

Wish Upon A Well

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



Note: The main theme of this story was inspired by the premise for a possible second-season episode of the Beauty and the Beast series, which had never been developed into a script and filmed. The idea was suggested by Virginia Aldridge.

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For my grandmother.



“That’s it; you’re last again, slowpoke!” Samantha chirped, grinning at Geoffrey, her hands on her hips in a victorious manner.

“That’s not fair...,” her friend moaned, catching his breath. “You’ve got longer legs.”

The girl challenged him with raised eyebrows - they were almost of the same height. As their eyes met, both children burst into laughter. The rest of their friends joined them, and the happy sound filled the warm early-autumn air in Central Park that Sunday afternoon.

“Give up, Geoffrey,” suggested Zach. “You can never win against her; even I can’t, and I can outrun anyone.”

“But I bet she can’t hide as well as we do,” countered Kipper, the youngest, with an assured grin.

“Try me!” The girl was not fazed by his challenge. “Zach, you count, the rest of us will hide.”

The oldest member of the group chuckled. *Kids...*

“Okay, as always, I’ll count to 50, then I’ll start searching. If I don’t find someone in half an hour, we’ll meet here again.”

The children nodded in agreement. Zach turned his face towards the nearest tree, closed his eyes and started counting.

Everyone ran in a different direction - Geoffrey started running without properly knowing where he wanted to hide. He was counting along in his mind. When he made it to thirty, he slowed down, looking around him to find some good place to hide.

As he was walking under a majestic elm tree, he stopped in his tracks. Right in front of him, only a few feet away, as if by magic, appeared an old, stony well with an ornamental wrought-iron roof.

The Wishing Well..., he thought with widened eyes. He’d heard about it once but had never seen it until now. It was almost as if it was only a story that the people in the Tunnels passed on from generation to generation. The sight itself was enchanting, but the reason that made the tunnel child stop was the figure he spotted at the well.

A grey-haired man in his early sixties was leaning against a walking stick and looking at a photo in his hand. He was dressed in an old-fashioned brown suit, probably from the early 60s, and he was holding a brown hat with the brim turned down in front. Geoffrey had seen such an outfit only once... when Father went up top on his ill-fated short trip.

However, the man’s face was what caught the boy’s attention the most. Its square shape with a wide forehead and jaw could have suggested strength and leadership qualities. Yet, the melancholic, longing look of his dark eyes gave it a much softer expression. Hidden partially behind the nearest tree, Geoffrey strained his ears as much as possible. He heard the quiet words coming out of the man’s mouth as if he was talking to some invisible companion. Those quiet words hit him somewhere deep inside his still childlike soul. He couldn’t understand a word of it, for the language was foreign to the boy’s ears, but the painful tone of the man’s voice and the solitary tear running down his cheek spoke a language understandable by anyone in the world.

Geoffrey was contemplating silent retreat when the man took out a coin from his trouser pocket, and after a brief moment of observing it, he threw it into the well. Then he wiped away the tear from his face, and with a deep sigh, he slowly walked to sit down on the nearest bench.

The tunnel boy was deep in thought as his sensitive brown eyes followed the mysterious stranger. What strange fate could have marked this man so painfully? Was there anyone in his life to help him with whatever it was that saddened him? Or was he all alone, walking through life as a lonesome strider?

Hide-and-seek forgotten, Geoffrey slowly turned, and unable to return from his brooding, his feet set out for the walk back towards the Tunnels.



“Geoffrey?” A curious, gravelly voice broke the silence in the chamber.

The boy was startled at such a sudden interruption of his thoughts. He noticed that the literature lesson had already ended and all the other children were gone, leaving him alone with his tutor, who was watching him intently while holding a volume of Frances H. Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* in his hands.

The pupil shook his head apologetically. “I’m sorry, Vincent. I was thinking about something.”

“I can see that you have something on your mind. Would you like to share what’s troubling you?”

Geoffrey sighed, and a worried expression appeared on his gentle face. “It’s this man I’ve seen in the park,” he started. “He seems very sad and lonely. I wish I could help him.”

Vincent listened to the whole story of the mysterious park visitor with genuine interest. His little friend’s compassion for the stranger made him smile - Geoffrey had always been a sensitive child.

“So you have seen the man twice more?” Vincent asked. “Yes, always on a Sunday, at about the same time, in the afternoon,” confirmed the boy. “He comes to the well, stands there for a while, then sits down on a bench nearby and holds the photograph in his hands. Do you think there is a way we could help him somehow?”

