

THE GIFT

By

Judith Nolan

*"There is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter
and good humour..."*

Charles Dickens

"It is good to see you, Catherine. I have missed your company these last two weeks." Vincent moved to one side to allow Catherine to step over the broken brick threshold of their meeting place beneath her apartment building.

"I know. Me too. It's been more than two weeks," she apologised softly, as she laid one hand on his forearm. "Joe asked me to go up to Providence to help Edie out with one of her more difficult investigations. She's been swamped and badly needed my help. You remember that she took the job with DA's office up there, as the head of the Domestic Violence Bureau, after I refused to go."

"I remember..." Vincent replied gently knowing that had been a very difficult time in their budding relationship.

He shut his mind to the chilling and painful memory of the two men who had drugged and kidnapped him, then confined him to a cage to be studied and dissected like a dumb animal. Catherine had saved him then with her bravery and raw courage.

He inhaled deeply. He would not allow that dreadful memory to spoil their reunion.

Catherine saw his expression and compressed her lips. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to upset you over the memory of that time."

She shook her head. "I guess sending me up there was Moreno's way of getting back at me for turning the position down after he recommended me. He doesn't like it when his people don't toe the line."

"Please forget it. It's all in the past..." Vincent put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close. "You are back now..." he murmured against her hair. "That is all that matters. And now we can spend the evening together before you must go back Above."

"Yes..." Catherine sighed as she rubbed her cheek lovingly against the ribbing of his grey vest. "I'm looking forward to it. I have missed this... And you..."

She hugged him tightly before she stepped back out of his embrace. "I've been bringing some things down for all of you. I found stuff I don't need around the house."

She indicated a large cardboard box behind her in the corner of the sub-basement behind her. "I had been adding things to it now and then before I was called away. I didn't think you would mind if I made some donations to your world."

"How could I mind when these things are being given with love?" Vincent asked gently, as he stepped over the threshold and bent down to pick up the box. "I will look forward to seeing what you have brought for us."

Catherine watched him anxiously. "They are just some things I thought might be useful to you."

"Well, you have been busy. This is curiously heavy," Vincent replied, as he stepped back into the tunnel. "As soon as we reach Father's chamber, I'll send out an invitation on the pipes for people to gather."

"I hope everyone will be happy with what I've brought for them," Catherine worried. "I tried to think of everyone."

"Then, come with me and we will find out. If we hurry, we'll have some time to share them before we all sit down for William's grand feast. Lady May and David have sent us down a great number of goods we usually don't see. William has been drooling over it all for the last four days. Father isn't at all sure we should accept such extravagance. He had started to say we really should send it all back. He was overruled by a majority vote."

He chuckled quietly. "And that was before he uncovered the greatest gift of all. Even the Father could not resist the blandishment of two jars of Russian Beluga caviar."

"Amazing..." Catherine shook her head as they turned and walked down the tunnel side by side. "I still can't get my head around the fact that you have David Bowie as one of your Helpers. It seems too fanciful."

Vincent shrugged. "Over a recent game of chess, he told me that he realised he's lived in New York longer than he has lived anywhere else. He found it amazing. He never thought he would become a New Yorker. Now he wants to give back to those less fortunate than himself."

"Well, I think it's wonderful and he is a very generous man."

"David is thankful that he is always treated as one of us, whenever he comes down here. He wouldn't have it any other way and we respect him for that."

"I'm glad..." Catherine linked both hands around Vincent's upper arm and they walked on in companionable silence until they reached the entrance to Father's chamber.

Vincent followed his love inside and placed the large cardboard box in the middle of the floor. Seated behind his desk, Father looked up from his reading. He took off his spectacles and frowned at them.

"Catherine? How lovely and unexpected to see you. Ah, what do you have there? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"Just some things I no longer need," she replied quickly, knowing the old man's strict rules about anyone who tried to give too much or more than they could afford.

She remembered Vincent's comment about the beluga caviar and tried not to smile. It seemed that even a stern follower of the rules, like Father, had his price. An expensive one too.

