

Merry Christmas, Jenny Aronson

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



The inimitable Miss Jenny Aronson was walking briskly along one of the countless pathways in Central Park lined with elegant, vintage-style streetlamps, reminiscent of the long-gone eras. She rubbed her hands together, trying to escape the chill creeping into her bones. It was one of the coldest days that year, frost creating masterful patterns on the railings, benches and wherever its artsy fingers could reach.

Why on earth did Cathy insist on meeting here instead of round mine or hers, or some cosy little café where we could sit comfortably and warm and swoon over some handsome guy at the next table?

The question remained unanswered, but Jenny had known Catherine Chandler for many years and learnt that often, especially in the last few years, there was often no rhyme or reason to Catherine's actions. She wasn't complaining, though. It had been only a few months since Jenny had found out her dear friend was not dead indeed, and the shock and extreme joy of that revelation still hadn't properly worn off.

She stopped to glance at her watch, buried under layers of her gloves, an oversized sweater and a long cobalt blue winter coat she had just bought herself for Christmas as a treat for a difficult year.

"One o'clock sharp," she said out loud and looked up at the pathway again, her teeth chattering. "I'm here, Cathy. Where are you? You really could come on time before I turn into

Frosty the Snowman.”

“I *am* on time,” a soft voice coloured with amusement replied behind her.

Jenny swiftly turned around. “I bet you learned that from Kristopher,” she said, raising her eyebrows. “I swear you appear and disappear like a ghost lately!”

With a beaming smile, she walked into her friend’s heartfelt hug.

“Why on earth here, today out of all days? Don’t you watch the weather forecast?” Jenny inquired, rubbing her arms to warm up.

Catherine chuckled. “Um... not lately, I’m afraid. I’ve been a bit busy,” she said with an enigmatic smile. “And I wanted to meet here because it’s the closest to where we are going.”

Jenny was intrigued and tilted her head. “As far as I know, there’s no cosy retreat where they serve at least half-decent coffee anywhere near here, especially not on Christmas Day...”

“Well, about that... I know of a place just like that,” Catherine replied and intertwined her arm with her friend’s arm. “And since your mother couldn’t make it to New York for Christmas this year, I thought we could spend it together.”

“Oh, Cathy!” Jenny was overjoyed. “I hope you opened my present this morning.”

“Of course,” Catherine chuckled. “I love the book, thank you! I’ve always had a weak spot for Blake.”

“Don’t I know that,” Jenny remarked, rolling her eyes. “You kept reciting *To The Evening Star* throughout the whole Radcliffe years!”

“The first edition you gave me is all the more appreciated because I know how much you had suffered back then,” Catherine replied, grinning.

“You are forgiven, but only if you get me some hot drink. I’m freezing here!”

Catherine laughed and pointed toward the drainage tunnel entrance in front of them.

“Your wish is my command, but first, I have something to tell you,” she said quietly, looking around. There was no one in sight. “But not here,” she added, gently pulling Jenny’s arm, making her follow inside the drainage tunnel.

When they stopped at the closed iron gate, Catherine turned to her friend. Jenny was confused, to say the least, searching the unusual place suspiciously.

“Cathy, what are we doing he---“

“You *must* promise me you’ll never tell anyone about what I’m about to tell and show you now. Lives depend on it.”

Those words got Jenny’s full attention. “All right... You have my word.”

Catherine took a deep breath. "I guess we better start from the beginning. Do you remember a few years back when I got attacked and cut with a knife?"

Jenny frowned, shuddering at the memory. "Of course, I do. How could I forget my best friend almost being killed? You were missing for ten days after it happened. You said you don't remember what happened to you."

"Well... That's the thing," Catherine said and reached for the lever to open the gate. "I *do* remember..."

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They were walking through the tunnels – Catherine assured and talking, Jenny listening with half-opened mouth and wanting to ask something now and then but being too amazed to do so.

"So... correct me if I'm wrong, but basically, you're saying there is a world under our world where people live as we do?" Jenny asked when Catherine finished her narration.

"In a way... not exactly as we do, because obviously, they had to come up with various ways of how to get access to some electricity, fresh water, find a way to heat their rooms, get regular food supplies and so on without the world Above finding out about them," her friend explained.

"I guess the food comes from the... Helpers, as you called them," Jenny pondered.

"Yes. I am one of them."

"Did you become one as a thank you for them saving your life back then?"

"Partially," Catherine agreed. "But once I learned more about the whole community, their values and how they help each other, I wanted to be part of that world, at least in some way."

She stopped and turned to Jenny, smiling. "They've changed the way I see life and people today. I'm not the same person I used to be."

Jenny smiled too, squeezing Catherine's arm. "I've noticed that for a while," she said. "They obviously have done well by you."

"Yes... It took Father a little while to start trusting me because..." Catherine paused. "Well, it was a bit of a rough start but I'm glad we've become very fond of each other since then."

Jenny smiled, then narrowed her eyes. "Why do I have the feeling there is something more?" she asked.

Catherine chuckled, knowing she couldn't hide the truth any longer. "Because there *is* more, actually, *the* most important thing..."

