

Angels Never Fly Alone

Author: CK

Rating: K / P6

Contents: When you've lost your dearest ones, Christmas, the season of love, happiness and family come-together, is the hardest time of the year.

Disclaimer: Nothing mine. Bruno Heller and his team definitely deserve to be the rightful owners, as they had made so many great things with this show 'til now.

A/N: There is a German song, "Engel fliegen einsam" (translated word-by-word = "Angels fly lonely") by Christina Stürmer, an Austrian musician, that gave me the idea for the title and the little story you'll find in the fic :)

He never turned on the lights.

Sometimes a single lamp, yes, but not more. His house always stood dark and seemingly empty, deserted and lonely. Only that it wasn't; in fact, someone was living in this dreary, empty and joyless home that had once been filled with laughter and happiness.

And especially now, when Christmas was knocking on his door, he felt the coldness of this empty and dark house even more. But he just couldn't bring himself to change anything. He didn't deserve it. It was his fault, everything that had happened, and now he had to live with it, *in* it. He had to live this life he had created, he had caused. It was his bounden duty and he would not run away.

Not even on Christmas.

When Patrick Jane came home this evening, on the 24th of December, on what was Christmas Eve to the majority out there and just the end of another day to him, he expected this for so many people most beautiful, happy and joyful time of the year to be for him not different from the last years. When he sat alone at home, lost in self pity and self-flagellation, deep in thought, thinking over and over again what he could have done to prevent those terrible events seven years ago from happening.

For him, Christmas was the worst time of the year. It was when he missed his family most; missed the shining eyes of his daughter when she saw the Christmas tree, missed sitting in front of the fireplace with his wife, exchanging those little gifts that were so secret and special that they never were part of the gifts under the tree, but were only exchanged when their daughter had gone to bed.

Tears dwelled in his eyes every time he thought about those special moments, moments that had assured him that he was the happiest man in the world, and the luckiest, having a wife and a child like these two. It hurt remembering them, and their wonderful moments, and yet he allowed himself from time to time to fall back in time and relive these moments.

Until the picture changed and all he saw was his family covered in blood.

Only the tiny bit of self respect he still had somewhere inside of him held him back from drinking himself into oblivion; he always told himself that he needed a clear head, in case suddenly Red John showed up and got arrested. This probably would be his only chance for revenge; and he wanted to know what he was doing when he confronted the man who had made a living hell of his life.

So, he would again just sit in the dark, stare outside and watch the ocean turn into a dark, restless fluid when night fell, came and went, the black waves like a mirror of his soul.

When he, without thinking much about it, decided for his Christmas to be no different from the last years, one thing he hadn't taken into account - the sudden ringing of his door bell. He didn't expect anyone. He never expected anyone coming to his home. It was a dead place for a lonely soul. Not one that was prepared for visitors; it hadn't seen any in years.

And certainly not on Christmas.

At first, Patrick ignored it. He wasn't in the mood to see anyone, and if it was only some employee of a fundraising organization. Yet, whoever waited at his door was obviously very stubborn, ringing the door bell again and again. Frowning, he gave in and walked to his door, checking if he could see anything through the glass wall next to the door. But no one was to be seen.

The person coming into view when he opened the door was definitely the last one he would have expected. But then, as already said - he never expected anyone ever. At all.

"Lisbon?" he asked confused when he recognized his boss in the dim light. "What are you..." He was interrupted when she walked past him with the words "May I, it's not exactly warm out here." and straight into his kitchen - not that he would wonder how she knew where said room was - and followed her, even more puzzled. What was all this about?

She didn't look up when Jane entered the kitchen moments later, but only unpacked the bags she had brought with her. After a few seconds of silence, she finally allowed him an explanation.

"I assumed since we're both alone on Christmas, we could very well spend it together. Cho is with his family in Wyoming, Rigsby and Van Pelt spend the holidays together - not officially, but you can bet on it -, and we also shouldn't be alone. We would both only drown in our musings and self pity, so either we do it together - in that case I have sleeping pills - or we try and have a nice Christmas with a good dinner and good wine. And some movies," she put some DVDs on the counter, "and don't worry, I've brought my notebook, in case you don't have a TV and DVD player."

