

Deck The Hall...

Judith Nolan



"I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year..."

Charles Dickens

"If you will allow me, Father, I would like to try and make this Christmas a special one for your world," Catherine asked. "Especially for the children."

She was sitting next to Vincent in Jacob's chamber, trying to come to grips with the finer points of chess. She hadn't played since she was young and in the two years since Vincent had saved her life that night up in the park, she was only a little closer to mastering the more intricate moves.

"That is very thoughtful of you, my dear. What did you have in mind?" Father queried, looking up from the board to consider her closely over the rims of his spectacles.

"Well, I thought I could buy enough food for a really great feast," Catherine warmed to her theme when she didn't get an outright rejection. "Maybe even a tree..."

She gave Vincent a sidelong glance of cautious triumph. The previous night he'd warned her she might not get a good reception to her idea, when she'd broached it as they stood together on her balcony looking at all the festive lights of the city.

“Father can be a real stickler for the rules we all must live by for the survival of our world,” he’d said. “His first and favourite rule is self-reliance. We try to take very little from the world Above. Only the necessities of life. We make everything else we need, or we barter for things. It is a time-honoured tradition that has served us well.”

Catherine sat forward over the chessboard eagerly. “Then I would buy gifts for everyone. I could make it a lucky dip for the boys and girls.”

She shrugged. “I won’t have time to wrap them all myself, but I have used an excellent present wrapping service in the past. All I would need you to provide would be a list of the ages and number of children living Below. I’ll take care of the rest.”

She felt she had presented her case well, even under the speculation of Father’s somewhat dubious look. As a lawyer, she’d faced down stern judges and won her arguments. She wasn’t about to concede any of her ground without just cause.

“Of course, I would find things for the adults, as well. What do you think?”

“What do I think...” Father pursed his lips as he dropped his gaze to the chessboard, seemingly becoming lost in the contemplation of his next move. The silence between them lengthened, underscored by the soft hiss of a nearby brazier.

“Father...?” Catherine prompted, as she waited for the old man’s pronouncement, her warm sense of achievement fast evaporating. Beneath the table, Vincent reached to squeeze her hand, as he gave a subtle shake of his head, encouraging her continued silence.

“Ahhh, I see how you’re trying to corner me, Vincent...” Father finally made his next move and then looked up. “What I think is I know that you mean well, Catherine, and your heart is in the right place. Please do not misunderstand me, but you are speaking of material things. The kind of things this world has tried hard to do without.”

“A few presents and a good meal?” Catherine’s brows rose. “Surely at Christmas time, I can show my appreciation for all your world has given me?”

She glanced at Vincent. But his grave face was set and gave away nothing of his thoughts.

“I understand your motivation. I truly do.” Father also looked to Vincent for confirmation. “But in this world, things must be earned. Your proposal would create

an expectation that you may not be able to meet next Christmas. Or the one after that. It could easily become a want, rather than a need.”

“In our world...” Vincent took up the explanation. “If a child needs something they must earn the right to possess it. Even the youngest among us understands this. A broken skateboard, discarded by your world, can be mended. A chipped bowl can be glued back together. Errands can be run to earn a reward. Nothing is bought solely to be given away, unless it is a vital necessity we cannot purchase in any other way. Like the medicines Father might need in the hospital.”

“You mentioned your system of barter last night...” Catherine’s eyes narrowed in thought. “The way things used to be done in my world.” She lifted her shoulders in defeat. “I had not imagined that was how it could work. Surely, sometimes wanting to possess a few new things is not a crime?”

“I don’t believe I said it was.” Father shook his head. “Sometimes, as Vincent said, we are forced to buy what we cannot find in our scavenging. But money has a powerful pull and we try to limit our reliance on it.”

“We go Above when we need something we cannot find down here,” Vincent informed her, countering his parent’s last move with one of his own. “It never ceases to astound me what your world throws away for the want of a wheel or a little mending. For your world, it is easier to cast aside what is seen as a broken thing, for the advantage of going and buying a new one. Down here we do not have that luxury and we do not need it. Here, material things are cherished for their longevity and passed down the generations.”

“I can see how that could work...” Catherine thought about the many things she had thrown away in her life for having some minor defect. She comforted herself with the knowledge that she had donated many good quality items to the Good Will.

“Please don’t be disheartened...” Father made his next move before reaching his hand across the table to clasp hers. “Every year, Lady May donates food and wine and her time to make the festive season as joyful as possible. It has become a tradition after so many years. I’m sure she would be pleased to accept your help with her arrangements and purchases.”

