

FINAL WISH

A glowing lantern with a yellow light, set against a dark, textured background. The lantern has a black metal frame and a glass globe. The light is warm and yellow, casting a glow on the surrounding area. The background is dark and textured, possibly a wall or a cave.

CHARLOTTE BOND

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To Steve

Who was the first person ever to believe in me, and who still does the best covers

FINAL WISH

Charlotte Bond

The weak light of the oil lamp illuminated the three bags with their meagre rations laid on top. Xavier stared at exactly the same food that had been in the bags when the tunnel had collapsed three weeks ago: two and a half loaves of bread, three fillets of salted fish, a small wheal of hard cheese, a large handful of nuts and some dried apple rings. Every instinct told him it was magic, but deep down, he didn't want to believe it. He didn't want to become a ghost.

'Look,' Mikael said, gesturing to the food, 'every time we wake up, there's two and a half bloody loaves in our packs. It's exactly the same bread too. See there? That's the baker's thumb print where he got it out of the oven.'

'The water too,' Hans added. 'I drained my water-skin to the dregs last night, and it's full again this morning.'

Uncomfortable beneath their stares, Xavier looked away from his two hunched-over companions and lifted his eyes to the solid walls of the mine shaft. He'd been a miner for as long as he could carry a pick. The closeness of the walls had never bothered him; he'd always found a comfort in their solidity. Yet since the tunnel they were working in had collapsed and cut them off from the living world, he had found himself getting jittery. He fought a daily battle against an unfamiliar sense of claustrophobia that threatened to crawl up from the depths of his bowels to tighten his heart with panic. In the faces of his friends, he often saw the same fatigued terror but he knew that, whereas he had resigned himself to their ultimate fate, they still carried hope.

'We've just been careful, that's all, rationing ourselves,' Xavier said. 'We've—'

A bellow of rage from Hans cut off his words. The enraged echoes bounced around the enclosed space and Mikael, no more than a boy, covered his ears with his hands. Hans stood, his whole body shaking, his eyes blazing. 'What's wrong with you?' he hissed. 'Why can't you see it's the same damn food? We've been eating the same food for weeks now.'

Xavier held out his hands placatingly and in an effort to force the conversation onto safer ground said, 'You can't know how long we've been down here.' The three of them lived in a permanent gloom, where night and day had no meaning to them. The only way to count time was through the rumbling of their bellies.

'I know how long it's been,' said Mikael quietly. He hesitated when the others stared at him, but then reached into the pocket of his breaches and pulled out three small sticks about the size and length of a man's finger. 'I cut a mark in these each time we sleep.' He held them up for inspection. There appeared to be two dozen cuts on each of the sticks.

Xavier shrugged. 'We've most likely been sleeping differently without daylight, not working a full day.'

Hans thumped the wall, sending a small shower of grit cascading onto the floor. 'What will it take, old man, to convince you that magic is at work here?'

This was the crux of it. How to explain to them? Xavier did believe that magic was responsible for their never diminishing food and water supply. But whereas the others saw it as a sign of hope, he saw it only as heaping more cruelty onto their already pitiable situation.

Xavier sighed. 'Fine. Say it's magic. How does that help us?'

Hans eyes gleamed. 'It means there's something watching over us, keeping us safe. It means we'll surely find a way out and—'

'No!' yelled Xavier, lurching to his feet as his frustration got the better of him. Hans took a step back, his eyes wide with shock. Xavier tried to calm himself. His nerves had been frayed by the constant half-light and stale air of their living tomb. 'We shouldn't think like that,' he said in a softer, but still gruff voice. 'Whatever magic is refilling our bags, it's not going to help us get out of here. We're going to die here, Hans. Not for a while maybe, but we will. We need to come to terms with that and prepare ourselves, not waste time waiting for an escape that is never going to happen.'

Mikael's bottom lip trembled, his eyes glistening with tears. Xavier felt shame like a punch in the gut. He hadn't meant to cause his young friend such distress. He knelt down, taking the younger man's hands in his own. Gently, he said, 'If we were going to be rescued, by our friends or by the spirits themselves, then don't you think we would have been saved long before now?' Mikael looked away, unable to hold his gaze.

