

# **“It Came Upon a Midnight Clear...”**

**Judith Nolan**



*"Our hearts grow tender with childhood memories and love of kindred, and we are better throughout the year for having, in spirit, become a child again at Christmastime..."*

***Laura Ingalls Wilder***

**NOTE:** Some of the dialogue has been taken from the Season Two episode 'God Bless The Child' of the TV series 'Beauty and the Beast', written by Alex Gansa and Howard Gordon.

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New York City was dressed in its finest Christmas holiday decorations. People were ice skating with Santa on the rink at the Rockefeller Center. The towering Christmas tree at its heart was all lit up with white angels trumpeting before it. The crowds thronging the streets, shops and cafes appeared happier and brighter because it was the holiday season.

But the light-spangled, festive gaiety masked a multitude of darker stories. One story, in particular, was potentially going to have a sad ending that didn't fit into any Christmas story about peace on earth and goodwill to all men.

Or, in this case, one troubled and scared young woman who'd fled from her new home, leaving behind her child. All because she'd felt rejected by a man

she'd come to love with all the confusing passion hidden within her scared and lonely heart.

"Oh, Vincent... none of this is your fault..." Catherine whispered, driving her car around yet another corner, driving down another seedy street where young women like the missing Lena plied their dangerous trade.

She drove slowly, searching desperately for any sign of the runaway. She owed it to the young woman baby's and to Vincent. She had to try to find her before it was too late and Lena became just another pin in a crime map, or a statistic within a police report.

But Catherine's search was proving fruitless and she was running out of time. She'd been driving for more than two hours and the cold was deepening. Prostitutes and pimps stood in small groups all along the once affluent street. Fires lit in old oil drums kept them warm.

"*Dammit*, Lena! Where are you?" Catherine gripped the steering wheel tightly in her frustration.

She was aware this was Lena's patch and a place she knew well. Its seedy, rundown apartments would provide ample places for her to hide and many shady people willing to help her, for a price.

Ahead of Catherine's car a young, tough-looking prostitute with spiky blonde hair, heavy makeup and a flashy red scarf around her neck was watching her drive up. When Catherine stopped and wound down her window, the young woman hurried over.

She leaned into the car window, smiling broadly. "Happy Christmas!"

"I'm looking for a girl," Catherine told her. "She's about twenty, blonde? Her name is Lena."

The young woman's wide smile faded slightly. "Hey, what she can do, I can do better," she purred.

"I'm sure you can," Catherine replied, trying not to show her frustration. "But it's her I'm looking for. I need to find her urgently."

The brassy young woman's smile disappeared and she dropped her seductive act. In her normal voice, she asked, "What's the name again?"

"Lena."

The woman straightened, turning to her companions. "*Yo!* Anybody know a Lena?"

"Lena? Lena who? *Nah!*" one of the street women called back.

The streetwalker leaned back into Catherine's car, her smile returning. "No luck, lady. What you want her for, anyway?"

"She's in trouble."

The young woman smirked. "Who isn't?"

Catherine stared at her without speaking. Finally, the prostitute relented with a long-suffering sigh.

"Try Maurice at the Penthouse, 989 Avenue C." She turned and walked quickly away from the car.



Catherine found the address with some difficulty. The building was one of a long row, all tumbled-down and derelict. As she locked her car and crossed the pavement, a police siren wailed in the distance and somewhere a clock chimed the midnight hour.

"Tomorrow is Christmas Eve..." She shook her head, as she pushed through the building's damaged front door.

Darkness, filth and the sound of scurrying rats greeted her. She frowned at the broken and graffitied elevator in the corner of the lobby. Even if it had been working it didn't look trustworthy.

She crossed the cracked tile floor and began to climb several flights of the rickety, trash-choked staircase until she could go no further. She paused on the top landing.

"Hello...?" she called.

There was no reply, no sound of human habitation. The smothering silence held an unseen menace.

Catherine walked cautiously toward the apartment door at the end of the landing. "Hello...?" she called again.

She pushed the door open slowly. "Maurice?" She walked in, looking all around. But she could see very little in the smoky darkness.

"Maurice?" she repeated.