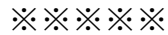
“That might be very difficult,” replied Vincent truthfully. “We don’t know the man’s name, where he lives, or anything about the photograph you saw in his hands, not who is in it.”

After a brief moment of silence, Geoffrey spoke with conviction. “If anyone can do it, it’s you. You can do anything.”

Moved by such faith in his abilities, Vincent smiled and seeing his little friend’s unusual determination, it was clear he at least had to try. After all, the past year had proved to him that nothing was impossible...

“Perhaps there is a way,” he stated with a smile.

Geoffrey’s face lit up with gratitude... and hope.



The night was pleasantly mild. It seemed the late summer was trying to reclaim its reign from autumn. The dark sky over the city was sprinkled with twinkling stars, visible quite clearly from places Vincent was leading Catherine through.

“I don’t think we have ever walked this way,” she remarked with a curious smile, glancing at him as they strolled hand in hand through Central Park.

“There are many pathways in the park leading to various places,” Vincent replied enigmatically and tightened his hold on her hand a little. “I’ve spent countless nights throughout my life here, and yet I continue to discover ways and places I have not set foot upon before.”

Catherine’s contented, blissful expression revealed how fond she was of their walks, exploring the park together. Recently, these night walks had become more frequent, weather permitting, and she thoroughly enjoyed them.

Joe would have a fit seeing me out here so late, she thought, with an amused smile.

She was fully engrossed in the delight of breathing in the pleasantly mild air, listening to the sound of their own footsteps, rustling gently in the grass, and the calming sound of the tree leaves moving in the light breeze. It came almost as a shock to her when Vincent suddenly halted.

“This is my latest discovery,” he said and pointed to the well a few meters ahead. Even in the darkness of the night, Catherine saw the beautiful and intricately shaped cast-iron roof of the unusual object, one rarely seen in a public park.

“Oh, it’s beautiful! I never knew there was a well in Central Park,” she admitted curiously, wide-eyed. “It looks like it was made sometime in the late 19th century...”

“Not long after the park was officially opened, yes,” added Vincent, proving his great knowledge of his second home.

“Why would someone build a well in a public park?” Catherine wondered.

The lion-man chuckled, glancing into the dark depth of the well. “People in the Tunnels talk of legends, almost magical stories about it, most regarding unfulfilled love. Some of the older Tunnel dwellers swear that those who express their deepest wish here will always have that wish fulfilled.”

“How come you never found it before?” the woman by his side asked, secretly in awe that there was something Vincent hadn’t known about.

“There is no sign of it on any map. Apparently, only people who truly need it will find it at just the right time,” he explained with a smile.

Catherine couldn’t suppress a smile of her own. “Do you believe in it, in its power?”

“Believing in something with all your heart is half of the making of a dream come true,” he replied, regarding her fondly.

The look in Catherine's eyes softened as she regarded his exotic yet attractive face in the moonlight - she had her own, secret dream... or maybe not so secret. Their eyes met for a moment. Then Vincent looked away, breaking the intensity heating up the air between them.

"It was Geoffrey who told me where to find it." He spoke after a moment and told her the boy's story about the old man, making clear the real purpose of bringing Catherine to the well.

"And you don't know the man's name or where he lives?" she inquired.

"No. Geoffrey says he couldn't make out what the man was saying, only that he looked very depressed and lonely," Vincent stated, his eyes fixed on the deep darkness inside the well, which was covered by a heavy cast-iron grate.

A resolved expression appeared on Catherine's face when she spoke again. "It seems Geoffrey found the well for a reason. We must try to find out what it is."

Vincent smiled, having expected her words. He turned his head to look into those big emerald eyes, full of life and decisiveness.

"I might have an idea."

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His feet carried him to the same place as they had every Sunday afternoon in the past five months. Ever since he had discovered the old well on his lonely walks through Central Park, he couldn't break the habit of visiting it once a week. He was never much into magic, but since being a believer, faith was not unfamiliar to him. And faith usually walks hand-in-hand with hope. So after all, was it really so unusual that he might have believed in something as trivial, in many people's eyes, as the power of a wishing well?

His only companion was his walking stick, a piece of old chestnut-brown wood with a silver handle shaped like the head of an eagle. He had needed it ever since he had tripped on the stairs and broken his hip a few years ago. The recovery didn't go as he had hoped for.

