

Tunnel Treats

by Judith Nolan

“Are you gently sleeping, here inside my dream?
And isn't faith believing all power can't be seen?

As my heart holds you just one beat away
I cherish all you gave me every day...

'Cause you are my forever love,
Watching me from up above...

And I believe that angels breathe,
And that love will live on and never leave...”

Richard N. Marx and Linda Thompson

Chapter One

Christmas Gifts

Snow was already sifting down in soft, silvery veils over New York City when Catherine woke on Christmas morning. Her apartment was still dim, the curtains drawn against the pale winter light, but she could already tell, without getting up, that the world outside had taken on that hush that only comes when snow covers the city like a blessing.

The telephone had rung late the previous night. Her father had called from Massachusetts, where he was spending the holiday with close family friends. He had encouraged her to join him.

Catherine had been tempted, but finally she'd chosen to stay in New York. She'd given a gentle excuse about work, about needing quiet time to rest after the last, hard-fought court case. But, of course, that had not been her true reason.

Her heart was now being pulled elsewhere. Away from the world of privilege and power she'd grown up in, and toward the tunnels. Toward someone who lived there. Toward the one person whose presence could turn even a cold winter night into warmth.

“If that's what you want, Cathy,” her father had responded. “I'll miss you.” He paused and sighed. “Just say the word, and I'll drive back up and take you out on the town. It's been too long since we've done that together.”

“Oh, please don't,” Catherine had responded quickly. “It's all right, Dad. I'll be all right. But thank you. Enjoy your holiday. You deserve it.”

“I love you, darling. Merry Christmas.”

“I love you too, Dad. Merry Christmas....”

Still lying beneath her warm quilt, Catherine smiled with anticipation. '*Merry Christmas, Vincent.*' She did not say the words aloud. They were whispered through the bond instead. A breath carried on the quiet, invisible thread that connected them with an unbreakable awareness.

She snuggled deeper into her pillows as she felt, faintly, something warm in reply. Surprise. Gratitude. And something else. Something like joy.

Catherine finally rose and made coffee and toast. She watched the soft flakes drift through the grey morning light beyond her windows. Her living room was already decorated. Tasteful coloured lights, a garland across her mantel, and a large bag of expensive, wrapped gifts she would deliver to friends later in the day.

She had accepted two invitations to Christmas parties. One from Jenny Aaronson's publishing firm and the other from a charity gala for the district attorney's office.

Both were expecting her to attend. Now that he'd been elected as the city's new D.A., Joe had made it very clear he required her to be at the gala, or he'd want to know the reason why. Catherine grimaced as she sipped her coffee. Both were ongoing parts of her world. And both felt more like a duty now, rather than a pleasure.

Once upon a time, she would have been out on the town early on Christmas Eve and not seen the inside of her apartment again for forty-eight hours or more.

"That was the old Cathy..." she told the empty room.

By mid-morning, she had dressed in an elegant outfit, perfected her make-up, and picked up the large tote bag full of expensive gifts. She left the apartment to take a taxi to the publishing house event. It was a midday Christmas brunch at an exclusive Fifth Avenue hotel. Everyone who was anyone in the publishing world would be there.

Jenny greeted her with enthusiasm and kisses as she thrust a flute of champagne into Catherine's hand.

"Now you must mingle, darling..." Jenny commanded. "There are a lot of bores, but it's Christmas, after all. The season for forgiving." She chuckled at her own joke as she sailed back into the crowds of attendees in the nearby restaurant.

Catherine followed her slowly as she sipped her champagne. The lobby was bursting with poinsettias and gold ribbons, and the chandeliers sparkled like frozen drops of sunlight. She entered the party proper, and the crowds of people were joyful, loud, and already practising the art of seeing how much champagne they could drink before noon, and the food service went into full swing.

Catherine threaded her way from group to group, smiling, exchanging greetings and gifts. As fast as she gave them out, she accepted small wrapped tokens from acquaintances to refill her bag. Perfumed soaps, chocolates, a slim hardcover poetry book and several packets of expensive writing paper sets. Every gift was expected to be acknowledged in turn with handwritten 'thank you' notes before the new year came around. Some traditions needed to be maintained.

It was almost a relief to be able to hide out behind the heavily decorated branches of a towering Christmas tree to catch her breath and resist the constant offers of more champagne from sharp-eyed waiters. As she stood there, two people paused to debate the merits of their winter ski trips and their expectations for the new year.

She frowned as she listened to talk that once she would have willingly joined in. But now her thoughts drifted.

'Today, Below must be alive with preparations,' she thought. *'They will all be busy...'* Busy in a very different way. Without glittering ornaments or champagne fountains. Busy with meaning and purpose.

She imagined Vincent among them. The image filled her chest with something warm and tender. If she closed her eyes briefly, she could almost feel the tunnels' torchlit glow. And wrap herself in the sensation of loving care that flowed back to her on a voiceless whisper...

