

# *A Christmas Fairy Tale in New York*

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



Catherine opened the door of her apartment and entered. Her hand reached for the light switch, but for some reason, she abruptly changed her mind and pulled it back again. She shut and locked the door, dropping her handbag on the couch. The dim light from the city penetrating the transparent curtains mirrored her mood at that moment perfectly.

For almost eight months, she'd been living a new life, very different from the one she had before. New lifestyle, a new attitude towards life, new face... Well, not exactly new, but in a way it did feel new to Catherine, whenever her fingers traced the only remaining scar near her left ear. She got used to it; in fact, she'd grown to like it...

Automatically, her hand searched for it again, and she couldn't help but smile. But as quickly as the smile appeared on her face, it faded again. The scar was the only physical evidence reminding her of *him*... For people around her, it was a reminder of a horrible accident. For Catherine Chandler, it was a reminder of new hope.

A deep sigh escaped from the deepest part of her being as she absently walked over to the French door leading out to the balcony. She plugged in the colourful string of fairy lights lining the door from outside and inside. It was Christmas Eve, and yet, there was still no Christmas tree in the fancy but cosy apartment of the newest District Attorney's Assistant. Yes, a few days ago, she landed a new job, as well,

gaining a new purpose in life, much more meaningful than in the previous thirty years of her life.

*It's Christmas Eve, and I don't even have a tree.*

Catherine shook her head and chuckled. Time seemed to move too fast for her recently. First, the recovery from the surgery, convalescent home, dinners with her father and Tom, searching for a new job and finding it. And only two days ago, she had met with her new self-defence trainer. So much had happened in the eight months since she had met *him*...

Her eyes suddenly burned at the renewed memory of the extraordinary man who had left such a deep mark on her soul and in her heart. She swallowed hard as tears threatened to overcome her.

*I need to move on. I have a new life, new work, I have Tom...*

The thought of her still-boyfriend caused an involuntary wave of coldness washing over her. Ever since she had returned to her world, she felt more and more distant from the man she had once thought she loved. That was back then, though, when she *thought* she knew what love was...

The Christmas Eve dinner she had shared with her father that night was a lovely occasion, as every year. The only thing casting a shadow over it was Tom's presence. Catherine was trying to block out her feelings, the fact that she couldn't think of one reason why it was good to remain in the relationship with him. After the holidays, in the new year at the latest, they needed to talk...

How strange that our perceptions about love and life can change from one day to another. All it takes is to meet someone special. His name invaded her mind, lurked behind every corner of her heart, echoed in every gust of wind.

*Vincent...*

A sudden sound of her phone ringing into the silence of the apartment startled her. She walked over and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

*"It's me, Cathy. I just wanted to make sure you got home all right,"* a voice of an elderly man said on the other end of the line. *"Since you didn't want Tom to take you home..."*

"I'm fine, Daddy, there's not much that can happen in a cab on Christmas Eve," Catherine teased, touched by her father's care, though.

*"I know, it's just... Well, you didn't look like yourself tonight, and I thought... Is everything all right between you and Tom?"*

An eloquent silence that followed made the ace of corporate law understand that his daughter was in deep emotional turmoil.

*You know you can tell me anything, Cathy...*” His voice softened.

“I know, Dad,” she replied finally, closing her eyes. *Not everything...* She opened her eyes again and tried to sound composed. “Let’s say it’s complicated. But don’t worry, I’ll work it out soon.”

There was a sigh on the other end of the line, as Charles Chandler realised again how his daughter tried to avoid the topic - and distance herself again, like so often in recent months.

“But I had a lovely time with you, Daddy, thank you,” Catherine added with genuine love and gratitude, trying to sound more cheerful. “Don’t forget to open your present tomorrow morning. You don’t have to wait until I come over for dinner later.”

A chuckle from her father made her smile. *“And make sure you open yours. There is a little thing inside from Marilyn as well.”*

“I will, and thank Marilyn for me.” Catherine thought fondly of her father’s devoted secretary of many years.

*“Merry Christmas, Cathy...”*

“Merry Christmas, Daddy...”

A click on the other end of the line finished the conversation, and Catherine put the receiver down. She smiled at the thought of the small, nicely wrapped box that just about fitted in her handbag. And then, a very different thought crossed her mind.