The old man had often said the tunnel world could not become entirely dependent on the world Above. That would destroy them. They had to stand on their own two feet as much as possible. Catherine respected his cast-iron views, even though they irked her at times.

"I'll go and tap out an invitation on the pipes," Vincent said, watching his wary parent talking with Catherine.

He walked back up the steps and out into the tunnel beyond. He picked up a nearby stone and tapped out a quick invitation for those who could be spared from their duties, to come to Father's chamber. Soon, many of the denizens of

Below were packed into every available space, breathlessly waiting to see what Catherine was going to hand out.

They still had William's grand feast to look forward to and now there were gifts. There was a heightened buzz of excitement as Catherine bent down to pull open the flaps of the large box.

"Go on, open it," a small child's voice called impatiently. "Let's see what you have in there."

"It's almost like Christmas," another commented breathlessly.

"Better than Christmas!" Kipper nudged his neighbour to quieten them. "I bet Vincent knows what's in the box. He brought it in. I saw him."

"Please be patient, everyone," Vincent cautioned, holding up his hands as he stood beside Catherine, his curiosity also piqued about what could be the box. He too leaned forward to see what his love had brought down to his world.

"There's plenty to go around," Catherine assured him as she began to hand out small gifts and trinkets to eager hands.

Handfuls of clothing followed along with books and games. It seemed there was enough for everyone. Chattering people began to filter out of the chamber, eagerly discussing their new treasures as they hurried toward the dining room.

"Thank you..." Winslow leaned closer to accept his gift. "Let's see what this is..." He unfolded an oversized leather jacket. "Oh, will you look at this! Thank you, Catherine! It's perfect!"

"I thought you might like it." Catherine smiled up at him. "It's just a few odds and ends I've been collecting up from around the house. You'll find a better use for them than I will."

She avoided Father's critical eyes. Even though he was now standing close and looking on with quickening interest, he seemed to be reserving his decision until he saw all she had brought down from Above.

"Things you found around the house, you said..." Vincent chuckled as he leaned in to pick up a folded item from the box. "You should learn to remove the price tags from your *'odds and ends'*." He held up the tag on a lovely tartan wool scarf.

"Okay, I'll do that next time..." Catherine smiled, as she pulled a large black and white sweater from the box.

She sat back on her heels. "My father bought this when he took up skiing and then put it in a drawer after just one trip down the slopes. I think he spent more time on his back in the snow than on his skis."

She got to her feet and held the garment up to measure against Father's chest. "What do you think?"

She didn't notice Winslow moving closer with a deeply envious look on his face. His eyes were fixed on the sweater, and they glowed with need.

Just then, Cullen and Jamie appeared at the entrance to the chamber. The woodworker grinned when he saw Father holding up the sweater with a deeply dubious look on his face.

"It's him. Father, that is definitely you. You could start a whole new, underground fashion." He chuckled at his own wit.

Father looked down. "This sweater?" He took it from Catherine's hands and stared down at it with disbelief in his eyes. "Are you sure? I mean, they're not really my colours."

Cullen nodded gleefully. "Oh, yeah. It's you, all right. Everyone will be able to see you coming!" He slapped his thigh with glee.

Winslow didn't comment. But he did ease even closer, quite forgetting the jacket he still held in his hand. He licked his lips as he frowned at what he now desired.

He glanced quickly at the others and wondered if Father would trade once Catherine was gone. He hoped none of them wanted the sweater as much as he did.

Father shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah, well, it's... uh... just what I need for when I... um, go skiing in the winter."

Everyone left in the chamber laughed at his comical expression. The old man put the garment aside and seemed to forget about it. Winslow picked up the leather jacket and threw it over his arm, waiting for his chance to do a trade.

"Oh, I almost forgot..." Catherine reached back into the box. "There is one more thing. I – I brought something for Mouse. As soon as I saw it, I knew it was him. Where is he?" She took out a blue metal box.