Xavier stood up and turned to Hans, who was staring at Xavier as if he was a mad man. What is it with you? Why have you given up already? It's not natural. *You're not natural.*

The sound of water splashing onto stone made the two of them turn. Mikael had opened his water-skin and upended it so water was gushing out over the floor.

'No!' Xavier lunged forwards to snatch the water-skin away, but Mikael twisted, allowing the last drop to fall.

'You idiot!' Xavier snarled. 'Now we have a third less between us.'

Mikael looked at up him. The boy's eyes were a bright blue in his grubby, dusty face. 'I call upon the spirits here to give us a sign. If they refill this water bottle, it means we're going to live.'

Xavier clenched a fist, fighting the urge to punch the boy and see if that knocked any sense into him. Then suddenly, a great weariness sapped away his strength and his fingers uncurled. He stalked as far away as their small cave would allow then sat down heavily on a rock, his back to the other two.

'Just don't think you're having any of mine if the spirits ignore you,' he muttered, knowing it was an empty threat.

Behind him, Hans murmured, 'It'll be full again tomorrow. You'll see.'

Silence filled the cave. It pressed down on Xavier's shoulders, forcing him to slump forward. Conflict warred within him. He knew that tomorrow the water-skin would be full again, but what good did that do?

He'd seen plenty of cave-ins. He'd heard many miners — far better and much worthier men than him — beg the spirits for help or rescue, and they'd been left to rot, just like all the other poor trapped souls. And as the gloom seemed to press even tighter around him, the terrible thought that he'd been trying to avoid crept to the front of his mind again.

What if all those ghosts we hear in collapsed tunnels aren't really the spirits of dead men at all? What if those trapped in this cursed mountain never die, but

are kept alive, like us? What if they live on, forever calling out for friends who've forgotten them?

He shook his head, desperate to dislodge the thought from his mind. He reached out and touched the wall, wanting the feel of solid stone to ground him and chase away thoughts of spirits. He half-expected to hear the cry of ghosts even now, but instead all he could hear was the sound of the two men behind him, continuing to breathe and exist against the odds.

After a while, Hans and Mikael went back to working at the rock fall. Surrounded on all sides by stone, mining was all they had left to define themselves, so they did it with even more zeal than before. Wordlessly Xavier joined them. His frustration at the two other men was quickly soothed by the rhythmic rise and fall of his pick. He forced his anger into the stones instead of towards his comrades. They worked in silence, but it was a comfortable silence, the ring of their picks on stone like a metallic birdsong.

Xavier's thoughts turned, as they always did at such times, to his wife, Sonja. At the beginning, after the tunnel collapsed, he had thought that they would die. But the days had stretched on, their water hadn't run out, and their rations had kept going. Then his new fear had become that he would forget his wife's face before the end. So he took every opportunity to remember each detail he could: her cornflower blue eyes, her smooth dark hair, the smell of rosemary on her soft, brown skin after she'd bathed in the river, the sound of her laughter. As he worked at the rock face, he held the image of Sonja in his head and his heartache pained him almost as much as his blistered hands.

They worked until tiredness made their eyes heavy and their movements sluggish. Mikael was the first to stop, and the other two lay down their picks as well. That was the agreement they'd made on the first day: all together, or not at all.

In an unspoken accord, they stretched themselves out on the smoother pieces of gravel that they'd each claimed that first night. Hans turned the oil lamp down low. He did not extinguish it completely; like the water and food, the oil hadn't depleted during their imprisonment but none of them were keen to extinguish the flame in case it wouldn't light again. Their current plight was dire; it would be unbearable in the pitch darkness.

Xavier was the last to fall asleep. He lay there for some time, listening to the soft, regular breaths of his companions, wondering if the air was as magically replenished as the food. Behind his closed eyes he saw his beloved wife, lying across from him in bed. She was smiling sleepily, her dark hair cascading over her shoulder. He curled up into a ball, wishing with all his heart that he could live to see her smile one last time.

When they woke up the next morning, Mikael reached immediately for his water-skin. It was full again. 'I knew it!' he crowed.

'That proves it. Something is watching over us,' Hans insisted.

'And it's going to rescue us,' Mikael added. 'What do you think is helping us? A bucca? A bluecoat? Maybe it's the kobolds.'

Xavier sat up and sighed wearily. 'Maybe something is watching over us, but how is it really helping us?' His dust-dry throat grated as he forced out the words

he'd not yet dared to say aloud. 'What if all that happens is that the spirit keeps us alive for weeks, months, even years? You know as well as I: there's no way through the collapsed shaft. There's no way for the other to get in or us to get out. What help is this spirit really giving us? If it keeps feeding us, we could remain alive down here for years, living out our lives in this gritty gloom, separated by stone from all those we loved.' He leaned forward, his voice dropping to a whisper. 'You've heard the ghosts, haven't you? The voices that call up from the abandoned mine shafts. What if those voices don't belong to ghosts — what if they belong to men, like us, that the spirits are keeping alive?' He saw the look of horror on Mikael's face and quickly added, 'Perhaps they don't mean anything bad by it. Maybe the spirits just don't know how to help us. They give us food and water, without realising that we can't get out.'

A tear leaked from Mikael's left eye, tracking a clean path down his cheek. He looked up at Hans and whispered, 'What do you think?'

Hans hesitated then said, 'I think maybe he's right.' Xavier felt a knot in his chest start to loosen. 'Maybe they just don't know *how* to help us. If we tell them, if we make a wish, perhaps they'll grant it.' Xavier swallowed down a scream that threatened to burst between his lips.

Mikael's face brightened. 'Oh, yes! That must be it. Let's try it.' He looked at Xavier, his own expression faltering as he took in the older man's grim expression. 'Please, just try it. Even if you don't believe. Just try. For us.'

Hans sat down so that once again the three of them were in a circle around the lamp. 'All together, or not at all,' he said.

Xavier looked from Hans's face, full of confidence, to Mikael's face, full of hope. He sighed. 'All together then,' he said reluctantly.

'I wish we could get out of here,' Hans whispered under his breath. Mikael and Xavier joined him, the three of them chanting the words like a litany. Xavier closed his eyes and let the memory of Sonja fill his mind as he whispered.

It was Mikael's voice that faltered first, then stopped. Xavier had no idea how long they'd been whispering their wish, but his throat was dry and sore. They all stared around the gloomy cavern.

'Nothing happened,' Mikael said, his voice quivering.

'Well, what did you expect?' Xavier snapped. 'That we'd open our eyes and be outside in bright sunshine? Or that an opening might have magically appeared in the wall?'

His words fell between them all, as heavy as stone. Tears shone wetly on Mikael's eyelashes. 'I'd give my life for one last glimpse of sunshine,' he murmured, his voice broken.

Hans grunted. 'I'd give *my* life for one last breath of fresh air.'

Xavier felt a prickling all over the skin of his arms, as if a cold draught had blown across them. Words passed his lips before he could stop them, words filled with longing. 'I'd give my life for one last look at my wife's smiling face.'

Just one last look that wasn't inside my head.

He felt a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. Despite their circumstances, he saw the others smiling too. Despair might be lurking in the shadows around them, but the three of them had shared a moment of happiness

and the atmosphere felt brighter for it. Xavier could almost taste the fresh spring air on his tongue and feel the warm sun on his skin. He could almost sense Sonja's comforting presence sitting beside him in the dark.

An almighty crack boomed around the chamber. Rocks began to tumble to the ground. The three miners scrambled to the far side of the cavern, pressing themselves against the wall. The crash of falling rocks subsided but the air was so filled with choking dust that Xavier couldn't see for some moments. He rubbed the dust from his eyes and squinted. The cavern seemed to be glowing. Their oil lamp had been smashed to pieces by falling rock, so the light couldn't be coming from that. For a moment, he wondered if it was the dust itself that shone, but then the air cleared enough that he saw the shaft of moonlight spilling in through a large crack in the cave wall.