Suddenly, a bright light shone right in her face. She held up her hands in front of her, trying to block it. "Hey!" She attempted to see past the glare, but it was useless. "Are you Maurice?"

"Some people call me Maurice," a bored, disembodied voice replied in a street-smart tone.

"Would you mind putting down the flashlight?" Catherine asked.

"Not if you don't mind putting down that purse."

Catherine glanced down at her shoulder bag. Knowing she had little choice if she wanted to find Lena, she slid the strap of her purse off her shoulder and dropped it to the floor.

Maurice walked over to pick it up, still keeping Catherine in the strong beam of his light. He moved back to sit down, finally pointing the light upwards so Catherine could see him.

"I'm looking for a girl," she told him shortly.

Maurice considered her with a cynical look. He was a young, black man wearing hip clothing and a black leather jacket that looked expensive.

"Lena, right?" he queried, going through Catherine's purse. "Word travels fast on the street, faster than light. Street speed."

"Then you know where she is?"

Maurice looked at her pityingly. "I'm an information broker."

"Does that mean yes?" Catherine demanded.

"It means I got to get my commission." He pulled the few notes from Catherine's wallet and held them up disdainfully. "Twenty-five dollars? Woman, I don't sell the time of day for that chump change!"

He threw the purse and wallet to the floor in disgust before snatching up his flashlight. He stood to leave.

"Then I'll have to owe you!" In her desperation, Catherine tried to detain him.

Maurice turned back to stare at her, his expression offended. "What you think I'm running? A credit store?"

They stared at one another. Finally, Maurice lifted the light back into her face. Catherine reacted by covering her eyes again with her hands.

"Don't think I'm going to forget the debt," Maurice replied hardly. "1157 39<sup>th</sup> street, Apartment 202." He slanted her a pitying look before he vanished back into the fetid shadows leaving Catherine to look after him.

"Thanks..." she said, leaning down to pick up her belongings, shoving her wallet back into her bag.

She returned the strap to her shoulder before she hurried from the apartment and out of the building. In the distance, police sirens were still wailing and the cold darkness closed in around her, making her breath catch in her throat.

There was no sign of Christmas cheer in this seedy neighbourhood. Catherine's pace increased as she crossed the sidewalk to her car. She unlocked the door and slid behind the wheel. This area was no place to linger...

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Lena sat in a robe at her makeup table, carefully applying a burgundy lip liner to her mouth with the aid of a large mirror. Her blonde hair was artificially curled and arranged to one side of her head with a clip.

The door to her apartment faced her. Suddenly, there was a knock to which she paid no attention. She knew the door was unlocked, so whoever was outside could come in or go away.

She wasn't in the mood for company right now. She would soon find enough people willing to pay for her companionship the moment she hit the streets.

"After all, it is Christmas..." She made a face at her mirrored reflection.

But the unwanted company found her. The door opened and Catherine walked in. She stood there, looking at Lena with a resigned expression.

"What'da *you* want?" Lena demanded in a hostile tone.

Catherine closed the door quietly. "I came to see how you were." She approached the makeup table.

Lena discarded her liner pencil. "Nothing you say is going to make me go back there." She picked up her lipstick and began applying it with deft strokes.

Catherine shrugged. "You're your own person, Lena. I can't force you. But your baby's down there waiting for you to go back to her."

Lena pursed her lips, gazing at her reflection in the mirror. "She belongs there." Her curt words sounded unconvincing.

"So do you," Catherine added quietly.

"I hate it there." Lena began to apply a black beauty mark above the right corner of her mouth. "It doesn't matter, it's not a real place to me anymore. *This* is my place and my life." She lifted a defiant shoulder.

"Is it?" Catherine looked around the shabby room. "This is real?"

Lena slipped off her robe to reveal a lacy camisole top. "This is what I know." She stood, moving around the end of the table to snatch up a sleeveless, shiny top. "This is what I do. I do *anything*. Anything you want, I'll do it." She pulled the top on with defiant movements.

Catherine looked at her sceptically. "And you're okay with that now?"

"Damn right." Lena added a red skirt to her outfit.

