

MERRY CHRISTMAS

by Gwen Lord

It happened so suddenly, taking them both by surprise. After a leisurely walk in the park, arm in arm, they had returned to Catherine's apartment. The hour was late, after 1 am, but their spirits were high, the three half bottles of assorted wines awaited them in the fridge. Vincent got the glasses and arranged the cushions by the fire, as Catherine appeared with the wines...

One drink followed another, as the fingers on the clock held the telltale secret of how late the hour was, but time held no meaning anymore.

Soon the wine relaxed them, words came easily, both agreeing that a life without each other, was no life at all. Finally, they agreed a "Happy Life" could be theirs, they knew the risks, the dangers, but the possibilities and the hope shone through. Vincent asked Catherine to forsake all others, to be his and his alone. Tears filled both their eyes as they clung together, their "Bond" now fully open, all secrets and desires now fully known.

It had been decided, following that wonderful evening, that they would exchange rings on Christmas Eve, and read aloud the vows they had lovingly put together to use for this occasion.

Sizes for the rings had been a major problem, her fingers so tiny, his so large but, after a lot of searching, Catherine had found a split ring which fit her finger and a large curtain ring which fitted Vincent's. Armed with her Grandfather's antique signet ring, Catherine entered the plush jewellers on 52nd Street, where you sank into oceans of carpet and voices were kept to a whisper.

You only visited such places when you were wealthy enough not to have a heart attack when you received the bill. Placing the antique ring in the assistant's hand, Cathy explained she wanted the ring made larger, to the size of the cheap curtain ring she now handed him. This raised an eyebrow, but not wishing to offend one of his firm's best customers, he smiled as he took it from her. She explained that after making it larger, she wished to have a small exquisite diamond set in one corner, and the initials V&C engraved in the other.

Vincent went to see Cullen, with his task for Catherine's ring. Together the two friends pondered on different ideas and textures. Cullen was a fully-trained craftsman, an expert in his trade, a teacher of his trade when he lived 'Above,' but one day circumstances beyond his

control, made him decide to leave his world and join the Helpers he once 'Helped Below.' Here his talent was soon put to good use, with everyone benefiting from his carving and delicate engraving. Soon the products of his work graced every corner of the chambers. Chess pieces for Father, chess pieces for Vincent, carved beds, ornate shelves, brooches and candlesticks, endless other items.

Vincent had shown a keen interest in Cullen's workshop, visiting him whenever he could find the time. Father knew where to find his son, when his absence was noticed. After five years under Cullen's guidance, Vincent had become a master of the same skills. He didn't have the certificates that Cullen had, but his craftsmanship was there, for all to see and wonder at.

Small delicate snowflakes began to fall soon after nightfall Christmas Eve, on Central Park and surrounding areas, transforming everything into a Winter Wonderland. When midnight was only an hour away, the flakes grew larger and more demanding, falling gently and silently on the now deep, virgin snow. A mantle of white enveloped every familiar sight - trees, benches, railings, hedges and road lamps.

The silence was so consuming, you could almost reach out and touch it, the very fabric of New York City life suddenly halted in its endless noisy grind. Now nostalgia took over, allowing everyone to remember the magic of snow, of childhood memories, snowball fights, snowmen, sleigh rides, red noses, soggy mittens, carefree childhood memories.

As Vincent walked toward the tunnel entrance, his sensitive nose twitched at the sharp contrast of cold air, contrasting the warmth of the chamber he'd left behind. Pulling his hood over his golden flowing mane, he set his feet in the direction of Catherine's apartment, which now lay ahead of him, the lights from her doors shining out like a beacon to him. The light of the full moon above sent glinting lights cascading over the smooth new snow, like a million tiny diamonds. His large leather boots cut deep into the crisp snow, as if he was alone on another planet, as life itself seemed to have ceased, and he the only one alive.

Behind him, the telltale footprints were already disappearing under the onslaught of falling flakes. He battled on, holding one hand above his eyes to shield his face from the unending volley of flakes.

The light from the apartment sent a shaft of welcome across the deep snow of the balcony as Vincent descended with catlike grace in the far corner. Easing his way to the door, he saw Catherine curled up snugly on the 'dinky little couch'. A few candles were visibly lit, such a romantic sight to his eyes. Tap, tap, tap ... and in an instant his beloved Catherine rushed to let him in, as the door allowed his imposing frame to enter, the swirl of snowflakes followed him in.

"Catherine, you look so beautiful," he whispered in his velvet voice, smiling at her.

"Thank you, Vincent. Come, take off your cloak."

Unclipping it, he carefully took it into the bathroom, shaking it over the bath, then hanging it on a hook behind the door.

"Come, sit by the fire, Vincent, and get warm, your hands are frozen."

Holding his hand she led him to the fire. Vincent sat on the floor and removed his boots, placing them next to the basket of logs, then stretching out his long legs, allowed his toes to line up with the warmth, letting life return to his frozen feet and limbs.

"Hmmm, that feels good, Catherine," he murmured. Crouching down next to him, on the assorted array of cushions, Catherine snuggled up to him, as he encircled her in his arms, then he lowered his head and kissed her hair, her cheek and finally her lips.

The Christmas tree stood on the other side of the fireplace, small and pretty with its tinsel and ornaments.

"Thank you for helping me do the tree last night. Don't Cullen's carved tiny figures stand out well?"

"Yes, he's very gifted, with a generous heart."

Looking at the clock Catherine whispered, "Vincent, it's midnight."

She turned, kneeling before him like an excited child.

"Yes," came the reply, then putting both hands on her shoulders, he pulled her to him, their lips came together like a butterfly's wings, followed by a deeper passion promising more.

Each taking out their slip of paper, they started to read the vows they had carefully put together. Vincent went first, then Catherine. Once these words were spoken, their vows made, they were one.

Catherine slipped the antique ring on Vincent's wedding finger, then Vincent slipped the ring he had made her, on her wedding finger. Looking up into each other's eyes, the moment was all consuming, their eyes told each other of the "Happy Life" they could now share, truly together.

"Happy Christmas, Mrs. Wells," he purred.

"Happy Christmas, Husband." They kissed with a new closeness, a new desire, a new beginning.