

NEW TRADITIONS

Janet Rivenbark

Vincent was in the dining chamber eating lunch with Father when he suddenly felt a wave of... he wasn't sure what it was... Despair? Loneliness? Sadness? All of those? ...from Catherine. She hadn't felt those feelings in months. Not since her father's death.

"What is it, Vincent?" asked Father.

"It's Catherine, and I'm not sure what it is." He put down his fork. "Something has upset her."

"What is she doing today?"

"She said she was going to buy a Christmas tree and decorate for the holiday. I'm going to go up later to help her."

"Perhaps something happened while she was out?" suggested Father.

"That's possible. You never know what you are going to come across in the City," Vincent agreed. "At least the sun sets early this time of year, and I won't have to wait until late to go Above."

"She's that upset?" Father was surprised. Catherine was usually so optimistic.

"More than she's been since her father died."

"She was quite distressed when you were ill," Father pointed out. "Maybe someone she knows has been hurt or is ill."

"I hope that's not so. I'll find out soon enough."

Vincent finished his lunch spend the afternoon helping Mary organize one of the storage rooms.

Catherine was never far from his thoughts as he worked with Mary.

Vincent was at the threshold below Catherine's building early, and it was still twilight when he stepped through the elevator maintenance door onto the roof.

Catherine's feelings had ebbed and flowed all day, but each time her anguish had returned they'd only increased, and he was anxious to get down to her apartment. He had to force himself to wait until it was completely dark before he swung himself over the edge of the roof and dropped to the balcony.

The sight that met his eyes when he looked in to make sure she was alone, almost made him wonder if he'd been mistaken all afternoon.

Catherine sat cross-legged in the middle of her living room floor, surrounded by all the paraphernalia needed to trim her tree and decorate her apartment. In fact, to him, it looked as if she could trim three trees with all the ornaments, garland and tinsel that was strewn about the room. At first, he didn't know what she was doing, but then he realized she was crying.

Before he even had time to think, he was inside the apartment, had dropped his cloak over a chair and was on his knees in front of her. The scent of the tree in the corner almost overpowered Catherine's cologne.

"What is it Catherine?" he asked softly as he knelt and took one of her hands.

She looked up at him and sighed.

"I didn't think it was going to be this hard," she told him.

"What is hard?"

"All of this." She gestured at the decorations that were piled around her. "These are my decorations and Daddy's. I thought I'd spend the afternoon going through everything and deciding what I want to keep and what I can get rid of. I figured it would make the actual decorating easier once you got here. But every ornament I touched was a memory." She sniffed and looked down at the ornament she held.

Vincent settled on the floor beside her and gathered her into his arms.

"Good memories?" he asked.

"Mostly," she said as she smiled through her tears. "This one," she held up the plain red ball and turned it so he could see what was painted on it. "Mom made it for Daddy on their first Christmas." She showed him the heart painted on it with white paint that had yellowed a bit with age, and the initials "CC & CC" inside the heart. "It was kind of a family joke that we all had the same initials: CEC."

"What do the E's stand for?"

“Daddy was Charles Edward, Mom was Caroline Eleanor and I’m Catherine Elizabeth.”

“You said they were good memories...” he prompted.

“The first Christmas after Mom died we didn’t decorate, but that was when our *new traditions* started.”

Vincent plucked a tissue out of the box and handed it to her.

“What were they?”

“When Mom was alive, we always opened gifts on Christmas morning, and Mom cooked a big dinner, and there was always company. That first year, Daddy decided that we’d eat out on Christmas Eve. Then we went and looked at the decorated trees before we went ice skating. After that, we went back home and opened our gifts on Christmas Eve.

“What about Santa Claus?” he asked. He’d had a discussion with the younger children the week before. Some of the ones who had arrived recently were concerned that he wouldn’t find them.

“Santa still came that year,” she said with a smile. “But after that... well... let’s just say that that I was a rather progressive child who didn’t believe in fairy tales.” She looked up at him, and her eyes softened as she stroked his cheek. “Who knew how wrong I could be.”