"It keeps you alive."

"Keeps me alive," Lena agreed, tucking her top into her skirt.

"A week ago, you said it was killing you," Catherine replied in an angry tone.

"So that was then!" Lena glared at her. "Things change."

"What things?" Catherine demanded to know.

"Things...," Lena said lamely, walking away to pick up a pair of high-heeled strappy shoes from a nearby dresser.

"Like your voice?" Catherine observed. "You don't even sound the same!"

She watched Lena approach her. "Don't you see what you're doing? Painting your face. Putting on this costume. You're trying to make yourself into someone else."

"Don't you give me that!" Lena snapped.

She walked behind Catherine to sit at her table. She began putting on her earrings with careless movements.

Catherine leaned her hands on the edge of the table. "It hurts me to see you like this! I can't..."

She sighed. "You remember what you told me that first night? About being outside? That cold feeling? Well, you can hide there if you want, but you've got a place on the inside now, with friends. People that care about you!"

Lena didn't reply. She sat staring into her makeup mirror with a blank expression, as if she was trying to shut out the whole world and not hear anything Catherine said.

Catherine sighed. She could see she was not getting through to the young woman, suspecting she was silently willing her to leave.

"It's your choice. If you want me to leave, just say so."

Lena looked up at her. "Leave...," she said, emotionlessly.

Catherine nodded briefly. "If you ever want to talk with someone, I'm there." She turned and headed to the door.

Lena watched her leave. At the very last moment, she found the courage to say, "Please..."

Catherine turned back from the door to look at her. She stood waiting.

"Don't leave...," Lena begged. She looked down, her whole body slumping as she began to cry.

Catherine walked back, going down on her knees beside her to take the frightened young woman in her arms and hug her tightly.

"Yeah...," she soothed her. "It's Vincent...?" she asked quietly.

Lena nodded slightly. "I love him..."

"I know...," Catherine sighed. "So do I..."

She pulled back, tilting Lena's face up with her gloved fingers beneath her chin. She cupped her cheeks briefly before taking a tissue from the box on the table and beginning to remove some of the makeup from Lena's tear-stained face.

The young woman reached for another tissue. She used it to dry her eyes before blowing her nose. She removed her earrings as she smiled shakily at Catherine.

"I must look like an awful wreck," she whispered.

"You look beautiful." Catherine reached to remove the clip from Lena's hair. "That's better," she approved, as the long blond curls fell naturally around the other woman's slender shoulders.

"Now let's get you changed into some sensible clothing. You'll catch your death going out into the cold in these flimsy things," she said with compassion.

"I've still got the tunnel clothes Mary made for me," Lena confessed shyly. "I... was happy in them. I couldn't bring myself to throw them away."

"Perfect," Catherine approved, getting up to draw Lena to her feet.

Lena changed quickly from her silvery top and skimpy skirt into the warm tunnel outfit she pulled from a bottom drawer of the dresser. She pushed her feet into a pair of long boots before dressing in her spotted coat.

She turned to Catherine, wrapping the thick coat close around her body. "I miss my baby so much. I didn't think it would hurt like this." She pressed the flat of her hand to her abdomen. "It's like something's missing from deep inside of me. I can't sleep, I can't eat..."

She sighed, lifting her hand to draw a cross with one fingertip over her heart. "But, I didn't tell anyone about where I'd been, or where my baby is now," she said, lifting her chin proudly. "I've kept their secret, just like I promised Father I would. No matter what."

"I know..." Catherine reached to hug her close. "And Vincent does, too."

"Are we going back now? Will we see him?" Lena asked hopefully.

"Yes, we will see him. Now, we can pack what you want to take and we'll put your bags in my car. I'll deliver them Below for you later."

"Most of this stuff isn't mine." Lena looked around the room with distaste. "I borrowed some of it and the rest belongs to Maurice. Where I'm going I won't be needing any of it, ever again."

Reaching down, she picked up the silvery top and red skirt. With a look of satisfaction, she dropped them both into a nearby waste bin. "We can go now. There's nothing left for me, here."