“This person you mentioned that found you in the park... Am I right when I assume it was a man?” Jenny grinned.

Catherine’s smile widened. “Yes,” she replied.

“A *young* man?”

“Relatively young.”

“A relatively young... *handsome* man?” Jenny grinned again.

There was a small hesitation on Catherine’s face, but then her lips curled into a smile again.

“To me, he’s beautiful.”

Jenny noticed the tenderness in her voice and a special warmth in her eyes. “I think I really want to meet this guy,” she said then, genuinely curious.

“You will,” Catherine assured her, as they resumed walking. “In fact, he’s the main reason why you are finally here.”

“I don’t suppose he’s looking for a companion,” Jenny teased, making her friend laugh.

“Unfortunately no. He’s already... taken.”

Catherine’s look was eloquent, and Jenny’s excitement threatened to spill over.

“Oh my God!” she exclaimed, grabbing her friend’s arm. “How long has this been going on? Since he saved you? Why did you never tell me?”

“I will explain everything,” Catherine stopped the flow of Jenny’s words, chuckling, “but there will be time for it later. First, we meet Father in his study. Every person who gets involved in the secret of the world Below needs to be approved by the Council first, and Father is the head of it. You are lucky to have such good recommendations,” she teased, “so he approved you without problems, especially once I told him you could help supply the Tunnels with not only the latest literary works. It’s still polite to introduce you to him first.”

Jenny beamed. “What would I ever do without you, Cathy?”

She swallowed a lump forming in her throat, remembering her despair a few months back when she believed her friend was dead.

“Probably hunt for your next male victim,” Catherine quipped. “Anyway, we’ll probably meet a few other people on the way, so try not to be overwhelmed.” She resumed walking, but suddenly stopped and pierced her friend’s look.

“Oh, and Jenny...” Her look was serious. “*Behave.*”

Miss Aronson raised her eyebrows, and her lips curled into a cheeky smile. “Catherine Chandler,” she said. “When have I ever *not*?”

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The Great Hall was buzzing with activity and cheer. The cool air was permeated with mouth-watering smells of various delicacies from William's kitchen, candle wax and warming mulled wine.

"The Helpers have outdone themselves again," Jacob Wells senior remarked with gratitude before helping himself with another sip of his mulled wine. "I know, I say the same each year but I genuinely feel so each year."

"You all deserve nothing less," Catherine said warmly, touching his hand. "And it only shows that the values of the world Below spread further than you can imagine."

Jacob patted her hand, and their eyes met. "I am so happy you are a true part of this world now, my dear."

Jenny, sitting opposite them, watched their exchange with interest and a gentle smile. Something about the interaction reminded her of the way Catherine used to be around her own father. Jenny met him only a handful of times, back in their Radcliffe days, but the warmth and genuine care and love between father and daughter was obvious. She was glad that Catherine, after losing both her parents sooner than expected, had found paternal love and support in someone else.

"Where is Vincent, by the way?" Jacob suddenly inquired. "He better hurry or there won't be much food left, especially if Mouse managed to smuggle Arthur in here again." His eyes nervously skimmed the familiar faces, sitting at the long, festively set tables.

"Vincent?" Jenny sensed the door finally opening to solve the only riddle left to her.

Catherine opened her mouth to speak but then smiled and looked back at the patriarch. "Jacob needed a bit of attention. They will both be here... at the right time." Her look spoke more than her words.

"Oh... of course," the old man said, nodding. For a while, he forgot that Catherine hadn't revealed everything to her friend yet.

Jenny was confused. *How many Jacobs are there in this place?* She didn't have much time to ponder because Catherine turned her attention to her.

"I think the time has come for you to learn the rest," she said more earnestly. "I have known and loved you for about half of my life and I trust you with it. What you'll hear but mostly *see* now will be something you mustn't tell anybody Above... well, Joe knows about it and Diana..."

"Joe?" Jenny interrupted her, with mouth open wide. "And who's Diana?"

Catherine shook her head. "Never mind, I'll explain later, but you must promise it will remain a secret. As I told you before, lives depend on it, especially one..."

The look of Jenny's eyes was honest when she spoke. "I swear, you can trust me, Cathy."

"All right," Catherine replied, nodding. "You asked about the man who saved my life back then. Well... he's the father of my child, the child which was born while I was in captivity."

Miss Aronson had experienced several surprising, some quite shocking moments in her life. However, the statement she had just heard robbed her of all appropriate words.

"What...? I mean when...? How?" Coherence suddenly became a foreign word for the woman who could talk one to death on her best days.

Catherine sighed and smiled. "I was very early on before the kidnapping so I wasn't showing yet. That came later... And I didn't tell you because I had only known it for a few days before..." Her voice faded, remembering the darkest period of her life. A sudden wave of guilt hit her. "And I am really sorry I didn't tell you since my return, but I had a good reason, as you will soon see... Anyway... Our son was born healthy and with the help of a few dear friends, Joe being one of them, we were reunited with him."

"Cathy, that's... incredible!" Jenny exclaimed, squeezing her friend's hand from across the table. "Where is he now? Can I see him?" Her initial shock quickly gave way to excitement.