"I... haven't."

"Just like I thought, that's why I've pa-"

"Lisbon!" It didn't occur often that Patrick Jane was irritated and confused - well, it occurred pretty much never - but now he looked almost annoyed. His mind refused to understand what was just happening. "What is this about? No offence, but I'd rather be alone..." He trailed off when she looked up again and he caught the expression in her eyes before she turned them away.

Broken. Lonely. Crying out for help.

"Please. I don't want to be alone. Last year's Christmas was almost killing me," she begged whispering, her eyes still avoiding his.

"I'm so sorry, Teresa. But I don't know if I'm the right person."

"We both shouldn't be alone now. And we know each other well enough, know the other's past. Let's just forget for a short while which demons are chasing us and have at least a bit fun. All I want is some happiness. And peace."

He walked around the isle counter, coming to stand beside her. Lying his hands on her shoulders, Jane turned the dark-haired woman towards him and then gently lifted her chin, making her look at him. She looked so vulnerable, so sad and lost, that it almost shocked him. He knew that inside of this tough little agent was a deeply hurt soul, but never before had she shown it so openly. Until now. He could see her desperate need for a bit company, someone to lean on. He didn't know if he was the right person for this, but when she obviously thought that he was the best choice, he would have faith in her. He could never send her away or deny her a

wish like this. He had once told her he would always be there for her, and he had promised Bosco he would take care of her - and now that she needed him, he would not turn her down.

Finally, he nodded and kissed her on the forehead.

"Alright. What do we have for dinner?"

Jane wouldn't have believed it if anyone had told him he would enjoy a Christmas dinner again after the death of his family. But here he was, eating with Lisbon, both of them sitting at his kitchen counter isle since the dining room lacked of furniture - as most parts of his house -, talking and laughing. He hadn't felt that happy and light in a long time and he could tell it was the same for Lisbon.

Teresa.

Using each others first names had been no question, and they both had to admit that saying - and hearing - it felt good. And right.

"And Rigsby and Van Pelt really think we don't know? We've been working together for over a year; they should know better..." Lisbon chuckled. Among all the things they were talking about they had also come to speak about the two love birds of their team. Those two who obviously believed their relationship was still a big secret.

"They should, but I think they're so afraid of being caught and transferred that they simply hope no one has noticed yet. Especially not now, after Minelli's departure and while we don't know who will follow him. I'm sure it would have been less of a problem with Minelli, but now, without good old Virgil's patron-like protection... I would be afraid, too."

"Yeah, you're probably right." A trifle bemused, she noticed the frown on his forehead. "What?"

"Promise me one thing, Teresa?" Now it was her turn to frown, and raise an eyebrow at the same time.

"Whatever happens, don't punish them. Not for being in love." Jane's expression had become serious. He liked seeing people happy, as he was missing some happiness of his own so much, and she understood this longing all too well.

"You, Mister, should know by now that I certainly won't resent them their relationship as long as they don't mix up private business and job." She pointed at him with her fork that held a piece of potato. Playfully, he quickly moved forwards and stole the piece of the vegetable from her. "Hey!" she protested, but couldn't suppress a grin.

"I know. Only wanted to be sure," he answered while munching the potato. Lisbon only shook her head at him, a bit irritated, but more so amused by his somehow unusual behavior from the man with normally pretty good manners.

"Maybe we should tell them that we know it," Lisbon thought aloud, and nibbled at a piece of carrot.

"Nah. Just think about it. It's too dangerous. They wouldn't have to be so careful in our presence - and so they wouldn't be. That's okay, as far as I'm concerned, and you and Cho, too, I guess. But when someone suddenly walks in on them, other agents for example..." He had a point, Lisbon noticed; the risk of being caught was too great for them. Young love was often too carefree; she knew it from her own experience. At that thought, she cringed a bit inwardly, and although she was sure that she had her expression well schooled and that it didn't tell anything of the pang of pain she had felt for a moment, she was nevertheless met by Jane watching her with concern in his eyes. "You're alright?" he asked, cocking his head and trying to read her mind, obviously.

