

Author's note: As we all know, there is no official "Christmas Story" in Season One. And isn't THAT just a shame? To put such things to rights, we offer this little tale, and I must tell you that the events here are set a bit after episodes like "Song of Orpheus," but before episodes like "Shades of Grey" or "Promises of Someday." Just so you know where you are. Ready then? Good! Let's get going!

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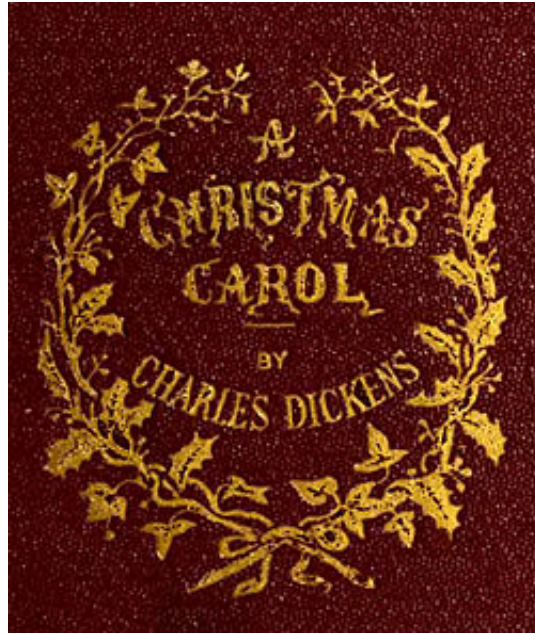


A (Father) Christmas Carol

An audio story, read by Skippy

For the Yule Page on Treasure Chambers, 2018.

Text in red is a narrator's aside. Enjoy!



A Christmas Carol. *Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.*

Ahem. Oh, for goodness sake, stop it. Just... stop. That's Dickens, and bluntly put, nobody ACTUALLY reads him, anymore, though a lot of folks pretend to. It isn't that he isn't *good*, mind you. It's not that he hasn't had his day, to be sure. Even Vincent likes him. But this is *Christmas*. And I know you don't want to hear me read Charles Dickens to you. Why would you?

You want me to read a Beauty and the Beast story to you, don't you? Something about Vincent, and Catherine, and Father and Mouse, and at least some of those other characters we've all come to love so much. Of course, we might *borrow* a bit from Mr. Dickens. But it's *borrowing*, not stealing, as Mouse would say. So. Shall we begin again? Ahem.

A (Father) Christmas Carol

(Done properly this time, and somewhat hastily
written by Cindy Rae.)

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Chapter One

Christmas Eve Vexations



Jacob Wells wasn't dead. Well, of course he wasn't. In that, he in no way resembled Jacob Marley. And not only was he not dead, he was fairly livid, at the moment. (That much, he did have in common with the other Jacob, who was right furious with Scrooge, in the beginning of the story. At least some things are constants. Isn't that nice?)

Yes, Father wasn't dead, but he was in a bit of a snit, gentle listener. It was one of those days when it seemed not one thing had gone his way. The children were unruly, and Mary seemed indifferent to it. They were excited about Christmas,

you see, and running through the halls. They'd demanded the story of Vincent's birth, as they did every holiday season, then scattered gleefully, the minute Arthur had run into the room and made off with a cookie from the common plate. Mouse had raced after him, while Jacob shouted at the tinker to keep his pet in a cage.

"Mouse! Keep that animal locked up! How often do I have to tell you—"

"Okay, good! Okay, fine!" Mouse had shouted back at an irritated Father. They both knew it probably wouldn't happen.

Well, after that rambunctious episode, Jamie had argued with him about taking her crossbow with her on sentry duty. (Father had opted for "no," while Jamie had insisted asking "But Father, why not?" Repeatedly.) Teenagers are no joy, sometimes. Jacob knew it was true.

But the youngest tunnel dweller wasn't giving anyone any peace, either.

Here it was, Christmas Eve, and baby Luke was teething. And if the level of fussing he was accomplishing was any indication, he was cutting fangs big enough to rival Vincent's own. No medicine Jacob knew of would stop his squalling, and Jacob (Wells, not Marley) did the best he could with that one, but he knew it wasn't very much.

Yes, he had to admit that if it had been "one of those days" for him, it was going to be "one of those nights" for Kanin and Olivia. Mary fed him a bottle of sweet milk, and declared him to be colicky, on top of the teething. It was a dreaded diagnosis, since there wasn't really a cure.

The list of other things the good Doctor Wells couldn't cure today seemed equally long. His knee was acting up, and he was quite out of the cream he used for it, with no replacement in sight. Chilly weather meant Sarah's arthritis was giving her fits, and Rebecca declared she had no idea what design she might use for the Winterfest candles, that year. Cullen had come in with a headache, and took the last of the aspirin, and then he'd bumped Father's chess table on leaving, scattering the chessmen across the board, even causing some to fall onto the floor. This peeved Father no small amount, because he'd been in the middle of re-creating Fischer and Spassky, seventh game.

Then Samantha had come in, then Kipper, then Old Sam. All of them had wanted Jacob's advice on something, though in at least two of those cases, Father doubted if they'd actually take it, which annoyed him a little more.

After that, more people with more problems. Jacob's opinion on when the Winter Concert should be held needed to be changed, twice, thanks to this or that. Winslow was testy, and declared that not much work was getting done, even though one of the big pipes was leaking, in the lower chambers.

Could it wait another day or two? Probably. But that decision didn't make Winslow any happier.

Father felt very much like he was losing control of his domain. And it put him in a foul mood, indeed.

It was about this time that he made his way to Vincent's chamber, hoping to be able to indulge in a calming cup of tea and a bit of reasonable conversation with his favorite tunnel dweller, only to be met by his huge son, as he cheerfully swung on his cape, clearly meaning to go out.

It was dark outside. Jacob knew what that meant.

"Vincent! You can't mean to go Above. Not tonight, surely?" Jacob asked.

Vincent's good spirits could not be dimmed. "The night is clear and cold. And I mean to see ..."

"Catherine. You mean to see Catherine." Father adopted a peeved tone. Well, he was peeved, so that was fair. "The fact that there are artificial *lights* hanging in almost every window and extra police officers and security guards everywhere won't dissuade you, I know. Won't make you listen to reason." Vincent simply tugged on his gloves, deciding not to engage in an argument.

Jacob knew his voice had an impatient edge, as he gestured down the corridor.

"Well, go on with you, then! I suppose I'll see you when you need stitched up ... if I even see you at all!"

Vincent had no idea what to make of this black mood, but he didn't dare ask about it, for fear of more reprisals. And before he could say so much as another word, Jacob firmly turned his back and waved his son away with his free hand,

clutching his cane with the other. Father stalked off down the tunnel corridor as quickly as his crooked walking stick would bear him to go.

Someone definitely needs an infusion of Christmas spirit, Vincent thought, but knew better than to say it out loud.

Jacob made his way back to his own chambers, the rapid tapping of the stick indicated his misgivings about Vincent going Above, on Christmas Eve. *He'll get himself killed going up to see her one of these nights, Father fumed silently, as he limped his way down the corridor. Because he won't stop until that's just what happens! Doesn't anyone down here have any sense? Has the holiday turned everyone's brains to... figgy pudding, or some such? Bah!*

And he sulked off to his chambers, the picture of Fatherly indignation. Which is quite a picture, I can assure you.

Father's hopes for a calm, peaceful evening were dead as a doornail, to quote Dickens. And there was no sense pretending they weren't.

He went to bed early, and feeling quite grumpy. "I wish Christmas would come and go, and just ... take all this chaos with it!" he vowed, tugging the quilt up over his shoulder. "Perhaps I will just sleep through it. Not that anyone would truly care if I did!"

And with that, he blew out his bedside candle, and went to sleep.

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Chapter Two

The Ghost of Margaret Past



Now, of course, this is the part where the first ghost comes to trouble Father, dear fans. Isn't it good that we jumped right in, there? I knew you'd think so, for I do, too. Let's see now... Oh, yes. Here we are...

Jacob tried to sleep deeply, but the tinny sound of pipe messages seemed to grow louder and louder, inside his room, until he was well and truly awakened.

What's this? He thought. *What's all this racket!?*

But it wasn't the sound of distant pipe traffic that was waking him up, my friends. Oh, no. That's too easy, and too predictable.

It was the sound of his chessmen, being scooped up off the floor and settled rather loudly, helter-skelter, back on his chessboard. The pieces rattled together. As did his dead wife's long string of pearls, every time she bent over to retrieve

another piece. "There you are, you little pawn. Come to me now... got you!" Margaret told it, reaching for where it had rolled beneath a chair.