Winslow shrugged, still focused on the sweater. "Oh, he's supposed to be here. I told him to come. But he was in a world of his own. Mouse isn't exactly the most dependable when it comes to –"

Right then, Mouse came rushing into the chamber. His face was smudged with dirt, and he was out of breath and red-faced. In his haste, he nearly fell headfirst down the steps. He saved himself by grabbing for the rails and grinning at his audience.

Father frowned up at him. "As Winslow was saying, Mouse hasn't entirely grasped the concept of time."

Remaining at the top of the stairs, Mouse grinned his unconcern. "Time? Easy. Early? Come before Mouse. Late? Come after. Come too late and there's no dinner left at all." He grinned as he pointed toward Winslow's ample girth before he vaulted over the stairs using the handrails and hurried to stand next to Vincent.

"Hi, Vincent," he said softly. "What going on?" He glanced down at the open box.

Father sighed. "Yes, I see we shall have to be more specific in the future. Well now, tell me, Mouse, what have you been doing?"

"Working..." Mouse replied evasively. "Got lots of stuff to do. Important stuff. Need more time. Always do."

"I see..." Father raised his brows. "Something useful, I hope?"

Vincent interrupted their conversation quietly. "Catherine has brought you a present, Mouse." He pushed the tinker gently forward.

"Okay good, okay fine..." Mouse said doubtfully, his wide eyes growing more round still as he saw the blue metal box Catherine held out to him.

He touched it with a dawning smile that made him look even more boyish. "Tools? For me? All mine?"

"All for you." Catherine nodded and held the box while he opened the lid and stared inside in amazement.

Mouse gazed down at his gift before his wondering eyes travelled to each of his companions. "Look. *New!*" He picked up a spanner with great reverence. "Shiny too!"

Cullen leaned closer to peer at the gift. "Expensive," he murmured in an envious tone. "Better take good care of them, Mouse. Don't want to see any rust."

Winslow sighed and looked impatient. "Uh, just say thank you and get it over with, Mouse. We all got places to be and food to eat." He sniffed the air and licked his lips.

Mouse bobbed his blond head. "Thank you." He grinned widely as he caressed his new tools with loving hands. "All mine..."

Catherine smiled at his diffidence. "You're welcome. I'm just so glad I could help out."

Vincent cocked his head at the message being tapped out on the pipes. "It seems our feast is now ready. Come quick or go hungry, William says."

"Then we'd better go quickly," Catherine replied with a smile as she accepted Vincent's offer of his arm.

They walked up the steps and disappeared through the chamber entrance followed by Jamie and Cullen. Mouse laughed as he skipped after them, clutching his gift close to his chest. Father turned away to fetch his walking stick.

"We'd better get moving too..." Winslow sidled up to the old man and hovered at his elbow. "Um, about that sweater that Catherine just gave you..."

"What about it?" Father adjusted the fit of his stick before looking up. "It's a very fine sweater."

"Yeah, it is. But you can come clean with me." Winslow looked around. "There's only you and me here now..."

"I don't know what you mean," Father prevaricated, starting to walk away toward the chamber entrance.

Winslow hurried to fetch his leather jacket. "Do you want to trade?" He held it up by the shoulders, turning it back and forth to display his wares.

"Well... I..." Father stared at it as if he'd only just seen it. "It is a very fine jacket." He glanced from the tan garment to the black and white horror of the sweater.

"Yeah..." Winslow nodded, putting his gift aside to pick up the discarded sweater. "But so's this. But I reckon that jacket will suit you better than this." He waved it at the older man.

"You may be right..." Father fingered his bearded chin with one gloved hand. "I have never been a fan of such somewhat garish garments..." His brow wrinkled up into a deeply worried frown. "But what if Catherine finds out? After all, she did intend that sweater to be for me. It was her father's."

"It'll stay as our secret." Winslow picked up the leather jacket again and held it out while keeping the sweater close to his chest. "I promise, I won't wear it in company. How does that sound? I'll keep it for special occasions."

"Like a date?" Father chuckled a little.

"Yeah, well, I get my share of lovin'. Don't you worry about that," Winslow shot back, advancing the jacket closer to the old man's free hand. "Deal?"

