

WHAT ARE YOU DOING NEW YEAR'S EVE?

Janet Rivenbark

Catherine pondered the list in her hand.



She had taken care of a lot of her Christmas shopping already, but was definitely going to have to memorize the rest of this list. If Jenny or Nancy saw it, there would be questions. Questions she wasn't prepared to answer... yet.

There were going to be enough questions if they caught her buying gifts for men, but she was reasonably sure that she could pass it off as gifts for Joe and some of the other guys at the office or even Jay Coolidge at her dad's old law firm. And Mary would be easy... well, maybe not easy to buy for, but easy to explain. She could always pull Great Aunt Lydia out of her hat.

She stuck the list back in her planner, pulled out the other one with Nancy and Jenny's names, and put it in her purse.

Every year since they graduated from college, over the first weekend in December, she, Nancy, and Jenny would get together and shop 'til they dropped. Since neither her nor Jenny's places had enough beds for all three of them, Catherine's father had always rented them a three-bedroom suite in one of the posher hotels

in town. He said it was his gift. Catherine was continuing that tradition. It was Friday, November 30th. She'd come straight from work and had already checked in and was meeting them in the lobby.

The plan was always the same: dinner Friday night in their favorite Italian restaurant, then back to the hotel to drink wine and eat junk food while they talked and caught up on everything that had happened since the last time they'd been together. They would be up in the morning in time for a hearty breakfast... maybe brunch... then they would shop. No high heels, just good, comfortable shoes because they would be walking... a lot. Dinner out again on Saturday night; more wine and talk, then they would sleep in on Sunday, have a room service breakfast, a late checkout, and then leave.

Catherine exited the elevator in the lobby, and as she rounded the corner, she heard Jenny greeting Nancy. They must have just arrived.

"I didn't keep you waiting, did I?" Catherine asked as she approached.

"I just walked in the door," Nancy said after a hug.

"And I've been here less than 5 minutes," put in Jenny.

Both women were carrying overnight bags and large canvas totes. Catherine handed them each a key and led the way to the elevator.

They contained their conversation until they reached the room, and then it erupted.

"What time are our dinner reservations?" asked Nancy.

"Not until 8:00," Catherine told her. "They have a wedding rehearsal dinner in the large dining room tonight, so I had to take a later time."

"Works for me," said Jenny as she came out of one of the bedrooms with a bottle of wine under each arm and one in each hand. "We'll have time to have a glass of wine and talk a little."

Nancy exited the other bedroom, also carrying several bottles of wine.

Nancy smiled when she got to the wet bar and saw that there were already four bottles on the counter. She added her four, and when Jenny added her four, she laughed out loud.

"Are you sure we're going to have time to shop?" she asked. "If we drink all of this, we will be in a stupor for the next two days."

"We are eating pasta tonight, so we can drink more wine. The pasta will soak it up," Jenny insisted.

Catherine found a corkscrew and opened a bottle. She grabbed three glasses and followed her friends to the sofa in front of the window. Nancy was standing in front of the window admiring the view.

"Why do I not live in this city?" she asked. "I love it and never tire of looking at the views."

"Because you wanted a place where you could have a yard for your kids to play with the dog?" suggested Catherine as she set the wine glasses down and started pouring.

Nancy turned from the window and flopped down on the couch.

“Yeah, everything for the kids,” she agreed with a sigh. “I love ‘em, but I can’t wait until they are both in school, so I can do something besides cook and clean and tie shoelaces. I’ve dusted off the cameras, and I’ve been taking pictures again.”

“You going to do something with it once they are in school?” asked Jenny.

“I’m going to try. Robby will start next September, and Jill won’t be starting for another couple of years, but that should give me time to look at my options. The problem is, if I decide to do something like wedding photography, most of that will be on weekends, and that is about the only time I get to see Paul. He leaves the house at 7am and isn’t home until 7pm, and by the time we’ve eaten, and I’ve put the kids to bed and cleaned up the kitchen, he’s sound asleep. We only get about an hour first thing in the morning and then over dinner to talk. Seems like every time we plan something just for the two of us, one of the kids gets sick, or something else comes up to squash our plans.”

“And I thought my love life was bad,” commented Jenny with a laugh.

“What love life?” Nancy put in, and they all laughed.

“Have you thought of doing studio work?” Cathy asked. “You could turn your pool house into a studio.”

“That is something to think about. I’d have to look at the zoning and probably get permission from the Homeowners Association. What about you, Cath?” Nancy asked. “Did you ever patch things up with that Vincent, you told me about?”