“I’ve noticed that 10 or 11 is the age most of the children realize that Santa Claus is a myth and represents the spirit of Christmas more than anything.”

Catherine nodded before she continued. “When we got up on Christmas morning, we cooked a big breakfast together, then watched old movies on TV. We didn’t bother with a big, fancy meal. We usually ordered Chinese take-out or something from the Kosher deli, since they are about the only places open on Christmas Day. It was our holiday, just the two of us. Even after I was older and went off to college, we would still do the same things. We started decorating again the second year after Mom died and we always did it the first weekend in December. Even when I was in college, I took the train home the first weekend, and we decorated, then I would go back on Sunday.

“Once I moved out we did two days. We’d decorate my place on Saturday and then his on Sunday. I remember the Christmas I was living with Stephen, he didn’t want to decorate, but Daddy and I did it anyway. Then Stephen got upset because I wanted to spend the holiday with Daddy. I invited him too, but he thought I should spend all my free time with him.”

She was quiet for several minutes as he held her and rubbed his hand up and down her back.

“Are you still going to decorate?” he asked.

She nodded and pointed to the tree in the corner of the living room between the fireplace and the door to her bedroom.

“I got the tree in, and it’s in the stand, and I managed to make sure all the lights work, but that was when I started going through the ornaments and got distracted.”

“Have you eaten?” he asked. He was pretty sure he knew the answer to that one.

“Not since breakfast,” she admitted.

“You should probably eat something before we start on the tree,” he suggested, as he rose and headed for the kitchen.

He was back in a few minutes carrying a sandwich and a soft drink.

“You eat, and I’ll put the lights on the tree.”

She did as she was told and watched as Vincent worked.

She was finishing the sandwich as he turned on the lights, then stepped back to check them.

As they decorated, he could tell every time she picked up an ornament that had a special meaning, and he asked her about each one.

Finally, they came to the angel for the top of the tree. It was a little battered, but Catherine smiled as she took it out of the nest of tissue paper in a sturdy wooden box.

“Your mother’s?” Vincent asked.

“In a way,” she answered. “The Christmas after Mom died, Daddy and I were out Christmas shopping. He was helping me find gifts for some of my friends. I saw this angel on the top of one of the display Christmas trees in Macy’s, and I was convinced it looked like Mom. I told Daddy that I had to have it. I begged and did everything short of throwing a tantrum to get it.” She glanced shyly at him. “I wasn’t really a spoiled child.

“Daddy asked one of the sales girls if they had any like it for sale in the store and she directed us to the section where they were selling ornaments and decorations. There were several in boxes that were just like it, but I insisted that I had to have the one that was on the tree. I was convinced that it was Mom and I had to take her home.

“One of the sales girls finally took pity on me and talked to her floor manager who gave her permission to sell us the one from the tree. Daddy lifted me up, and I took it down. He paid for it and I wouldn’t let them put it in a bag. I cradled it all the way home. We didn’t even put up a tree that year, and the angel sat on my nightstand for the whole year. In fact, for the next three or four years, the only time it left my nightstand was when Daddy picked me up so I could put it on the top of the tree. I finally got too big and I had to use a ladder.”

Vincent surprised her when he put his hands around her waist and lifted her, bracing her bottom against his chest, so that she could reach the top of the tree to place the angel.

She was laughing for the first time that day when he set her back on the floor.

It was well after midnight by the time they finished and started putting away all the empty boxes. Vincent was amused by the fact that they had managed to use all the decorations from two households. Every room had some kind of decoration, including the bathroom and kitchen. Aside from a few broken ornaments, some garland that was tangled beyond salvaging and some old lights with broken cords, everything had found a home.

“What are you going to put everything in when you take all this down?” Vincent asked, as he helped her flatten the boxes so she could take them to the dumpster in the morning.

“I have plastic storage boxes. They are easier to label and stack in my storage room in the basement.”