*How is your Christmas, Vincent?*

She had been thinking about it all holiday season. A time that is so full of cheer, anticipation, and fun in her world... What is it like in his world? Do all the Tunnel inhabitants spend it together? Do they have their own traditions, or the same as Above? And do they have enough food to share between them?

Catherine frowned. Winters in New York could be harsh. Many homeless people found their death in the freezing weather out on the streets. Are they warm enough Below? She tried to chase off her worries by shaking her head.

*They’ve been living there for many years; surely they have what they need. I only wish I could do something for them, for Vincent...*

The thought of him kept hovering above her like the sun, brightening her eyes and warming her heart. All day long, even throughout the dinner, sharing memories and a laugh with her father. And especially when Tom kept going on about his business, spoiling the mood with complaining about the incompetency of some of his work partners, unable to drop his work issues, at least on Christmas Eve.

*Do they have a Christmas tree below?* Catherine contemplated.

Absently, she got changed from the overly beautiful and overly expensive new dress into her cosy flannel pyjamas. Any other night, she would have put one of her silk nightgowns, but that night, she longed for something simpler, more comforting. Something that reminded her of the cosy and safe feeling of the soft and warm cotton nightdress she wore when she was recovering Below...

In a sudden desire to brighten up her apartment with some holiday cheer, she climbed on a stool and from the back of the top shelf of her huge built-in wardrobe, she managed to pull out an oblong box, putting it on the bed. Her face lit up with childlike excitement when she opened it to reveal a small artificial Christmas tree with dark green needles. It didn't look spectacular, like the real tree her father had proudly standing in his large living room, but it was a tree, and for some reason, Catherine, all at once, found it beautiful.

Suddenly, she wished she had had the time and energy to pick up a real one, but at that moment, anything would do. The tree was less than a metre tall, and she used to have it in her room on the campus during her studies at Radcliffe. Remembering the fun they'd had with Jenny and Nancy each year, when decorating it at the beginning of December, made her smile. And she also remembered the smell of the real Christmas tree her parents used to put up in the living room back home each year, usually a white fir...

She went down on her knees and pulled out another box from under the bed. A Christmas tree needed decorations, and the ones in the box contained vintage ornaments from her childhood. Her friends tried to persuade her to get more modern ones, but Catherine's feeling of nostalgia and her memories made her resist stubbornly year after year.

With a beaming smile, she brought the tree and the box with the ornaments to the living room, decided to put it up there, on a stool near the dining table. In the still semi-darkness of the room, she stopped abruptly. A sudden terrible longing filled her heart. She was about to put up a Christmas tree, but the probability of finding under it what she wished the most for was minimal. And yet...

She turned around, glancing at the French door. Her lips extended into a wide smile again as she grabbed the tree, moved towards the door and opened it. The late December air was icy, a light breeze making the sporadic snowflakes dance around her. There was something almost magical about that night.

*After all, it's Christmas Eve, Catherine pondered while she ran inside quickly to grab a thick cardigan. And then she immersed herself into work, stretching out the tree branches after she put it on the little wrought-iron table near the other French door, leading to her bedroom. One by one, she began pulling out the pieces of her family's heirloom, admiring each ornament anew, each awakening more memories.*

*Mum gave me this little ballerina after our Nativity play in the third grade... And we chose this Nutcracker together in that antique shop on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue! And this angel...*

Catherine sighed, and her eyes glistened; a bittersweet smile appeared on her face. Her father gifted her the glass angel with golden wings the year when her mother died.

*“Every time you hang it on the tree, mum will be even closer to you,”* he'd said back then, when they hung the fragile ornament near the top of their tree. How beautiful, and how ironic - the angel was as fragile as life is...

It was almost midnight when Catherine finished decorating her little tree on the balcony. The last thing she did was plug in the short string of fairy lights on it. The warm golden glow of the tiny flower-shaped bulbs reminded her of the colours in his chamber.

“I wish you could see it, Vincent,” she whispered wistfully into the night, puffing out a cloud of steam.

Her eyes wandered along the finished tree, satisfied with the result. A sudden idea crossed her mind - something was still missing to complete the picture. She ran inside to climb back on the stool and dig something out from the back of the wardrobe shelf. Returning back to the tree, she put something under it, along with a brief note.