"Margaret?!" Jacob proclaimed from the bed, as she settled the piece with its fellows. She wrapped her thick sweater a bit more firmly around herself. He could see through the sleeve, for a moment, and then it solidified.

"There! Oh. Good evening, Jacob. Having a bit of trouble, were you?" she asked.

Jacob eyed the haphazard board. "A bit. I was plotting out a game, and the pieces got all -- I have no idea why I'm discussing chess with you! Margaret! Whatever are you doing here?" *It's because I've dreamed her*, he thought.

"I've come to see you, of course," Margaret replied. She set his slippers by the bed, inviting him to get up. Father swore he could smell her perfume, still, just the faintest trace. "After all, you don't really think you're going to be allowed to sleep through Christmas, do you?"

She was beautiful, and looking very much the way she had the first day she'd come down. Her hair was beautifully done, and her pearls shone, in the soft candlelight. Her nubbly, tan sweater even sported a holiday pin. It was an enamel Christmas wreath, adorned with a shiny red bow. One she hadn't been wearing when she'd passed away, over a month ago. "Collect your robe, and come along now, Jacob." She extended her lovely hand. It still wore his rings. "We don't have much time, really."

Jacob pushed aside the covers. "We don't?" he asked, still astonished by her. He stood and grabbed a warm robe, belting it around his middle. He slid his sock-clad feet into the slippers.

"Of course we don't. Just an hour. Now... take my hand. We're all here to help you."

All? Father wanted to take her by the hand, just like he'd always done in the early days of their marriage, and then again, at her sad ending, but curiosity made him wait.

"Margaret? What do you mean? Who is here to help me? Why do I need—"

"Questions. Always so many questions! It's what made you a good doctor, I suppose." She stepped closer. "You may as well know we're here to more than

just help you. We're here to save you. I'm your Ghost of Christmas Past! Isn't that lovely?" And of course, Margaret gave him an absolutely radiant smile.

"Christmas Past?" He asked. "Are you really?"

"Who else?" Margaret asked cheerfully. She extended her hand again. "You have to take my hand, Jacob. This has to be voluntary. I can't force you to do it."

"I... I'm dreaming this... aren't I?" Jacob asked his beloved wife.

"If you like. Come along, now. Really. The clock is ticking."

Father reached out, and as their fingers touched, the entire room was filled with an almost blinding light. The stone walls of his home fell away, and all the books and trappings fell away with them.

Jacob felt as if he was being pushed backward, just a bit, by invisible hands, though he still held fast to Margaret's. When that sensation stopped, the Above world opened up, before him, and Jacob had to blink from the brightness of the light. When it dimmed, the scene before him came into focus.

It was daytime. And like an animal that had grown quite used to living in shadowy places, the bright sunlight of the day caused Father's eyes to sting.

"Margaret... I –"

"Do you know this place?" Margaret asked, as they both watched their first home solidify into view. Snow covered everything, and the sky was crystal blue.

Jacob smiled, with remembered joy. "Know it? I could walk the path to that mailbox blindfolded! It's our first house! Just a modest little rental while we were getting going, I know, but... but this is the place we lived in right after we were married!" His smile was almost as radiant as hers.

A neatly kept, tree-lined street formed all around them. Cars from the 1950's trundled by, and in the yards there were neighbors Jacob hadn't thought of, or seen, in years.

"Oh, there's Charlie Fenway. Quite fond of me was old Charlie. Charlie!" Father waved, as a bespectacled younger man pushed horn rimmed glasses up his nose, then hung a Christmas wreath on his door. "I say! Charlie!" Father called a little louder.

“He can’t hear you, Jacob. None of them can. These are but shadows“

“They’re but shadows of the things that once were. I know the story, Margaret.”
He sighed at her happily. What a lovely dream he was having.

Margaret gave him a fond look. “So you do.”

“So, they can’t see me, or hear me?”

“No,” she said. “These are the things that have already happened. But don’t lose hope. I think you’re about to see someone you knew better than Charlie. Better even... than me.”

She gestured back to their pleasant, white house, trimmed with dark grey shutters. A red Christmas cactus bloomed riotously, in a pot, and a sprig of mistletoe hung over the door. Even though there was snow on the ground, and Father was standing with Margaret clad in his night things, he felt no cold.

And then, he suddenly saw himself come out of his own front door. A much younger version of himself, of course, since this was the past. There wasn’t so much as a touch of grey in his hair or beard.

“My goodness, don’t I look young,” Father admired, as a Jacob Wells from over thirty years ago approached the mailbox.

“I always told you you looked handsome,” Margaret approved, watching his ebony cane hit the snowy walk with a sure stride. “So dapper. So dashing. So... mine,” she sighed, smiling, as he opened up the mailbox and reached in.

“I was that,” Jacob sighed right along with her, as he watched his younger self thumb through a stack of Christmas cards, bills and ads. Tucking the stack under his arm, he hurried in, thanks to the decidedly chilly nip in the December air.

“Our first Christmas. I loved this time. For us,” Father said, beaming at her. Their more recent reunion had been too short, and he knew that part of him was still very much mourning her passing.

“I know you did.” She smiled right back at him. “We both had such plans.” She took his patched elbow, and walked with him up the steps to the house. Not amazingly, the climb didn’t bother his knee. *The virtue of a dream climb*, he thought. *Or maybe it’s the virtue of being squired around by a ghost?*

“We did have plans, didn’t we? I remember your father only approved us living here while he was off scouting locations, for a ‘proper house for us.’ One he planned on having built. There are times when I think this was the happiest time of our marriage.”

“There are times when I think you are right. Perhaps,” Margaret said mysteriously, as she shimmered through the front door. Thanks to touching her, Father shimmered with her.

Father found himself standing in his own kitchen, from three decades ago. A pot of beef stew was simmering on the stove.

“I never did learn to cook,” Margaret commented to him, as her newlywed husband lifted the lid on his own creation. Good-smelling steam filled the air. It was a simple meal, one meant for a busy day.

“You did fine. And we managed well enough,” Jacob told her.

“It’s cold out there,” the younger version of Father was saying to his equally young wife. A lovely young Margaret was giving him a dotting smile. “Why don’t I go and build us a fire?” he asked, setting down the mail on the kitchen table.

“Why don’t you?” Margaret answered sunnily, as he went into the living room.

“I loved that old fireplace,” Jacob recalled, as he watched himself go. “The chimney flue stuck sometimes, and you had to rattle it and give it a good pull, but it—“

He’d begun to follow himself into the living room, but Margaret placed a staying hand on his arm.

“Wait,” she ordered.

Jacob caught a certain look in her eye, and knew she was to be obeyed. He heard himself chattering away in the next room, while the younger version of Margaret crossed to the kitchen calendar. She flipped it back to November, then forward to December, again.

Jacob knew this was a thing he hadn’t seen her do, in their lives together. “What is she... what are you doing?”

“Watch,” Margaret commanded, in the same steady tone. “Just watch, Jacob.”

Margaret flipped the calendar again, and began counting days. As Jacob stepped closer, he realized he knew what she was doing. She was counting from the days of her last period to this month.

“Please. Oh, please,” the younger version of Margaret implored the brightly printed paper. A large picture of a Christmas tree covered the December page. Jacob watched her say a little prayer. A prayer he knew was in vain. *She’s counting to see where she is in her cycle. She’s hoping... she’s hoping...*

Margaret was hoping she was pregnant. But Jacob, now older and wiser, knew she wasn’t. Wasn’t, and never would be.

She counted again, and again, her face a study in wishful thinking. Her period was due any day. And Jacob could see in her face that she was very much hoping it wouldn’t appear.

Father turned toward his wife. “I never... I never knew you wanted... so much... to... to...”

“To give you a child?” The older version of Margaret Chase smiled a little sadly. “We’d only just begun talking about it, I know. I did want it. Very much. I think I didn’t want to get your hopes up. Just in case I couldn’t.”

He looked at the woman who’d been his bride, and still was, in his heart. *How was it that I was married to you, yet didn’t know you feared infertility?*

Yet, they’d been childless, as a couple. As she had been, all her life.

His voice came from the other room. “There! That should set us to rights,” he said cheerfully.

They both heard him returning from the living room, as the younger Margaret hastily returned the calendar to its correct page, and quickly reached for two cups, covering up what she’d been doing.

“We’ll keep it good and going, and then just add more wood to the fire later,” he declared, “It will keep us nice and warm.” He planted a contented kiss on her cheek, as she settled two teabags into the cups. He never realized what she’d been doing.