“Let me know when you want to take it all down. I’ll help you,” he offered.

“New Year’s Day is on a Monday,” she said. “If I don’t take everything down then, it will have to wait until the weekend.”

She was just making small talk, as she tried to think of a way to ask him to stay a little longer.

Her stomach gave a little growl, prompting her to think of food. She’d eaten the sandwich Vincent had made her early, and it was now after midnight.

“Are you hungry?” she asked. “There are some places that will deliver all night. Or I could fix something.”

“We could fix something together,” he suggested. “Do you have any soup? I saw some homemade bread in your bread box. When I made your sandwich earlier, I saw that you’ve got some good cheeses in the refrigerator. We could make some grilled cheese sandwiches and have them with soup.”

“That sounds delicious. I’ve got some homemade tomato soup in the freezer. It’s from the Italian Deli that Joe and I had lunch at one day last week. It’s the best tomato soup I’ve ever had. It’s got chunks of tomatoes and basil.”

They worked in companionable silence until the meal was on the table. And when they were done eating they both sighed happily.

“I wish we could do this more often,” she said, as she rose to gather their dishes and put them in the dishwasher.

“So do I,” agreed Vincent. “Maybe we could make a New Year’s resolution to make more effort. You could come Below for dinner once a week, and I could come here and eat with you once a week. It would guarantee that we’d see each other at least twice a week.”

“It would work great at this time of year, but the rest of the time it doesn’t get dark early enough,” she pointed out. “I don’t mind eating at a fashionably late hour, but I think we would both get terribly hungry for half the year. I know it’s only one night a week, but during the summer, maybe we could eat dinner at our normal times then share some kind of a decadent dessert.”

“As long as you agree to actually eat dinner.” He was very familiar with her eating habits.

“I promise. I’ve been better lately since I haven’t been working so much overtime. We could take turns providing the dessert,” she added.

He smiled and nodded. “Agreed. So when would you like to join me for dinner Below?”

“You’re going first? OK.” She went out to her desk for her planner. She sat down across from him and opened it. “Luckily, December is usually pretty slow for us. Judges don’t like to start any big trials because of all the holidays. I don’t think I’ll be asked to work late any time for the next couple weeks. How about next weekend?”

“How about tomorrow?” Vincent countered. “You can join us for Sunday dinner, then I could join you here on Wednesday or Thursday.”

“I’ve got court on Wednesday, there are several arraignments, so I know I’ll get home on time that evening.”

They followed through with their plan, and it worked perfectly. They were both very pleased that their plan was working so well.

When Vincent joined Catherine at her apartment on the Wednesday before Christmas, he invited her to Christmas dinner Below on Monday.

“Why don’t we do that instead of dinner on Sunday,” she suggested. “That’s Christmas Eve, and I promised to answer the phone at the Holiday Hotline again this year. I’d hate to have that cut into our time together. And it will give me a little time to wrap a few last-minute gifts, that afternoon before I go.”

“The children always want extra stories on Christmas Eve,” Vincent told her. “That should work.”

Catherine showed up early in the office of the agency that set up the Holiday Hotline every year. But compared to previous years, it was very quiet. She only took three calls in the four hours she was there. And they weren’t dire emergencies. In each case, it was just someone who needed a sympathetic ear.

When she left at midnight, it has begun to snow. It had been an unusual year, there had been some flurries on and off since the middle of November, but no real snow. But this time it was sticking. In fact, there was already several inches on the ground. She was glad she’d worn pants and her boots.

She exited the subway station just a few blocks from her building, but instead of heading home she turned and went into the park. It was a short walk to the threshold there, and she suddenly wanted to share the snow with Vincent.

In the culvert, she tripped the lever to open the door and was surprised to find Vincent standing on the other side.

“I suddenly had the feeling you were coming here,” he told her in explanation.

She grabbed his hand and tugged. “You’ve got to come with me,” she told him. “It’s snowing, and it’s beautiful!”

