

Their First Christmas

Judith Nolan



"My idea of Christmas, whether old-fashioned or modern, is very simple: loving others. Come to think of it, why do we have to wait for Christmas to do that?"

Bob Hope

Catherine

Catherine sat at her desk with a pen gripped between her fingers, her brow furrowed in concentration. She was trying to break down the last of the Kellerman testimony before Joe terminated her employment in a fit of frustration because she was taking too long over it.

All around her, the bullpen was quickly emptying as the lucky and the fortunate got ready to go home at a sensible hour for once. Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and since it fell on a Friday this year, there was the tantalising promise of a three-day weekend ahead.

Catherine knew a brief pang of regret for the old days when she would breeze into work after midday and leave early to go gift shopping before having drinks with friends. She'd always managed to find a date for the festive night.

Until recently it had been Tom Gunther. She grimaced. "But not anymore..."

Her old life seemed like a distant dream. Her pen stilled over her work as her attention drifted into more recent memory.

"I miss you, Vincent," she whispered on a rushing sigh, wishing she could see him again, knowing it was impossible. "I hope you have a Merry Christmas..."

"Have a Merry Christmas...", one of Catherine's colleagues called, waving as she headed for home. "See you after the holidays..."

"Yeah, don't let the boss work you too hard," another smirked, as he made good his escape.

Their greetings jerked Catherine from her reverie. Thinking about Vincent was getting her nowhere. Even though she ached to see him, she knew it was impossible.

She bent her head back over the breakdown before Joe appeared from his office and chewed her out. As the end of the working day advanced she'd noticed his mood often darkened and the rubber band he used for stress relief came into play.

"Don't worry about me. I'll still be here tomorrow," she called back to her departing colleagues, waving them off with a moue of discontent.

She worked on in silence for several minutes, unaware that she was now the last one left in the bullpen. Bent over her legal pad, she didn't see or hear her boss approach.

Turning his habitual rubber band over and over with his hands, Joe stood behind the planter next to Catherine's desk watching her work.

'Admit it, Maxwell. You've been riding her pretty hard. Threw the kitchen sink at her, just like Moreno wanted you to. But, maybe... just maybe... you've misjudged her? There's real grit here now. Something you never saw in those first few weeks when you were convinced she'd never work out...'

Catherine, oblivious to his thoughtful regard, copied something from a legal tome onto the pad. She paused to push the silky fall of her hair impatiently back behind her ear.

"How's my breakdown coming along, or shouldn't I ask?" Joe finally stepped forward to inquire, hitching one hip onto the corner of her desk. "All you have to do is admit you can't finish it and quit for the weekend. No one's going to blame you." He shoved the rubber band into his trouser pocket.

"What? And give you the satisfaction of saying *'I told you so'*?" Catherine barely looked up from her yellow legal pad, as she wrote at a furious pace across the page.

His taut silence said she'd overstepped. Keeping her head down she asked, "Can you give me another two hours, Joe? I'm about halfway through."

"Well, I'll give you credit for sticking with it," Joe acknowledged grudgingly. "Kellerman's a very slippery customer. I expected you to have given up by

now and come begging me for an extension until after the weekend, so you can go home too." He shrugged. "Some of the others have and it's kosher."

"Then, obviously, you don't know me well enough, yet." Catherine glanced up at him sharply. "Despite what you may have heard about me, I don't quit."

Joe's doubting huff said he didn't believe her. Catherine was sure he'd heard all the stories about her dubious work ethic when she'd been employed at her father's firm.

She wanted to tell him that was the old Cathy. Vincent had changed her. There could be no going back to her old ways, not now. But she was still having to prove herself to her new boss daily.

Joe leaned closer. "Don't you have some swanky Christmas Eve party you'll be late for?" he prompted, trying another angle to needle her. "Or some wealthy boyfriend you're just itching to see, tonight?"

"I gave up all the swanky parties to come and work for you in the D.A.'s office," Catherine replied sweetly, lifting her chin at him. "And I've found that men are just too demanding and needy."