Below, the preparations for Christmas had begun long before dawn. The older children had hardly slept at all and were abroad to drag their elders out of their warm beds before anyone was ready to be up and dressed.

Soon, the tunnels were buzzing with soft voices and purposeful movement. Children hurried about carrying bowls of popcorn and cranberries, or wooden boxes of handmade decorations. A group of women knitted by lantern light, finishing scarves meant for those Above who needed them. Others carefully wrapped jars of preserved foods to be left on the doorsteps of families who had too little for the season.

Father, wrapped in a heavy woollen shawl, stood near the central chamber, arranging books beside a small, decorated table.

"Vincent," he called over his shoulder. "Could you see if Mary requires any help with the parcels for the hospital ward? Time is of the essence."

Vincent was already on his way. "Of course. I'll go right away."

Mary's chamber was always warm, and today even more so. She was sorting the last bundles of knitted blankets the children had made. She hummed an old carol under her breath as she worked.

"Ah, Vincent," she said with relief. "I could use your bigger hands for these heavier boxes. They're going to the children's ward Above. Pascal has arranged their delivery using one of the old access points near the service elevator."

"I'll send one of the children for a goods trolley," Vincent replied.

He looked around the chamber, and several arms were thrust into the air with excited children attached to them. Some danced to be seen and picked.

"Kipper can run the fastest." Vincent nodded to the boy. "Make sure you're back in ten minutes. There is no time to lose."

"Make that eight!" Kipper shouted excitedly as he dodged away through the chamber entrance.

Vincent smiled as he lifted the large boxes with ease. The contents were blankets, toys repaired in the workshop, and books carefully rebound in the library chamber.

"These will make the festive day brighter for many," he said softly.

Mary looked at him with that motherly fondness she always kept just under the surface. "Yes, they will. Down here, that is the only purpose of the day. To brighten someone else's life."

"As it should be," Vincent acknowledged.

With a crash of spinning wheels, Kipper returned with the required cart. As he stacked the boxes onto it, Vincent thought of Catherine. Of her world of shining storefronts and glowing towers. Of gifts wrapped in ribbons, fine boxes tied with gold and bottles full of expensive champagne. She told him she had two events she needed to attend.

And he wondered if she felt at home in that world today. So many things had changed for her in the last three years since they'd first met. He was aware she was no longer the young woman of parties and endless rounds of corporate functions and five-star dinners.

Something in the bond stirred. He felt a fervent wish, soft, reflective.

'No', she seemed to say, though no words existed. *'I am not that woman anymore...'*

He felt her, then. She seemed to be drifting among people, smiling politely as she accepted many gifts. Despite the people around her, he felt her loneliness, faint but real, threaded into the edges of the joy she'd found with him.

He had been pushing the cart down the tunnel, but now his steps slowed. Several children had asked to go with him. They chatted excitedly as she hurried along.

'She misses you,' the bond whispered.

And Vincent felt his heart respond with confessions of abiding love. He smiled and shook his head as he continued on his way toward the surface with an eager-to-help Kipper running ahead of them all.

Catherine left the brunch early. Jenny had protested and asked her to stay, but accepted Catherine's claim that she needed to prepare for the evening gala.

In truth, she longed for quiet. For meaning. For simplicity.

She walked through Central Park as snow continued to fall in lazy spirals. She watched children tug sleds, their laughter echoing through the trees. Ice skaters made the most of the frozen lake.

Then she hailed a passing cab and continued south toward a neighbourhood she knew well. Near a small community shelter, she called for her driver to stop. She got out and paid him off.

She walked back to a tall, thin man who was standing, looking irresolute, at the bottom of the steps up to the shelter. He had one arm in a sling, and his face was pale from the cold. The steps were many and covered in snow.

She'd recognised him. He'd testified in one of her recent cases and had helped her to win it against the odds.

She knew she owned him. She approached him. "Edward? Are you all right? Do you need a hand?"

He turned and blinked at her in surprise. "Is that you, Ms Chandler? Didn't expect to see you down here." He shifted, trying to keep warm. "Just... stopping by. Thought I'd bring something for those who don't have much."

He opened the small bag he was holding. Inside, Catherine saw six cans of soup and a few items of woollen clothing. Not gifts given in expectation. But in gratitude. And perhaps need.

"Here, you can lean on me..." She offered her free arm.

"I'm too heavy for you." Edward shook his head, as she helped him up the steps of the shelter.

"I'm a lot stronger than I look," Catherine countered, as she held the door open for him. "Go on in..."

The blast of warmth inside welcomed them both inside. Edward spoke quietly with the volunteers and handed over his gifts while Catherine stood aside, watching.

'This,' she thought. 'Is the true meaning of the day...'