“Mouse, Cullen, Winslow and I are going Above on Saturday night to search for treasures that can be mended and used as Christmas gifts Below,” Vincent commented. “Why don’t you come with us?”

"I think that is a wonderful idea," Father approved, as he sat back in his chair. "Then you can truly see how much your world discards as useless or broken."

"I think I would like that." Catherine nodded. "I will admit to suddenly being curious about what is thrown away."

"By the way, Father..." Vincent moved his queen before indicating the set of the board. "I do believe that is checkmate again."

"Again? I must be losing my touch..." Father groaned. "I'm fast running out of people to teach how to beat me." He shook his head ruefully.



"Are you sure this is all right?" Catherine worried, as Vincent and their small group approached a tidy line of dumpsters in an alleyway behind an expensive, Upper East Side apartment building.

A light fall of snow had mantled everything in drifts of white. There was a decided chill in the air and the night wind was keen. Catherine was glad she'd dressed sensibly in thick sweats and a warm jacket. She rubbed her gloved hands together, blowing on them as she stamped her feet to keep her circulation up.

"If they call the cops, by the time they show up, we'll be well gone," Cullen advised helpfully. "But if we're really quiet, no one will even know we're here. Anyway, at this late hour, they're all tucked up in their beds dreaming of making their next deal." He winked at her in the darkness. "These sorts of places have the best stuff."

"It's not like taking a shopping list to Macy's," Winslow shrugged. "But it's a whole lot more fun. You never know what you're gonna find." He arranged their large, four-wheeled wooden cart to the best advantage beside the first dumpster.

"Mouse is good at finding and taking," the tinker added, as he lifted the dumpster's lid. "Topsiders throw away lots of good stuff." He hoisted himself up and over the side, dropping down carefully onto the contents within.

"If it's wooden I can mend it. Anything made of metal goes to Winslow," Cullen said quietly, before he too disappeared over the side.

"Vincent and I will keep watch," the blacksmith confided, with a self-deprecating grin. "I'm too old and too big to get up in there. And Vincent's eyes are the best for spotting any potential danger. He'll keep you safe."

“Are you coming?” Cullen leaned out over the side, extending his hand to Catherine.

“Should I?” She looked at Vincent doubtfully.

“You wished to see how our world works.” He shrugged. “Don’t worry, it’s safe enough in this neighbourhood. I’ll keep a close watch.”

“Just like shopping at Macy’s...,” Catherine murmured, as she allowed Cullen to take her hand and help her up and over the side.

She discovered the interior was far cleaner and tidier than she expected. She landed on a pile of flattened cardboard that had once held a large television, from the bold labelling on the outside.

“These kinds of people take pride in their cast-offs.” Cullen shrugged. “It’s weird. Like they’re competing to see who had the cleanest, neatest refuse. Much better than the ones downtown.”

“Stuff is stuff,” Mouse opined, digging his way steadily toward the bottom of the dumpster. “You gonna talk or work?”

“Okay, Mouse, keep ya shirt on. I was just trying to show the lady a good time.” Cullen winked at Catherine again.

He began to direct her on what to look for. She was a quick study and caught on fast. They began to work their way through the line of dumpsters, Vincent keeping pace with them and a close eye on Catherine’s progress. Winslow came behind him, pulling the cart with an ever-growing pile of rescued items.

“Are you getting tired?” Vincent asked solicitously, as he took Catherine’s hand to help her as she climbed out of the last dumpster.

“I am, a little,” she admitted, leaning back against the side of the dumpster, trying to ease the pain in her lower back from all the bending down she’d been doing for the last few hours.

“But I am completely amazed at how many useful things have been thrown away. Look, I found this...” She turned back to the dumpster, grasping what Cullen handed up to her before he too climbed out followed by Mouse who closed the lid behind him.

Catherine held up a small Tiffany lamp to the streetlights. “It only has one small, broken piece of glass. It’s beautiful. What a waste to throw it away.”

"It is the way of your world," Vincent replied, liking the fire in her eyes. "It can be fixed and be as good as new."

"Father likes his Tiffany lamps, doesn't he?" Catherine looked up at him.

"One of his few vices, along with the occasional cigar," Vincent chuckled. "What did you have in mind?"

"Cullen said he could fix it easily enough. I think this will do wonderfully for Father's Christmas present."

"He would certainly be very proud of your industry on our behalf." Vincent reached to pick some dried leaves out of her hair.

"You all good here, Vincent?" Cullen stepped up to ask. "We better get going. It'll be light soon."