*Now it's complete...*

Then she walked over to the balcony edge, wrapping herself tighter into the cardigan.

*Santa will be on his way soon...*

Catherine smiled, watching the twinkling stars across the dark sky over New York, succumbing to the childlike dreaming as she used to do many years ago.

“Wherever you are, Vincent, I hope you have a lovely Christmas and spend it with those who love you. You deserve all the love you can get; you deserve everything...”

Her eyes longingly wandered into the distance, looking over the benighted Central Park, into the city lights, imagining Vincent walking in the park, well-protected in the shadows of the trees, enjoying his restricted freedom at least for a bit.

“I truly wish you could see the tree, Vincent,” Catherine breathed. “I wish I could see you again, I wish...”

She shivered in the cold as the snowflakes were still floating in the air. A small smile reached her bright eyes when she cast one last look at the little symbol of the holidays, gently illuminating the balcony with its warm colour; and at the small object underneath the tree.

“Merry Christmas, Vincent, be well...,” she whispered and walked inside her apartment, shutting the door and leaving the world outside behind.

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The Tunnels were cold, but not unpleasant that Christmas Eve. The festive cheer, smiling faces and heartfelt wishes filled them with something that turns cool rocks into burning embers. And although most of the underground folks were asleep already, one of them was still wandering about the long, torch-lit corridors.

Vincent was deep in thought, as he walked casually from his father's private quarters after their Chess game. It had been a lovely Christmas Eve, as always in the Tunnels. Friends sharing a nice meal (so generously provided by the Helpers), reminiscing about the year slowly giving way to the new one, children playing games together to tame their excitement for Christmas Day morning.

Santa contributed modestly in the Tunnels, but each gift given was given with love and cherished as the greatest treasure. Children were learning from very early on that giving is more important than getting. Their handmade gifts for their parents or friends were always received with the utmost gratitude and love.

Vincent smiled, imagining Father's grin on his face when he opened his present tomorrow morning and found a pair of his favourite spectacles. He'd broken the frame a few weeks ago, and he was upset, since this pair had travelled with him through time for more than twenty years. His friend, doctor Peter Alcott, was constantly amazed how Father's eyesight hadn't changed over the years. Vincent took the spectacles to Mouse, the genius tinker of the underground world, who helped restore them to their former glory.

It was just after eleven o'clock, and sleep seemed like a waste of the precious magic of that night to Vincent. Moreover, he was growing restless. Suddenly, he craved for fresh, crispy winter air and the sight of the cool blanket of snow glittering in the streetlamps. He decided to have a short walk in the park. That had always helped in the past when his mind and heart grew weary.

*Weary? I am not weary; I just feel...* Vincent sighed and hung his head for a moment before walking on. *I feel incomplete...*

Ever since that fateful night in mid-April, the most legendary Tunnel dweller had often been caught in a state of melancholy and brooding. His striking clear blue eyes often wandered into the distance, with his mind miles away. Even the children had noticed that their beloved teacher was often sad, though he did everything in his power to conceal his sadness and he was always perfectly prepared for his literature lessons.

Vincent suddenly halted his steps at one of the children's chambers. For a moment, he watched them happily slumbering away in their little beds, wrapped in warm quilts.

*Probably dreaming of Santa*, he chuckled, smiling, seeing their contented, rosy-cheeked faces. The memories of his own childhood expectations resurfaced again, as every year.



He managed to walk only a few steps further when a little boy of about eight, with a dark nest of hair bumped into him at the tunnel bend.

“Kipper!” Vincent breathed. “What are you doing here so late? You should be in bed,” he stated, concerned.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Vincent,” the child apologised. “I couldn’t sleep, so I thought I’d check out whether it’s snowing Above. Fresh snow is perfect for making snow angels. We could go Above with other kids tomorrow.”

Kippers eyes burned with excitement; his cheeks had a tinge of red, probably from the crisp air in the Park.

“Have you ever made a snow angel, Vincent?” the boy asked curiously, rubbing his hands in an attempt to warm them up.

His teacher smiled and went down on his knee to face him.

“A long time ago, when I was only a little younger than you,” he replied softly. “It was the first time I’ve ever seen snow.”

“Only once??” the boy wondered.

