

A CHRISTMAS TALE

by Pat Paone

(from Stories from Below)

Catherine gratefully closed her front door with a sigh of relief and unceremoniously deposited her packages onto the nearest sofa. Shrugging out of her coat and slipping off her shoes, she headed straight for the shower. It had been one hell of a day and she had a thumping headache, which was probably due to the fact that she had spent her lunch hour Christmas shopping and had therefore not eaten a thing all day. But first she had to take a shower; then she would eat.

Half the evening was already gone thanks to her hectic schedule at the DA's office, and it was becoming increasingly obvious to Catherine that the criminal element of New York City did not intend to take a holiday this Christmas.

Whatever happened to the season of goodwill to all men? Catherine wondered grimly, as she finished the last mouthful of microwave lasagne, placing the empty plate on the floor at her feet.

She needed to accomplish a miracle in the next few days, in order to be prepared for the approaching holiday. She had spent so long searching for the right gift for Vincent, and as a result she was way behind with the rest of her Christmas purchases. Catherine sighed as thoughts of Vincent flooded her senses. It had been such a dreadful week, full of disappointments and frustrations, and her nerves were on edge. Even her shower hadn't really helped, and Catherine knew that only the comfort of Vincent's strong arms could ease the tension she was feeling, but sadly she was not expecting Vincent this evening, as he had promised to help with the Christmas preparations Below.

Turning her attention to the mound of packages littering her sofa she lifted one carefully and withdrew a delicate porcelain figurine from its packaging to study it intently, before placing it on the coffee table in front of her while she located the special gift box she had bought for it. This was her gift for

Nancy; a special *thank you* for inviting her to spend the Christmas holiday up at Westport this year. There had been no time to wait for it to be gift-wrapped at the store, so she planned to do it now, *if* she could find the elusive box, which seemed to be nowhere in sight. Eventually finding it, Catherine now felt thoroughly disgruntled and turning sharply back to the coffee table she knocked the figurine with her elbow, sending it flying off the table onto her empty dinner plate where it smashed into tiny pieces.

Catherine stared in horror at the shattered fragments of porcelain which were strewn over her carpet, and promptly burst into tears. This was the last straw. She suddenly hated Christmas and everything to do with it. Just then, a soft tapping at the balcony doors drew her attention and she sprang to her feet.

"Vincent!"

It was a cry from the heart as Catherine jerked open the doors and threw herself into his arms, sobbing with complete abandon against his chest.

Vincent was thoroughly alarmed by Catherine's actions. He had been drawn to her balcony by the feelings of agitation and sadness he had felt in her through the bond, and he had excused himself from his duties Below as quickly as he possibly could. Now his arms tightened protectively around her as he pondered on the cause for this outburst.

"Catherine," he murmured anxiously against her hair. "What is it? What has happened to upset you so badly?"

Catherine's arms tightened around him and she pressed her face against his vest, breathing in the familiar scent of him as she struggled to regain a small vestige of her composure. She had needed him so badly and he had come to her, as he always did. But in Westport she would be so far away from the reassurance of his loving arms. So far away from the person she needed most in the world this Christmas.

Vincent felt her tremble as she drew back slightly to look up at him, and he could tell that she was valiantly attempting to regain control of her emotions.

"What a way to welcome you," she gave him a watery smile. "I'm so sorry, Vincent."

"You have no need to apologize, Catherine," Vincent assured her, gently stroking her back in a gesture of comfort. "But please won't you tell me what's causing you such distress?"

Catherine felt ridiculous. It all seemed so trivial and unimportant now that he was here holding her in his arms, and she couldn't tell him the real reason she felt so miserable. It would seem too much like emotional blackmail somehow but she had to tell him something, so she told him how awful her week had been; about the grim cases she had been working on until late in the evenings; about her frustration at not having enough time for the Christmas shopping she needed to do, and lastly about the clumsiness which had caused her to knock Nancy's gift flying off the coffee table. What made matters worse was that if she had bothered to take her empty plate into the kitchen the figurine would have landed on the soft carpet and may not have broken at all.