He stumbled forward, his legs shaking, and peered through the crack. He looked out onto a sloping, green hillside. He saw the other side of a valley opposite. If he pressed his face to the gap and peered to the left, he could see a lake in the distance.

The lake. My village. Sonja!

'Xavier...' Mikael said weakly.

'There's a crack,' Xavier said breathlessly, 'to the outside world. I can see moonlight, trees, the lake — we can get out through it. We can go home.'

'Xavier.' The despair in Mikael's voice caught Xavier's attention and he turned round. Mikael knelt on the floor, Hans's head cradled on his lap. There was blood on the miner's chest and dribbling from his mouth. Xavier knelt down and tried to examine Hans's wound, but the stricken miner cried out in pain at even the slightest touch.

Hans gripped Xavier's arm, pulling him close. 'Is it... beautiful?' he croaked, his eyes fixed on the crack in the wall. 'Is it the way you remembered it? We haven't been down here so long it's all changed?'

'It is beautiful,' Xavier assured him softly, 'and it's waiting for all of us. We'll carry you through and-'

'The breeze!' Hans exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. 'I can feel it on my skin. I can smell pine and the rain.' He took a deep breath which transformed into an explosive cough, splattering his chest with dark black blood. He slumped back, his chest still. The dust settled on his open eyes.

Mikael bowed his head. Copious teardrops stripped the dirt from his cheeks before dripping onto the floor. Xavier could feel tears washing the dust from his own face too. They sat there for some moments until Mikael glanced up at the crack and said tremulously, 'Do you think we could...?' He tailed off sadly and Xavier knew the boy had just made the same assessment he himself had done.

'No, we can't drag him out. The opening's too small. We'd likely rip off an arm or something. We'll have to open the gap even before we can squeeze ourselves out.'

Misery pinched Mikael's face. 'Open it some more and hope the whole thing doesn't give way, trapping us again, maybe even killing us, you mean?'

'Exactly,' Xavier said grimly. He cocked his head. 'Would you rather stay safe in here?' The lad shook his head vehemently.

With freedom so tantalisingly close, Xavier and Mikael set to work with more vigour than they'd shown since the first day of the cave-in. It took them most of the night to widen the crack enough that they felt they had a chance of squeezing through it.

Mikael turned to look forlornly at Hans. 'I guess we'll have to leave him here then.'

'Yes. I don't fancy our chances of pulling through a corpse already gone stiff.' Mikael nodded, brushing a knuckle against his running nose. Xavier squeezed his shoulder. 'We can always come back for him. And if we still can't get him out, he'll have the mountain as his tomb. That's a grander monument than either you or I could hope for.'

Mikael nodded again and they turned their attention back to the crack. As the more wirey of the two, Xavier went first. It took him three attempts before he found the correct angle and the right way to wriggle before he was through. He tumbled to the ground and lay there, dew wetting his cheek. The breeze brought him scents so vivid and different to the stale air of the cave that it made his head spin. He detected grass, leaf mould, the iron tang of blood from a night hunter's recent kill. Above him, the sky was filled with the rosy light that comes before the dawn.

Xavier struggled to his feet and turned back to the crack. Mikael's frightened face flooded with relief as Xavier peered back in.

'Thank goodness. You were gone so long I thought something had happened.'

'No, it was just... too much for a moment. Come on. I'll show you how to get out.' Mikael, slightly wider around the shoulders than Xavier, had a harder time squeezing through the crack. On his fifth attempt, he had to call a halt to catch his breath.

'I think I might need to go back and work on widening the hole some more. I'm almost through and — oh!' Sunlight, which had been creeping down the valley side, now flooded over his face. Mikael's eyes unfocused; a look of rapture softened his features. 'I had never thought to see the sunrise again.'

Xavier was just turning to look at the spectacle himself when a rumble from the cave made his head snap back round. The stones in the crack shifted and fell. A blunt woof of air escaped Mikael's lips as a stone landed on his back, compressing his chest against the opening.