"Yeah, fine, just lost in thoughts for a moment. Sorry," she dismissed his concern. Or at least she tried.

"Teresa..."

"It's fine, Patrick, really, I am fine. Only a memory... the... good old days." She sighed. "It doesn't matter. We want to have a happy Christmas, don't we?" He wasn't all too convinced; he'd rather listened to her sorrows, knowing that talking about it helped. But then, she was probably right; they wanted to forget their sorrows at this year's Christmas, and sharing unpleasant memories wasn't something that would help with the forgetting. And so, he simply nodded and offered a cheering smile.

Dinner was finished in silence. Once the plates were empty, they filled the dishwasher and returned to their seats and wine glasses, letting the machine do its work.

Their conversation once again moved from work to hobbies and habits, likes and dislikes. Somehow they managed to avoid topics like family, simply everything that would hurt too much, and yet talked for hours, and a few times their laughter almost knocked them off their barstools.

It was fairly past midnight when Lisbon yawned, making Jane chuckle slightly.

"I didn't know I was so exhausting," Patrick commented with a flirtatious hint in his voice. She caught the suggestive meaning and grinned evilly.

"Oh, trust me, you're every day," Teresa gave back and they both laughed quietly. "Would it be okay if I returned tomorrow... no... today... well, this afternoon?"

"You wanna go home now?"

"Sure. What did you thought I would do?"

"You can't possibly drive, you had way to much wine."

"I can't stay here either, I don't think you've a guest bed. You don't even have a couch," Lisbon pointed out with a raised eyebrow.

"I... Maybe you're right," he admitted, but almost immediately changed his mind again. "No. You should... I... I'd like you to stay. I may not have a bed, but I've a mattress in the store room, and I've blankets and pillows. If that's okay for you. We... we could have breakfast together in the morning," he offered, the hopefulness of his suggestion, his question evident in his voice.

She looked at him for a few long moments. They were both really hopeless cases. But didn't that mean they had to stick together?

"Okay," she finally agreed, "I'll try it. But only if you let me... make my *camp* in front of the fireplace."

"Whatever the lady likes," Jane smiled and went to get the sleeping things for her. He stopped mid-step when he heard her calling after her.

"I've nothing to sleep in," she said. And Patrick couldn't help but peek around the edge grinning, making the senior agent growl and shoot him a playfully angry look.

Half an hour later, Lisbon's *camp*, as she had called it, was ready and looking very comfortable. She had no doubt that she would sleep well. Patrick had even brought her a shirt of his, and it was long enough to cover her almost to the knees. So she would show nothing he hadn't seen before when they had set a trap for her former psychologist.

"Need me to tug you in, little Teresa?" he asked with a boyish grin that made her heart jump for a second when she returned from the bathroom, already changed into her sleeping attire.

"I may be small, but I'm not a child, *Patrick*," she emphasized his name with a warning tone, though they both knew she was as amused as him. The mood remained light and easy, but only because Lisbon bit her lip before a comment about only little girls needing to be tugged in by their daddy could slip her.

"I simply wanted to make sure you're warm and comfortable and don't need anything else before I go to bed, but if you don't want..." He pouted a bit, playfully turning away, and she laughed lightly.

"Alright, alright. Tug me in, but I can assure you I am perfectly happy." Crawling onto the mattress, she slipped beneath the sheets and blankets and sank back into the pillows, sighing contentedly. Jane kneeled beside her, making sure that there was nothing left uncovered, and no wrinkle caused a hole where cold air could flow inside the cocoon the dark-haired woman was cuddled into. Despite the fire in the fireplace, it wasn't exactly warm in the house, probably because of the huge rooms and windows.

Busily, he leaned forwards, and he almost lay atop her, his face coming dangerously close to hers. She looked up at him, but didn't say anything. It took him a few moments to notice the position they were in, and his eyes met hers. Time froze between them then, and no one dared to move.

It hung in the air between them, the question whether they should take this step or not. Their gazes intensely on each other; their lips longing for a touch they were yet afraid to give. Too much was to lose, too much at stake. A passionate acting on feelings or attraction that wasn't worth the friendship it could destroy. Not that it made it easier to turn away and ignore the desire that was hidden deep inside their souls.