“A few more times since then, but not since a long time,” Vincent replied with a gentle smile, and his mind drifted off to the past...

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*“Come on, Vincent! There’s no one around, you’re safe. Look, it’s snowing again; we can make snow angels, it’ll be fun!”*

*Two boys were standing at the exit from the drainage tunnel. One was taller, dark-haired and courageous, filled with a desire for adventure. The other was younger, shorter, with a long golden mane falling over his slender shoulders, and a face and hands that were never supposed to see the light of day, or even the world Above...*

*“Father will be angry if he finds out,” the younger boy spoke nervously.*

*“No, he’ll be furious. That’s why we can’t waste any time and need to be back soon,” the taller boy remarked. He extended his hand towards his shy friend, who hesitantly accepted it and dared to make the first steps on the cold, glittering blanket. Then, bending down, he curiously took a bit of snow between his clawed fingers.*

*“It’s cold...” He smiled wondrously, his whole face alight.*

*“Of course, it’s cold!” The older boy laughed. “It’s winter, you silly! Come on, let’s make some snow angels.”*

*He ran out into the open and slumped into the soft snowy cushion, moving his arms and legs as if he was flying. His unbound joy was palpable when he started laughing.*

*The golden-haired boy was fascinated by his friend's image, but even more by the pleasantly chilly but soft feel of the snowflakes descending on his face, which was covered with the finest dust of stubble in places. He stretched out his hand, inviting the little icy miracles to land on the warm palm of his small hand, immensely enjoying their cool caress.*

*After the initial hesitation, he joined the older boy in the snow, spreading his arms and legs wide. Then he started imitating flying, with the excitement belonging only to the little ones. His deeply-set sapphire-blue eyes gazed at the dark sky above them, sprinkled with countless twinkling stars. He stopped 'flying' and lifted his arm as if trying to reach for the celestial light.*

*"You can't, silly." The older boy next to him smiled, looking at his little friend's enchanted face. "They're too far."*

*"I know, but I can imagine what it would feel like to hold one," a soft-spoken reply came, followed by a wondrous smile.*

*Wisdom doesn't know age; it comes naturally, descending upon us often unexpectedly, but always when we need it the most.*

*"Yeah, I suppose you can," the older boy whispered with admiration in his voice, and a heartfelt smile reached his warm brown eyes as they met the blue ones...*

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Vincent was standing outside the drainage tunnel, leaning against the cold concrete wall. With his arm extended, he was catching the snowflakes into his palm as back then, when he was a boy of mere seven years. Christmas Eve spread its silvery wings over Central Park, and its secret guardian couldn't get enough of the beauty around him. He pushed off the wall, looked around to check that he was truly alone and set out for his walk.

Every year on Christmas Eve, he explored his beloved park differently than on any other night - with the curiosity and eagerness of a child, wonder and gratitude of an adult. Every year, it brought him joy and warmed his heart. Something had changed, though, since last Christmas. Vincent still admired the sparkling view and the crunchy sound of the snow beneath his feet, and the peace and quiet of the night that many people call Holy. Yet his heart was overcome by wistfulness and longing...

*I wish I could share this walk with her...*

Vincent had never felt alone on his nightly exploration of the city's most beloved place of recreation. The park had always been his friend, his ally against the solitude, which even the love of his Tunnel family couldn't drive away, especially



since he had reached his adulthood. But for the past almost eight months, not even his favourite place could fill the void in his heart. The void that kept growing with each passing day.

He remembered the faces of his friends and family earlier that night; everyone was happy and jolly. It made him smile, but it also made him even more aware of how much he was missing someone in the wide circle of the people he loved. Someone who was far away from their world, and yet so close...

Deep in his thoughts, Vincent stopped following his usual route around the park. When he snapped from his brooding and his eyes focused on the real world around him again, he stopped in his tracks. He noticed that he had reached almost the end of the park - one of its gates only a few metres away from him. Back to his highly developed senses, he scanned the area around him with his eyes and ears, making sure he was still alone.

*Father would use up his entire vocabulary to reprimand me for my carelessness...*

When he assured himself that not a soul was in the park, Vincent was about to turn around and walk back to the Tunnels. Suddenly he stopped and looked back over the gate into the distance. He recognised the building immediately; his eyes observed it with keen interest many times in the past few months, always safely covered by the shadows of the trees.