“Do you think my father will find anything for us, soon? He hates us living here, you know,” Margaret said, keeping the conversation flowing. She smiled as she said it, indicating she didn’t mind living there at all.

“I know. But I’m just getting myself established, and I’ve got to save my nickels,” younger Jacob replied, knowing he harbored dreams of a private practice, someday.

“He says he’s looking in Boston.”

“I don’t want to go to Boston.”

Her grin was conspiratorial. “And just where is it you would like to go, Dr. Wells?” she asked settling the kettle on the stove.

“Anywhere, with you.” Both Jacobs said it together. Father remembered saying it.

The compliment had earned him a loving smile, from both his brides.

“Why don’t you open up the Christmas cards and set them on the mantle with the others, darling?” the younger Margaret asked him.

And it was in that moment Jacob realized why they were here, watching this particular day.

No. No, don’t do it. A warning bell went off, in Jacob’s mind. A very sudden one. Sudden, and very shrill. He suddenly knew what was in the stack of mail, the stack he’d pulled out of his mailbox, on the 24th of December.

“No,” Jacob said out loud. But of course his younger self couldn’t hear him.

“All right. There’s one here from Peter Alcott!” young Jacob declared, oblivious to his older self’s distress.

“Don’t,” Father said.

“They can’t hear you, Jacob,” Margaret reminded him.

“Peter! How are he and Lillian?” young Margaret asked.

Jacob tore open a large white rectangle. “Hale as ever. And... she’s expecting! Peter says he’s hoping for a girl.”

Father watched a shadow cross the younger Margaret's eyes. "How... how wonderful for them!" she enthused, though it was just a touch forced. On the stove, the kettle began to steam. The version of Jacob who was still looking at the mail had completely missed Margaret's mixed expression.

"Let's see. One from your Uncle Vernon, one from the Fenways, one from... what's this?" Jacob pulled out a rectangular business envelope. A fairly long one. It was stamped and sealed, and looked very important.

"Don't. Don't open it." Jacob pleaded with his younger self. "Throw it in the fire. Throw it away. Just... don't..."

"Hmmm?" Margaret's young self looked at the proffered envelope, and read the return address. "Chittenden? What's that?" she asked.

Younger Jacob set the other mail aside, and concentrated on this one. "A research facility with a very prestigious reputation." He turned the envelope over, in his hands. "Something your Father mentioned to me. Something to get us... in better circumstances while he looks for house locations... if they'll accept me..." He slid a well-manicured finger under the edge of the envelope.

Father's face was ashen. "Stop. Stop. I don't want to watch this. I ... I can't watch this, again. Margaret. Please," he said. On the stove, the kettle began to shrill.

The envelope came open. Jacob knew only too well what it said. It was his invitation to join Chittenden. It was his invitation to ruin his life.

"Please," Jacob repeated, knowing that the news that would ruin his marriage would initially be met by such joy, from the two of them. He couldn't bear to watch it again. Not knowing all he did.

"Dear Doctor Wells," young Jacob read aloud, to his excited wife.

The Margaret of the here-and-now touched her husband's arm, and in a twinkling, he was back in his own room.

"Thank you," he said. **And I can tell you, Father was most grateful, indeed.**

"It's all right, Jacob," Margaret replied. "The hour is all but gone, anyway."

“Why... why did we go there?” Jacob asked, his eyes wide with remembered despair. “Why show me that... that terrible moment? That... wonderful, yet awful day?”

“It wasn’t to hurt you, if that’s what you’re thinking.” She brushed her soft hand down the sleeve of his tattered robe. “We needed to teach you something. Something you struggle with, even now.”

“And what’s that?” he asked.

“That... that sometimes, even when we’re quite sure we know what’s coming, that we know another person, or what’s going to happen ... well. Things aren’t always as they seem.”

He blinked away the beginning of tears, remembering not just the letter, but the picture of her, scanning the calendar.

“I didn’t know that you badly wanted a child, so early.”

Margaret gave him a sad smile. “And then came Chittenden, and we were apart for a few months, until you got settled, and I moved out. And then...” she let the sentence trail.

“And then... the world blew apart,” he finished for her.

She nodded sadly. “I would never trade those days in that sweet little house. Not for anything, Jacob,” she assured him.

Father drew in a deep breath. “But you wanted me to understand that things aren’t always as simple as I see them.”

Margaret nodded. “They never are.”

Father remembered his initial reaction at being back on the tree-lined street.

“When you first showed me that place, I... I’d forgotten the bad. Because the day was bright, and I was with you; I only wanted to remember the good.”

“Yes, and sometimes we do just the opposite, with our memories. We remember the bad, and *forget* the good. Memory is such a ... a funny thing, Jacob. And yours is ... clouded, by me. By what we were. And what we weren’t.”

A distant bell sounded, and it struck one time. They both heard it.

“I have to go, now.”

“Margaret,” Jacob begged, “Just a little more time. Just a little more.”

But what could she show him? She was the Ghost of Christmas Past. Would she show him the weeks he’d spent working at Chittenden? His explosive findings, and the disdain he’d been met with, when he’d reported them? The days of his trial? His disgrace? Did he really want her to relive all those things with him, again? Because aside from the last week of her life, they really didn’t have so much more.

“I can’t, Jacob. If we’re to get through this, you know what’s coming next.”

“The Ghost of Christmas Present.” Jacob calmed himself, knowing this was all still an elaborate dream.

“The Ghost of Christmas Present,” she confirmed. “Good-bye. Good-bye, my dear husband.”

And in a flash of Christmas light, she was gone.

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Chapter Three

The Ghost of Christmas Present

Now I must tell you, that Jacob returned to his bed, because that's just how it goes in Dickens. But of course, this isn't Dickens, so after a very short while, Jacob was awoken again, this time by the sound of his chair being scraped back against the floor.

Jacob's eyes opened to what was by now a familiar white light. He pushed aside his covers and got right up.

When the light faded, an utterly unfamiliar black man sat at his chess board, setting up the black pieces. He wore what looked to be an elaborate costume, with a large robe. The cowl of a hood was down, so Jacob could clearly see his face.

I must be dreaming, Jacob thought. For I've never seen this man in my life.

"So, ah, this is the place, huh?" the man asked. He swept the room with his arm, to indicate the space, and eyed Jacob's chambers – and then Jacob, speculatively. The black man rose, and offered to shake Jacob's hand. Then he realized there was quite a claw on the end of his furred gloves, and removed it. He offered the hand again.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Jason Walker. The ah - The Ghost of Christmas Present."

Jason Walker! I bet you didn't see that coming, dear listeners! Well, well, and my, my. We don't see him in fan fiction very often, do we? Do you think he's there because he passed away while he was in the tunnels? Margaret did. I wonder what he'll have to say? Let's find out. Let's see now, where were we again? Oh, right here:

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Jason Walker. The ah- The Ghost of Christmas Present.”

Father shook hands, cautiously. “I’m Jacob Wells. I don’t believe we’ve met, before.”

Jason chuckled at that, as he let go of Father’s hand. “Me either. Ain’t that a kick? I’ve met Vincent, though. And Catherine. Well, time to go! An hour isn’t much, y’know.” Jason walked up the steps to the room’s exit.

“I thought I’d know all the people I met this evening,” Father said to Jason’s back. The big man turned.

“Why? Dickens didn’t write it that way. Scrooge didn’t know any of his ghosts, except for Marley.”

“I’m not Ebenezer Scrooge,” Jacob huffed. “And I’m a ... generous man, in my way.”

“In your way,” Jason agreed, though he rather sounded like he didn’t mean it. Father wasn’t sure if he liked that. He rather thought the two of them were about to have an argument of some sort.

But Jason just gave him a “come here” motion, with his fingers, and Father complied, mounting the steps slowly, using his walking stick. Jason escorted him through the hallways of his own home. The tinny sound of pipe messages accompanied their walk.

“So, you’re not Scrooge, huh?” Jacob asked conversationally. “We’ll see, Father. We’ll see.”

Jacob decided not to answer him. For what could this stranger know about his life?

They passed by Samantha, as she chased Kipper through the hallways. Winslow, still hard at work, walked by with his tool bag slung over his shoulder, making for the leaky pipe. Once again, Jacob realized that no one knew he was there. No one but the ghost beside him.

“This is the same night I gave up on, an hour ago,” Jacob complained. He saw no reason to live through more of it.

“Good thing it didn’t give up on you,” Jason returned, touring his home. Father wasn’t so sure about that.

“Quite the place you got here,” the younger man observed. They both continued toward the park entrance.

Are we going Above? Father wondered.

As they rounded a turn, Father could see Vincent talking to Jamie both of them standing near the gate that led to the culvert, and the park entrance. It was Jamie’s sentry post, and she was still quite upset over the discussion Father had had with her earlier that evening.