"You go on and we will follow." Vincent took the lamp from Catherine and added it to the top of the pile of goods on Winslow's cart.

"You've got a good scrounger here." Cullen patted Catherine's shoulder. "She can come out with us any time."

"Thanks..." Catherine wiped the dust from her face and clothing. "But I might take a rain check on that for a while. My desk job doesn't require so much bending." She eased her sore back again.

"Pity that. Let Vincent know any time you change your mind." Cullen shrugged before he turned away to follow the others as they headed for home.

"I will walk you home," Vincent offered, drawing Catherine's hand through the crook of his arm.

"I feel I have achieved something tonight, Vincent." Catherine laid her cheek against his upper arm as they walked.

Vincent looked down at her. "That was Father's intention. For you to see below the surface of our world, and how it sometimes links with yours."

"I'll never look at a dumpster the same way again," Catherine declared with a small laugh, as they walked slowly toward her apartment building.



On Christmas Eve the dining hall in the world Below was crowded and humming with the goodwill of the season. Catherine and Vincent stood together at the edge of the crowd.

“That all went rather well.” Catherine looked around the room with a deep sense of satisfaction.

“I think you’ve made this a very memorable Christmas for all of us.” Vincent smiled down at her.

“Oh, Lady May and William did most of the work. I just did as I was told.” Catherine shook her head.

Vincent took her hand. “Father loved his gift of the Tiffany lamp. That was a wonderful find.”

“Cullen’s repair made it as good as new.” Catherine nodded. “Now I do have one more special gift.” She bent to pick up the Macy’s bag at her feet.

It appeared to be heavy and awkward, so Vincent took it from her, hefting it with a look of speculation.

“Since we have already exchanged our gifts...” He contemplated her closely. “I know I am not the recipient.”

“No, and don’t ask. You’ll see...” Catherine searched the room for her quarry, finally spying him on the far side of the crowd. “Come on...” She squeezed Vincent’s hand before tugging him after her.

Catherine hurried over to Mouse before he could scurry away on his own business. “Mouse, I have something for you.” She took the bag from Vincent and held it out.

The tinker accepted Catherine’s gift with wide eyes. He opened the bag and peered inside. “For Mouse?”

“For you,” Catherine confirmed with a smile. “And I wrapped it myself.” She glanced at Vincent significantly.

“What is it?” Mouse took out a Christmas wrapped gift.

He shook the parcel and it rattled metallically. He must have liked the sound because he put his ear to it and shook it again.

“Careful...” Catherine reached to still his hands. “You won’t know what’s inside unless you open it.”

“Okay good, okay fine!” Mouse danced from foot to foot before settling cross-legged on the dusty floor.

He set about opening his gift with gusto. A flurry of torn Christmas paper flew all around him. “Ohhhh...” He finally held up a large, polished wooden box with cast-iron, dragon claw hinges and a key lock. He turned it around and around, admiring it from all angles.

“Nice box.” He stroked the smooth grain of the wood. “Good strong hinges. It’ll last.”

“It’s more than just a box. I think you should open it,” Catherine encouraged.

“Oh, okay...” The tinker’s wide eyes grew even rounder as he turned the key and lifted the lid to discover the contents. “Oh, Mouse loves Christmas! And he loves Vincent’s Catherine! Thank you!”

He stared at the neat rows of gleaming tools that filled the space, touching them lightly with one fingertip. They were all wooden handled and well-oiled. They were certainly not new, but had been well kept.

“Catherine...” Vincent looked down at her, the thorny question about how much she’d paid for such an expensive-looking gift written large across his features.

“Hang on...” Catherine held up a denying hand. “Before you say anything, hear me out. I bartered for them from an estate my father was winding up for a close friend who is moving to Los Angeles to be closer to her grandchildren. Her late husband had been a craftsman, and all his tools were in excellent condition. I gave of my own time and my conveyancing expertise, in exchange for my pick of the ones I thought Mouse might find most useful. Mrs Marsden liked the idea, though she wasn’t too sure why I was giving up my fee for some tools.”

She paused to watch the tinker lovingly caress each gleaming tool with deep reverence. “I asked Cullen to make the box, in exchange for some supplies he needed. And then Winslow crafted the hinges for nothing when I told him the gift was for Mouse.”

“You applied the best principles of the barter system,” Vincent approved, putting an arm around her shoulders and hugging her close. “What goes around comes back to you in full measure. I am very proud of you.”

“Thank you, Vincent.” Catherine smiled happily, as she laid her cheek against his shoulder, very pleased that her first, and possibly only, fundamental lessons in dumpster searching had been put to good use.



“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