"That was just the last straw!" she wailed, as the tears threatened once again. Catherine sniffed angrily several times before burying her face against Vincent's chest once more.

Vincent held her silently, as his hands continued their soothing ministrations across her back and shoulders. He knew that the underlying sadness he felt in her was due to the fact that this would be the first Christmas since her father's death, and this was one of the main reasons for her highly emotional state. But there was something else; something he couldn't quite pinpoint and yet he felt it strongly within her.

Over the top of her head he surveyed the shattered fragments which littered her carpet, and Vincent made a decision. Easing Catherine away from him he took her hand and led her through the open doors of her living room. Once inside he guided her to the sofa and made sure she was resting comfortably before turning his attention to the broken china. then, dropping to his knees on the carpet he proceeded to gather up the tiny fragments, carefully placing them onto the empty plate, which miraculously was still in one piece.

Catherine stared at him in stunned silence. Vincent *never* entered her apartment. Even after all this time, she knew it still made him feel uncomfortable to cross the threshold into her world, but here he was, on his knees before her, attempting to erase all traces of her clumsy accident as if it were the most natural thing in the world for him to be doing. As she gazed at his bowed, golden head her heart swelled with love for him.

Sensing her scrutiny Vincent looked up. "This was the gift you had purchased for your friend, Nancy?" he inquired, indicating the assorted pieces of broken china now piled neatly before her.

"Yes." Catherine nodded glumly.

"Is it replacable?" Vincent asked.

"Oh, I expect so," Catherine answered, with a weak smile. "I'm sure I'll find something just as good tomorrow."

She let out a long, deep sigh which pierced Vincent's heart with its sadness.

Still kneeling before her, Vincent took her hand in his. "Please, Catherine," he implored. "Won't you tell me what really troubles you?"

Looking at his beloved face so full of concern made her want to cry again and she blinked hard, turning her face away so that he wouldn't see the tears which threatened to fall. She was angry at herself for behaving like a blubbering fool. What was wrong with her tonight? She was usually so much stronger than this.

Vincent gently placed his fingers beneath her chin turning her back to face him and as she looked into his inquiring eyes, the worry she saw reflected there seemed to draw the words from her.

"I don't want to spend Christmas up in Westport," she stated flatly.

Vincent's heart skipped a beat, as hope suddenly flared within him. He had been bitterly disappointed by Catherine's decision to spend the holiday with the Tuckers, but he'd been very careful not to let her see his discontent. Her happiness was his main concern and he had been prepared to suffer the emptiness of Christmas without her, as long as she was where she wanted to be.

"I see," he said slowly.

"Do you?" she asked.

"No, not really," he admitted. "Why did you accept Nancy's invitation if you did not wish to go?"

Catherine shrugged helplessly and gazed at him with tear-filled eyes. "I suppose I just wasn't thinking straight at the time," she said, in a small, shaky voice. "I knew it would be the first Christmas without my father, and Nancy was being so kind, and I didn't want to be alone, and... and... the invitation I *really* wanted didn't come."

Her lower lip trembled uncontrollably and the tears which had filled her eyes now rolled unheeded down her cheeks, as Vincent drew her forward into his arms. She sobbed against his neck and he could feel the wetness of her

tears against his skin.

"I don't want to be a burden to you, Vincent," she mumbled between sobs. "But I just can't bear the thought of being without my father *and* being without *you* this Christmas. It's just *too* much."

"Oh, Catherine." Vincent's voice quivered with emotion as he held her tightly against him, stroking her hair soothingly. "You could *never* be a burden to me. *Never*. Nothing would give me greater joy than to have you share these festivities with me.... with us, Below. It was what I hoped and prayed for, and I did come here to invite you."

Catherine's head shot up at his revelation. "When?" she asked, with a puzzled frown.

"The very evening you told me of Nancy's invitation," Vincent replied.

"Father and I had discussed it that afternoon. The thought had been on my mind for some time, but it was Father who actually suggested inviting you to join us this year."

"*Father* suggested it?" Catherine echoed in amazement. Vincent nodded.