“But he’s wrong, Vincent! It’s a *good* idea if I have this near!” She’d clearly brought her crossbow to sentry duty, over Jacob’s objections.

“And this is why I get aggravated,” Jacob muttered, watching the scene.

“Shh,” Jason ordered shortly. Vincent was answering her.

“I know that you and Father disagree, but think, Jamie, just for a moment.” Vincent’s low voice was its ever-persuasive self. “What happens if an intruder breaches the gate?” he asked her.

“I shoot him right where he stands!” Jamie declared proudly, sighting down her crossbow.

“Yes... and what then? Vincent asked.

Jamie dropped the weapon. “What do you mean, ‘what then?’ It’s over. Isn’t it?”

“Do you ... kill this man?” Vincent asked. “And if you do not - and I never want you to face such a thing - does he leave the way he came? Jamie, we exist only with secrecy.”

“Robert has a slingshot.” Jamie was still fired up.



Both Vincent and Father filed that information away for later. “A small stone isn’t an arrow,” Vincent reasoned. “Someone hit by a rock has no evidence that there are people living down here. A crafted arrow gives them that,” Vincent stated logically. “And I will speak to Robert,” he added.

Father and Jason watched as Vincent gently took the weapon from Jamie’s hands, and turned it over. “It’s a fine crossbow, Jamie. And you may yet do some good with it. Perhaps even ... save a life, some day.”

And we know she will, don’t we, listeners? But that episode is a good bit away, yet. All right, let’s get back to where we were.

“And I will speak to Robert,” he added again.

Father watched the exchange. He could tell Jamie was listening. “He’s better with her than I was,” Father admitted.

“Yeah. Shh.” Jason repeated, while Vincent continued speaking.

“And I pray that it serves you, and all of us, well. But not this way. If someone comes in, you withdraw, and send out a message on the pipes. Pull the false wall in place. These are the plans that keep us safe. That is your charge.” Vincent offered her back her weapon.

Jamie took back her crossbow, and looked glum.

“Fine.” She still sounded doubtful. “I’ll take it back to my room. No sense leaving me alone with temptation. Will you watch the door for me, for a minute? I’ll be right back.”

Vincent nodded at her capitulation. “Of course.” He settled himself on a carved bench.

“Sorry to hold you up. You going to see Catherine?”

“Also ‘of course,’” Vincent almost smiled, as he said it.

“She’s a fire cracker,” Jason admired, as Jamie sprinted away. “I could have used a few like her in my brigade.” Jason’s dark eyes looked wistful. “They were all fighters, too. And they all had white hats.”

“I can’t say I can picture Jamie wearing one,” Father replied, watching Vincent, as he extracted a thin volume from his cape pocket.

“What’s he reading?” Jason asked.

Father read the cover. “Sonnets of the Portuguese. Elizabeth Barret Browning. Love poetry.” Father sighed. “Of course.”

Jason eyed the book. “Love sonnets! Can’t say I ever indulged in those, myself. You?”

He had, once upon a time. As a matter of fact, he’d read more than one of them to Margaret. *How do I love thee? Let me count the ways*, Father thought. But Jacob had a hard time concluding that he was standing with Jason Walker, “The Subway Slasher”, about to discuss Browning. Or any other reading choice. Still, he played along. Dreams didn’t always make sense, and this one was a doozy.

“I might have,” Jacob conceded, answering Jason’s question.

The younger man (would that be “the younger ghost?” Jacob wondered) sighed, as well.

“It’s a lot to keep track of, ain’t it,” Jason said. Though it was a question, Jacob didn’t think it was actually posed as one.

Father answered, anyway. “Yes. Yes, it is. Sometimes, it really is,” he replied, thinking about Vincent, Jamie, Mouse, little Luke, and the other people who inhabited his home. And he was responsible for all of them, in his way.

“It’s a tough thing, managing it all.” Jason folded his arms across his broad chest. “It makes you... a lot of things. Responsible. Powerful, even when you don’t really want that. And even when you do.” He stepped away, letting Father take in the words.

Father nodded in understanding, realizing that Jason Walker too, had shouldered the burden of command, and of many lives, under his watch. Perhaps this big black man knew more about what Jacob’s life was like than he previously suspected.

“Some of the days certainly have... challenges in them,” Father admitted.

“And they call you ‘Father.’ He calls you that,” Jason observed, nodding Vincent’s way.

Father took in the picture of Vincent, reading by lantern light. “And so I have been. To him, and many others. I would say ‘others like him,’ but we both know there aren’t really any of those.”

Jason put one booted foot against the wall and leaned back against it. “Yeah. No kidding. I even tried to be him. Or wanted him to be like me. Whichever. It didn’t work out. And... and I know what it is to have everybody counting on you. How... hard that is.” He looked back toward Father.

“It is hard. Sometimes,” Jacob said.

“Nah. It’s hard all the time. You just get better at managing it.”

“Do you think so?” Jacob asked.

“Sure. It’s always there. Always that... responsibility of command. How it shapes what you think. How it doesn’t let up, so you can’t let up.” Jason glanced Vincent’s way, again. “I made a mistake. A big one. I was the man who couldn’t afford to make any of those, too many people counting on me, and I did. I made a mistake.”

“You mean... the man you killed, accidentally,” Father said. He well knew Jason’s story. What he hadn’t gleaned from the papers he’d heard from Vincent.

The brown eyes tracked back to Jacob. “That... no, not just that. That was an accident, yeah. But... the mistake was me thinking it was all on me. That I had to fix what was going on, in the subways. No matter what.”

“You were trying to help people.” Jacob defended the other man to himself.

“I was. That’s just it. My motives were pure.” He put the foot down and stepped closer. “It’s the results that were off. Way off.”

“Vincent says you spared his life.”

Jason nodded. “I did. Act of redemption. Fine. But it... it didn’t even the score. It didn’t bring back the transit cop I hurt. I killed,” he amended himself.

“Is that what you’re here to tell me? That you regret killing another man?” Father asked, wondering what in the world that had to do with him. As far as Jacob knew, he’d never killed anybody.

Jason shook his head. “I’m here to tell you that all the good I did didn’t erase the bad. That all the times I was ever right didn’t fix the time I was so, so wrong. Nobody I saved brought that man back. Or any of the others. But since I was in charge, was responsible for so much, I didn’t dare *be* wrong. Couldn’t let myself see it. Couldn’t admit it to myself, much less anybody else. Not until...”

“Until... until the harm you’d done was irreparable,” Father concluded for him.

“Yeah.” The brown eyes were full of understanding. “Not until then. Not until it was too late, past too late, to fix things.” He nodded toward Vincent, then glanced back at Jacob, again.

Vincent, oblivious, simply turned the page of his book.

“I take it you’re implying I’m making a mistake, when it comes to the raising of my son?”

Jason shrugged. “Ain’t implying nothing. Just saying ... authority is like a subway train, sent running down the tracks. Momentum carries it forward, and it’s awful hard to stop it, or turn it back.” He cut to the chase. “If what you think about him and Cathy Chandler is wrong...”

“I think what any sane man would. And he doesn’t tend to listen, actually,” Father replied, a bit huffily.

Jason considered that. “Maybe not. But he *hears* it. And you’re his father, or the closest thing he has to it. Whose counsel does he respect more than yours?”

Father heaved a gusty sigh and sat on the nearest boulder. "To tell you the truth, I'm not sure what I think, anymore." Father set aside his cane and tugged the belt of his robe a little tighter, just for something to do with his hands. Jason simply watched, in silence.

"At first, when he first found Catherine, brought her down... I was so certain she was a danger to us – to him," Jacob explained.

"And now?" the young ghost prompted.

Father picked up his walking stick again, and scratched at the dirt with the end. "Now... I'm not sure that still isn't true, even though... even though I may have... misjudged her," Father admitted. "But her world is still the greatest danger to him. He's been hurt by it. But..."

"But?"

Jacob knew he owed Catherine Chandler. And it was a debt he could never hope to repay. "She brought my wife down to see me, not so long ago. Margaret. She was the ghost who came to see me before you."

"I saw her on the way out. Classy."

Jacob nodded. "Yes. She was. Is," he corrected himself. "A wife I thought I'd lost. I wife who... became a ghost, in my arms. I'd have had her be nowhere else," Jacob added quickly.

Jason tilted his head and regarded his charge. "It's not everybody who would think that way."

Jacob shook his head. "You don't understand. After... *years* of nothing, I got to see her for *seven days*. Seven... incredible days." Father shook his grey-haired head again, as Vincent dog-eared a page, and read on, oblivious to the conversation going on a few feet away from him.