Unhurried, the man made his way to the well, leaning against it with a sigh of relief. A habit can become a great comfort, be it even a minor one. He took an old, lightly-stained photograph from his jacket pocket.

So here we are, again...

His thumb caressed the woman's face in the photograph, his eyes closed, and his lips started moving in quiet prayer. Minutes passed as a light breeze played with the short strands of his grey hair, and only the sound of children's laughter broke the train of his thoughts after he had finished his prayer.

He opened his eyes to the scene in the photograph again. It brought a bittersweet smile to his lips. Long, bony fingers reached inside his jacket pocket again, this time they fished out a dime. He dropped the coin into the well and watched it fall through the grate, waiting for the familiar distant splashing sound. Once he heard it, a deep sigh put an end to his ritual. He turned and made his way over to the bench nearby. Once he rested on it, his dark eyes found the well again, and his mind began to drift away.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" a soft feminine voice gently interrupted his contemplation.

When he turned toward the direction of the voice, he saw the face of a beautiful young woman, with big emerald eyes, regarding him with the warmest smile he had seen in a while.

"I... yes, it is," he agreed, surprised.

"I've heard that this well makes people's wishes come true," Catherine continued.

The old man chuckled and glanced at the object in question again. "Yes, so I've heard," he replied quietly. Catherine noted the sadness in his voice.

"May I sit down?" she asked.

"Please," the man answered with an unsure, slightly raspy voice, though genuinely glad. Since his early retirement, it had been a while since he had spoken to someone other than a mailman or a shop assistant. He still didn't feel brave enough to start a conversation. His unexpected companion solved that problem for him.

"I've often walked in Central Park since I was a child, and my parents brought me here on Sundays. But I had never seen this well until recently," she remarked casually.

"I discovered it randomly a few months ago, on one of my walks," he shyly braved an answer.

"A friend showed it to me. He always manages to surprise me with things and places I've never seen before," Catherine added with a revealing smile.

The old man noticed the twinkle in her eyes as she spoke. The heartfelt and kind tone of this woman's voice, and the warmth in her eyes, suddenly made him feel more comfortable. Barely used to socialising in the last few years, all at once he craved it like a child craves sweets when looking at them in a candy store window.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I have a feeling this friend of yours is... special to you," he noted, a hint of melancholy appearing on his face.

Catherine reprimanded herself mentally for allowing her emotions to run away with her. She shook her head bashfully.

"You are not wrong," she replied and smiled. "He is *everything* to me... By the way, my name is Catherine."

"John is mine," the man answered and gentleman-like shook her hand, nodding briefly.

Suddenly, she sensed that the door to solving the mystery was opening. "Do *you* have anyone who means everything to you, John?"

With the blink of an eye, the man's face grew sad as he lowered his eyes, pinning them to the ground.

"I did once...", came the answer, "a long time ago."

Hearing the pain in his voice, Catherine felt deep sympathy for the man by her side.

"What happened?" she asked the simple, the most logical question.

He raised his eyes to her and seeing the genuine interest in this stranger's beautiful eyes, a feeling of resignation came over him. Wordlessly, he reached for the photograph in his pocket and passed it to her.

“She was the most wonderful woman I have ever known,” John started, leaning back with a sigh, and his eyes wandered into the distance ahead. “We lived in the same village, attended the same school, shared the same friends. She was smart, witty, elegant...”

“Her family wasn’t rich, but she always managed to make the most out of the least, creating magic. And how she loved to laugh! Her sense of humour was one of the things I loved most about her, especially when she played pranks on others,” he laughed. “Nobody was safe with her, but she would never go as far as hurting someone.”

He looked at the woman in the photograph again and grew earnest once more. “We were only children when World War II started, but we would spend as much time in each other’s company as we could, along with the rest of our circle of friends. You don’t ignore the fact that something horrifying is going on around you, but you try to find a silver lining in each cloud, even the darkest one...”

“It was surely different for the Americans, at least during the first years, but when you were growing up in Europe and had war right at your doorstep, your life was no walk through a rosy garden, I can tell you that.”

Catherine was listening intently, slowly being swept away by melancholy. However, John’s last words brought a small smile to her face. “I had a feeling you were not a born American,” she remarked warmly.

Her companion chuckled. “I know. Even after more than forty years, I still can’t get rid of my Polish accent.” He glanced at her with an amused smile, shaking his head.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” Catherine reassured him. “In the end, we are all children of this Earth, regardless of our accent, descent, or the way we look... I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt you,” she apologised, eager to hear more.

