

# Christmas Gifts

by Janet Rivenbark

Catherine glanced up at the clock as she was stacking the last file in her OUT box.

*Damn! It's almost 8 pm already.*

That had happened a lot over the last few years, even with her promotion to Deputy DA. The DA's office was chronically understaffed, and she found her days at work growing longer with every budget cut.

That was the reason she'd decided to go to the office on Christmas Eve even though they'd all been given the day off. She thought she'd get caught up on a few things.

Now, it was late, she still had to pick up groceries for the next few days, and it would be unlikely she'd find anything open.

"Long's Grocery," she said out loud as she descended to the lobby of the building a few minutes later.

He'd expanded his store about a year before and she knew he stayed open until 10pm every night — hopefully, even Christmas Eve.

Catherine drove to Chinatown and felt lucky when she found a parking spot just up the block from Long's store, which was still open.

"Hi Miss Chandler," Edward called out as she entered.

"Hi Edward," she waved, as she grabbed a cart and started wending her way up and down the narrow aisles.

She was standing in front of the case in the frozen food section when someone touched her arm and startled her. As she swung around, prepared to fight, she caught the handle of her purse and dumped it on the floor.

When Vincent reached the threshold in the basement of Long's grocery, he pulled the list out of his pocket, as he tripped the lever that opened the new door.

They had set it up with Long so that they could come up to the store and pick things up and have it added to a tab, even when the store was closed. He wasn't sure if it would be open or closed tonight. The Longs were Vietnamese, and he wasn't sure if they celebrated Christmas.

All he needed were some spices and a pint of heavy cream. William had found he was short a few things he needed to prepare dinner the next day.

Edward looked up as he entered the store from the basement stairs. He smiled and waved then returned to the book he was reading. Vincent picked up a basket and headed for the spices.

"Whole black pepper, cinnamon, salt and a jar of capers," he mumbled to himself, as he perused the shelves. He found what he needed, dropped them into the basket, and headed toward the back of the store where the dairy products were.

He rounded the corner was startled to see another person, a woman, in front of a frozen food case.

*Why didn't Edward say something?* He wondered as he started to back away.

But then the woman turned and he could see her profile.

*Catherine!* He hadn't seen her in several years. The stress of his illness had been hard on both of them, and when the Bond hadn't returned, she'd decided that it would be best if they didn't see each other again. She'd said that she didn't want him worrying about her, or have him go through any more anguish over what he had to do when he came to her rescue. He'd understood her reasoning, but it had hurt.

It had hurt even more, as over the next year, the Bond had gradually returned. He'd known that her job was much safer, and Peter had told them about her promotion.

Vincent had often wondered what would happen if she'd needed him during that time; what would he do? Go to her aid, naturally, but it hadn't happened.

Now he was standing in a grocery store not six feet from her. Almost of their own volition, his feet carried him to her, and he reached out and touched her arm.

He immediately knew that it had been a bad move; he should have spoken first.

Catherine swung around, her hands up, ready to fight and her purse went flying scattering the contents from frozen pizza to the ice cream section.

"Vincent!" she gasped, when she realized who stood in front of her. "What are you doing here?"

“Same as you, apparently,” he answered, holding up the small plastic basket he carried. She took a step toward him, stepped on a lipstick that rolled under her foot, and almost fell. He grabbed her as she stumbled and set her back on her feet in a clear spot.

“Perhaps we should pick everything up before we attempt to move,” he suggested, bending down to gather things from the floor. Catherine did the same, and they dumped everything back into her purse.

“Is that all of it?” he asked.

Catherine looked and nodded. “It looks like it.” She set the purse back in the cart, zipped it closed, then turned back to Vincent with a smile. “I never dreamed I’d run into you in a grocery store.”

“Nor I you,” he agreed. “How have you been?”

“Good. I *am* working a lot. The hours seem to get longer and longer. And with the new budget cuts, it looks like they will continue in that direction. And you? How’s Father?” she asked. “And everyone else Below?”

“We are all well. You know that Kanin is home. He was paroled just in time for Christmas. Olivia and Luke were thrilled. Peter let us know he was coming, and he said that you passed the information to him. Thank you.”

“Anytime!” she assured him. She noted how stilted their conversation was. Painfully so. She turned and snatched something out of the freezer as Vincent walked a few feet and grabbed a small carton of cream. They both headed to the checkout at the same time.

Edward was grinning widely as he rang up Catherine’s selections. He rang up Vincent’s small collection, as Catherine tried to figure out how she was going to carry four bags of groceries out to her car.