In the end, it was Patrick who broke the eye contact and then got up.

"Good night, Teresa." She looked at him with a hint of sadness in her eyes; though this time, the sadness had another reason.

"Good night, Patrick. Thank you."

"You're welcome. And I have to thank you, too." He shot her another, thoughtful look before he turned to the stairs.

"And Patrick? Merry Christmas."

"To you, too."

The first thing invading her dreams had been the smell of freshly brewed coffee. Smiling merrily, she snuggled deeper into her pillows and blankets when her mind told her that her breakfast was taken care of. She dozed back into sleep, though she didn't really enter the land of dreams again, but drifted away to the sounds of clattering dishes and cooking water that were to be heard softly in the distance.

"Hey, sleepyhead," a gentle voice, filled with light amusement, woke her some time later, "don't you want to get up today? It's Christmas." After yawning and stretching thoroughly, Lisbon cracked one eye open, only to find Jane sitting on her mattress, looking at her with a smile on his lips and a fond expression in his eyes, and holding a cup of coffee.

"You're a saint," Lisbon mumbled happily, sat up and took the cup from him. Carefully, she took a few sips of the hot liquid.

"Some people would disagree," he grinned, what caused her to smile, too. He was right; there weren't many people out there who would agree with her, but then, those people didn't know him. She wasn't claiming to

know him either, but she had a good idea of his quirks and his way of thinking - and his heart. Because in his heart, he was a wonderful, compassionate man, even though he mostly tried to hide it.

"So, what are we going to do today?"

"What's normally done on this day. Gifts in the morning, a nice lunch at noon, some fooling around, and a Christmas dinner in the evening. I checked what you've brought. I think we'll have the best Christmas dinner in California."

"I hope so, it took me a good while in a terribly crowded supermarket to find all these things." She took another sip of her coffee, and a less happy expression settled on her face. "You were hopefully joking about the gifts, weren't you? Because I've none," she admitted sheepishly and looked at him apologizing.

"Actually, I wasn't joking. But don't worry, my best Christmas present - and my first in years by the way - is that you're here and that you remind me how wonderful Christmas can be. Besides, you've brought all the food. I'll take that as gift." He grinned winningly, then turned to pick something up that was lying beside him on the ground, shielded from her eyes by his body. Smoothing the small ribbon atop the little box, he turned back and presented it to Lisbon. "And since I didn't have that perfect idea with celebrating Christmas together and all, I can only offer this little thing. Merry Christmas, Teresa," he explained and placed the gift in her hand.

Looking at her consultant a bit shocked and slightly embarrassed, she carefully pulled the ribbon away and opened the box. And the first thing her mind offered her as a reaction to what she saw was a loud gasp.

Open-mouthed she stared at the stud earrings, neatly placed in black velvet. They were small, and would be almost unnoticeable when covered by her hair, but she liked that. Plain und simple, and yet beautiful; just as she preferred it. They were silver and held one stone of a rich dark green color. She didn't dare to guess.

"You didn't want the jewelry I had bought during the Vegas case, but I meant what I said back then - emeralds do look lovely to your eyes. I understand that the huge and heavy jewelry isn't your style, so I hoped you'd maybe like these," he answered her unasked question.

"I... I can't...," she stuttered, completely taken aback. This was not a 10 or 20 Dollar gift they might have given the other as a Secret Santa. This was expensive. And very personal.

"Yes, you can. Let it be... a promise." His voice had been so low that Lisbon had almost missed his words. She shivered involuntarily when she understood the meaning of them.

"Thank you," she breathed and in a hasty movement, she kissed his cheek, before pulling back, almost shyly avoiding his eyes. They sat there for a few minutes, Jane dealing with the tingling sensation on his cheek while Lisbon fiddled with her gift and tried to calm herself, before she announced, "Well then, I guess I should get up now; I might not have a real gift - one wrapped up - but at least I have a little surprise for you waiting in my car." Patrick, who already stood, offered her his hand to help her up, which she thankfully took.