People giving to others what they could. Not out of obligation, or custom, or ceremony, but out of the shared humanity of need in the face of the city's unashamed plenty.

"See you, Edward..." She waved to him as she retreated to the front desk.

"Don't you be a stranger now, Ms Chandler," he called back even as he settled at a long table with his fellows and began to eat a hot meal of soup and bread.

Catherine spoke with the attendant at the front desk as she pulled most of her gifts from her tote bag. She left them with the man, along with a generous check.

She smiled at his startled words of thanks before she walked back outside into the cold. The sky had darkened. Lights were beginning to glow behind apartment windows. Christmas trees flickered like beacons inside homes.

Her world was beautiful. But was it showing its true face? Was it enough?

She wrapped her scarf tighter and whispered, "I wish you were here, Vincent."

Deep below the city, her love paused in mid-step. Their bond warmed with the answer.

By evening, the tunnels were glowing with lanterns. A hearty feast had been set on the long tables in the dining room. Homemade lanterns, crafted by the children, hung from ropes across the chamber ceiling, their soft glow dancing like captured stars.

Vincent watched as a young girl, Ellie, carefully placed a carved wooden animal beside a plate. She arranged it with great care.

She looked up to see him watching her. "It's for Luke," she said shyly. "He likes stories about deer."

Vincent smiled softly. "I know he will treasure it."

Ellie looked up at him. "Vincent? Will you be here tonight? With all of us?"

"I am always here...", he replied softly.

Mary, arranging candles nearby, watched him knowingly. "He has somewhere else he might wish to be, though," she murmured.

Ellie's eyes brightened with curiosity. "With *her*? The beautiful lady you saved that night long ago."

Vincent's breath caught. Children saw more than adults sometimes.

He inclined his head. "Perhaps, for a little while. But my place is here, with all of you."

Ellie nodded sagely. "Good. Everyone should be with someone on Christmas. You got your pretty lady, and we got you." She grinned happily.

Vincent felt the truth of her words. He felt it resonate through him with quiet strength.

As the evening closed in, the food was consumed, and many small gifts were exchanged. There was a warm scarf for Father, carved bookends from William for the library, and a new handmade journal left anonymously at Vincent's place. He acknowledged the gifts before he finally wrapped his cloak around his shoulders and slipped through the tunnels toward the world Above.

Toward Catherine and the place his heart wanted to be.

Catherine returned home from the D.A.'s gala sooner than she knew Joe was expecting. He'd scowled as she collected her coat and made her excuses. His look said he would deal with her come Thursday, when they were all back at work. Then he had turned his back and returned to his guests.

"It can't be helped, Joe." Catherine shrugged at his back view.

The event had been stunning and a ringing testament to the new D.A.'s considerable organisational skills. There were crystal glasses, a six-foot-tall ice sculpture and delicious dishes served on huge platters. People bid on a range of items as the champagne flowed freely.

Not one of them dared talk shop. Not under the eagle eye of their new boss.

It had been lively and bright. The bidding had been fast-paced, and every item offered had been sold. But it all had felt hollow to Catherine. She went through the motions on autopilot and didn't take part in the bidding, as she moved steadily toward the doors.

The moment she returned to her apartment, she kicked off her shoes and changed into clothing more suitable for a chilly winter's night. She pulled on a thick winter coat as she stepped onto her balcony, hugging her arms against the cold. Behind her, the mantle clock chimed midnight.

Snow dusted the railing. The city below sparkled with red and gold lights. Christmas songs drifted faintly from the street-level festivities.

She closed her eyes. '*Vincent...*'

And then, he was there.

She felt him before she heard him. A warm presence, a familiar pulse through the bond. She opened her eyes.

He was standing at the edge of the balcony, cloak dusted with snow, breath clouding softly in the night. His long hair glowed gold in the lights from her apartment. His eyes, always so gentle, held a warmth that thawed the cold instantly.

"Good evening, Catherine," he said softly.

"Vincent." Her voice broke on his name. "I hoped... I thought you might come."

He stepped closer, stopping an arm's length away. Not out of concern but reverence. "I felt you," he said. "Across the distance. Your heart... reaching."

She smiled, though it trembled. "I have been thinking of you all day. I wanted to be with you."

He stepped closer. "And I, with you."

She gestured toward the city. "It's beautiful, isn't it? All the lights, the music, the decorations."

"It is," he agreed gently. "The night covers many things most people choose not to see."

"Yes. And it also feels..." She glanced away. "It feels empty. I went to brunch with Jenny Aaronson and then to Joe's D.A. charity gala. I smiled, accepted gifts, and made small talk. But everything felt so... so shallow."

"I understand..." Vincent listened without judgment.

"People exchanged things they could buy," she continued. "Perfume. Jewellery. Books. All lovely. All thoughtful." She rested her palms on the top of the snowy brick wall. "But none of it felt like... the true meaning of Christmas."