“Vincent? Who is Vincent?” questioned Jenny. “I’ve never heard of a Vincent. Why haven’t I heard about Vincent?”

“You did, Jenn. Remember the night I almost drowned? I said I wouldn’t be alone.”

“So that’s his name. I was thinking that maybe you and Joe had a thing going and that he was waiting in the stairwell until I left.”

“Joe?” Catherine laughed. “You know I love Joe dearly, but he’s more like a big brother.”

“He already has a bunch of sisters,” Jenny commented.

“Three - four if you count me,” quipped Catherine.

The conversation continued for the next hour, in the cab on the way to the restaurant, through dinner, and then well into the night once they were back at the hotel, where they made quite a dent in the collection of wine bottles.

They were at breakfast the following day planning their shopping strategy, when the conversation finally got around to shopping.

“So, who are you buying for this year?” Jenny asked Catherine.

“There aren’t many people on my list this year,” Catherine admitted. “Dad used to give Jay a bottle of his favorite Bourbon every year. I picked up that last year. I give cash to the security and maintenance staff in my

building. A bottle of Scotch for John Moreno. Those are the easy ones. Then there is Joe, Rita, Edie, and you two.”

“What about Vincent?” asked Nancy.

“Him too and his family,” Catherine admitted.

“So, what are you going to get Vincent?” asked Jenny. “I’d suggest a stop at Victoria’s Secret.”

“For Vincent?” Catherine stifled a giggle. “I don’t think he’s into women’s lingerie.”

“For you, you goof.”

“I know, but isn’t that just a little bit *unsubtle*? Even for you?”

Nancy laughed out loud at that, and Jenny and Catherine joined in.

“Well, I believe in asking for what I want,” Jenny retorted with a snort.

“So do I, but that is taking it just a little too far, at least as far as Vincent is concerned. But he likes nice fabrics, so I thought he might like a silk shirt...”

“Or some silk boxers?” Jenny added.

They broke into laughter again, but the idea did appeal to Catherine.

“Where do they sell silk shirts for men?” asked Nancy.

“Macy’s, Sac’s, Brooks Brothers,” Jenny answered. “What size?”

“That might be a problem,” Catherine admitted. “Maybe something along the line of a silk poet’s shirt? I wouldn’t have to be so exact on the size then.”

“This time of year, you might actually find something like that, but if we can’t, there are always costumers.”

After lunch, the search for the perfect gifts was on.

At the end of the day, Catherine had to admit that she’d probably gone just a little overboard, especially on Vincent. She’d bought a cashmere scarf, a leather eyeglass case for Father, a pretty flannel nightgown and robe set for Mary, and a set of jeweler’s tools for Mouse.

For Vincent, she’d found the perfect poet’s shirt. It was made out of heavy cream-colored silk. She’d also picked up a pair of dark blue silk pajamas, a dark blue cashmere robe with slippers to match, several books, a black cashmere sweater, a hand-carved cedar stationery box, and as an afterthought, and due to a lot of peer pressure, a pair of bright red silk boxers. She wasn’t sure if she would have the courage to give those to him. They were so exhausted that they decided that they’d have dinner in the hotel restaurant, and soon afterward, they were back in their suite talking and drinking wine again.

“Are you decorating this year?” Jenny asked Catherine as she refilled all the glasses.

“I bought a small potted Norfolk Island Pine. I read that they will live in a pot for a while, and I thought I might take it up to the cabin and plant it there next spring. It’s just the right size to put on the coffee table. I decorated it with little red bows and some colored tinsel. You?”

"I didn't bother. I'm hardly there long enough to enjoy it. Mom is having her annual Hanumas/Christmukkah bash; I helped her decorate. She did invite both of you, didn't she?"

"I got a note from her," said Nancy. "But Paul's family is doing something that night, and if I throw them over for friends, I'll never hear the end of it." Nancy made a face. It was a well-known fact that there were some members of Paul's family she wouldn't mind never seeing again.

"I got an invitation, too," Catherine said. "I called and told her I'd be there. It's been ages since I went to one of those Christmas-Hanukah celebrations. I wouldn't miss it."

Catherine remembered the first time she'd told Vincent that Jenny's mom, Amanda, had been raised Catholic but had converted to Judaism when she married Ben Aaronson. She'd related some stories of their blended Christmas-Hanukah family get-togethers that had Vincent laughing heartily, especially when she told him that Amanda had always swung back and forth between calling them either Christmukkah or Hanumas, depending on which one came first in December of that particular year.