An inexplicable power was drawing him nearer, a sweet voice in his head calling him to come closer. Vincent knew he shouldn't have; it wasn't safe. And yet... Climbing buildings, sitting on the rooftops and roaming the nocturnal streets had been his pleasure for many years. He always knew where and how to hide from curious eyes.

*Just once, for a brief moment, to be closer to her... To feel her more than a mere distant, yet persistent, warm humming in the deepest part of my heart...*

Reason had no chance that night; it was love that won over and gave him the courage to very carefully glide in the shadows to reach the building he set out for. His long and strong legs carried him without making a sound, especially when he started climbing the eighteen storeys up to her balcony.

It was reckless; it was daring; it was everything Vincent knew he should not have done. And yet, it was everything it was supposed to be. When he very silently descended upon the floor of her balcony, hiding in the corner like a scared child, his heart was beating so fast that he was sure everyone could hear it. Shutting his eyes for a moment and leaning against the brick wall, he took a deep breath, trying to calm down his panicked breathing and frantic heartbeat. Once he managed to do that, he finally opened his eyes and wonder seized him anew...

It was dark inside of Catherine's apartment; the curtains were drawn across the two sets of French windows from the inside. But the reason Vincent gasped was the little Christmas tree standing on a stool next to the more distant French doors. Its

warm yellowy fairy lights reminded him of the fireflies he saw in children's books a long time ago.

He had seen many Christmas trees across the city from the rooftops, but this one was different. It was more personal; it was *hers* - a miracle spreading warmth and light in the cold, frosty night, illuminating the world and bringing hope and love into every open heart...

Vincent listened for a moment, straining his hypersensitive ears, in case he heard any movement in the apartment. When he was sure Catherine was asleep, apprehensively, he stepped closer to the tree as if drawn by a magnet. He admired each ornament decorating the tree, feeling that each one had a special meaning.

*This ballerina... Perhaps Catherine used to dance as a child... And this angel... Perhaps it reminds her of someone very special in her life...*

The desire to touch them was overwhelming; his need for physical contact with something she had touched as well was unbearable. But Vincent didn't dare. He didn't belong there; this was her world, not his. He had to go back. And yet...

His eyes wandered to the French doors, which, as he instinctively felt, were leading to her bedroom. His breathing suddenly got ragged, clouds of steam escaping his mouth with every shaky breath. The irresistible desire to get closer drew him to the very proximity of the door. His trembling hand cautiously reached for the glass pane, so carefully as if it was about to break any moment. When his palm landed on the cold, smooth surface, Vincent released the breath he didn't realise he was holding..

*I can feel you, Catherine... I can feel your heart, beating calmly while you are sleeping... I can feel your melancholy, your loneliness, your longing... I don't know what is it that you long for, but I am with you. You are not alone, for I feel the same. You will never be alone again, for you and I are connected and always will be...*

Vincent pulled back his hand, hung his head for a beat and started retreating to the shadows, ready to leave. In the last moment, before climbing over the balcony half-wall, a small object under the Christmas tree caught his attention. Unable to ignore it, he silently made his way back to the tree and went down on his knees to inspect it.

When his look focused on the object, he gasped, and his eyes welled up. There, in a small black box without a lid, lay an old, worn-out toy lion. Next to it was a small card with a few words written on it, reading, "*For the greatest gifts are rarely found under the Christmas tree...*"

The thing that made his eyes go misty was recognising the piece of cloth on which the lion was resting - it was the handmade handkerchief Vincent had given Catherine once while she was recovering from her injuries Below.

He wiped away a stray tear and got back up to his feet. He smiled at the little toy that had such a special meaning to Catherine. Casting one last look at the Christmas tree, he glanced at the door. Then, with his heart both heavy and soaring, Vincent climbed over the half-wall and started descending into the night.

*Merry Christmas, Catherine... May your heart find peace and everything you long for. May it find the greatest gift you dream of. Know that you have given me mine...*

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*"Listen to the mustn'ts, child. Listen to the don'ts. Listen to the shouldn'ts, the impossibles, the won'ts. Listen to the never haves, then listen close to me... Anything can happen, child. Anything can be."*

*- Shel Silverstein-*