“No harm done, young lady.” John smiled, ready to continue. “Well, anyway... A year after the beginning of the war, our parents understood things were not looking good for us and like so many, they decided to pack up and take their loved ones away from Poland. They had to spend all of their savings. It was a very arduous journey, but we made it somehow. New beginnings are always difficult, especially in a strange country, and we didn’t speak the language at first. However, with hard work, we managed to settle down and find a new home.”

“I can imagine you missed Poland anyway,” remarked Catherine with compassion.

“Of course, not a day had gone by when I didn’t think about returning there someday. But life was busy, years passed, and now... I guess I got too settled here in the end.”

A small smile told her that John had truly accepted life in his second home. There was still more to find out, though. “What happened with both of you then?”

“She was resolved to become a teacher. A few years after the end of the war, she started working at the local school for Polish children, teaching English, Math, and Biology. I helped my father, who was a carpenter by trade. He managed to open his own business after a few years of working for a kind man who employed him, soon after we had arrived in New York.”

John stretched his legs, and for a moment, he was basking in the sun, which veiled the late afternoon park in a golden glow.

Catherine allowed him to take a breather and fixed her eyes on the photograph that she was still holding. In it, there was a beautiful, gentle-faced young woman in a black period dress, in the arms of a young, dark-haired man, dressed in an elegant dark suit, white shirt and a black bowtie. They were gazing at each other, and although they were not smiling, the intensity of their connection and the underlying emotions were palpable.

"That photo was made at a ball organised by our school three years after the war had ended. We thought it would be fun if we borrowed period costumes from the local theatre group of which we were members." He smiled again. "My, my, she was some actress! I always thought she should have become a professional... Well, there was a photographer at that ball. I don't know how, but I finally found the courage to ask her to dance with me. I had danced with other girls before, but this..."

"This was about dancing with someone you had true feelings for," Catherine finished with empathy.

John looked at her with a sad smile and sighed. "Yes... although she didn't know..."

"Why?" Catherine couldn't comprehend.

"I guess I never thought I was... worthy... interesting... good enough to be more to her than just a good friend. I didn't think I could give her everything she deserved..."

Catherine felt a sting somewhere under her left ribs. The words felt too familiar, as if about someone she knew and cared deeply for.

"I think I can understand," she stated quietly, with a distant look.

"No offence, but how could you?" John raised his eyebrows with a small smile.

She chuckled and sighed. "Trust me, you're not the only one with confidence issues."

He narrowed his dark eyes, studying her profile with interest. There was something fascinating about this woman, and very comforting.

Catherine returned his inquisitive look, telling herself that despite being in his early sixties, the man next to her still possessed great charm. And judging by the photograph, he indeed had been a good-looking young man once.

"In any case, we finally made it to the dance floor together, but then Alina spotted - oh, I apologise," John changed the topic suddenly. "I didn't mention her name! Well, now you know. Anyway, she spotted the photographer nearby, taking pictures of the couples in the room. She said, 'Janusz, let's have a picture taken to mark this lovely day!' So we did."

He noticed Catherine's curious expression. "Janusz is my Polish name. I changed it sometime after I came to America. John is easier to spell," he explained, drawing an understanding smile from her. "That photograph is the only image I have left of her..."

"What happened?" she inquired with interest.

John absently played with the eagle head on his walking stick. "Two years later, she met someone."

Silence befell them immediately as if nothing else needed to be said. The pain behind those few words expressed a whole range of emotions weighing on him.

“Were you sure she didn’t feel the same way about you as you did about her?” Catherine asked eventually.

A sigh preceded his words. “She never said anything. We spent a lot of time together in the final school years, but things changed once we both started working. She met new people and one of them was her future husband. He was a good man, I’ll give him that - polite, intelligent, kind, well-behaved. Not rich either, but Alina never looked at people for their money. They spent more and more time together and two years after they first met, I was already a guest at their wedding...

“After another year, they moved to Rhode Island, where he got a better job. Alina and I wrote to each other for a couple of more years, but somehow we drifted apart with time. I guess Providence wanted it that way.”

Catherine shuddered at his words. *Providence... Rhode Island...* She too got offered a better job in Rhode Island once, and like Alina, she too chose to follow her heart - by staying in New York. Would she have become a solitary, lonely wanderer like John, roaming the streets and parks almost two hundred miles away, if she had left back then?

“I’m sorry,” she said with compassion, after her quiet contemplation.