"That was quite a gift," Jason observed.

"It's one I can never repay. And... the day Catherine freed me, the day she brought us together... well. She told me... about Vincent... She loves him."

A dark eyebrow raised. "Do you believe her?"

Jacob closed his eyes, knowing he did. "I don't see as I have a choice."

Vincent, still unaware, turned another page. This time, he smiled, subtly. Clearly, he liked what he'd found.

"Does he know?" Jason asked, nodding toward Jacob's seated son.

Father had never even considered the question, before. "There's probably no way he couldn't. He... senses everything she's feeling."

"And that makes you, leader that you are, father that you are, afraid for him."

"Only a fool wouldn't be," Jacob concluded, a touch of wistfulness in his voice.

"Then be afraid," Jason advised, offering his hand to help Jacob to his feet. "But don't make *him* afraid," the younger man concluded, placing a strong hand on Father's elbow. "Don't... share your fears."

"When it comes to the two of them, I'm afraid that's—"

"Afraid. There's that word again. Stop. *Don't* share your fears. He has no need of those. Neither does she. They both have enough of those, on their own. Share your hopes. That's what I'm s'posed to show you."

Jacob looked between the two men, one so sure he was right, and the other oblivious to all of this. Yet also equally sure, in his way.

"I can't afford to be wrong about this," Father fretted, as ever, concerned about the perils Above. "If I am, it could kill him."

The brown eyes turned very somber. "On that, we agree. If you're wrong, you could kill him."

Father got the feeling that he and Jason meant something entirely different.

If I discourage him and that's wrong... If he listens, and he loses her—

Jacob barely formed the thought before they all heard Jamie, barreling back into the tunnel. She was without her crossbow. But Jacob would have bet his queen's knight that she was already planning what kind of weapon she'd practice with, next. Vincent closed his book and rose, at her entrance.

"Okay, I'm back," she said, taking Vincent's place near the door.

Vincent adjusted his cape. "Very well. I hope you have a peaceful night," he replied.

"It's Christmas Eve in New York. I doubt there's much of a chance." Jamie smiled.

"It's late. And the cold tends to keep most people in."

"But not you." The smile didn't dim.

Vincent reached up to move the lever that would open the outer door. "I am not... most people," he said to his young friend, giving her a conspiratorial smile in return.

"You sure aren't," Jamie answered.

Jason Walker threw back his head and laughed, at that one.

"Merry Christmas, Vincent," Jamie added.

Father watched the exchange, and the other man's reaction. Laughter, from Jason? At this companionable exchange between his two children, both of whom admitted Vincent wasn't 'most people?' Father could hardly believe it.

"Merry Christmas, Jamie. And Jamie..." Vincent pulled the gate open. "... about Father,"

"Yes?" she asked.

Father perked up his ears, rather interested in what was about to be said.

"He... he only wants what's best for everyone. And he's had a difficult evening. I think we should all try to be more... patient with him, at times. Remember the burden he carries. It is difficult to shoulder the responsibility of so many."

Jamie dropped her eyes, a little. "Yes, Vincent. I'll remember. And I'll try."

Vincent put a brotherly hand on her shoulder. "No one could ask for more."

The cold air was tumbling into the passageway. "It smells like it's going to snow," Jamie observed, as Vincent pulled up the hood of his cape.

"So it does," he replied, sounding positively cheerful, at the prospect. "I hope it will." He swept out into the chill December night, leaving Jamie to close the gate and secure the lever, behind him.

Standing there, Jacob conjured the image that painted; of Vincent standing on Catherine's balcony with the woman he loved, while fresh snow fluttered to the

ground, all around them. It was a lovely picture. And one he very much hope his huge son got to enjoy.

“You’re thinking about what all this means to him,” Jason said, as Jamie settled herself back at her post.

“I am,” Father admitted. *I don’t dare be wrong. Not about this. I don’t dare*, he thought. He wasn’t sure if Jason’s visit helped with all of that, but at the very least, it did clarify things for him. He was responsible for much. Sometimes, he knew that made him over-cautious.

Be safe, Vincent. Please be safe, Father thought. Jacob couldn’t help but fret for his son.

“It’s a risk he has to take,” Jason said, as if he were reading Father’s mind.

“I know,” Father admitted. “I think that’s the part that worries me the most.”

He watched Jamie untie the wide sash of her belt, then practice using it as a sling, with the loose stones, nearby. *That’s my girl*, Father thought, realizing how devoted she was to protecting all of them.

“Yep. I sure could have used a few like her,” Jason said. “And my time here is done.”

Just as he said it, a distant bell chimed two times.

“Are we going back to my chambers?” Father asked. Light began to build, all around them.

“Ain’t up to me,” Jason said, stepping away. Father realized Jason Walker was bidding him farewell. He tugged the glove back on, and gave a small wave.

“Remember: Hope, not fear!” Jason called.

“I will remember,” Jacob promised.

Father felt the light engulf him, and bear him away. When he opened his eyes he was in the hospital chamber.

Across from him was the last person he ever expected to see. And probably the only one he should have. A long brown braid was slung over one shoulder, and it was touched with just a few threads of silver.

“You! It can’t be. It can’t be you!” Father exclaimed.

“And who else would be the Ghost of Christmas Future, for you? Who else made you a father, Jacob? Ensured your future, that you’d have one, forever?” Devin’s mother asked.

Grace! Don’t you just love that we’re seeing people Jacob doesn’t expect, dear listener? What a ripping way to end that chapter! Makes you want to go right on, doesn’t it? Well, I won’t keep you waiting! Settle in, now, and let’s see what happens.

**



Chapter Four

Christmas Grace

Jacob could only stammer, looking at her. “Grace! I... I... er, that is, well...”

“And you’re terrible at saying ‘hello,’” the middle-aged woman chided.

Jacob didn’t quite know how to do that. Especially considering he’d spent a good bit of the evening with his wife. Isn’t he in quite the pickle, now?

“I... er. Hello, Grace. That is to say... I can’t say I really expected to see you here.”

Grace shrugged, and the gesture lifted the simple shawl she’d always kept wrapped around her shoulders and tucked into her waistband, against the tunnel chill.

“I passed into the next life from this one, right here. Same as the others you’ve seen. Merry Christmas Eve, Jacob. And that’s all the time we have for pleasantries. Let’s go.”

She reached for his hand, and caught it, but Jacob put a staying hand on her arm. “Grace. Dear Grace. I’m so sorry. I know I never got to say it, and ... and you have to know I—”



“Did everything you could. Of course I do. You’re talking about the past, Jacob, and I’m here about the future. Step lively, now!”

Like almost everything else about Grace, her walk was practical. She had a sure, steady stride, the kind that meant she was going someplace, and wasn’t content to stop until she got there. There was no dilly-dallying, when it came to Grace. There never had been.

Jacob struggled to keep up. “Where... where are we go—“

“To see the future! Of course!” Grace interrupted. Jacob remembered that it was a thing she’d done fairly often in life, as well.

Nearly his height, with a broad forehead and plain face, she looked much the same as she had the day she’d first brought him Below. Fingerless gloves covered her hands, and a heavy apron with deep pockets covered her long skirt. Her shoes were cheap, and half a size too big for her, and she wore extra socks to make up for it. Bereft of jewelry, cosmetics, or any other form of adornment, her chief virtue was her long, dark hair. It was something her son had inherited from her.

The future. Children were the future. And he had one, with her.

“Devin...” Jacob began, but didn’t know what to say, from there. Devin had disappeared years ago. For all Jacob currently knew, he was dead. “Is he... with you?” Father asked.

Grace looked around. “You don’t see him, do you?” Grace asked, intent on leading Jacob through his tunnel home.

“You mean... right now? No. No, I don’t. Does that mean he’s still alive and—“

“It means this ain’t about him. It’s about you. You and... your other son,” Grace said, with no hint of jealousy in her voice. “Come along, now. Here we are.”

She took Jacob into his own chambers, where they both saw Vincent setting up the chess board for a game. A pot of tea sat to one side, and Vincent dropped two teabags in the steaming water. Though his movements were sure, he seemed burdened by something, as if some sort of weight was bearing him down.

“Ah, there he is!” Grace called out. “Vincent! Devin’s favorite person in all the world, and yours too. What a magnificent being he is. So big!”

He was, and Jacob could see he was occupied, as he prepared for their evening, together.

“Wait. That... that’s not my tea pot,” Father observed, watching Vincent settle the lid on a green ceramic pot. The one he currently used was brown.

“Not yet,” Grace replied. “Master Wong will give it to you for Winterfest, in a few years.”