Vincent picked up his one small bag and turned to her.

“Let me help,” he offered, but he didn’t wait for her answer. He picked up two bags and moved toward the door. He stopped long enough to pull his hood forward to cover his face, then stepped out into the snow, holding the door for Catherine.

“Did you drive?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s the dark gray Ford down by the corner,” she said as she followed him.

She had her keys out, and she opened the trunk when they reached the car.

They put the bags in, and she closed it. She glanced back at Long's just in time to see Edward turn the sign to CLOSED and turn out the lights.

"It looks like you just lost your way back Below," she said. "Get in, and I'll take you to another threshold. Peter's or the Park?"

Vincent hesitated a moment, but she was right. It wouldn't be safe for him to walk very far. It was Christmas Eve and there were many people out, going to parties, or out to dinner.

"Thank you, Catherine," he said gratefully. "Peter is Below this evening, so the Park would be the best choice."

They got in the car, and Catherine started it and turned on the heat.

"They say that this will get worse before it gets better," she said indicating the snow falling around them.

"They do? I hadn't heard. Will you be all right?"

"Sure," she assured him. "It's not supposed to get bad until much later. I'll be home well before then."

She pulled out of the parking place and turned the car toward the park. Once off the side streets, the traffic was heavy, and they slowed to a crawl.

"How are the children doing?" she asked, aware that she was trying to fill the awkward silence.

"Very well. Brooke is going to nursing school Above. Zack has gotten so good in the pipe chamber that Pascal occasionally takes time off. Samantha is growing into an intelligent, lovely young woman. And Kipper, Geoffrey and Eric are still the Three Musketeers, although Geoffrey seems the more mature of the three. Little Cathy and Luke are growing like weeds and have become inseparable."

"How is Lena?" His mention of her namesake prompted her question.

"She studied with our high school students for a year, then went Above and took the GED and passed it. She's now attending classes at NYU. She hasn't made up her mind what she wants to major in yet, but she's only just started her sophomore year."

"That's wonderful to hear. Congratulate her for me, and tell her that if she needs anything, to give me a call."

"I'll do that," he promised.

The silence was growing awkward again as they reached the spot on East 65<sup>th</sup> Street, where it crossed the park and was closest to the park threshold.

Vincent reached for the door handle then stopped and turned back to Catherine.

“Merry Christmas, Catherine,” he said as he leaned forward and surprised her by kissing her on the cheek. “Thank you for the ride.”

Catherine sat in stunned silence for a moment before she said: “Merry Christmas to you too,” almost too late for him to hear as he left the car.

Vincent stood and watched as her taillights disappeared into the haze created by the snow that was swiftly turning into rain.

Catherine was back in the parking garage under her building within minutes. It took her two trips to get all four bags of groceries up to her apartment. And she tried not to think about what had just transpired while she was doing it. But her mind kept drifting.

*He kissed me... she mused as she put the groceries away. On the cheek, but it was something he'd never done before.*

Vincent took his small bag to the kitchen. William had gone to bed, so he put the cream in the refrigerator and left the rest on the worktable.

Back in the study, Father and Peter had just finished a chess game. Peter was putting the board away, and Father was pouring brandy into glasses.

“Would you like to join us in a toast, Vincent?” Father asked. From the look of his flushed face, he and Peter had already indulged in a few toasts.

“I think I will,” Vincent said, going to get another glass from the cabinet.

Father poured, and they all raised their glasses.

“Merry Christmas,” Father announced.

“And Happy New Year,” Vincent added automatically.

They all took sips from their glasses. Vincent closed his eyes and let the warmth of the liquor and love of family flow through him.

“The weather is turning nasty Above,” he said a few minutes later as Peter prepared to leave. “It’s a good thing you don’t have to go out in it to get home.”

“I hope it’s not so bad that Catherine isn’t able to get out tomorrow. She’s supposed to join me for dinner,” said Peter.

“You’ve been Above tonight?” Father asked in surprise.

“Yes, I went to Long’s to pick up a few things that William needed for tomorrow...” he paused a moment. “I ran into Catherine. She was shopping at Long’s too.” Both the older men looked at him, but he didn’t elaborate.

“I think I’ll take this back to my chamber,” Vincent said, indicating the glass he held. “Goodnight, Father, Peter.” He turned and left.

Vincent knew that he was leaving rather abruptly, but he’d suddenly felt a surge of emotion from Catherine, and he wanted to ponder it in private.