“I’m not,” her companion countered. “I got to spend many years in her presence, shared her joys and sorrows, and forged a friendship that neither time nor space could erase from my mind. I do have regrets, but mostly, I am grateful.”

A small smile settled on his face before his eyes travelled into the distance again.

“People always say, ‘I wish I could see you at least one more time’... Sometimes it sounds so trivial, so insignificant, trying to change something that can’t be changed... and yet I can’t help but wish the same, at least to know she’s well and satisfied with her life. I know it will never happen, though. Too much time has been lost,” he concluded with a sigh.

The azure blue of the sky above them started fading in the late afternoon hour.

“Nothing is ever lost,” Catherine spoke gently into the cooling air, watching two thrushes exploring a patch of grass. “With love, all things are possible...”



On that quiet, peaceful afternoon, Vincent climbed the circular staircase to the upper level of his father’s chamber. The patriarch’s main library was his destination, and he knew that the volume he was looking for was not among the countless book piles scattered everywhere around the lower chamber level. It was in one of the several tall bookcases, with neatly organized editions on the shelves. Vincent used to spend hours there as a boy, always excited by the prospect of immersing himself in a new, foreign place and a new adventure.

“I really need more proper shelves in here,” Jacob’s voice suddenly flew up to him from below.

“That’s what you said last year,” Vincent remarked. “And the year before. In fact, you say that at least once a year *every* year, whenever you get new books from the Helpers.”

“Well, yes, but this time I truly mean it. This place needs some order. I will need to have a word with Cullen,” came the reply, filled with conviction.

“I’ve heard *that* before, as well,” Vincent stated quietly, smiling.

“Anyway... are you looking for anything specific?” the patriarch asked from behind his dark-rimmed glasses, changing the topic.

”*Odyssey*,” his son answered, his sharp eyes skimming through the spines on the nearest shelf.

“A-ha, I see,” Jacob replied, making his way up to join Vincent. “Your heart is crying for some Greek drama. Since you were twelve, you have read it only... ten times.” He chuckled.

“As you always say, Father... ‘Good books are like good friends that we love returning to’,” the younger man remarked fondly.

Jacob reached for a volume on the shelf in front of him. “Of course.” He passed the book to Vincent and raised his eyebrows. “Even if they deal with murders, immorality, animal transformations and cannibalism,” he added with a grin, amusing them both.

“But it also deals with life’s journey and the power of love,” his son contradicted softly. “One that persevered for decades, only to fight separation and all odds, to find fulfilment again.”

“Oh yes, the devoted, passionate, evergreen, undying love. I know.” Jacob’s grin faded. “The one that often makes us suffer more than we can bear,” he added with sadness, more to himself than to Vincent.

The lion-man regarded his father for a moment before he spoke. “And yet, we love anyway.”

Jacob lifted his eyes to him, briefly silenced by those few words. The corners of his mouth turned upwards as he nodded. “Quite foolishly we do.”

Vincent tilted his head, putting his hand on his father’s shoulder. ”*We are all fools in love.*”¹

The knowing smile and a kiss on Jacob’s temple were Vincent’s parting gifts, before he descended the stairs and quietly left the chamber with the book in his hand.



The Assistant District Attorney’s office was buzzing with activity on Monday morning. As Joe had liked to emphasise in recent weeks, it was the high season of crime, meaning everyone had to give 110% to their work, without exception.

Catherine was browsing through one of the too many files crying for her attention, waiting on her desk. Forcing herself to focus, she was well aware of the fact that she was failing. Her mind kept returning stubbornly to the conversation she had had with her new acquaintance the day before. Suddenly, her brooding was interrupted by the thud of more files landing on her desk.

“Tough weekend, Radcliffe?” Joe raised his eyebrows.

¹Jane Austen: “Pride and Prejudice”

"I'm sorry, Joe," she apologised, fully back in the present. "My brain just shut down for a minute."

"Yeah, a common phenomenon in this office lately," came the sarcastic reply, accompanied by a grin. "These need a response within a week. You better tell your brain to hold off on the vacation for a bit longer."

Catherine watched her boss turn on his heel and return to his private office. She shook her head with a loud sigh. She intended to fully focus on the file again when she spotted Rita approaching her.

"Here's the file on the guy from the Johner case you wanted. I'm still searching for the one from the Pernell case. He's a bit tougher to figure out, " the computer division's up-and-coming rising star stated from behind her large, black-rimmed glasses.