"So why didn't you ask me?"

Vincent eased Catherine away from him and rose to his feet, a slight frown creasing his forehead as he pondered his reply.

"You told me of the Tuckers' invitation before I had the opportunity to issue my own, Catherine," he said quietly. "I knew that our humble celebrations Below could never compare with the comfort and luxury of the festivities you would experience with your friends in Westport. With them, you would have the kind of Christmas you always shared with your father."

"But surely that decision was mine to make, Vincent?" Catherine looked up at him from her kneeling position on the carpet.

Vincent's heart overflowed with love as he gazed down at her. She looked so fragile, so vulnerable as she knelt before him, and he knew that she was absolutely right. He should have allowed her to make that decision for herself. He raised his hands in a gesture of apology.

"Yes, it was, Catherine, or at least it should have been," he said with a sigh.

"But it seems that we are both concerned about being a burden, because I was afraid you might accept my invitation simply because you would not wish to offend me." He gave her that small half smile she loved so much.

"I'm sorry."

"There's no need to apologize, Vincent." She smiled up at him. "I think perhaps we should both have trusted each other enough to be honest, don't you?"

Vincent lowered his head. "Yes," he agreed softly.

"Vincent," Catherine continued, "I really don't care about comfort or luxury. All I want is to be with you, and while it's true the temperature in the tunnels can be rather chilly at this time of year, the warmth and sincerity which your family extends, more than makes up for that." She squeezed his arm gently, making him look at her. "Nancy and Paul are wonderful people; their invitation was kind and genuine, but I know they will understand. I really want to spend this Christmas with you, Vincent." In her mind, she added, *And all the Christmases to come.*

Vincent's heart swelled with happiness at her words, because he knew they were completely sincere. Catherine really did want to spend her Christmas Below, with *him*, and there was nothing in the world that he himself wanted more. Drawing her into his embrace, Vincent rested his cheek against her hair, breathing in the familiar scent of her; a sweet fragrance he would never tire of.

"Then nothing would give me greater pleasure than to invite you to be our guest for this holiday, Catherine." Vincent drew back slightly to look into her eyes.

"And nothing could give me greater pleasure than to accept your invitation, Vincent," Catherine answered, and for the first time that night her smile was truly radiant.

Christmas Eve Below had far exceeded Catherine's expectations. She had been totally entranced by the warmth, love and genuine sincerity which exuded from the community of this subterranean world. They didn't have a great deal, but what they had they shared gladly with anyone who needed it. Christmas down here was a far cry from the mad frenzy of last minute shoppers in the world Above, frantically spending every penny they had.

The evening had begun with a carol concert by the children, which had been a resounding success. There had been a wonderful meal served in the

Great Hall, so that the whole community could sit down together. Glancing at Vincent, Catherine could see he looked happy and relaxed, and she felt the same way. It was the first Christmas they had actually been able to spend together, and although Catherine felt a deep sadness at the loss of her beloved father and she missed him very much, being here with Vincent, in this atmosphere of peace and love, was a healing balm to her soul. She hoped this would be the first Christmas of many that they would spend together.

Much later in the evening, when the festivities had gradually died away, Vincent led Catherine back through the labyrinth of tunnels, to give her his Christmas gift in the privacy of his chamber. Reaching for a small, carefully wrapped package from the shelf above his bed, Vincent placed it in Catherine's hand.

"Merry Christmas, Catherine," he said, almost shyly.

Catherine slowly undid the slightly worn gift wrap to reveal a small, heart-shaped box. She raised her eyes to meet Vincent's as he watched her expectantly, then lifting the lid she gasped with delight. On a bed of red velvet lay a pair of exquisitely crafted crystal earrings.

"Oh, Vincent!" Catherine exclaimed, joyously. "They're beautiful, they're absolutely exquisite." Her eyes shone with happiness as she looked up at him. "Thank you." She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him, still clutching the precious box tightly in her hand.

"They match my pendant so perfectly," she remarked, drawing back slightly to look down at her gift once more. "Are they also from your Crystal Cavern?" she inquired.