"It's Hanumas this year," Jenny announced with a laugh. "And she's planning it for the 22nd, which is the Saturday between the end of Hanukah and Christmas."



Joe raised his eyebrow at Catherine's request for extra time off.

"But with Christmas on a Tuesday this year, we already have a four-day weekend and then another one the following weekend with New Year's," he pointed out.

"I know that, but I haven't taken any extra time off since spring, the year before last," she reminded him.

"When your friend was sick," he mused. "Well, since we aren't busy during the last few weeks of the year, I guess I can spare you. What days do you need?"

"Starting on Wednesday, the 19th, then the week after Christmas. I'll be back on the 2nd with everyone else," she said.

"If I can be nosey, why so many days?" he asked with a grin.

"Well, I still have some wrapping to do and a few last-minute gifts to pick up. There's a party on the 21st and another on the 22nd...."

"You going to the Aaronson party?" he asked.

"Yes, how do you know about that?" She was surprised.

"Your friend Jenny called me a little while ago and invited me. She called it Hanumas?"

Catherine laughed at the perplexed look on Joe's face. But she wasn't surprised by the invitation. Now that Jenny knew that Catherine wasn't interested, she was ready to make her move. Jenny had always thought Joe

was “cute.” She looked at Joe consideringly and then smiled. *Well, I guess you could call him ‘cute’ if you look at him through Jenny’s eyes,* she admitted to herself.

“Okay, what’s the smile for?” he asked warily.

“Nothing... It’s just that Amanda Aaronson’s Hanumas or Chismukkah parties are the places to be this time of year. Jenny has told some good stories, and I’ve been to a few of them myself. Jenny’s mom, Amanda, blends both her families. She was raised Catholic and converted to Judaism when she married Ben. She got the idea for a combined celebration when she invited her parents and in-laws to Thanksgiving dinner the year she and Ben were married.”

“How many have you been to?” he asked.

“A few when we were home on holiday break from school. But back when I still worked for my dad, we always went off on a trip somewhere warm over Christmas, and I was never here. And last year, I was in Albany for that conference. Amanda had her party early last year since Hannukah started on the 22nd. And the years before that, you were cracking the whip, and I couldn’t get time off to breathe, much less get ready for and go to a party. It’s been a while, and I’m looking forward to it this year.”

“Okay, lay off the sarcasm,” he said with a grin. “It got you a promotion, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, your old job, and I’m almost as busy as I was before... So... do I get the time?”

“You’ve accrued vacation time, so you’ve got it.”

“You going to go to the party?” she asked as she was leaving.

“Yeah. It sounds like fun,” he said with a grin.



Before the Aaronson party, there was Winterfest. Catherine stood in front of her closet, trying to decide what to wear. People Below usually wore their best, and for her first Winterfest, she’d worn that white, off-the-shoulder dress, but it had been a little chilly.

Warm wool skirt, leather knee-high boots, and a turtleneck sweater, or the green velvet with the sweetheart neckline? She looked back and forth between the two outfits, and after some consideration, she tossed the skirt and sweater on the bed and bent to get the boots. The skirt and the boots were black, but the sweater was red cashmere and looked festive. The addition of her crystal necklace would dress it up.

Later, after the opening ceremony, Catherine and Vincent were sitting in a corner talking, waiting for the crowd to thin at the buffet table.

“When I came down earlier, Eric was really hyper,” she commented as they watched Eric, Kipper, and Geoffrey running around on the other side of the Great Hall. “What’s gotten into him?”

“One of the helpers gave Father a large jar of candy for Christmas. There were almost two pounds of it. Father had it on his desk. He thought they were chocolate-covered raisins, and he’s been allowing the children to eat them. It turns out that they are chocolate-covered espresso beans. Father didn’t realize it until half the jar was gone. He ate one, and then he noticed he had children bouncing off the walls.”

“Oh, my goodness,” said Catherine with a giggle. “They won’t slow down for days.”

“It’s bad enough that all the children were excited about Winterfest and Christmas; now they are all high on caffeine.” Vincent joined in her laughter.

While walking back to Catherine’s threshold, Catherine commented on the evening.

“I’m glad it was much less exciting than my first Winterfest, the year before last. Narcissa even showed up voluntarily this year.”

“And Elizabeth,” Vincent added. “She seldom even keeps track of the dates, but Mouse went and reminded her, and she came.”

“She is so sweet. She was making sketches of what was going on and handing them out.”

They reached the threshold, and Catherine stretched up and kissed Vincent, lightly.

“Will you be coming down for Christmas?” he asked after a slight, surprised pause.

“I wouldn’t miss it. Father told me what you do on Christmas Eve, so I’ll be down for that, then I’ll be back for lunch on Christmas Day.”

“What are you doing between now and then?” he asked.

“Well, Jenny’s family has a party tomorrow night that I’m going to, then I’m driving to Peekskill on Sunday to visit my dad’s Aunt Lydia. She’s in a nursing home, and when I didn’t make it up to see her last year because I was working, I heard about it... a lot... like every time I saw her this year. So, I’m going this year and taking her some of her favorite cookies.”

“You’ll be back in time for Christmas Eve?” He sounded worried.

“Yes, it’s not that far. It only takes about an hour, and the nursing home she’s in doesn’t like visitors staying past dinner time. So, I’ll be home early.”

As Vincent returned to his chamber after leaving Catherine, he pondered his choice of a Christmas gift for her. He’d been so sure when he first came up with the idea, but now, after learning how to make it and then spending a couple of months on it, he wasn’t as sure as he had been.

He knew that she loved the stained-glass window over his bed, and he had come up with a way to give her one of her own. Not exactly like his, but a more colorful version. He’d gone to a Helper who created stained

glass art, and he'd spent several months learning the skill... much to Father's chagrin when he'd had to patch up several cuts Vincent had accidentally inflicted on himself.

Finally, he'd felt ready to create something; what he'd made had turned out surprisingly well. It was so good that several people Below were asking if he'd make something for them. The Helper who had taught him was helping him set up a workshop where he could work.

But now, he was suddenly unsure of the gift. *Where will she put it?* he wondered. *The only windows in her home are the doors in her living room and bedroom.*

He shook his head and told himself to stop second-guessing his choice. He was sure that she would love it and that she'd find a place to display it.



Catherine's cab pulled up in front of the Aaronson house just as Joe walked around the corner.

"You walked?" she commented as they met at the bottom of the steps.

"I don't live that far from here," he told her. "It was so warm today, and I decided I needed the exercise."

They went up the stairs, and Catherine rang the bell.

A little boy wearing payos (side curls), a yarmulka, and a red and green Christmas sweater, answered the door.

"Hanukkah Sameach!" he said, then grinned and added. "Merry Christmas!"

"Happy Hanukkah, Natan," Catherine returned. "You've got door duty tonight?"

"For another ten minutes, then it's Daniel's turn," he answered. "Jenny said to tell you she's in the kitchen."

Natan closed the door behind them and went to sit on the bench to one side. He pointed at the bench on the other side of the small foyer. "You can put your coats there."

Catherine and Joe left their coats, then Catherine led Joe across the living room and introduced him to Amanda and Ben Aaronson.

She left them chatting and went to the kitchen in search of Jenny.

Jenny was arranging a tray of food when Catherine walked in.

"You going to hide in the kitchen all night?" she asked.

"Is he here yet?" Jenny asked. She looked nervous.

He who?" Catherine asked, picking a piece of cheese off the platter.

"Joe, you ninny. Is he here?"

"He is. We met in front of the house and came in together."

Jenny's face went pale.

"Where is he?"

"I introduced him to your folks and left him to come to find you. Natan told me you were in here." Catherine was on the verge of laughter but managed to subdue it. Jenny really looked nervous and upset.

"Thank you for introducing him to Mom and Dad. You saved me that, at least."

"What's going on, Jenn?" Catherine asked in concern.

"It's just that there's something about Joe. The few times I've met him, we just seemed to click when we talked. I invited him on a whim. I hope he doesn't think that it was too forward." Jenny wiped her hands, picked up the tray, and headed for the door.

"He's here, isn't he?" Catherine pointed out. "He wouldn't have come if he hadn't wanted to, and since you and I are the only people here he knows, then something had to have caught his interest."

"It could have been you," Jenny pointed out.

"Nope. He knows I'm seeing someone. It's not me. Besides, there is kind of an unwritten no-fraternization rule in the DAs office."

"You're sure?" Jenny asked. Catherine hadn't seen Jenny this unsure of herself with a man since they were sophomores.

"You'll never find out if you don't get out there and talk to him."

Catherine succumbed to her laughter after Jenny left the kitchen. After she got that out of her system, she followed Jenny out.

Halfway through the evening, Joe found her. He was grinning ear to ear.

"This is great!" he exclaimed. "It's too bad the whole world can't be here. I was just in a conversation with a Catholic priest and a Rabbi. And they are both Jenny's uncles."

Catherine laughed. "A Catholic priest and a Rabbi go to a Hanumas Party... sounds like the beginning of a bad joke."

"What's a joke?" asked Jenny as she walked up.

"Joe just met your uncles, Father O'Connell and Rabbi Aaronson."

Jenny looked across the room with concern written all over her face.

"They weren't arguing, were they?" she asked. "That is one of Mom's rules for these parties: No arguing religion or politics."

"They weren't arguing, but they were having a very animated conversation," Joe put in.

"Were they frowning?" she asked.

"No, in fact, they even laughed a few times," Joe told her.

Jenny put her hand over her heart and sighed in relief. "That's good to hear."

A little while later, Catherine found Jenny back in the kitchen, but she was with Joe this time. She was explaining some of the unfamiliar items on the food platter.

“Jenn,” she called across the room. “I’m driving to Peekskill to see Aunt Lydia tomorrow, so I’m heading home.”

Jenny crossed the room, and they hugged.

“How’s it going?” Catherine whispered.

“Great!” Jenny whispered back. “He’s asked me out to dinner next week.”



The visit with Aunt Lydia went as expected.

Catherine was thanked profusely for the cookies and then admonished for not being there the previous Christmas.

“But I’ve visited every month since then,” Catherine pointed out.

“But it’s not the same as Christmas,” Aunt Lydia said. “So, have you got a young man yet?” The change of subject threw Catherine for a moment. Aunt Lydia hadn’t asked that question in ages. She spoke without thinking.

“I have. We’ve been seeing each other for almost four years.” Once the words were out, there was no calling them back.

“It’s not that Tom Gunther, is it?” Aunt Lydia might have had a stroke that had confined her to a wheelchair, but her mind was still as sharp as ever.

“No, I broke up with Tom years ago,” Catherine assured her.

“So, who is this new man?”

After a moment of thought, Catherine decided to be as truthful as possible.

“His name is Vincent.”

“Does he have a last name?”

“He was adopted as a baby, and the man who adopted him is Jacob Wells.” Vincent didn’t use that name, but it satisfied Aunt Lydia.

“What does he do?”

“Well, he teaches, among a few other things, but the teaching is what he seems to enjoy the most.”

“Sounds solid and dependable. That’s just what you need,” Aunt Lydia said. “But you better snag him soon. You aren’t getting any younger. What are you now? 32?”

“Yes, Aunt Lydia,” Catherine said with a smile. This was the same conversation they’d had many times.



Christmas Eve, and Catherine was back in front of her closet looking for something to wear. It had been a long time since she'd done anything as frivolous as shopping for herself. She'd worn the green velvet to the Aaronson's party. Besides, it would be chilly Below. She pulled several things out, looked at them, then shook her head and put them back. This was just a "family" get-together; no need to get too dressed up. She finally settled on a pair of winter white wool slacks, a matching cowl neck sweater, and brown boots. Once dressed, she pulled on a red wool coat, picked up her oversized tote bag of gifts, and headed to her threshold, where Kipper and Geoffrey met her.

"Where's Vincent?" she asked.

"He's helping William move some stuff for tomorrow's dinner," Geoffrey told her. "He said he'd meet you in Father's study."

"I need to go to Vincent's chamber first," she told the boys. "I want to leave my coat and some of the things in the bag."

The boys left her at Vincent's chamber. They were anxious to get back to their Christmas Eve fun.

Catherine took off her coat and hung it up, then pulled several wrapped packages out of her bag before heading down the tunnel to Father's study.

When she got there, she found the party was just getting started. Father was sitting on the settee talking to Peter, while Mary put the finishing touches on a simple buffet set up on the table they usually used for council meetings.

Everyone greeted her, and Mary hugged her.

"Do you want to put those under the tree in here or in the dining chamber?" Mary asked.

"In here," Catherine told her with a smile. "Everything for the children was sent down last week."

Catherine put the packages under the tree. She'd left all of Vincent's gifts, except the stationery box and a book, in his chamber. In the end, she had wrapped the red boxers, but there was no way she would let him open them here, in front of everyone. He would be terminally embarrassed, and so would she.

The evening was pleasant, and Catherine enjoyed hearing the stories Father told about some of the previous holidays Below, and some of his childhood on the island of Guernsey in the English Channel.

Catherine received homemade gifts from Mary and some of the others and a book from Father but was surprised that there was nothing from Vincent.

"I left your gift in my chamber," he whispered. "It was a little large."

“I’m proud of you, Catherine,” Vincent told her as they walked to his chamber later. “You didn’t get carried away this year.”

Catherine smiled and deliberately batted her eyelashes at him.

“I have a confession to make,” she admitted.

“What’s that?”

They had reached his chamber, and she pointed at the bag sitting on his writing table.

“I didn’t take them all to Father’s study. The rest are over there.”

Vincent sighed and walked to the table. He glanced into the bag.

“You are incorrigible, you know, and way too extravagant.” He told her. Then he walked to the screen in the corner of the chamber and returned with a large fan-shaped item wrapped in brown paper and tied with red yarn.

“If that is for me, then it might be another case for the pot and kettle,” she said with a laugh.

“But I made it. That’s different.”

“And I didn’t make what I give you? I mean, I might not have made it with my two hands, but I earned the money I bought it with,” she retorted.

He pointed at the bed.

“Sit,” he directed with a half-smile.

She grinned back and sat.

“I want you to open this first,” he told her, setting the package in front of her.

Knowing that the yarn and the paper would be reused, she carefully removed it and what she found took her breath away.



“It’s beautiful!” she exclaimed. “You made this? I didn’t know you could do this.”

“We have a helper who taught me. I find it very relaxing, and I am now setting up a workshop so I can continue,” he told her. “I’ve had requests for more pieces already.”

“That’s wonderful,” she told him.

“Where do you think you’ll put it?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe I can somehow mount it on the doors to the balcony in my bedroom. It would be lovely to look at every morning.”

After some discussion on how that might be achieved, Catherine went to the bag and started pulling the packages out. She urged him to open them.

“You overdid it again,” he pointed out as he sat on the chair next to the table, and she went back to sit on the bed.

“Once a year,” she told him. “I only indulge you and myself once a year.”

“Twice,” he corrected.

“Twice?” she asked, then remembered. “... But that was your birthday, a special one, your 35th.”

Vincent shook his head and picked up a package that he carefully unwrapped. By the time he’d gotten down to the last one, he was overwhelmed.

“What am I going to do with all this?” he wondered out loud.

“Well, the last time you wore your *good* shirt, I noticed that it was getting a little threadbare,” she said.

“But this one is silk,” he pointed out.

“And?”

“The old one was cotton... and these pajamas. Silk pajamas and a cashmere robe?”

“Cashmere is very warm and a lot less scratchy than wool. And I hope the slippers fit.”

“I’m sure they will, but where am I going to wear a cashmere sweater?” They were both laughing by the time he said that.

“When you come to visit me?” she suggested with a giggle.

He picked up the last package.

“I can only imagine what this might be,” he said as he carefully removed the ribbon and paper.

“I just have one thing to say about that one before you open it,” she said, suddenly serious

He hesitated. “What?”

“I succumbed to peer pressure when I bought that. Nancy knows your name and that we’ve been seeing each other for several years. She mentioned you, and Jenny jumped on it, then they both started making suggestions for gifts for you. This was the one at the top of their list.”

That made Vincent a bit wary; he’d heard stories about some of the escapades of Catherine and her two friends.

He carefully opened the box and folded back the tissue paper. He looked at the contents of the box and then back at Catherine, whose face was almost as red as what was in the box.

He lifted the item out and, using both hands, held it up in front of his face. After a moment, he peeked around them at Catherine, who was still bright red.

“Red silk boxers?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” she started, putting her hands over her face. She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. When she looked up, the boxers were nowhere to be seen, and Vincent was studiously inspecting one of the books she’d given him.

The rest of the conversation revolved rather stiffly around the stained glass, his plans for the workshop, and the books she’d given him.

They were unusually silent on their walk back to her threshold later.

They were standing at the bottom of the ladder to the basement, and Catherine was preparing to climb up; Vincent was going to hand her the stained glass once she was up.

“I’m sorry I embarrassed you,” she told him, turning back to him before starting up the ladder. “If you like, I can take them back, or maybe you can give them to someone?”

Vincent shook his head as she started to climb.

“No, I’ll keep them, and I think I’ll wear them. I think I even know the perfect occasion.”

She reached the top of the ladder, climbed into the basement, and then leaned back out to take the stained glass.

“When?” she asked.

But Vincent didn’t answer; he just smiled up at her enigmatically. And as she started to turn away, she heard him call up to her.

“So, what are you doing New Year’s Eve, Catherine?”