"That was quick, thank you!" Catherine accepted the file with appreciation. "You're doing really great having been here only for a few weeks now. You've come at the worst time... it's been pure madness here for the past month."

"Well, I have big shoes to fill," Rita replied with a humble smile. "Or so I've heard."

Both women chuckled. Then Catherine looked at the piles on her desk but immediately leaned back in her chair, resignedly, shaking her head. She realised there was no way of getting back into attorney mode unless she could do something about the issue occupying her mind. Suddenly, she had an idea and looked at Rita, who watched her with amusement.

"Would you have time to look up something else for me?" Catherine asked hopefully.

"When does anyone have time here? But go for it. Anything for you," came the reassuring reply.

Catherine looked around to see if Joe was in sight, then taking a piece of paper, she wrote down something and passed it to Rita.

"I need you to see if you can find anything about this name."

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The rain was persistent that day and Catherine Chandler was battling her way through it with her umbrella, trying not to get drenched. She managed successfully to avoid disaster until she was almost at her destination - an old brownstone on 59th Street, on the southern side of Central Park. Just then, a cab, going past with speed that raised the eyebrows and adrenaline of the nearest passersby, gave her a shower that surpassed her morning one.

"Damn!" she cursed, frustrated, putting a few wet strands of hair behind her ear. "This better be worth it," she muttered and walked up the few stairs leading to the front door.

She pushed one of the doorbell buttons and waited.

"Hello?" a strong woman's voice came from the speaker.

"Mrs Kaminski?"

“Yes, *speaking*, ” was the reply.

“Hello. My name is Catherine Chandler. I’m sorry to bother you, but I would like to speak to you if you have a minute. I believe we have a common acquaintance.”

A brief moment of silence was interrupted by, “Come in, please,” and the sound of the buzzer. The click of the door followed and Catherine pushed it open.

She found herself in a long hallway decorated with a few landscapes and portrait paintings on the walls. Only a moment later, she spotted a figure appearing in front of her, standing at the door leading to another room.

It was a woman in her late 50s, dressed in a colourful long-sleeved, flower-pattern dress, with a crown of short, permed and blue-rinsed hair. Around her neck, a delicate golden chain with a small cross completed her elegant look. Her curious, small blue eyes noticed Catherine’s state and immediately she moved toward her. Although time had certainly left its marks, Catherine easily recognised the features of the young woman in John’s photograph in the face right in front of her.

“Goodness, what brings you here in such dreadful weather? Come in, you need to get dry,” said Mrs Kaminski, taking her guest’s soaked coat and umbrella. Then she drew the young woman into the living room, seating her near the crackling fireplace.

“Thank you,” Catherine said gratefully with a smile, warming her chilled hands by the fire. “I guess fall has finally arrived.”

“Tell me about it,” Mrs Kaminski said, putting a warm blanket over her young guest’s shoulders. “I realised that while playing with my flower pots yesterday. The night frosts always come earlier than I would wish them to.”

She was about to sit down in the vintage armchair by the fire when she straightened herself up again.

“I apologise! Would you like anything to drink? I guess you could do with something hot. Tea or coffee perhaps?” she offered friendly.

“Coffee would be lovely,” Catherine replied gratefully. “Thank you.”

“I won’t be a minute,” assured her hostess and briskly disappeared to the kitchen.

That gave Catherine a few minutes to look around and have a brief visual tour of Alina’s life. It seemed as if time stood still in that room. The neat but not too fancy vintage furniture in natural, warm colours gave it a feel of the late 1950s. Various porcelain statuettes in a glass display, on the wall shelves, and on what looked like a very old, black grand piano decorated the space, along with a set of crystal glasses and bowls in another glass-door display. There were more beautiful landscape paintings on the walls, but what Catherine found most interesting were the photos.

There weren’t many of them, only three.all black and white, on the mantelpiece, but they all radiated comfort and happiness. In the first one, there was a family of five in front of a Christmas tree - Catherine recognised one woman as Mrs Kaminski, probably in her early forties then. The man next to her seemed a bit older, seemingly her husband. The other three people in the photo were younger, two girls and a boy, all in their late teens. It was very likely that it was a photo of Alina with her husband and children. The second photo was a portrait of

the same older man from the first picture. An approximately three-year-old, curly-haired girl with cherubic cheeks was looking out of a window in the last photograph.

“Oh, when we were still young and beautiful,” Alina’s smiling voice came from behind Catherine’s back.

“You still are,” her guest replied, turning to her with a genuine smile.