Catherine was surprised at the feelings that thinking about seeing Vincent evoked. They were almost overwhelming. She was confused.

It all kept her awake for quite some time when she finally went to bed. It was hard to shut down the thoughts running through her mind.

She kept asking herself the same questions.

*Did I make a mistake when I said we shouldn’t see each other anymore?*

*Was his safety my true motivation for breaking it off?*

*And what was the meaning of that kiss?*

She dreamed about it that night and was still thinking about it when she woke the next morning.

She’d almost managed to put it out of her mind by the time she got to Peter’s, but his first words brought it all back.

“I hear you ran into Vincent last night.”

Peter suddenly felt compelled to tell her all about everything going on Below, and that didn’t help.

They were clearing up after dinner when Peter commented on the fact that she was so quiet.

“Well, you’ve been so chatty, I haven’t really been able to get a word in edgewise,” she said with a laugh.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “You were so quiet. I felt compelled to fill in.”

“Sorry,” she said contritely. “It’s just that seeing Vincent last night has me second-guessing my decision. That’s all.”

“Did you talk to Vincent about that?” Peter asked, as they carried coffee cups into the living room.

“No, but you know how he is...”

“Yes, and I also know that one of the complaints you had was that he was always making decisions that he said were for your good, but he never talked to you about it. Wasn’t your decision made the same way?”

“But that was different...,” she protested.

“How was it different? You never asked him what he wanted. You just decided that being with you was too dangerous for him, and you walked out.”

Catherine was quiet for several moments, and when she looked up at Peter, there were tears in her eyes.

“I did, didn’t I?”

“And you both haven’t been doing much more than marking time ever since. I haven’t seen either of you enjoy yourselves or really laugh in several years.”

Catherine set her coffee cup on the table and stood.

“Thanks for dinner, Peter,” she said, heading for the foyer where she’d left her coat. “It was lovely.”

“Where are you going?” Peter asked, wondering if he’d offended her in some way.

“I’m going Below to talk to Vincent,” she said firmly. “I need to apologize.”

“Good girl!” he said with a grin. “Use my threshold; it’s shorter.”

“Thanks Peter!”

She hugged him and headed down to the basement.

Vincent hadn’t slept well, and one of the children commented that he seemed “spaced out.”

He hardly spoke during dinner and had a faraway look in his eyes. Father wondered where his son’s mind had gone, and if his meeting with Catherine the night before had anything to do with it.

Peter had said that Catherine was going to be at his house for dinner and Vincent could tell that she was there. He decided he had to speak to her, but passing out the children's gifts seemed to take forever. When it was finally over, he left the dining chamber at a swift walk.

He was almost to Peter's when he realized that Catherine was Below, and it was only a few moments before she came barreling around a bend in the tunnel and slammed right into him.

His arms instinctively went around her as she snaked her arms up and around his neck, and buried her face in his vest.

"Catherine?" he questioned.

"I'm so sorry, Vincent," she said, her voice muffled by his vest. "I made arbitrary decisions without even talking to you. I was wrong."

Vincent took her by the upper arms and held her at arm's length so he could see her.

"Catherine, you only did what you thought was right. You did it out of the need to protect me, and I understand that now. I made the same kind of decisions without consulting you. I'm just as guilty."

He seemed so cool, and he'd been very reserved the night before, even though he'd kissed her on the cheek.

*He kisses a lot of people, she thought. I've seen him kiss the children and Father.* The thought that maybe he didn't feel the same things she did had her stepping back, breaking his light hold on her arms.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly, wrapping her arms around herself protectively. "I was just talking to Peter, and he pointed out that I'd never talked to you about my decision, and that maybe I should have. I... I just wanted to make sure I hadn't hurt you."

Catherine turned and started to walk away, and Vincent was suddenly struck with the idea that he was losing her all over again. The feelings he was getting from her though the bond were chaotic, but over all of it, he could feel her disappointment and tears.

He went after her and grabbed her arm almost roughly and pulled her back into his arms.

“Don’t go,” he whispered, as he held her. “Please don’t ever leave me again.”

“Oh God, Vincent,” she said between sniffles. “I was so scared that Peter had been wrong. I missed you so much. I promise I’m never going anywhere ever again.”

Later, in Vincent’s chamber where they were sharing his chair, Vincent nuzzled Catherine’s ear through her hair.

“Merry Christmas, Catherine,” he said. “I’m sorry I don’t have a gift for you.”

“But you do,” she argued. “You are my gift.”

“As you are mine,” he agreed.

END