Vincent took a slow breath, his voice deep and warm. "Below, our gifts are different."

She glanced back at him, urging him silently to go on.

"A gift may be a blanket sewn by many hands, or a book restored for someone who cannot afford one. It may be a day spent repairing a broken door or window for a family Above. A meal shared. A kindness given quietly. An hour of labour. An act of mercy."

His eyes softened. "Some gifts cost nothing. And yet... they mean everything to those in need."

Catherine's throat tightened. "Everything to those who have so little." She moved closer to him. "I gave things away to a shelter downtown. Things I didn't need, and they could use."

"Those are things given with a full heart," Vincent added softly. "They are treasures."

She stepped closer. "But you give them. Every day."

He shook his head. "They are given by all of us. I am only one among many."

"Maybe," she whispered. "But you are the one I feel them through."

Vincent lowered his gaze to study her expression of love and acceptance.

She touched his hand. He placed his other hand over hers. Snow fell around them in soft spirals.

"Vincent," she whispered. "What did you receive today? As a gift?"

He thought for a long moment. "A poem from Samantha. A scarf Mary knitted. Father insisted I accept a book of his that I had been admiring." He smiled slightly. "And William left a large dish of sugared cinnamon biscuits in my chamber, though he denies it."

"Your one weakness..." Catherine laughed gently.

"But the greatest gifts," Vincent continued. "Were not things. Kipper left an apology for a quarrel he had with Eric. A difficult apology bravely made. Rebecca offered to help Cullen find the things he needs for his woodwork. An elderly man, Thomas, who rarely leaves his chamber, walked to the dining hall simply to wish everyone peace. We made him stay and join us, instead of eating alone in his chamber."

Vincent's voice softened to a whisper. "These acts... they are the heart of our community. They make us who we are."

Catherine felt something warm bloom inside her. "I wish I could have seen it."

"You feel it," Vincent murmured, touching his chest. "Through this bond we share."

A long silence followed, filled only with the whisper of snow.

Then Catherine said, very softly, "I have not given you your Christmas gift."

He shook his head quickly. "Catherine, my love. Your presence is a gift beyond anything I could ever receive. You are everything to me."

"But I do have something," she said. She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a small, plain box. It was not wrapped in gold or tied with an expensive ribbon. Simple. Modest.

Vincent hesitated. "Catherine..."

"Please..." She pressed it into his hands.

He sighed as he opened it slowly. Inside was a small, leather-bound notebook. The kind a writer might use. But on the first page, written in her neat handwriting, were two lines:

For Vincent—

For your thoughts, your dreams, your stories.

His breath caught. "Oh, Catherine..."

"I asked a local craftsman to bind it," she said quickly. "He specialises in handmade paper. I thought... You might like to write your own stories."

Vincent stared at the book as though it were a great treasure. Snowflakes landed on the leather, melting into dark spots.

"It is perfect," he whispered. "Catherine... thank you."

She reached for his hand again. He clasped hers tightly with his free hand.

"And now," she said softly. "Please tell me all about your Christmas."

"Very well..." He drew her within the warm shelter of his cloak and told her.

Slowly. Deeply. The lanterns. The children. The gifts of labour. The food was cooked by many hands. The laughter and the quiet moments. The joy of giving without expectation. The abiding presence of community.

She listened with her whole heart and rejoiced with him.

Then he asked, and she told him of her day. Of the beauty, the emptiness, the obligations, the glitter that felt weightless. Of the moment at the shelter. Of the small, real acts of kindness she had witnessed.

Vincent's eyes warmed as he listened.

Two worlds, spoken aloud.

Two worlds finally understood.

When she finished, Catherine nestled deeper into her love's embrace. The city lights shimmered below them. Snow continued to drift down around their silhouettes.

"Vincent," she whispered. "Your world... I think it's the one that understands the spirit of Christmas best."

He gave a soft, almost sad smile. "Your world celebrates. Ours remembers."

"And tonight?" she asked. "What do we do?"

His voice was low, reverent. "We share."

They stood together. Above and Below, winter and warmth, celebration and meaning. Two souls bound by something deeper than gifts or parties or ceremonies.

Snow fell softly across the balcony.

Catherine turned her face toward him. "Merry Christmas, Vincent."

He bowed his head slightly, his breath stirring her hair.

"Merry Christmas, Catherine."

For a moment, the whole city seemed to pause.

And in that quiet, their worlds came together. Not through gifts wrapped in silk, nor through grand gestures, but through the simple, precious gift of presence.

Through being together.

Through love unspoken yet fully understood.

Chapter Two

Secret Gifts

Catherine had never seen Father look so thoroughly confounded by a hat. It sat on the dining table before the old man's critical gaze like an honoured relic. Which, in a way, it was. It was a long-forgotten piece of his distant past.