“Young people often tend to be too kind to the older ones. But thank you,” she remarked gratefully.

With a chuckle, she walked over to her guest. She put a decorative tray with a vintage porcelain coffeepot, two cups with saucers, a sugar bowl and a creamer on a side table. After making and passing Catherine her coffee, she approached the mantelpiece, observing the framed photographs.

“My children, and my late husband,” Alina said with a fond smile. “We had a good life, Eliaz and I. It was filled with love, respect and common values. We always had each other’s back... until he passed away unexpectedly almost eight years ago.” A touch of melancholy coloured her voice. “That’s when I moved back to New York. Even after thirty years of living away, I felt I had a certain... attachment to this place.”

She smiled and looked at the last photograph. “My eldest granddaughter,” she added and couldn’t suppress a giggle, affectionately observing the little girl in the picture. Suddenly, she looked earnestly at Catherine.

“Excuse me, but you said we have a common acquaintance. Who did you mean?” Alina inquired curiously.

Her visitor searched for the right words for a moment.

“Yes, I...,” Catherine hesitated only briefly before taking a sip of coffee and putting the cup down. “I would like to do a favour for someone I have only recently met, and I believe you could help me.”

The older woman knitted her brows but encouraged the stranger to continue. “Go on.”

Catherine smiled, happy to have found a door open to fulfil her mission. Her warmhearted look focused on the sky-blue eyes of her hostess.

“Let me tell you a story...”

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It was already past 11 p.m. when she hastily made her way down to the basement of her apartment building. Quickly descending the ladder, she finally landed on the concrete ground and turned around to look into the semi-darkness behind the ever-present beam of white light.

“I’m sorry I’m late. Work has been a nightmare this week,” she apologised, while taking quick steps to meet the tall figure in the shadows.

“No need to apologise, Catherine. I know you’re busy,” Vincent countered with a gentle smile. The vision of her silky hair, wetted by the rain, framing her face and her coat leaving

watermarks on the ground made ‘butterflies in the stomach’ sound like an understatement. It reminded him of another enchanting sight a few weeks ago.

“And just as I got out of the cab, it started pouring buckets, and I realised I forgot my umbrella in the office,” she laughed, shaking her head. “It wasn’t as elevating an experience as that time at the concert, though.”

She crossed the threshold and embraced her beloved ardently. It was the moment she had been craving and waiting for all day... the most singular place... the feeling of comfort, peace and love... in his arms.

Vincent rubbed his cheek in the wet strands of her hair, smiling. “You could have sent a message. Rest is what you need most now,” he remarked with care, though secretly pleased that she had come in person.

She raised her head to look into his eyes. “*This* is what I need most now.”

Those words and her gaze disarmed him. “You have been successful,” he stated without hesitation, pride in her abilities colouring his voice.

Catherine’s beaming smile confirmed his theory. “I wish I could surprise you at least once without you *knowing* already.” She laughed, enjoying how Vincent humbly lowered his eyes.

“You surprise me every day, Catherine, never doubt that,” he replied, eventually.

She resisted the urge to do something spontaneous and returned from the clouds.

“Yes, I have been successful, and by Sunday evening, we should have the question answered.”

“What question?” he asked.

“The question ‘Are all things possible with love?’”

The excitement of the expectation in her voice was evident, though the sparkle in her eyes told him that Catherine had known the answer to that question for a long time.



The hands on his leather-strapped watch showed 5 p.m. when John approached the Wishing Well in Central Park on yet another Sunday. For a while, he was watching the still green leaves on the nearby trees sway gently in the autumn breeze. Then he took a deep breath and sighed, taking the familiar photo out of his pocket.

These trips were becoming more and more difficult for him emotionally. Why was he doing this to himself? What was he hoping for by performing this childish routine Sunday after Sunday? Why hadn’t he tried to reconnect with Alina years ago already? All these questions were invading his mind, as was one answer - he was *afraid* to reconnect.

Knowing he would never have been more than a friend, he feared his heart would not have been able to bear it. Yet, as the years passed, so had his longing. His voluntary loneliness had become burdensome and depressing. Some people were content living alone, or at least they could live with the reality of returning to an empty home and living mainly for their work. John

was not one of those people, though. While being successful at his job and an independent individual, he was only human. He *could* have been a friend now.

"You silly fool," he chided himself with a sigh and decisively put the photograph back into his pocket. "You're too late, thirty years too late."