“A few years?” Jacob raised an eyebrow. “How many?”

“Shhh!” Grace said, reminding Father of Jason Walker. “Watch. And learn,” she instructed, nodding toward the doorway.

Father looked up to see himself, coming in the entrance. But it was not himself of today. Indeed, Jacob saw that his hair was a good bit greyer, and that the stiffness in his knee was just a bit more pronounced.

“Vincent? Already here, are you? I’m sorry I’m late. William needed me for something. It seems we went through quite a bit of the supplies, this holiday.”

“Is it anything serious?” Vincent asked, settling the pieces on the board.

“Nothing a trip to Wong’s shouldn’t settle,” Jacob replied, leaning heavily on his walking stick. “Thank you for getting this ready.”

“I was just setting up the game,” Vincent replied, putting the pawns in place. He judiciously eyed Jacob as the latter made his way carefully down the steps.

“It’s taken to freezing, Above. You’d think I’d stop being surprised, when it’s cold in December,” Jacob complained, making his way to his chair.

“Pascal says there will be snow,” Vincent said. Both Grace and Jacob caught the wistful look that passed over Vincent’s face. A look he banished, as the older version of Father drew nearer. Vincent pulled out Jacob’s chair and turned up the lantern, near the table.

From this angle, the now-younger Jacob could see not only the deeper lines in his own face, but the subtle ones in Vincent’s. The blue eyes looked sadder than they used to, and... empty, in a way Father couldn’t quite name.

“So ah... shall we have a game, then?” Older Jacob asked.

To his younger self's ears, the invitation sounded a bit forced. Vincent simply nodded, and then sat down across from him.

"This is Christmas in the future?" Father asked Grace. She only nodded, as Vincent moved his opening pawn. Older Jacob answered back with his own. In spite of Vincent's formerly sad look, the game went on. This seemed familiar. This seemed right. After a while, they were both clearly concentrating on the game.

"Doesn't seem so bad," Father observed, watching himself do the thing he did so often, with his son. Grace simply continued to observe the room, silently.

Surprisingly, Vincent lost the game, and they set up the board again. The second match ended in a draw.

Also surprisingly, Jacob realized how rarely they spoke, during the match. In the past, chess games were often times when father and son discussed tunnel business, or the goings on in their community. This odd, almost quiet contest was unusual for them.

"Something's wrong. What is it?" Father asked Grace. She simply put a cautionary finger to her lips. "Watch," she whispered.

Older Jacob reached over for his son's hand, and gave it a paternal squeeze. "It... it will get easier, Vincent. In time." He was obviously trying to console his son.

"What will get easier? What... what happened?" Jacob asked. But Grace didn't answer.

Vincent's sad eyes looked up from the chess pieces to Father. The blue gaze was naked with pain.

"In time," he echoed. He drew his hand away from his rook. "I'm not sure... if I believe that... or I dread that it might be true."

Vincent laid his white queen down, conceding the stalemate to a loss. It meant they wouldn't have to play another game. Vincent had now lost what would usually have been two out of three matches.

"Vincent..." The name trailed away. The older version of Jacob clearly didn't know quite what to say.

“The pain feels like... like it’s all I have left of her,” Vincent replied, rising from the table. They both knew they wouldn’t play anymore. There was no point. Vincent turned to go.

“It was for the best,” Jacob said to Vincent’s retreating back. “You know it was. You even said it was, at the time.”

“How prudent you sound,” Grace observed. Jacob knew it wasn’t a compliment. Grace had always been possessed of her own kind of wisdom. She didn’t disdain prudence, as a rule, but there were times when she didn’t embrace it, either. It was another way in which Devin was much like her.

“Prudence is often equated with sagacity,” Father said, not quite sure why that wasn’t true, right now.

“Not always,” she answered, as they both continued to watch Vincent.

Vincent stopped in his tracks, taking a moment to answer his father’s charge.

“I did. I did say it. And so did you.” There was no accusation in the tone. Whatever this was, they were past that. Vincent scooped up his cape from the back of the chair, and tugged it on. The movements were so slow, they both knew he wasn’t really going anywhere.

How different this is, from the night he was going to see Catherine, Jacob realized. He looked so... full of energy, then. So... pleased with himself. With his prospects.

“I know I said it,” Vincent admitted. “But I didn’t feel it. That it was for the best.” Head lowered, Vincent left the room.

“What? What was for the best?” Jacob asked Grace. “Catherine. He’s talking about Catherine. He must be. Did something happen to her?”

“Happened. Yes,” Grace answered, as Jacob watched his older self rub a more grizzled chin with a thoughtful hand. The older man could only stare at the place where his son had just been. So did his counterpart.

“Wait,” Jacob realized. “It’s Christmas. If it’s Christmas, that means Catherine has no work. Why is Vincent here at all? Why isn’t he with her?”

Grace sighed, then shook her head. “It is Christmas. But not for them. They are no more.”

Jacob was struck by the pronouncement. "They're... no more? What does that even mean? Good God. She isn't... dead, is she?" Jacob was appalled, at the thought. He knew Catherine's work was sometimes dangerous...

"No. No, she isn't dead," Grace replied. "That was but one possible future for her, but this is the more likely one that plays out. They are... separated." Grace looked up and to the left. "It's their first Christmas, for that. And right now, Catherine Chandler is in Westport. And she is weeping."

Jacob was aghast. "How... how did this happen?"

Grace shrugged. "He listened to his fears. And then, he listened to yours. Watch."

Grace touched his arm, and Father felt time spin forward, and much to his horror, he saw Christmas play out again, and then again, very much in the same manner. An increasingly older Vincent would come into his chamber to set up the chess board, and play with an increasingly older Jacob. They were two old bachelors spending a lonely Christmas in each other's company.

Jacob realized he was perhaps ten years older in one scene, and nearly twenty in the next. He'd traded his walking stick for a sturdy crutch, and the steps in his chamber had been replaced by a sloping ramp, so he could make his way down. Thick dust gathered on the books at the top of his study. He clearly never climbed up there, anymore. Many of them had been carted to the space below, so he could reach them. They all but lined the stone walls.

"So many of your fancy books in this room, Jacob," Grace observed, nodding toward the mountain of reading material around them. "How to fix a broken bone, how to fix a burst appendix, deliver a baby, ease the croup ... makes me wonder. Did any of them ever tell you how to fix a broken heart?"

They both watched Vincent as he purposely threw the game to a very old Jacob.

"Well I'll be! I won!" Father wheezed, capturing Vincent's queen. "Checkmate!"

"Yes. You won, Father," Vincent said, rising. Jacob did the same, very slowly, and Vincent carefully tucked his parent into bed. "You won," Vincent repeated. There was a world of sorrow, in his tone.

"He... he blames me?" Jacob asked Grace, as they both watched his son tuck him into bed.

Grace shook her head. "He's too honest a man for that. But you didn't exactly help... did you?" It was a gentle accusation.

Jacob closed his eyes as he owned his guilt. "I... I don't suppose I did. But Grace, you have to know I only wanted what was best for him..."

Time yanked them both forward again, only this time, the scene felt different. They were still in Jacob's chambers, and Vincent was still there, setting up the chess board. But there was an almost eerie silence to the room. Vincent settled himself into his chair. The now old, green teapot was still there. But now, there was only one cup, sitting near it. Jacob realized that both were covered with a fine film dust.

Vincent advanced his pawn, even though there was no one else in the chamber. "It's your move, Father," Vincent whispered. It was cold in the room. December cold. No brazier had been lit in here, in a long time.

"This is still Christmas?" Father asked Grace. She nodded.

Christmas, again. And very somber one, from the looks of things.

"Jamie's playing with her children, in the park," Vincent told no one, even as he addressed the empty chair opposite him. "She says... she says there might be snow." Vincent rubbed his forehead with one hand, then covered his eyes. Jacob knew his son was fighting tears.

"Vincent..." But Jacob knew his son couldn't hear him. "I'm here. I'm here, Vincent."

"You aren't, actually," Grace said, sympathy in her tone. "I'm sorry, Jacob. Truly."

They both watched as Vincent's long-taloned nail hovered over his king. "You win," he said softly. Vincent laid down the king in surrender, having not touched another piece on the board. "You win," he repeated, laying down the white queen, as well. He braced his hands on either side of the table, and this time, the sob did come.

"I'm... I'm gone. Aren't I?" Jacob asked, more concerned for his son than he was for himself. Heavy streaks of grey threaded his son's once-bright mane of hair. Crow's feet etched his blue eyes, and the fingers in his left hand looked arthritic.

Grace didn't answer. She didn't have to.