It had once been an elegant black silk top hat. Now the brim was slightly wilted, and the red silk lining had frayed. But it was still somehow proud. As if it remembered those long-ago nights when a much younger and more starry-eyed Jacob Wells had proudly worn it to the opera with his lady on his arm.

"Where on earth did you find it?" Father asked with a bemused frown.

"It had been thrown far into the back of the old storage chamber," Vincent replied with a slight smile. "I knew it was yours when I saw your name had been stencilled into the band."

Father reached for the hat and turned it around to study it from all sides. "I'd forgotten all about it..." His lips thinned. "I don't even know why I bothered to keep it. There's no use for it down here."

He looked around at the tunnel dwellers who had begun to congregate for their evening meal. They'd been distracted from their tasks of setting the places with plates and utensils, or carrying in the dishes of food from the kitchen, by the mysterious hat.

"Catherine said she needed a hat," Vincent replied, as he glanced at her standing beside him. "I saw this one the last time I was looking for something in that storage chamber."

"I told Vincent about an idea I had for all of you," Catherine murmured. "He thought it was worth considering and said I should ask you for your approval."

"I see..." Father considered her with a measure of caution in his gaze. "And what idea is that?"

"What's the hold-up out here?" William interrupted loudly, as he bustled out of his kitchen to see what everyone was so excited about. "The food's ready for servin'. It'll get cold."

Around him, the dining hall was buzzing with the particular sort of excitement that could only be stirred when something new had been suggested to the world Below. No one hurried to get ready to eat. They all wanted to know what Catherine's new idea was for them all.

"I said I thought Catherine's idea was interesting and would make a good challenge for us all," Vincent added loyally.

"Well..." Father mused cautiously. "I am willing to listen to your new idea, Catherine." He glanced at the tunnel folk crowded around them.

Now, even William had been distracted from his desire to get the meal served. He folded his arms across his chest as he waited.

Catherine smiled. "I told Vincent that it's something we do Above. It's a holiday tradition. It's called a Secret Santa exchange. Everyone puts their name into a hat, and then everyone draws out one name. Whomever you draw, you're responsible for giving that person a Christmas gift. Then we give them out on Christmas Eve. That gives everyone three weeks to find something or make it."

"Buy a gift?" Mouse interrupted, eyes wide. "Better to make. Or maybe trade? Or could you find? Borrowing is fine if you bring it back. Okay, good. Okay, fine."

He danced from foot to foot with excitement. Laughter rippled through the hall.

Catherine shook her head. "In my world, we would simply buy something. But here, you can make, find, or trade for it. Whatever fits the person and what's available down here. Or Above," she amended gently. "But you can't tell anyone whose name you've drawn. That's the secret part."

"Secrecy," Father said gravely, as though Catherine had suggested forming a covert underground organisation. "Well, that is certainly in keeping with our traditions."

"Father, we *are* a covert underground organisation," Mary reminded him dryly.

"Yes, yes," Father muttered. "I can see the irony of the situation."

Vincent stood slightly apart, observing the chatter, the warm lantern-light playing over his features. His eyes met Catherine's, a subtle smile curving his mouth.

She felt a flutter of hopeful anticipation. A childish spark she hadn't felt in years. '*If I drew your name,*' she thought. '*I would find something worthy of you. Something that spoke to your depths, your quiet strength, and your poetry.*'

Perhaps everyone here already had their roles, their responsibilities, their rhythms. But here was something light. Something playful. Something festive. She wanted to give the world Below, a holiday that belonged to all of them. One that held a little mystery along with some much-needed wonder.

"All right," Father declared, raising his hands. "I will concede it is a good idea. If this is to be a plan for this season, you have my consent to begin."

"Well, what we need to begin with right now is our evening meal," William grumbled, as he tried to restore order to his domain.

He sorted out the crowd around him and marshalled his helpers. Soon, everything was back to normal, and the meal was duly served.

It was over the cold dessert that the hat was finally passed from hand to hand, along with a basket full of scraps of note paper for everyone to write their names on. There was a lot of good-natured ribbing as each name was folded and dropped into the hat.

Jamie dropped hers in with a dramatic flourish. Mouse dropped four scraps of paper before Catherine caught him and made him start over.

When the hat finally returned, full and ready, Father gave it a hearty shake. "Let the drawing begin." He stood and held the hat up high.

One by one, everyone reached inside and drew a name. They left the hall to be sure their name wasn't discovered by the mystery recipient.

Catherine waited until near the end, slipping her hand into the soft, frayed darkness of the top hat. Her fingers brushed one slip of paper, then another. She half-closed her eyes, smiling in anticipation as she prayed she would draw Vincent's name.

She pulled out a folded note and retreated into a corner to open it. She gasped as she deciphered the scrawled name as '*Mouse.*'

Her smile froze. She looked again. It still said '*Mouse.*'

"Darn...", she whispered.