"And that would be?" he asked curiously, skillfully covering up the bit of awkwardness and nervousness.

"Wouldn't be a surprise if I told you," she called out when she headed for the bathroom. She quickly changed and refreshed herself a bit before she joined him in the kitchen to drink the rest of her coffee and eat a toasted bagel he had prepared; then she left the house.

"Be back in a minute!" she informed him before she was through the door, not hearing his offer of help.

He was busy preparing a few things for their lunch when he heard her coming back inside. Curiosity took the better of him, and he peeked around the corner - only to immediately rush to Lisbon's side, who was carrying a fir of about her own size under one arm, and a brown box under the other.

"Why didn't you say anything? You can't possible carry this alone!" he reprimanded her and took the tree from her. "Where do you want it?"

"Living room, next to the fireplace. And I didn't say anything because I wanted to surprise you with this. I wanted to have everything ready before you see it."

"Then let's make a deal; I help you putting this thing up and then don't come back until you say you're ready. There's enough for me to do in the kitchen anyways."

"Okay," Lisbon agreed when he put the fir down on its foot Teresa had already adjusted before bringing the tree inside. As soon as it stood in the right place, exactly where she wanted it, Jane left, saying that he would pretend he hadn't seen anything, and that he would wait for her to call for him.

Lisbon turned up in the kitchen when he was peeling the potatoes, and she looked at him guiltily, apologizing that she hadn't been helping him with the meal. He only told her that it would be for her to take care of their dinner then, and she decided that she could very well begin with the preparations now, so that there wouldn't be too much to do in the evening.

"So, are you ready then?" Jane asked casually while he gave her another carrot to slice.

"Not completely, there's one thing I still need to do. But first we finish the preparations here." He didn't answer, but only watched while she chopped the vegetable. She had just shoved the vegetable pieces from her wooden platter into the bowl, when he announced:

"Good, then do whatever you have to do, 'cause for now everything's finished."

"Alright, then...," Teresa began, suddenly a bit nervous, "Um, it's Christmas... and... give me a few minutes. And don't you dare go into the living room!" He didn't have the time to react before she was gone; he only heard the bathroom door being opened and closed again.

When she reappeared about ten minutes later, he had to remind himself to breathe. She had changed from pants and blouse to a knee-length black dress with a square neckline, lined with dark green spangles. Her hair was open, only the outer front strands were held back with a small barrette at the back of her head - so he saw that she was also wearing the earrings he had given her.

"You look...," he searched for a word that would suit the picture, but had to realize that there wasn't any, so he simply went with, "beautiful." His gaze roamed and admired her body, and Lisbon blushed slightly when he didn't stop even after what seemed like half an eternity to her. Only when he chuckled, she finally moved to his side.

"What is it?" she asked curiously when she saw the amused twinkle in his eyes, and followed his look down to her feet. And also laughed - she was still wearing her slippers, the ones with the face of a deer, complete with small plush antlers. "They're more comfortable than heels," she shrugged and Jane felt the strong desire to pull her into a hug, but withstood that desire for now.

"I guess it's time for me to change, too," the blond man at her side said, but was instantly stopped by her hand on his arm.

"No, Patrick, please. It's nice to see you wearing something other than your suit," Lisbon told him, referring to his dark blue cashmere sweater he was wearing over his shirt instead of his vest and jacket. He looked at her for a moment, his expression unreadable, and then nodded slowly.

They ate in comfortable silence, not feeling the need to talk this time, but nevertheless also not having the impression of any kind of awkwardness. Teresa was glad that it didn't matter whether they were babbling away

about everything that came to their minds, like they had done the day before, or they were just occasionally smiling at each other, but other than that were completely lost in their own musings and memories.

It was almost routine when they filled the dishwasher after they'd finished eating. Only this time, they didn't return to their seats in the kitchen; this time, Lisbon took Jane's hand and led him to the living room, made him wait a moment around the corner so he wouldn't be able to look inside, went and turned on the lights on the tree, and then called him inside.

His eyes, full of emotions, made every effort she had with all the planning and organizing worth it.