Xavier scraped his fingers bloody trying to shift the rock, trying to give the boy room to breathe. Yet even as he worked, Mikael's lips were steadily turning blue. The boy's eyes were wide and panic-filled, his breaths coming in short, shallow pants. His hands scrabbled frantically at Xavier's back, trying to haul himself free.

Xavier's experienced miner's senses told him that the large rock was wedged and wouldn't move for anything short of blasting. Mikael's frantic movements were growing weaker. Xavier left off the rock and instead wrapped his arms around the fading boy.

'Can't... breathe...' Mikael gasped.

'I know,' Xavier said, trying to sound comforting even as his words caught in his throat. 'It'll be alright, Mikael, just a few minutes and...'

He stopped talking. Mikael's gaze had slipped over Xavier's shoulder. Sunlight made his pale face glow. Mikael rested his head on Xavier's shoulder staring at the sunrise. The boy's blue lips curved into a small smile as his final breath passed between them.

Xavier slumped down to the ground. He sat there for some time, still as stone. Tears leaked from his eyes but he was too exhausted to give vent to the sobs that writhed inside him, like snakes caught in a pit.

Eventually, when the sun was fully in the sky, he got unsteadily to his feet and walked down the valley. His steps were slow, his tread heavy. He didn't know precisely where he was. The lake he lived by was large and fed by a number of tributaries from the valleys that surrounded it. Xavier's sense of direction had been muddled after so long underground. The world around him looked both intensely familiar, but also incredibly strange.

He wandered to the water's edge and stared at it for a few moments, hoping that something would jolt his memory and help him to orient himself. But still he recognised nothing. Picking randomly, he turned left and began walking that way. He knew there were settlements all around the water's edge; surely the first one he came across would give him a better idea of where he was.

Yet it was not a village he encountered, but a solitary person tending their pigs. Xavier stumbled forward, grateful and excited at the prospect of encountering another living soul. The woman had her back to him and was unaware of his approach. She threw her cloak over her shoulder, unknowingly exposing her arm and side to his gaze.

Xavier stopped and stared, recognition finally slicing through his hazy thoughts. That dark green rough-spun skirt had often lain folded at the bottom of his bed; that arm had encircled him nightly. Joy surged through him.

It's Sonja. It's really her. I'll get to see her smile again. I'll get to-

A thought rose up and sucked his happiness into a sink hole of black despair. He thought of Mikael's face as the sun caught it; his friend's words crept to the front of his mind.

"I'd give my life for one last glimpse of sunshine."

Xavier shuddered. In his mind, he saw once again the crushed and bloody body of Hans.

"I'd give my life for one last breath of fresh air."

No. It's just a coincidence. Isn't it? The spirits heard our prayer for a way out and answered.

Or did they hear our words, what we'd give our lives for, and think we were asking for a trade?

His own words ran through his head: "I'd give my life for one last look at my wife's smiling face." Dread certainty settled on him.

I could leave now. I could turn and walk away. Even if Sonja turns, she won't know me at this distance. She must think I'm dead. I could walk away and maybe live a long time, a very long time. Then I'd come back as an old man, see her one last time, when I was ready to die.

He shifted anxiously, undecided, and a twig snapped under his boot. Sonja spun round, her hand going to the knife at her belt. She stared at him, no recognition in her eyes for the thin, dirty man before her.

Now. I have to go now. Before it's too late.

Sonja frowned, squinting at him. She lifted a hand to her forehead, blocking out the early morning sun. Recognition flared in her eyes and her mouth became an O of surprise. Then her lips curled up into the wonderful smile that had sustained him through those dark days.

Pain bloomed in his chest, setting the nerves in his hands tingling. Numbness sped down his legs and his vision grew blurred. Yet Xavier even as he sank to his knees, he smiled back, knowing that the trade had been worth it. He was dying, he knew, but he was surrounded by air and sunlight, and the image that hung before his eyes as darkness closed around him was that final, wonderful smile.

If you enjoyed this story, why not check out my novel "The Poisoned Crow," a dark fairy tale available now on Amazon Kindle.