Mouse, who collected strange odds and ends faster than William collected complaints. Mouse, who built inventions from scraps that defied logic, who bartered in odd little treasures, who had a system of value that was entirely his own.

She heard Vincent's soft footfall beside her before she looked up. "A name that pleases you?" he asked quietly.

She hesitated. "A name that... surprises me."

His blue eyes glimmered, full of mischief, affection, and amusement. "I suppose that is part of the fun you promised us all."

"Yes...", she nodded, though she still felt an odd lurch in her stomach.

Secret Santa wasn't about hopes. It was about giving.

'*And perhaps...*' She glanced over at Mouse, who was already silently scrutinising his slip of paper upside-down, right-side-up, and sideways. He looked confused and worried.

Catherine smiled at his honest confusion. Perhaps this would be a chance to understand him better.

Mouse caught her looking and waved enthusiastically. Then he tripped over a stool and vanished briefly from sight.

"Oh, dear," Catherine murmured as Father rushed to rescue both Mouse and the stool. "Well, I suppose the challenge is part of the charm."

Vincent's laughter rumbled deep in his chest, warm and quiet. "I will not tell anyone of your recipient. But perhaps Mouse will be most fortunate. Whatever you choose for him will come from the heart."

"Thank you, Vincent. I hope so...", Catherine whispered. But she had absolutely no idea what on earth to give him.

Vincent put one hand on her arm to indicate it was time to leave to return Above. Catherine called her goodnights as she left the chamber. Many called back and waved to her. Others seemed deep in tangled thought about what they were going to do with the names they had drawn.

"Mayhap you have been hoisted just a little with your own petard..." Vincent couldn't resist a little gentle ribbing as they walked together on the path toward home.

After a hard day at work, Catherine decided to stroll through a very wintry Manhattan instead of calling a cab to take her home. She was bundled up in her thick winter coat as the icy wind sliced between the skyscrapers. Christmas lights twinkled from every shop window, wreaths hung on every lamppost, and people rushed past carrying brightly wrapped presents.

She paused before Macy's great display windows, each one a miniature world. Mechanical ice-skaters spun gracefully. Paper snowflakes drifted under spotlights. A model train wound its way through a glittering make-believe village.

"What can I find for a genuine genius who lives in a cavern and says, '*Okay, good. Okay, fine,*' more than anyone I've ever met?" she murmured aloud.

She entered the store, letting the warm rush of air greet her. As she moved from section to section, she considered options.

An enormous tool set that had everything? "No, Father would have a heart attack."

A compass? "Mouse would dismantle it within the hour..."

A model aeroplane kit? "Too Above..."

Something beautiful? Something practical? Something whimsical? She tried thinking like Mouse. But it was an exercise that made her head spin.

She stopped before a shelf of leather journals. "Perhaps Mouse might enjoy something to sketch in, to take notes in—"

Then she pictured him using the pages to calculate the velocity needed to launch a new pulley system from one side of the tunnels to the other, and grimaced.

A soft scarf caught her eye next. But Mouse sometimes wore about five at once that looked as though Jamie had knitted them with her eyes closed while riding in the back of a subway car.

"Besides, I'm supposed to be trading, finding or making..." Catherine sighed as she moved on.

The toy section was too childish. The range of electronics made her hurry on by. As with all things decorative, Mouse collected junk, but *meaningful* junk.

She sighed. As she returned to the sidewalk. She breathed in the crisp December air. Lights glowed above her, strings of bulbs twinkling against the sky. Christmas music drifted from speakers. She loved this season. Loved the promise in it. Loved the warmth, the hope, the sense of something gathering.

She only wished she had something to bring back to the world Below besides chilled fingers and vague frustration. She turned down a quieter street. It was lined with small, independent shops. A little bell tinkled overhead as she stepped into one, the warmth of a log fire wrapping around her like a soft blanket. The sign outside had read *Old Manhattan Curiosities*.

She moved slowly among the shelves. There were wooden toys, brass spyglasses, delicate music boxes, and crystal bottles with swirling etchings. Everything had a story. It felt like a place Mouse would adore. Still, she didn't know what she sought that would allow her to trade, find or make.

Then she saw it. Tucked behind a stack of sepia maps, half-hidden: a small, intricate object resting on a velvet square.

She leaned closer. It was a pocket-sized kaleidoscope.

Not a cheap toy. Not the flimsy plastic kind she had seen in passing. This one was made of polished brass, hand-engraved with swirls and tiny starbursts. The glass at the end was clear and polished, and within, the shifting mosaic of coloured glass pieces rearranged themselves into fractal constellations.

A whole world of patterns, endlessly changing. Inventive, surprising, beautiful and somehow, Mouse.

Because no one else she knew would marvel at shifting colours like they were secret codes in a universe only he understood. No one else would treasure the mechanism as much as the spectacle. No one else would take it apart just to see how it worked. Then he'd put it back together with one new improvement.