"It is never too late to be what you might have been," an emotionally-charged voice startled him from behind.

When he turned around, the image of a middle-aged, elegant woman regarding him with her hands pressed to her chest took his breath away. Time can rob us of many things, but never of recognising a beloved face.

"Alina..." he whispered, slowly raising his hand as if to reach for her, to assure himself she was real and not only a fantasy.

Finally, encouraged by his disbelieving smile and the tears rolling down his cheeks, she slowly closed the distance between them. Her eyes were glistening, and when her own hand cautiously reached for his, he noticed it was shaking.

"Janusz..."

Not far away from them, in the shade of the old elm tree, Catherine was watching the lost and found lovers with a contented smile, deeply moved inside.

"Will she stay with him now?" asked Geoffrey, watching the scene with her.

"I think there is no doubt about that," Catherine answered, fondly ruffling his hair. "The truth is out, and nothing separates them anymore."

The boy felt pride in his young heart for having played a part in the successful reunion. "Everyone who loves someone should be with them, always," he contemplated.

Catherine's smile faded a little as she looked at him. "Sometimes it's not so easy, Geoffrey," she said softly, her eyes on him but her mind somewhere else. "Sometimes it takes... patience. But if we *really* wish for it and hold on tight to that wish... we *can* make it happen."

Her little friend's smile was contagious. "I know *you* can, too," he remarked knowingly, and Catherine suddenly thought that he was growing up too fast.



Another pleasantly mild night descended upon Central Park, and it seemed that even more stars decided to show off their beauty to the world. It was almost midnight, but the two lovers standing at the Wishing Well were in no hurry to leave. They were leaning against it and watching the great spectacle in the dark sky above them.

"It feels so wonderful, Vincent," Catherine remarked in awe and couldn't wipe the smile off her glowing face.

"You have achieved something special, Catherine. You brought back to each other two souls who were bound together all their lives. That *is* something to feel wonderful about," he replied, regarding the moonlight reflecting on her happy face.

“Alina said she had always loved John, but because he never called his feelings by their true name, she didn’t wish to ruin their friendship. She thought that’s how he wanted it.” She shook her head at the irony. “How familiar...”

A painful memory flashed in Vincent’s eyes, reflecting her own - Providence, Rhode Island. It had almost parted them forever.

Catherine brought them back to the present. “Time can separate people for life, but sometimes, it can bring them together again. And it is thanks to *you*, that I was able to be a part of the happy ending for John and Alina,” she added with a smile.

“Thanks to Geoffrey, his perceptiveness and generous heart,” he corrected her modestly, though gladly sharing the triumph with her.

Catherine reached into the pocket of her denim jacket. She produced a dime and showed it to Vincent, prompting him to take it.

“For you, Vincent. Make a wish,” she said with smiling eyes.

The gesture warmed his heart, but his hand gently closed her hand, which held the coin.

“Thank you, but I can’t.” His voice was filled with regret. “I’m afraid my wish would be too daring to come true...”

Catherine’s heart ached when hearing those words, but then a bright smile replaced the melancholy on her face.

“Then I shall make a wish for *both* of us,” she stated, her eyes locked with his for an intense moment.

She moved her hand above the grate covering the well, closed her eyes and dropped the dime in. When she opened her eyes to Vincent again, they shone with strong conviction in the moonlight. They were leaving no room for doubt. Whatever Catherine had wished for, he knew she believed in it with absolute certainty.

When her small body hid in his embrace, Vincent smiled and rested his cheek on the top of her head.

“For so many years, he couldn’t forget her,” Catherine pondered. “He never even married... just like Father and Margaret.”

“Or Odysseus and Penelope,” Vincent added, and his eyes wandered up towards the sky. “Two souls waiting for one another, parting on their common journey for a while, only to share it again in the end. No force can push true love into oblivion - not separation, not differences, not even time.”

They were standing in their embrace for a while, listening to the colourful sounds of the night, each of them deep in thought. Vincent’s sudden soft chuckle made Catherine raise her head. Her inquisitive look asked the question for her.

“I was only thinking,” Vincent explained, amused by his own childlike urge. He then pierced her eyes with a direct gaze. “What did you wish for, Catherine?”

For a moment, she regarded him silently, finding pleasure in keeping up the suspense. Then her lips broke into a mysterious smile as her arms tightened their hold around his waist.

"You know the rules, Vincent. If I tell you, it won't come true..."



"Remember tonight... for it is the beginning of always."

- Dante Alighieri