Vincent nodded, pleased that his gift had made Catherine so happy.

"I have something for you, too," Catherine said, with a secretive smile. Delving into her bag she withdrew a beautifully wrapped package.

"I hope you'll like it," Catherine handed Vincent his gift and then going on tip-toe she kissed his cheek softly. "Happy Christmas, Vincent."

Catherine's nearness and her sweet kiss affected Vincent quite strongly and he almost dropped the package she had placed in his hands. He felt his face flush with embarrassment and quickly lowered his head to concentrate on unwrapping his gift, suddenly feeling clumsy and awkward. His fingers trembled slightly, making it more difficult to untie the gold ribbon which secured it, but eventually he succeeded in carefully loosening the wrappings

to reveal a slim, leather-bound volume entitled *Alfred Tennyson; Poetical Works*.

Opening it carefully and turning the pages, Vincent murmured, "Tennyson. A first edition." He looked up at Catherine with luminous eyes. "Thank you, Catherine. I will cherish it always."

Holding her gaze, his eyes seemed to tell her all that his words could not, and Catherine suddenly experienced a powerful sensation in the pit of her stomach which made her catch her breath.

"Are you tired, Catherine?" Vincent inquired softly.

Catherine shook her head immediately. "No, I'm not in the least bit tired, Vincent." Somehow she instinctively knew that he had something to suggest to her. "Why do you ask?"

"Mouse informed me earlier that it has been snowing steadily Above throughout the evening," Vincent continued. "I wondered if you would like to take a walk up to the park entrance?"

Catherine's face lit up enthusiastically. "Oh, I'd love to," she exclaimed in delight. "The park always looks so beautiful in the snow."

They made their way up to the park entrance, and stood together at the concrete mouth of the tunnel, enchanted by the scene which met their eyes. The park had become a winter wonderland, covered by a thick blanket of gleaming snow as far as the eye could see, and it was still falling in large, silent flakes all around them. Catherine shivered slightly in the cold night air.

"Are you cold, Catherine?" Vincent asked in a concerned tone.

"Just a little," Catherine admitted, moving closer to Vincent. "But it's so beautiful up here, isn't it, Vincent?"

Vincent's concern for Catherine's comfort outweighed his initial hesitation, and he drew her back against him and wrapped the edges of his cloak around her to enfold her.

Catherine relaxed against him with a soft sigh. The warmth of his solid embrace soon dispelled the chills she had experienced earlier, and she settled back a little more firmly in his arms.

"The whole landscape has been transformed so dramatically," Vincent whispered against Catherine's hair.

"It's like another world, isn't it?" Catherine murmured dreamily. "A world that

belongs only to the two of us."

"Yes," Vincent responded wistfully, and the barely disguised yearning in his voice made Catherine turn in his arms to gaze searchingly into his eyes.

"I love you, Vincent," she said earnestly, willing him to believe in the truth of her words. "This has been the most perfect Christmas Eve for me, because I'm here with you, and this is where I always want to be. *Always,*" she reiterated firmly.

"Oh, Catherine," Vincent choked back a sob, as he drew her tightly against him, burying his face in the softness of her hair. "I love you too, with all my heart, but there *is* no world that belongs just to the two of us. We come from two separate worlds. I have no place in yours, and you could never be happy in mine."

"And neither of us could ever be happy without the other," Catherine interrupts swiftly. "We'll find our way, Vincent. We have to. It's our destiny to be together, and nothing can alter that. And besides, we have time on our side, don't we?" She cupped his cheek with her hand and smiled up into his tear-filled eyes.

Vincent nodded his head, giving himself to the moment. Allowing himself to believe in the magic of Christmas and the miracle of Catherine's love for him.

Their eye met and held. Mesmerized by the intensity of his gaze, Catherine wound her arms around Vincent's neck, bringing his mouth down to hers for their first sweet kiss.

To her delight he didn't resist her, and the warmth of his lips as they rested hesitantly against hers filled her heart with such piercing joy and overwhelming love. They stood locked in each other's arms and truly in a world of their own, as the snow fell silently all around them.

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