Catherine ran a gloved finger gently down the kaleidoscope's polished barrel. "But my main problem remains. I cannot pay for it..." She frowned at the price on the swing tag.

The shopkeeper, an older woman with soft grey curls, approached. "Lovely, isn't it? Hand-crafted. Late nineteenth century. It only came in last week as part of a sea captain's estate."

Catherine nodded. "It's truly perfect," she murmured.

And for the first time, she meant it. She looked at the kindly lady and decided to confess all and see what arrangement she could come to with the shop owner.

"It is perfect," she repeated. "But it's to be a gift for my Secret Santa recipient, and I'm sworn not to buy anything. I must trade, find or make whatever I give."

The woman smiled at her. "An admirable thought for this season of excess. Too many people overspend at Christmas and repent in the New Year. How may I help you?"

Catherine relaxed a little. "Can we come to some kind of arrangement for it?" She pulled a business card from her purse and held it out. "I'm a lawyer, and I work for the D.A.'s office."

She raised her brows hopefully. "If you ever have any use for some legal work, I can do it for you, free of charge. Would that be a fair trade?"

The older woman considered her for a long moment. "Well..." she said finally. "My new landlord is something of a money-grubbing shark, and he's looking for some way to break my lease so he can double my rent. I can barely afford what I'm paying now."

Catherine nodded quickly. "Telephone me a time I need to be here, and I'll help you put your heartless landlord back in his place. You have my word on that."

The woman's eyes shone with gratitude. "My name is Helen Parks, and I'd be ever so grateful if you would do that for me. My husband died last year, and it's been such a struggle to keep the shop going. I love it here, and my customers."

"Consider it done, Helen. Call me when you need me." On impulse, Catherine gave the older woman a quick hug. "And, if you need anything at all, you will ring me. Promise?"

Helen pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her eyes. "Thank you, and I promise." She sniffed and nodded. "I would say we have just made a very good trade."

"I think we have, too."

They walked back to the counter, and Helen wrapped the instrument in brown paper and string. As Catherine tucked the small parcel inside her coat, she felt a warm rush of satisfaction.

She had found just the right gift and made a new friend. Her heart was lighter as she left the shop and hailed a passing cab to take her home.

Christmas Eve dawned cold and misty with the threat of more snow. Catherine was happy that it was on a Sunday and she still had two more days off. After a hectic Friday of hard work under Joe's close and beady eye, her boss finally conceded to the season and told everyone to go home early before he changed his mind.

"Thanks, Joe...", Catherine told him amid the scramble of workers to be the first through the swinging doors to freedom.

"I'll see you all back here, bright and early on Tuesday, or I'll want your resignation," he growled at her. "Merry Christmas."

Catherine smiled at him, even as she knew better than to stop to argue or complain. She grabbed her handbag and coat and ran for the doors.

She got out of bed at a leisurely pace and made herself a breakfast of coffee and hot buttered toast with peanut butter and jelly. Her father telephoned and wished her a Merry Christmas. They made a date to meet at Delmonico's for a festive lunch together the following day.

Catherine dropped the receiver back into its cradle and smiled. She hoped her Secret Santa idea had worked for those Below. There was only one way to find out.

She dressed warmly for the chill of the tunnels and hurried down to the sub-basement entrance to that secret world. Vincent was waiting for her.

His curiosity was gentle and immediate. "You found something," he said, nodding toward the tote bag she was holding.

Catherine nodded. "I did. It took all afternoon. But when I saw it, I knew."

Vincent offered her his arm, and they began to walk toward the home tunnels. "May I ask if it was a trade, a find, or did you make it?"

"Not yet," she teased. "Secrets, remember?"

"Ah, yes." He smiled. "Christmas secrets."

She moved closer, brushing a kiss against his cheek, feeling his warmth even through layers of their warm clothing. "I think Mouse will love it."

Vincent brushed her bangs with his lips. "He will treasure anything given to him with kindness."

"Thank you, Vincent."

Their hands brushed. Their thoughts brushed too, soft as snowfall.

And in that quiet, she wondered who he had drawn from the silk hat. Had he hoped for her, the way she had hoped for him?

But she didn't ask. Couldn't ask. Shouldn't ask. *'Christmas secrets, remember?'*

The home tunnels were alive with whispers, rustlings, and hurried footfalls throughout the tunnels. Everywhere Catherine went, someone was hiding something. Jamie carried a suspiciously lumpy parcel wrapped in patched fabric. Kipper clutched something behind his back and sprinted away when she smiled at him. Mary pretended not to notice a mysterious bundle tucked behind one of the tapestries.

Catherine loved the sense of anticipation that radiated through the world Below. Laughter echoed down chill stone passages. Distant carols drifted in from Above on the threads of chilly air, while lanterns glowed brighter as the time for giving came closer.