“How far ahead is this? From this night, how long?”

Grace refused to give him an exact number. “He’s near the age you are now. You live a long time, Jacob. This is his first Christmas, without you.”

“He’s in his sixties?!” Jacob marveled that his still-vigorous son could look so bereft, and so burdened. “More than thirty years,” Father marveled, as tears flowed freely down his own cheeks. “He looks so... so sad. So... lonely. So... hopeless.”

“He dedicated his life to you. And to this place. But now, the one is gone. And the other, though safe... it is no comfort, to him. Or at least, it isn’t much. But he is safe. They all are.”

“Sometimes we must leave our safe places. And walk empty-handed among our enemies.” Father quoted.

“What?” Grace asked.

“It’s a line from a book. One Vincent memorized. It was... it was something he quoted to me. And... I think I’m starting to realize... how important it was, for him. It was one of his favorite lines.”

Grace looked at the dejected man before her. “Shame it wasn’t one of yours,” she noted.

“Catherine... what about Catherine? Did he never see her again? Never... go to her?”

Grace shook her head. “When she left New York... her life took a different path. They severed their bond. She even tried marriage, once. But... her heart was always broken. Like his.”

Jacob realized the insurmountable sorrow that had engulfed his son and the woman he’d loved. “Did she never have children, Grace?” he asked, hoping for at least that much consolation, for all of them.

The dark head shook again. “She... waited too long. Like me, maybe.” Eyes the exact shade of Devin’s own pierced the man who had once been her lover but had never been her husband.

“Her days marched on. They always do, whether we’re sad or happy. She died before you did. In some far-off land. In the end, the only thing she was married to was her grief. But she was still famous. Still rich, even though she gave a lot of it away. Her death made the papers.”

Jacob looked toward Vincent, who was wiping his eyes and pulling himself together.

“He must have been... inconsolable.”

Grace shrugged. “He was, in his way. And in another way, it was just another day without her. Just another day they both... missed their chance,” Grace said. “His heart was already in pieces, Jacob. Had been, for years.”

“No. No!” Jacob declared forcefully, driving his cane into the ground as he strode from his rooms, leaving the image of his dejected son behind him. “I say ‘no’ to this. To all of it!” He marched through the tunnel hallways, with Grace at his heels. “This will not be what happens!”

“And what do you plan to do about it?” Grace asked, easily keeping up with him. Jacob wasn’t sure whether she was walking, or floating, behind him.

“I intend to do what any good father should do!” Jacob said, making his way toward the doorway where Jamie was still standing watch.

“And that is?” Grace caught his arm, and he slowed down.

“Kick him back out the door the minute he comes in it!” Father declared hotly.

Grace let go of his arm. “That sounds... positively imprudent,” Grace said, unable to resist tweaking Father, just a bit.

Father slowed. “Grace... I... I failed Devin. Failed him almost completely. He didn’t even know I was his father. And now... now here’s Vincent, and I’m doing no better. I’m treating him as if he’s about to make every mistake I ever made, and ...”

“Devin isn’t Vincent, though they both needed much the same thing,” Grace declared.

That brought Father up short. “And what is that?” Jacob asked, not sure what it could be.

“Freedom. And your blessing, to use it,” she said, as they moved forward quickly, again. They rounded the bend, and there sat Jamie, right where she’d been earlier, a pile of decent stones at her feet. Clearly, she’d been practicing.

“Grace, I swear to you I won’t interfere with them. That the thought of him going to see her scares me to death, but... but the alternative is so much worse. They’ll get no more discouragement, from me.”

“And?” Grace prompted. ‘Giving no discouragement’ wasn’t good enough, and they both knew it.

“And that I’ll give them both what support I can. That I’ll... pray for them. Pray for them both. That they’ll find their way to each other, and keep finding that. That they’ll succeed. That they’ll thrive, even.”

She gave him one of her rare smiles. Grace’s plain face was almost beautiful, when she did that.

“That’ll do,” she said sensibly.

“But will it be enough?” Jacob asked, worried for all of them.

From somewhere, a distant bell struck three times.

Grace leaned close, knowing her time was up. “Devin still lives. And you’ll see him before much longer. And with your help... he’ll be an uncle, one day,” she whispered into his ear. “I’m not supposed to tell you that. But I couldn’t resist. Good-bye Jacob!”

Father’s jaw dropped and amazement lit his blue eyes. *Devin... Devin was still alive? Truly? And coming home? And he would one day be an uncle? But that meant... that meant that Vincent and Catherine would—*

“Grace! You have to tell me more!”

“Merry Christmas, Jacob!” Grace said, departing in yet another glittering show of bright light.

**



Chapter Five

"God Bless Us, Every One"

Father woke up in his bedclothes, quite tangled up in the blankets. After a few moments struggle, he finally kicked himself free, and hurried off down the corridor. He was several feet outside his door when the twinge in his knee told him he'd forgotten his walking stick.

"Bother!" he said, sounding very much like Mouse. He went back and collected it, while he pulled his robe belt tight and gathered a white stocking cap. The night had gotten a good bit cooler indeed, and the brazier in his chamber had burned quite low.

"I haven't missed it. I surely haven't missed it?" Father said, tapping quickly down the hallway, cursing the suddenly quiet pipes for not helping him know the time. Had he really slept through Christmas? He knew he'd threatened to.

Turning a corner, he nearly collided with William, who was sipping a large mug of warm apple cider.

"William! William, my dear friend, and so good to all of us, too," Father declared. "Come, you must tell me what time it is. What day it is!"

"What time?" William asked, noting Father wasn't wearing his pocket watch, considering he was wearing his nightshirt and robe. It was an answer the big cook always knew. "Just after midnight."

Jacob's heart sank. "And the day?"

William's broad face broke into a large smile. "What day? Why, it's Christmas Day, of course. Merry Christmas, Father!"

"Christmas! It's Christmas Day. The spirits came and went all in one night, just so I wouldn't miss it! Well of course they did. They can do anything they want to! Isn't that wonderful?"

“Uh, yeah. I guess so. Father, are you okay?” William asked, looking a bit worried.

“Never better!” Father replied, taking the mug from William’s hand and taking a sip. “My, that’s good. Might be a little better if we put a little spirit of our own in it, yes?” He returned the mug.

William gave him quite the look. Was Father actually suggesting they spike the punch?

“I’ll uh... see what I’ve got set by,” William replied, thinking Jacob had maybe already been into the cooking sherry.

“Come, now we must go and check on Luke, and then on Jamie. She has sentry duty by the park entrance, you know.”

William did. “Okay,” he replied.

“Vincent... he hasn’t come back in, has he?” Jacob asked.

William shook his head. “Not that I heard. The weather turned colder. I think there’s a lot of snow, up in the park. Might make it hard to travel.”

“Snow! Snow in the park! How lovely that sounds. We must make sure everyone who wants to goes up and gets to enjoy it.”

“Sure, Father, sure,” William said, not quite sure at all. Father normally hated colder weather, since it played havoc with his knee. A knee that didn’t seem to be bothering him particularly, right now. Even with the cane, he was walking so fast that the portly William struggled to keep up.

“Did uh... something happen, Father?” William asked, trying to find out what Jacob’s good mood was all about.

“Happen? Why of course something happened. It’s Christmas, William! And such a night for miracles. For miracles, and babies. Oh! Babies! Luke was in quite the state. But I’m afraid I was at my wits end, earlier.”

“Olivia talked me into breaking out the brandy, and rubbing some on his gums. It was Mary’s idea. Seemed to help.”

“Dear Mary, and such a treasure to us all, she is. I must make sure to tell her,” Jacob declared, making his way to Olivia and Kanin’s chamber. Kanin was hanging a trio of Christmas stockings off a dresser, while Olivia filled one with crib toys.

The new parents were playing “Santa Claus”, while the baby was down for the count.

“I know it’s late...,” Father whispered, from just inside the doorway.

“It’s all right, just stay quiet,” Olivia cautioned, as Luke slept the sleep of the innocent. “He went down just a little while ago. I gave him a lavender bath and sang to him. And we rubbed brandy on his gums. He didn’t like the taste, but he seems much better.” The new mother gave them all a smile.

They all admired the sleeping child. “He’s out like a light. Thanks for your help, Father.” Kanin whispered, tucking a candy cane into his wife’s stocking. Olivia had a taste for peppermint.

“I’m afraid I didn’t do very much but tell you there wasn’t much to be done,” Father admitted, sorry for his lack of sympathy, at the time.

“Mary said much the same. Teething and colic are no fun, but we’ll all get through it,” Kanin replied. Olivia pulled a soft blue blanket up over her sleeping son’s shoulder.