"He lives here, as do we, and you will see him very soon," Catherine beamed.

Jenny exhaled loudly and leaned back against her chair, her mind reeling. Over the last two hours, she had to process a lot of next to unbelievable information but this was bordering on fantasy. *Cathy rescued by a mysterious stranger who lives underground, falls in love with him and they have a baby, and I had no idea about it!*

Jacob was silently watching their conversation. Jenny's genuinely happy reactions strengthened the good impression of her he gained from their first meeting in his private quarters. Her intelligence, kind heart and empathy shone through, as well as her great sense of humour and enthusiasm for anything positive in Catherine's life. However, the real test was yet to come...

"So, when will I finally meet the mysterious Mr X who made this all happen?" Jenny asked after a brief pause. "Where is... Vincent?"

"I apologise for being late," a deep, gravelly and unusually soft voice said behind her, "but Jacob was a bit restless and needed a little time to settle down."

Jenny's mouth curled into a wide smile and half-opened to reply, but the moment she turned around to see the owner of that magnificent voice, words got stuck in her throat.

Vincent watched her calmly, with a small smile, holding his son in his arms - the baby was blissfully napping on his shoulder. Despite his extraordinary appearance, Vincent's imposing, tall and graceful figure, the great warmth and intelligence in his deeply set blue eyes, impressed the young woman immensely. She also noticed that nobody in the Great Hall seemed shocked or surprised by his presence and appearance.

"I'm happy to finally meet you, Jenny. Catherine told me a lot about you over the years," Vincent said warmly and outstretched his hand to her.

The stunned Jenny laughed, accepting the offered hand. She noticed the claws on it but didn't comment on it. "Not more than I am," she replied, enchanted, and he could read in her eyes that she meant it.

"A *lot* of things make perfect sense now." She glanced at Catherine, completely understanding her friend's significant withdrawal from social life and secretive nature over the past few years.

"Vincent is my adoptive son, Jenny," Jacob senior remarked, with a proud smile.

Jenny raised her eyebrows, connecting even more dots, then looked back at the lion-man. "I have hundreds of questions but I guess most of them are irrelevant or can never be answered, so for now, could I just say that you are positively... fascinating?"

Vincent chuckled, glancing at Catherine, who couldn't stop smiling. Jacob was fighting off a stubborn tear - he had heard several words people used for his son's appearance, but fascinating was not one of them.

"Michaelangelo's Pieta, da Vinci's Mona Lisa or Shakespeare's Hamlet... those are fascinating, but I would never use that adjective with myself," Vincent remarked with a small smile.

"Modest and artsy, are we?" Jenny teased and winked at Catherine, making her chuckle.

"Speaking of art, just wait until you see the painting Kristopher left me," Catherine added with an enigmatic smile.

Jenny's interest was aroused even more. "You never said!" she exclaimed.

"You'll understand why once you've seen it."

Miss Aronson exhaled loudly, her brain a little overwhelmed. "I have a feeling you two could write a whole novel about the past almost three years," she pondered aloud, making Vincent smile.

"If anyone can write here, it's Vincent," Catherine remarked with a dreamy smile. "He's wonderful with words... Maybe you can make him do it, even though I'm afraid, you could never get your publishing hands on *this* one."

Jenny pierced Vincent's eyes. "Give me an hour and I can make you do anything, my dear."

Hearing that comment, even Jacob chuckled, filled with relief, and enjoyed seeing Jenny enthuse about his sleeping grandson in Vincent's arms.

"I must confess I had my doubts when you suggested introducing her to Vincent in this direct way," he admitted quietly to Catherine, "but you were absolutely right. She's a true force of nature and takes it remarkably easy."

"Trust me, Father, it would take at least a tornado to knock Jenny Aronson off her feet," Catherine replied knowingly and stood up to welcome Vincent.

As if Miss Aronson wished to confirm those words, she turned to her friend, with a beaming smile, and proclaimed, lowering her voice. "He's gorgeous, Cathy, and he's got his father's eyes!"

"And his mother's tenderness and beauty," Vincent added softly, always moved by the miracle in his arms.

Despite the almost surreal environment and company she found herself in, Jenny couldn't fight the enchantment. "I bet Jake will have his father's charm when he grows up... Oh, this is just wonderful!"

Catherine chuckled, warmed but not greatly surprised by her friend's reaction to the revelation. "It will get even more wonderful," she remarked and exchanged looks with Vincent. "In January, to be precise."

Jenny's smile faded a little, confusion settling in her eyes. "January?" she inquired, puzzled but also intrigued.

Catherine put her arm around Vincent's waist, and gently stroked their son's head before turning her attention back on her friend, ready for the final reveal. "When was the last time you were asked to be a maid of honour?"

Realisation hit Jenny, knocking the air out of her lungs. The widened eyes and open mouth were exactly the reaction Catherine was expecting.

"Well? What do you say?" she asked eagerly.

Jenny shook her head and laughed gleefully, loving the extraordinary image of the young family in front of her eyes.

"I say... Merry Christmas, Jenny Aronson..."