"That's..." For the second time this day, he felt at a loss for words. "Thank you. That means a lot to me," he continued after a couple of minutes simply staring at the Christmas tree, wonderfully decorated in tones of red and gold, and glittering in its own light that came from the small electrical candles, attached to the branches. There was even a star on top, and for only a moment, he wondered how she had managed to put it up there.

Teresa didn't answer; she simply smiled, walked over to him and took his hand in hers. Together they stood for long while simply watching the twinkling the decorations gave with every tiny change of light, and listening to Christmas songs playing on Lisbon's notebook.

In the evening and after their dinner, they settled onto Lisbon's sleeping square, leaning back against a variety of boxes they had covered with blankets and stuffed with pillows, thus resembling a sofa. The fire in the chimney was lit once more, as were the lamps on the Christmas tree, and a peaceful warmth filled the room and wrapped the friends and colleagues up inside.

They had been talking again about everything and anything, except for the less happy topics, and savored the taste of a fine red wine Jane had found in his basement. Now and then, their talk ebbed a bit, when both got lost in their own thoughts for a while, but soon they returned to their conversation.

There was another pause, and Lisbon's mind wandered to dangerous territory without her realizing it before it was too late. "Tell me something about your family," she suddenly asked, if not blurted out, and her eyes widened in shock at her own words. She hadn't meant to say that. They had been skillfully avoiding those topics, but now she had brought it up. Scolding herself inwardly, she looked up, with a hint of fear in her features - but, to her surprise, Jane didn't look angry or irritated at her, but only thoughtful.

"Okay. But I want to know about yours, too."

Teresa had to stop her mouth from dropping open. That was an interesting deal, and sounded only fair to her.

"The first Christmas with our daughter, about nine months old then, was the best in my whole life. The tree was standing exactly where it stands now," he nodded into their small Christmas tree's direction, "and my wife and I hadn't been able to resist - we had to spoil our little one. So there were loads of presents. When they were all unpacked, she sat in the middle of bunches of wrapping paper and ribbons, only her head and her arms still visible, and cuddled a stuffed animal; I think my wife and I never found out what exactly it was, but it looked like a mixture of dog, cat and bear. It was very soft and almost as big as our daughter; she laughed and squealed happily the whole time while we were watching her and taking photos."

Lost in the memory, Jane was talking and smiling contentedly, which Lisbon noticed with some surprise. Only when he finished his story and came back to the here and now, sadness settled on his features. It was more the movement of his lips she understood, than the actual words, because his voice was even too low to be called a whisper. Yet she didn't need to hear it; she knew what he was saying: "I miss them." It matched her own feelings about her family, and how much she wished they were still there, all of them. She loved her brothers, but she missed her mother; she even missed her father, despite all his faults during his last years, and despite him leaving her and her brothers alone in the end. They were her parents, after all, and she loved them, still loved them, both of them.

"We had a tradition - at Boxing Day's afternoon, we went out, my whole family, and we took a long walk. When there was snow, we took a sleigh with us, and we built a snowman, or we made a snowball fight. My dad and I against my brothers, and my mum would be the referee. We never managed more than ten minutes of this, because even this short time had us already laughing so hard that we were just rolling on the ground. When we came home, my mum would make a huge pot of cacao, and we would sit in the kitchen, drinking the hot and sweet beverage, and talking and joking. I hadn't known anything else for 12 years of my life; it was a part of Christmas, like it simply had to be like this. When my mum died shortly before Christmas..." Lisbon trailed off and bit her lip to hold back the tears. She felt Jane pull her closer, silently offering her comfort when he kissed her hair.

"When I was a child, my mum told me a story," she silently went on, swallowing her tears, "It was shortly after the death of my grandma who I had loved dearly. My mum said, when someone dies, this person becomes an angel. And our thoughts will become little angels, too, accompanying the angel the beloved one is now. Angels don't have to fly alone; it's our memory that keeps them company. But we need to have happy, joyful memories - because the little angels are like our memories. The sad ones will become sad angels, as does every tear we shed, while the happy memories and every laugh sends out happy angels. That's why we should stop crying and think of the good times. So our beloved one will fly in the company of angels that will make him or her laugh. "

Jane looked at her, her words playing over and over in his head. Smart as he was, his mind didn't get the meaning of what she was saying. Did he have the right to be happy? Or was it rather his responsibility to send his wife and daughter happy angels to be with them?

Lisbon seemed to read his thoughts. Silently, she added, "Our families deserve the laughter. Yours, mine. And we both do, too. Think of the good times, but don't think of them yearningly and wistfully." She laid her hands over his and squeezed them lightly, giving back some of the strength he offered her with his embrace.

He didn't answer, but only pulled her even a bit closer to him, making her lean back against his chest. He knew she was right; he had known that for years. His wife for sure would want him to live on, and not to mourn and only wait for his chance for revenge. But he simply didn't have the strength to fight against those inner demons telling him to suffer from loss and guilt and to seek vengeance.

But then, there was the other side. That, since he had started working with Lisbon's team, a lot had changed; he had changed. His priorities. He knew it was a start, and he was proud of it, in some way. All he needed to do was to work on it.

When Jane felt his boss relax against him, he looked down, only to see her eyes closed.

"Teresa?"

"Mh?" was all he got as an answer when she pressed herself closer to him. A quick glance at the clock beside her camp told him that it was already quarter past one, and he decided that they could as well go to bed now; there would be enough time for further talk the next day.

Carefully, he laid her down, removed her deer slippers, smiling once more at the sight of these shoes that were so unlike Lisbon, the one he knew from work. He covered her with the blankets as he had done it the night before, and took the barrette from her hair. Gently he caressed her face for a moment, before he got up. The moment he stepped away from her little camp, she stirred and opened her eyes.

"Sleep, it's late already," he whispered softly, but she sat up anyways, and looked down.

"No, I have to get out of that dress first," she said and rose. She saw how he wanted to turn and leave, but held him back before he could take only one step. "Do you... mind waiting a moment?"

"No, sure." So assured, she hurried to the bathroom, changed and brushed her teeth, deciding against a shower as she was too tired and didn't want to let Patrick wait.

She returned to the living room to find him standing at the window, watching the dark sea. Coming up behind him, she took his hand to turn him around, and when he complied with her silent request, she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. He hesitated only for the blink of an eye, then he, too, encircled her with his arms, pressing her small form close to him.

"Thank you," she murmured, her head resting against his chest as she listened to his heartbeat.

"No, thank you," he replied, kissing her hair, before slowly releasing her. He walked her over to her 'bed' and helped her once more with the blankets. Also once more there was this moment of silently looking at each other; and again Patrick broke the moment. But when he got up this time, Teresa didn't let him walk away.

"Stay with me?" she offered, smiling gently at him, and held out her hand. He looked uncertain, not sure whether this would be a good idea, given the undeniable attraction and tension between them. But then, he knew that nothing would happen; they both wouldn't take, wouldn't *want* to take this step as long as demons of the past were chasing them; especially him.

So he took off his shoes, socks, and sweater, and joined Lisbon on the mattress. She pushed over a pillow when he slipped beneath the blanket, and he laid down on his side, facing her.

"Sleep well," Teresa whispered and took his hand, entwined her fingers with his and placed their joined hands between their heads. Then she closed her eyes.

"And you," Patrick whispered back, mustering her features. She looked so peaceful. A small smile lay on her lips, and the emeralds sparkled in the moonlight shining into the room, even though they were covered by the silky blanket of her dark hair.

For a few minutes, he watched her, saw her relax and fall into a peaceful slumber. Then he took a deep breath and also closed his eyes, the warmth of the small hand in his like the straw of hope he needed to hold onto.

He didn't ask for much. He didn't ask for his family to return, for holding his wife and daughter in his arms again. He didn't ask for absolution. He didn't ask for someone to take away his guilt, because he knew it was a burden he would have to live with.

What he wanted was, if only, a hand to hold.

Knowing that, whatever happened, there was someone he could rely on, someone who trusted him. Someone who liked him and even more, although this someone knew who he really was.

And he knew now that he had found someone like this.

And just for a moment, he was filled with a, though believed to be long since lost, yet familiar, feeling of happiness and peace.

FIN

... and Merry Christmas!