Lena and Catherine came walking home down a wide, twisting tunnel. They finally reached the small, candlelit alcove where Vincent stood waiting, a flaming torch in his right hand and Lena's baby secure in the crook of his left arm. He watched them solemnly as they approached.

As Catherine drew near she smiled at him lovingly. Vincent looked steadily at Lena, as she stared back at him with a new look of respect in her eyes, for herself and him.

Catherine watched them both as Vincent moved to give Lena's baby back to her. She took the small bundle with joy in her eyes.

"Welcome home, Lena," Vincent said quietly, a smile dismissing his grave expression.

"Thank you...," she whispered, hugging her precious daughter close.

While Lena gazed fondly at her baby, Vincent and Catherine shared an understanding look. He nodded and she smiled, grateful for the successful outcome of her quest to save one lost soul from a world that did not value her, or the hard choices she'd been forced to make in her life.

Vincent stood aside to allow Lena to go before him. Catherine followed, catching up with him to slide her arm around his. It had been a long night and she was grateful for the strength of his support.

"It's very late. You're tired. You should be in bed," Vincent laid his free hand over hers.

Catherine nodded. "I will see Lena and her baby settled first, then you can take me home."

"You could stay Below in the guest chamber. Then go up in the morning."

"I would like that." Catherine smiled.

"How did you locate Lena?"

"I was directed to a brash, street-smart information broker." Catherine shook her head. "I gave him twenty-five dollars and a promise that I would owe him a favour."

"You must be careful, Catherine. I should have gone with you."

"I know. But Lena was ready to return, even if she couldn't admit it to herself, at first. She ran away because she was overcome by what she saw as



rejection. People had been doing that to her all her life, leaving her outside, in the cold, watching other people live the life she wished she could have."

"Her thirst for love was truly too big for her to cope with," Vincent nodded.

"Now she understands that there is more than enough for her and her child in this world. Lena no longer needs to feel she is unworthy of what we have to offer them both."

"It looked so natural to see you holding her baby, tonight...," Catherine whispered, pressing her cheek to his shoulder. "It made me glad."

"She is an easy child to love and care for," Vincent replied softly, looking down at her. They exchanged a long look of understanding before he continued, "Father is preparing for the naming ceremony to be held tomorrow afternoon. It seemed appropriate for us to celebrate a Christmas miracle."

"Then I shall buy a naming gift when I go back Above." Catherine studied Lena's progress down the tunnel before them. "Do you know if she's chosen a name yet?"

"Not as far as I'm aware. Maybe Father knows."

"Then we will leave it as a lovely Christmas surprise," Catherine nodded, before they walked on in companionable silence.



The naming ceremony for Lena's baby took place in Father's chamber. Jacob stood next to Lena in the centre of the room. Lena was holding her baby. Tunnel residents surrounded them. Catherine and Vincent stood opposite them.

Father looked around at the gathering. "It has been said that the child is the meaning of this life. Today, we celebrate the child. This new life that has been brought into our world. We welcome the child with love, that she may be able to love. We welcome the child with gifts, that she may learn generosity. And we welcome the child with a name, upon which I believe Lena has decided."

"Catherine...," Lena told them, with a shy smile.

Catherine gasped, looking both shocked and pleased. Father looked on, approvingly.

"Her name is Catherine," Lena repeated, smiling at her friend.

Catherine's wide grin said it all. Sighing happily, she looked up at Vincent. He too smiled, but he didn't look surprised and she suspected he already knew.

Several others laughed appreciatively. Father chuckled as he watched their reactions, pleased with the surprise.

Samantha jumped forward eagerly. "Isn't it time for the presents, now?"

Father nodded to her indulgently. "Yes, Samantha, it's time."

Vincent leaned closer to Catherine. "Lena asked me this morning if I thought you'd mind. I said I couldn't think of a nicer, more appropriate Christmas gift."

"Thank you, Vincent..." She took his hand in hers.

The assembled gathering began to move forward, laying their gifts on the large central table. Still holding hands with Vincent, Catherine waited her turn to add the gaily wrapped box she was holding.

In the background the children began to sing, *"It Came Upon a Midnight Clear..."*



*"I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach..."*

**Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol**