

THE CHRISTMAS ANGEL

by Gwen Lord

"How many need Christmas dinner?" William asked in disbelief, unable to take in Father's statement.

"Thirty-three I'm led to believe, according to Zack," Father answered.

"The days are long gone when five or six chickens would feed us all on Christmas day." William put on his blue striped apron, tying it firmly around his ample frame. "I don't think I'll be able to cook the number of chickens we'll need, all at the same time, Father." He was clearly worried.

"Maybe we should have two sittings?" the older man offered a possible alternative.

"No, even two sittings wouldn't be enough. This year we have a problem." William sighed as he reached for a dish to crack eggs in, then as he whisked them he strolled over to Father, almost resting the dish on his stomach as he did so.

"Then what alternative do you suggest?"

"It's the latest lot of topsiders that came to us from Chang, that's what swollen our numbers."

"True, yes, it's true, but we have to open up our homes to them, because like us, this safe place is the only hope they have left."

"I know, I know." William was protesting, and agreeing both at the same time.

"Maybe Mary can come up with an idea?" Father beamed at his bright idea.

"I doubt even Mary can help here. I think we could do with some divine help, Father," he chuckled, and his whole body shook with laughter.

"Divine help?" Father repeated, equally amused.

"Yeah! You know the Bible story of the loaves and fishes and how suddenly they had enough to feed everyone. Sure could do with some of that divine stuff down here."

"We have three days, William, so I'll tell Pascal to send a message on the pipes for an Emergency Meeting in my chamber, tonight at 9 p.m. Between all of us, surely we'll come up

with a working plan?" and with that, Father left the kitchen.

At almost 9 pm Father's chamber was overflowing with young and old. As the steady chatter of why this meeting was called filtered around the room.

Father seated himself in his old comfortable chair and addressed the throng. The candles around the chamber flickered at so much movement, casting moving shadows on the rough rock walls.

"We have a kitchen problem to deal with tonight," Father began. "It would seem that because there are more of us now than ever before, the small stove will not be able to cope with a sit-down Christmas meal for everyone at the same time. However, we do feel that several sittings might be an option."

Turning their heads to one another, there were mutters of discord at the thought of being separated for Christmas dinner. From the back of the chamber, where Vincent and Catherine were sitting, her familiar voice called, "Would you let me help?" She was now standing on tiptoe so Father could see her.

"Catherine, I didn't know you were here. Welcome my dear."

"Thank you, Father, we have only just arrived. I would like to help if you would let me?"

Catherine looked at Vincent who was still holding her hand in his. She smiled at the encouragement she saw in his eyes and the love that was there too. Turning her attention back to Father she continued, "You have a problem which I believe I can fix."

As they made their way from the back of the chamber, Vincent whispered, "You are so wonderful, Catherine."

Again she smiled, "You have taught me to share other peoples' troubles, Vincent."

At last they reached Father, who gave Catherine a hug and then slipped his arm through hers. He motioned for everyone to be silent and said simply, "How do you think you can help us, my dear?"

Catherine turned to look at all the anxious faces and told them, "I wanted to buy each of you a gift for Christmas, but I have an idea that one gift between you all would be better. Let me provide the food, as my Christmas gift."

Cheers went up and everyone turned to Father to see his reaction.

"Catherine, are you sure? This is a very generous thing you're proposing?" Father whispered close to her ear.

"I have more money than I will ever use. I want to put that money to good use and what better

than to give all my special family a wondrous Christmas."

"God bless you, Catherine," a voice called out from the crowd.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING

Two days before Christmas Day, Catherine told Joe she needed a couple of hours off to do some Christmas shopping. As time was owing to her, he readily agreed. Catherine rushed out of the office so fast no one noticed she had gone. Several hours later she returned, all her shopping done, plans had been made and everything paid for.

CHRISTMAS EVE

It was now Christmas Eve and the long dark tunnels were bleak and cold, with only the golden glow of the home tunnels ahead in the distance, but even these did not reflect any Christmas spirit. A few home made decorations, mostly paper chains, hung limply and a small artificial tree stood in one corner and had been decorated as best they could manage. A few of the children had hung up well-worn socks for Santa's visit. Suddenly, the pipes came alive with loud tappings, telling everyone to assemble near Father's chamber at once. It didn't take long for the crowd to gather, all waiting to hear Catherine's plan.

Vincent came forward to speak, Catherine was by his side.

"We need everyone, except the little ones - they will stay with Father and Mary. The rest follow us."

"Like the Pied Piper of Hamelin," said one, as the long line of excited people hurried to follow. Soon they were at the secret entrance to Chang's Store. Vincent knocked and Chang opened the door. There inside the now empty store were merchants and trades people, all Helpers from Above. They were all lined up with goods for them.

One by one, all was passed to them and the chain line began. Their voices were full of excitement and joy. Catherine's tears ran unashamedly, she was overcome at the happiness her money had brought to these wonderful people.

Father could hear their voices now, so he and Mary stood to greet each one as they entered. As the goodies started to pile up, they were amazed that there was so much. Next came an eight-foot Christmas tree and a huge box of decorations. There were seven large freshly

cooked turkeys, pans of vegetables, bottles of wine, a box of large candles, and box after box of brightly-wrapped presents. Father's breath caught in his throat when he saw the boxes of Christmas crackers, the jars of fondant sticks, but tears filled his eyes when he saw the baskets of fresh fruit being carried through.

"Catherine, there are no words." No words could express the gratitude, or how thankful he was. Slowly, he dried his tears.

"I have never been happier, Father."

"But the expense, my dear, even for you."

"What expense?" she said in a faint whisper.

Father's arms were outstretched as he tried to span everything laid out before them. "All this, my dear."

A silence descended on everyone Below, as the bells rang out from a nearby church.

"I've learned from all of you that you cannot put a price tag on life or love. The heart has to want to share and mine wants to share with you. I used to think money was everything, but it is worthless unless it makes you happy. It makes me happy to help bring the magic of Christmas to you all Below. The Christmas Angels are here, in these tunnels, can't you feel them? Can't you hear them singing? You will if you try."

Slowly one by one, everyone started to sing *Silent Night* and a magic all its own descended on this happy group of people. The tree was soon dressed, with all the decorations glistening in the candlelight, and the aroma of food was mouth-watering. Tables had cloths placed on them and hours passed as the dark tunnels and chambers became alive with the spirit of Christmas.

Parcels were laid among the tree and socks were filled. Four special parcels lay on Father's desk. Two were for Father and Mary, from Vincent and Catherine, and the other two were Vincent and Catherine's presents to each other.

It was almost midnight when Vincent and Catherine finally found a moment when they could reflect on everything that had taken place over the past few hours. They were standing in the shelter of the tunnel leading out into Central Park.

Vincent took Catherine's hand and kissed it whispering, "Your generous heart has made so many people so happy, Catherine. People who had lost sight of hope now feel that there is hope. They had lost love, but now know that true love still exists."

Catherine had snaked her arms around Vincent's waist as she answered, "What I have done is nothing compared to what you have given me, Vincent. Money couldn't buy the faith in myself that you have given me. You changed my life forever. What I have done is nothing compared

to what you have given me." She reached up and kissed him.

Clearly moved by Catherine's sudden display of affection, he sighed, "I am so blessed, Catherine," and his arms held her close, not wanting this wonderful moment to end. When the first chimes rang out heralding the arrival of Christmas Day, Vincent and Catherine clung together as they wished one another "Happy Christmas," knowing that this year it was going to be a wondrous time for this special community.

Vincent spoke against the softness of Catherine's hair, marvelling at the fragrance that was hers, "You've certainly kept your promise, Catherine. It will be a wondrous Christmas for everyone," and softly he kissed the top of her head.

When Catherine raised her face to look at Vincent, the love in her eyes was unmistakable, everything about him was familiar and so dear to her. Deep in his soul, Vincent accepted what he saw in her eyes. Gently, he wrapped her inside the warmth of his cloak and bent his head to kiss her tenderly, savouring the joy of the intimacy that was theirs alone, and always would be. Slowly Catherine leaned back in Vincent's arms so that she could see the expression on his face.

"Vincent," she began tentatively, "I've moved my things out of the Guest Chamber....." She stopped because she had noticed a smile playing around the corners of his unique mouth. "You already knew....." she gasped.

Vincent took her hands in his and kissed them, "Of course! Did you think for one moment that I wouldn't sense what you've been planning for me? After all my love, you said it would be a wondrous Christmas for everyone!"

Catherine dropped her head on Vincent's chest, for once in her life, she was lost for words.

Vincent's great shoulders started to shake, and his laughter was a joy to hear. He held Catherine at arm's length and then whispered, "Mind you, it did help when I found your clothes hanging in my wardrobe and your overnight bag underneath the bed. What was I supposed to think?"

Catherine grabbed a handful of his mane and pulled his mouth down towards her. "And it's what you want too, you're absolutely sure?"

Vincent growled playfully. "Absolutely! Absolutely!"

Kissing him quickly, several times, she took his hand in hers and began to pull him in the direction of the Home Tunnels. "Then let's not waste another minute standing here, let's go home."

Nodding his head vigorously, Vincent swept Catherine up into his arms, repeating over and over again, "Absolutely! Absolutely!"

Catherine's joyous laughter could be heard as they began the long walk back to their secret place, each knowing that for them it would be the most wondrous Christmas of their lives so far.