Vincent asked when his son was nicely wrapped in warm clothes and resting in his arms, and he turned to Catherine.

"As ready as I'll ever be," she replied cheerfully as she did the last button on her long winter coat, curious about the destination of their impromptu late-night trip.

"Good." Vincent smiled and walked out of their chamber, with Catherine on his heels.



The late mid-December night in New York was very cold; the park wore a thick, glittery white robe, looking as if the Snow Queen herself had covered it with it. It snowed for the very first time that winter, hence the Tunnel children took a longer-than-usual time to return to their homes from their explorations Above, just in time for dinner in the Great Hall. Vincent had to smile when remembering their excited recalling of all their frosty adventures over their plates that day.

The first breath they drew as they walked out of the drainage tunnel was icy, but it didn't make them shiver. Vincent pulled his warm cloak tighter around little Jacob in his arms. The crunch of their steps made the baby's eyes go wider, his little mouth curling in a beaming smile.

"Welcome to Winter Wonderland, Jacob," Vincent addressed his son. The warmth and quiet joy in his voice spoke of love, fatherly pride and wonder.

Catherine stroked her child's pink cheek. "Your first snow, little one!" she whispered, excited.

She bent down to grab a handful of the cold, white mass and showed it to Jacob. One of his little hands got free from the protective layer of Vincent's cloak and reached for the intriguing fluffy stuff in his mother's hand. The boy's smile vanished soon after he eagerly felt the cold of the snow. He quickly pulled his tiny hand back, making his parents chuckle, but then, curiosity won over, and he slowly dared a second attempt at the contact. This time, knowing what to expect, he played with the snowflake bunches in Catherine's palm, and a smile reappeared on his sweet face, followed by a giggle.

"I think he likes it," Vincent remarked, amused, and squatted carefully to get Jacob some more snow to play with.

A memory of his own first encounter with the white miracle appeared from the vaults of his mind. He was seven years old, but even as an adult, he still felt the fairy-tale magic of that moment whenever he thought of it. Back then, he shared the experience with his step-brother Devin, who secretly drew him out of the Tunnels at night to give him the wondrous gift of winter. Now, it was his beloved sharing their son's first time seeing snow. And it was Catherine who chuckled.

"I remember how my father took me to Aspen for the first time," she said, with a fond smile on her face. "It was my first time on the skis. I was twelve and so excited when I saw those huge white slopes!" She paused. "Dad was terrified at my enthusiasm and relentlessly kept me away from them."

"And were you... successful?" Vincent asked diplomatically, slightly tilting his head. The mental image of a teenage Catherine standing on skis for the first time drew an amused smile to his face.

This time, Catherine laughed properly. "You bet... I was hopelessly bad and never made it past the learning slope!" The sound of her laughter rang in his ears, her answer making him chuckle. "But I won a Snowman Building contest." Pride brightened her eyes even more.

Vincent kept his gaze on her, admiring her youthful joy and her face illuminated by the moonlight. He only returned his attention to the little human bundle in his arms when he heard another mewling sound coming from it.

"It's all right, Jacob," he said softly. "You're safe... and loved."

The boy stopped fussing, and his slowly tiring eyes glided from the face of his father to that of his mother. Catherine sensed her chance.

"I think I know what could put him to sleep," she remarked and gently took her son from Vincent.

She looked around, just to check they were truly alone in the park, and then her eyes dropped to the now sleepy face of the baby in her arms. A tender smile preceded her voice, which began to sing.

"Sleep, my pretty one, rest now, my pretty one. Close your eyes, the day is nearly done. Rest your head, tomorrow will surely come..."

Vincent remembered where he had heard the lullaby for the first time. Over a year ago, and on a very sad occasion, becoming the last song the sweet Ellie heard before she left the Tunnels and this world forever due to pneumonic plague. And yet, despite the trace of sadness in his heart, he also remembered how much Catherine's interpretation and care for the girl moved him and touched something deep inside he never even considered until then - the thought of a possibility of Catherine having *his* child one day...

Now, after all the traumatic events that happened in the just ending year, that thought became reality - sweet, wondrous and almost magical, like the snowflakes that had just started quietly descending upon Central Park again.

By the time Catherine finished her lullaby, little Jacob was already fast asleep.

"I think we can return now," she whispered and smiled at Vincent. "Once he sleeps, not even a herd of reindeer would wake him."

Vincent chuckled and regarded mother and child a little longer before he put his arm (and part of his cloak) around her shoulders.

"Come," he said quietly and cast a last glance at the sparkling park before he pulled Catherine closer, and they disappeared inside the drainage tunnel again.

The moon continued shining brightly, making company to millions of twinkling stars in the dark sky, and complete silence would have fallen upon New York's favourite park, were it not for the quiet hush of the large snowflakes that continued in their icy dance.