“Bless you. Bless you both,” Father said, bestowing a loving kiss on each adult’s cheek. He put one on his fingers, and touched it to the crib. “Bless you all,” he added, quietly making his way out of the chamber.

“To Jamie?” William asked, drinking again from his mug.

“To Jamie!” Jacob affirmed, stealing it again for another sip. The two went off down the hallway together.

And just in time, too, because just as they rounded the bend, they saw Vincent, gently closing the metal gate, behind him, Jamie settled the latch, as the room filled with cool air, behind him.

“How was it, out there?” Jamie asked.

“Beautiful. Beautiful and cold,” Vincent said, shaking a fresh dusting of powdery snow off his shoulders. “There were carolers, earlier, but now, it’s so quiet, you’d swear you could hear the snow falling.” The two friends exchanged a smile.

“And you can’t possibly be here,” Jacob fussed, entering the small area.

Vincent looked Jacob's way. Clad in his robe and a stocking cap, he definitely looked a bit like Ebenezer Scrooge, out for a night walk, with his cane.

"Father?" Vincent asked.

"Go on, now, back to Catherine. You must go straight there, and invite her to breakfast. As a matter of fact, invite her back down, entirely. It's a bit nippy, but I'm sure we have room for one more."

Vincent looked between William and Jamie. The former shrugged, as if to say, '*I have no idea.*' The latter really didn't.

Jacob took a larger swig of William's cider.

"There ain't nothing in it but cider, and it ain't the hard kind," William said, following Vincent's quizzical look.

"It is... late, Father," Vincent tried to explain, as if Father was unaware of the time.

"Not a bit. Never too late, especially right now. Why, Christmas Day is just starting!" Father enthused.

"Just starting? Well, yes, but --"

"Now, I want you to go straight back to Catherine's, before she falls asleep. Tell her to bundle up warm, and bring her down. We'll all tuck in for a good night's sleep. In the morning, William here will get us up and we'll all have pancakes, together. Doesn't that sound lovely?"

He scanned the three faces in front of him, for consensus.

Vincent had no idea what to make of this. It did sound lovely. And very unlike Father. To the best of anyone's recollection, he'd never invited Catherine down, before. Vincent took the mug and smelled it.

"Told you," William said.

"Then there's something in the apples," Jamie offered.

"And Jamie! Brilliant Jamie," Father enthused. "I see you've been working on using a sling. May I say that's very clever of you?" Father complimented.

Vincent and William exchanged another questioning glance.

"I swear, I've got no idea. I found him in the hallway, this way." William said.

“It’s uh... it’s a little harder to aim, but I’m trying to get the hang of it,” Jamie replied, having no idea what else to say to Father.

“Yes. Well, you just keep at it.” He gave her shoulder an encouraging pat.

“Father, please don’t take this as an insult, but... have you been drinking?” Vincent asked.

“Only the milk of human kindness, sprung from the fountain of knowledge. Why are you still here?” Father questioned, making a shooing motion with his hand.

“Out! Go on, now, go! I want to see Catherine for breakfast, and have her tell me all the things she’s been up to. You don’t think we’ll be taking her away from her father, do you? Parents and children should see each other for the holidays.”

“He and Catherine already exchanged their gifts. He’s vacationing with Peter Alcott. Something about a fishing cabin. They are not due back until just before New Year’s.”

“All the more reason to get her down here!” Father said, reaching for the mechanism that unlocked the gate. Vincent moved to go back out again, unsure of what else there was he could do. Father was very insistent.

“And Vincent, please tell her...” Father’s blue eyes shone with fond regard.

“Please tell her ‘thank you,’ for me. She gave Margaret back to me. And I think that might be just the tip of the iceberg, of what she’s going to accomplish, here.”

Vincent had no idea what iceberg that might be. But it wouldn’t surprise him to see one sitting in the culvert, right now.

“I’ll... I’ll tell her of your regard,” Vincent stammered, going back out into the December night.

“There, that’s settled,” Jacob clapped his gloved hands together. “Jamie, you keep practicing. And when your shift is over, please see if Mouse is still awake, and if he is, tell him I’m sorry I raised my voice about Arthur. I know they’re close, and I didn’t mean to be cross.”

“You didn’t mean to... Sure, Father, sure,” Jamie said, in the expression of someone who was pacifying a lunatic.

Father walked back to his chamber, very happy with himself. “What a wonderful dream. Spirits or no, it was wonderful. And it’s going to be a very Merry

Christmas!” he declared, pleased with the world, and his place there, in general. “Rebecca seemed vexed about the design for this year’s Winterfest Candles. I wonder if she’s still awake?” he mused, going off to see.

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As Jacob was helping Rebecca out in the chandlery, and quite pleased to do that, too, a very large beast was having quite the conversation with an equally confused Catherine.

“And you say he invited me to breakfast? Me? Specifically?” Her raised eyebrow indicated she harbored some doubt about that. Fresh snowflakes were falling in her hair.

“He was most insistent. We’ve no explanation for it. William swears it wasn’t the cider, and we all know Father went to bed feeling most out of sorts.”

“He must have had... one heck of a dream,” Catherine said, chafing her arms against the chill.

“Perhaps he was visited by the Ghost of Christmas Past,” Vincent replied, not actually believing such a thing. “He even said that you should come and spend the night with us, if you chose to.”

Catherine was unsure. After all, she hadn’t spent the night Below since she’d stayed in Vincent’s own bed, convalescing from her accident. “Really? That’s... quite the invitation.”

“There are... guest chambers we could make ready for you,” Vincent elaborated.

Oh, come now, don’t go “Aww,” out there. It’s a Christmas story, and it’s set in Season One. You knew there wasn’t going to be any steam. Let’s see now, where were we? Oh, yes. Vincent was inviting Catherine to join them all, Below:

Vincent extended his cape so that it settled around Catherine’s shoulder and leaned in, both keeping her warm and making the unexpected invitation sound even more inviting.

“Come morning, I understand there will be pancakes. Old Sam will tell the Christmas story, and the children will sing the traditional songs. Sarah will lead us in a special prayer. William spends the day baking, and sharing what he makes

with everyone. We don't... exchange gifts exactly like you do. But we do have our own way of keeping the day."



Catherine smiled. How could she refuse?

"It sounds absolutely wonderful. Let me grab some things," she said, turning back to her bedroom. As she made ready to accompany him down, Vincent stood on her balcony, enjoying the continuous falling of soft snow.

"*God bless us, every one,*" he quoted Dickens. "Now, and always."

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Meanwhile, all done with helping Rebecca and now back in his chambers, Father straightened out his severely ruffled bed. "I don't care if it was a dream, and I don't care if it really happened. The important thing is, I felt it. All of it. I'm going to be different. I'm going to be... better."

Glancing over at his chess board, something there caught him quite by surprise. Rather than the pieces being still scattered on the floor, the way they had been before his visit from Margaret, he found the board all set up, save for three white chessmen. The queen's pawn was advanced two squares, as if someone had started a game. But the white king was laid down, and beside it, the white queen.

"Back up there, you two," Jacob said, remembering the sad sight of Vincent laying down the white pieces, in defeat. "No giving up, now. No giving up, ever. There's much to do. And many Christmases to have, yet." He put the pawn back where it belonged, then set the others back up. "There now," he said, liking it much better when the queen stood beside her king.

“You’re the strongest piece on the board,” he told the little carved queen figure. “The strongest, yet the most reckless, too. We have to be careful with you. He can’t survive without you,” Father said, making sure that queen and king sat just so, on their adjoining squares.

“He doesn’t have your freedom. Can’t move the way you do, that’s true,” Father continued, well aware he was talking to a chess piece. It didn’t matter one bit.

“You go in ways he can’t. But you can’t win the game without him.” Father knew he was talking not just of the game of chess, but of the game of life. Vincent and Catherine’s life, specifically. “You two stay together. You belong that way.”

And who knows? Maybe one day, Devin will come home, Father thought. And after that, some day ... grandchildren!

He held Grace’s reassurance like a secret promise. One he dared not share. Such things were long shots, he knew. But he kept such thoughts for another day.

“God Bless us,” he said, retreating to his bed so he could take off his robe and slippers. He tucked himself in.

“God Bless us, every one.”

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And so now, since we opened with a bit of Dickens, we should close with him, dear listeners. We are thrice blessed, and so must our story be. And so my friends, I leave you with this, the last lines from the more classic tale. May it be as true of Jacob as it was of Scrooge, and of all those we love, both fictional characters and not:

“And it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless Us, Every One!”

*No matter where you are in your own Christmas Carol, I
wish you love. ~ Cindy*



Merry Christmas