"Oh, ho. So, the little cat does have claws, after all..." Joe approved with a wry grin. As if he'd finally made his point to his satisfaction, he stood up. "Two hours I believe you said? I'll still be here. Don't let me down." Out came his rubber band again.

Catherine watched him walk away toward his office, whistling a Billy Joel song badly off-key.

"I might surprise you and finish it inside that time," she said, before dropping her attention back to her breakdown.

Her pen began to travel even faster. She knew Joe's only intention had been to try and prove she didn't have the staying power for this work. She was equally determined to prove she did.

"Be well, Vincent..." she whispered. "I hope your Christmas is going better than mine..."

Vincent

"Merry Christmas, Father." Vincent walked into his father's chamber to hand his parent a gift wrapped in a piece of antique silver paper.

He seated himself at the table, watching Jacob unwrap his present. He smiled with anticipation over the old man's reaction.

"*The Complete Book of Winning Chess Strategies...*" Father looked up from the cover. "Are you trying to tell me something, Vincent?"

"You're always saying you need to sharpen your game, since you're running out of people you can beat." Vincent shook his head. "I thought it might help. Mouse found it on one of his forays Above. Perhaps the previous owner discovered it didn't benefit his play as well as he'd hoped."

"Thank you, Vincent, for such a thoughtful gift." Father smiled wryly, putting the book aside as he sat back in his chair. "It will be good to see the same old faces for Christmas this year. Some of them we haven't seen since last Christmas. Lady May has been busy on our behalf, as always."

"Yes..." his son acknowledged on a rushing sigh.

There was only one face he was wishing to see. But he knew it was impossible.

"You're still thinking about Catherine?" Father asked in a resigned tone. "It's been almost seven months, Vincent. I had hoped you would've begun to forget her, by now."

"How can I forget her?" Vincent challenged quietly. "She's become a part of everything I do or think. I feel everything she's feeling. I know what she's thinking and when..." He shook his head. "A moment ago, she was thinking of me..."

"Oh, Vincent, it could never work between you two..." Father tried again to make his son understand there could be no future for their fraught relationship. "I hate to see you torturing yourself like this. With wishes and dreams of what cannot possibly be..."

Vincent's shoulders lifted in defeat. "Then, please tell me how to stop thinking and feeling everything Catherine is and does..."

"I can't..." Father stared at him helplessly.

"That's because there are no books on that subject." Vincent leaned forward to tap one long nail against the chess book lying at his father's elbow. "No strategies to tell your heart who, or what, or when, to love, against everything you've taught me to believe about myself. She's changed me completely, Father. There is no going back, not for me."

"You haven't gone Above to see her?" Father asked suddenly, his watchful expression tightening with trepidation. "Oh, Vincent..."

"No, Father..." Vincent shook his head. "I have sat on the rooftops looking down at her balcony. I know which apartment is hers. I know when she's home and when she's not. I have seen those people who matter in her life come and go. But I have not gone down to her. I have nothing to offer her."

"I suppose I must be grateful for that one small mercy." Father shook his head.

"I know I cannot risk everything to see her. No matter how much I wish things could be different for us."

"Then we must hope and pray that such a day never arises when your need finally outweighs your sense of caution and you do something foolish."

"If that day does ever come, Father, I will tell you."

"Thank you, son." Father ruefully acknowledged the weight of the burden Vincent had just given him.

He leaned forward to pull the set chessboard between them. "Shall we play a game or two before we go for supper?" he asked hopefully. "I think I can still beat you."

"I would like that," Vincent acknowledged.

He was well aware the deeply thorny issue of his impossible love for Catherine had only been shelved for now. Until Father could think of a new, more strategic way to approach it.

"Be well, Catherine...," he whispered, as he watched his parent make the first move. "I hope your Christmas is going to be everything you could wish for..."



"Christmas waves a magic wand over this world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful..."

Norman Vincent Peale