

# THE CHRISTMAS PRESENT

by Gwen Lord

Tell me what you're thinking," Catherine asked as she snuggled up to the man she loved.

Vincent smiled thoughtfully. With a wistful look in his eyes he replied, "How much I love you Catherine and how lucky I am."

He slowly bowed his head, as he felt a little shy about his answer.

"Are you sure that is what you are feeling. I noticed something else just then in your expression. Please Vincent, share it with me."

Struggling for words to say, he suddenly looked up into Catherine's face, which was full of concern for him.

"I long Catherine.. I long to live a life where we could be together..... above in the sunlight. Walking through the rain with you, without having the ever present danger, that is there for me in the sunlight."

Catherine cupped his chin in her hand and sighed. " I know Vincent. I want what you want. I feel the pain too, you know. I want so much for us to be together. I want to be able to walk with you EVERYWHERE."

"It hurts so much, Catherine, that I cannot even go Above in the daytime and buy you a present from a shop or department store, to come back to my chamber and wrap it up for you and give it to you on Christmas morning."

With tears glistening in her eyes, Catherine caught hold of Vincent's hands and looked up at him.

"Vincent I love you so much and it breaks my heart that you want so little from life and cannot do the simplest things - like shopping."

"I'm human too, Catherine. I have feelings, feelings that all men have, yet I am told that those feelings are not for me. Father means well, Catherine, and he's right... but..... it hurts so much."

"To me Vincent, you're beautiful. To me, you are all that my heart desires. I want you Vincent. You, and only you. Please know that what I am saying is true.

"Yes, I know that, Catherine"

Holding her close Vincent kissed her very tenderly and sighed.

"It is Christmas tomorrow and I have to be content to give you a gift that I have made from leftovers that topsiders discard."

For a long while they sat close together by the Mirror Pool, each of them in deep thought.

"Vincent," Catherine cried in great excitement. "If I could arrange for a shop to open later, after all the shoppers have gone home, would you come with me? Would you be content to have a few moments searching for that gift for me, even though it is still after dark?"

"You know I would Catherine."

"A friend of my father's has a shop not far from here. I did a favour for him once - and now is the time to call in that favour."

"What is the point Catherine? We still cannot visit his shop. Even in the darkness outside, there are still the lights inside."

Lifting her fingers against his lips Catherine begged Vincent to stop. It was going to happen and Catherine was determined to make it so.

They walked to the entrance to Catherine's basement, where she whispered, "Until tonight, Vincent".

"Until tonight, Catherine."

The shop door was very heavy and Catherine found that she had to use all her strength to push it open. The shop had that old time smell and she noticed that things hadn't changed at all. Marcus looked every bit of 75 and should have retired years ago.

"You're on time Catherine, just like your dad. He was always punctual."

"Yes, it's an emergency that has brought me here. A favour from you.. please Marcus".

"Of course, my dear. How can I help you"

"I have a friend, a dear wonderful friend that I love dearly. He is not like other men. He has facial disfigurements that others might be fearful of. But he has a wonderful soul and it shows through him. He loves me truly and wants to buy me a gift, so I wondered if he could shop here with no one else in store."

"Of course, Catherine. He is welcome. If you love him then he must be special."

"We will be here after 9 o'clock. Will that be okay?"

"I will be here, don't worry."

As the clock in the tower chimed nine the streets were almost empty. Only a few stragglers were left scurrying homeward. Vincent and Catherine now battled against the wind and soft falling snow. The light from Marcus's shop was like a beacon. Several times, Vincent stopped, a little fearful to carry on. But Catherine's reassuring tightness on his arm helped him towards those final steps. Once inside, Vincent huddled in the dark corner hesitating to move towards

the light.

"I am glad you made it Catherine, there is going to be a storm blowing, so I wouldn't stay too long. Come into the light Vincent you have noneed to fear. Catherine has told me everything and I welcome you".

Moving slowly towards Marcus, Vincent removed his hood, then looked straight into the warmest smiling face he had ever seen.

"Come Vincent. I have much to show you. While Catherine makes us a cup of herbal tea, we will select a gift for her."

Vincent was in awe as he looked at the many display counters loaded with beautiful trinkets and such like. He chose a china figure that he had noticed Catherine had glanced at in passing.

Vincent looked a little embarrassed as he called Marcus to one side.

"I have no money to pay ~ but I have this brooch that was pinned to my blanket when I was found. I don't know its value, but I would gladly exchange it for Catherine's gift."

Listening by the door, Catherine felt a tear roll down her cheeks. 'Vincent' she thought, *'you would do this for me'*.

"Catherine have you finished making our tea?" Marcus called. "Vincent has chosen his gift and now it's time to choose yours."

As they left the shop, armed with their presents all nicely wrapped ready for Christmas, Vincent felt very light-hearted. He was truly happy and he knew that his love was happy for him also.

Catherine had bought Vincent a new journal

As they reached the park entrance to the tunnels, the snow was starting to fall heavily. Happily, they ran Below. The pipes were ringing out that it was midnight, Christmas Day. They stopped for a moment and Vincent pulled Catherine to him.

"A Happy Christmas Catherine."

"A Happy Christmas Vincent."

They gave each other a warm loving kiss. This had been Vincent's best day in all his life. He had bought a present for Catherine in a real shop. Picking Catherine up he swung her around.

"I love you Catherine," he shouted for all to hear.

"I love you too Vincent," said Catherine between giggles.

Putting her down to the floor and after she had caught her breath, Catherine said, "I know about the brooch Vincent, I overheard. That was a great sacrifice you made."

"Some sacrifices are worth everything Catherine."

And Catherine smiled as her hand touched Vincent's brooch in her pocket. One day, she would wear it on her wedding dress, when she and Vincent married. She knew that day would not be far away.

"Yes, Vincent. Some sacrifices are worth everything."