He stepped through the door. He closed it and let her lead him out into the park.

“Do you have your gloves?” she asked. “Are you warm enough?”

“Yes, to the gloves.” He pulled them out of a pocket and put them on. “And I have a scarf.”

She took his hand and pulled him along. “The park is deserted,” she explained as they reached one of the footpaths. “I know you’ve been to the park at night, but I also know you stay away from the higher traffic areas.”

Before long Vincent found himself strolling down the middle of The Mall in Central Park, hand in hand with Catherine. He'd been to this area of the park many times, but he'd avoided the main walkway because there always seemed to be people there. Tonight, it was just he and Catherine.



"Isn't it beautiful? It's like a fairyland."

"Is this one of the things you used to do with your father?" he asked as they strolled along.

"No. We didn't come to the park often. Usually only for concerts. Mom loved it, but Daddy avoided it. I found out later that he'd proposed to Mom at Tavern on the Green. I used to climb trees here, but it took

a lot to get Daddy to bring me."

She guided him over to one of the benches lining the broad walkway. They brushed the snow away and sat under the statue of Robert Burns.

"The wintry west extends his blast, And hail and rain does blow; Or the stormy north sends driving forth; The blinding sleet and snow..." Vincent quoted with a reasonably good Scots accent.

"Is that Burns?" Catherine asked after she stifled a laugh.

"It's the only thing I remember of his that fits," he said with a smile. "Although this snow is much gentler than what he described." He looked around. "I've never heard the city so quiet."

"Snow does muffle sound, but it being Christmas Eve might have something to do with it. This city may never sleep, but it does slow down sometimes."

"I remember several winters in a row in the early 60s when there were heavy snowfalls. Even I got to go up and play in the snow with the other children."

"You did? In the daylight?"

He nodded. "Devin smuggled me up. All the children were so bundled up against the cold that no one could tell me from any of the others. Devin put a stocking cap on my head, muffled me up to my nose with a scarf, and put sunglasses on me. All that combined with the snowsuit, made for a perfect disguise."

"I'm glad you got to do some of the things the other children did," she said as they stood and started to walk again.

“And now you are seeing to it that I get to do one of the things that any other man might do. Thank you, Catherine. This could become one of our *new traditions*.”

He stopped and so did she, turning toward him. He cradled her face between his gloved hands and leaned down and kissed her. If anyone had passed them at that moment, they would have looked like any other couple stopping on their late-night walk in the snow for a romantic moment.

Catherine was taken by surprise, but she recovered quickly and wrapped her arms around his waist under his cloak.

When he drew back, she smiled up at him.

“Thank *you*, Vincent,” she said. “I’ve been waiting a long time for that.”

“You’ve kissed me before,” he pointed out.

“Ah, but you’ve never kissed me before,” she argued.

“I see,” he said, then leaned down and kissed her again.

“Would you like to stay Below, tonight?” he whispered after he withdrew the second time.

“I’d love to!” She smiled back up at him as they turned and walked back the way they had come.

“It could become one of our *new traditions*.”

“Yes, and we must cherish every moment and every memory, always!” Vincent added.

Winter: A Dirge
by Robert Burns

The wintry west extends his blast,
And hail and rain does blow;
Or the stormy north sends driving forth
The blinding sleet and snaw:
While, tumbling brown, the burn comes down,
And roars frae bank to brae;
And bird and beast in covert rest,
And pass the heartless day.

"The sweeping blast, the sky o'ercast,"
The joyless winter day
Let others fear, to me more dear
Than all the pride of May:
The tempest's howl, it soothes my soul,
My griefs it seems to join;
The leafless trees my fancy please,
Their fate resembles mine!

Thou Power Supreme, whose mighty scheme
These woes of mine fulfil,
Here firm I rest; they must be best,
Because they are Thy will!
Then all I want-O do Thou grant
This one request of mine!-
Since to enjoy Thou dost deny,
Assist me to resign.