Father sighed. "All right, since you want it that badly. Deal." He waved one hand toward his bed alcove. "Leave it in there. I'll hang it up later. If we don't hurry, there will be nothing left of this magnificent feast we've been promised."

"Okay, good. Okay, fine!" Winslow tossed the jacket onto the bed folded the sweater up and put it behind Father's desk. "I'll come back and fetch it later when everyone's gone."

He grinned widely as he ran up the steps behind Father and accompanied him out of the chamber and into the tunnel beyond. "Good trade."

The hour was now very late, and the grand feast was winding down at last. Many happy and well-fed people were milling about, helping to clear away the leftovers and leftovers, or chatting in small groups. The children had already been sent to their beds.

Catherine arched her back as she stretched her arms above her head. "Well, I guess I'd better be going..." she said regretfully. "I have some files with my name on them that I must get to in the morning. Or Joe will kill me on Monday."

She glanced at her wristwatch. "Well, it's now this morning, anyway. Thank God, it's Saturday."

Vincent stood up from the seat next to hers. "I'll guide you out. I won't be long Father." He nodded to his parent, who was seated on the other side of the long table.

Father smiled. "It has been such a pleasure to have you with us, Catherine. Do please come down again as soon as you are able."

"I will...," Catherine promised with a smile. "And thank you."

Father nodded. "Catherine, your gifts have brought much joy today. Everyone is talking about it. Thank you for that and your many kindnesses. We will put everything to good use."

Catherine smiled. She knew this was the old man's way of saying she could now bring down more for their world as long as she didn't go too far.

Catherine did her best to hide her smile. *'Such as bringing down too many jars of Russian beluga caviar...'*

She shook her head as she laid her hand on Vincent's arm. "I wish I could do more. There are so many things I wish I could give you."

Vincent put his hand on her shoulder. "But you already give a great deal of yourself, Catherine. Your generosity and friendship, to all of us. There is no more precious gift than that."

Catherine raised frustrated shoulders. "You know what I mean."

Vincent nodded. "Well, with what our friends bring to us, and what the world above casts aside, we have everything we need."

They turned together and walked from the dining hall and out into the tunnels. They walked in silence, each deep in their private thoughts.

It was only when they had nearly reached the surface that they stopped. Vincent turned and quickly put himself between his love and whoever was now following them.

They didn't have long to find out who it was. Out of breath and panting, Mouse came rushing out of the shadows and ran up to the pair.

"Mouse..." Vincent relaxed with relief.

"*Vincent! Catherine! I'm... glad I, glad I caught you,*" the tinker managed to puff.

Vincent frowned with concern. "Is something wrong, Mouse?"

The tinker shook his head vigorously as he pulled the small bundle from his jacket pocket and handed it to Catherine. "For you. A gift, from me. You give, I give. The way it's done." He backed up and put his hands behind him.

Catherine was deeply touched by his gesture. "Why, thank you, Mouse." She took the bundle and began to open the ragged piece of old, cross-woven brown fabric.

Mouse quickly put out one hand to prevent her. "No! Not here. Better at home. Get mirror. See how it looks. It looks fine. Beautiful like you." He blushed to the roots of his tousled blond hair.

Catherine smiled a little dubiously. "Okay. Thank you, Mouse."

"*Great!*" Mouse bobbed his tousled head. "Have to go, now. Help Father. He's lost without Mouse. Gotta ask Mouse. Mouse, do this. Mouse, do that..." He hurried away, back into the shadows, still muttering.

Catherine looked down at the bundle. "Do you think he..."

Vincent smiled. "Stole it? Mouse hasn't taken anything for weeks. Well, wherever he found it, you can be sure it came from his heart."

"And his heart is as big as this whole tunnel world," Catherine replied softly. "Just like yours..."

She tucked her gift into the pocket of her coat and once more accepted her love's proffered arm. They smiled at each other as they continued their journey to the surface. They would enjoy the small fraction of time they still had together before the impending dawn forced them to be apart once more...

"There is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humour and hurt..."

Erma Bombeck