And Mouse was trying to be subtle. Trying, and failing spectacularly. Every time Catherine passed him, he jumped, spun around, or stuffed something into his pockets.

"No looking!" he kept insisting. "Secret! Very secret. Okay, good. Okay, fine."

"I'm not looking," she reassured him.

"You *were* looking. Maybe. Could be. Better not."

Catherine suspected the tinker had drawn William's name, judging by the smell of cinnamon and the fact that William had chased him out of the kitchen twice, yelling, "If you steal one more spice jar, Mouse, so help me!"

The time for exchanging the Secret Santa gifts finally arrived. Vincent walked with her to the dining hall, where everyone gathered around the makeshift Christmas tree. William and several children had constructed it from branches wired together and decorated with bits of ribbon, paper stars, and tiny lantern jars. It was beautiful, and the whole large room smelled of freshly cut pine.

Father cleared his throat. "Tonight," he announced. "For the first time in our community's history, we celebrate with what Catherine has kindly introduced to us. A Secret Santa gift exchange."

"A tradition," Mary said warmly. "That I believe we will keep for many years."

"Thank you..." Catherine felt a swell of warmth.

"We will go in pairs," Father continued. "To present our gifts. Jamie and Olivia have made a list, and we will go in their order."

Jamie clapped her hands. "Okay, everyone! First up tonight are Mouse and Catherine!"

Catherine blinked. "Both at once?"

"It feels... symbolic," Jamie said, biting back a grin.

Mouse bounded forward, carrying a package nearly as large as himself, wrapped in patched silk cloth and tied with rope. "Catherine first! Catherine first!"

Catherine placed her long brown-paper parcel on the table before Mouse. "This is for you. I traded my services as a lawyer for it."

Mouse stared at it, eyes widening. "Small." He poked it experimentally. "But small is not bad. Small could be good. Good small. Okay, good. Okay, fine."

Everyone chuckled.

"And this..." Mouse hefted his enormous bundle toward her. "... is for Catherine."

It nearly knocked her over. Vincent steadied her with one hand, his eyes sparkling.

Catherine took a breath. "Mouse, thank you." She had no idea he'd drawn her name from the hat.

"Open!" Mouse demanded. "Open *now!*"

"All right." She untied the rope, pulled back the patched cloth, and revealed a sculpture.

Or was it one of the tinker's inventions? She wasn't sure as a soft gasp went up around the room.

It was a small table with a carved wooden base, but atop it was perched a delicate arrangement of gears and pulleys supporting a miniature carousel. But instead of horses, seven tiny carved lions circled the platform, each unique, each painted with careful strokes.

Mouse leaned forward eagerly. "You like? Found bits. Traded for wood. Jamie carved three. I carved four. Brooke painted. Kipper sanded edges. Cullen let me use the workshop for five minutes only."

Catherine touched one of the tiny lions, her throat tightening. Each one reminded her of Vincent. Some fierce, some gentle. All beautiful.

"Mouse..." she breathed. "It's... It's extraordinary."

"Wind up," Mouse instructed.

She turned the small brass key. Slowly, gently, the carousel began to rotate. A faint, tinkling melody drifted out, soft, sweet and haunting.

"It plays music," she whispered.

"Found an old music box. Broken. Fixed. Better than before. Best for Catherine. Okay, good. Okay, fine."

Her eyes prickled with emotion. She looked at him with his earnest, hopeful, and beaming smile. She hugged him impulsively.

Mouse froze, then patted her back awkwardly, as though hugging were a curious but acceptable custom. "Good gift," he said. "Very good."

"And yours," she said, taking up her long parcel and offering it to him. "Is for you."

Mouse tore the paper immediately. Then stopped. His blue eyes widened.

"A tube," he said reverently, lifting the brass kaleidoscope. "Fancy tube. Pretty tube. I gave one like this to Father. But it wasn't one as fine..." He stroked the embossed brass with reverent fingers.

"It's a kaleidoscope," Catherine said softly. "Look through it."

The tinker raised it to one eye, and colours blossomed across his face. Tiny, fractured mosaics reflected in his eyes. "Stars," he whispered. "Inside tube. Little pieces. They move. Catherine! They move!"

He twisted it again and again, mesmerised. "Better than Father's! Must be careful. Very careful. Okay, good. Okay, fine."

"Mouse," Catherine said, laughing through her tears. "You don't have to take it apart."

Mouse blinked at her. "But... must know how. But will not break. Promise. Maybe. Probably."

Vincent stepped forward, placing a hand on Mouse's shoulder. "It is a gift, Mouse. Something to enjoy. Something to marvel at."

Mouse nodded slowly. "Yes. Marvel." Then he grinned. "Best Christmas. Best ever."

Catherine felt Vincent's gaze on her.

"You found the perfect thing," he murmured. "It was a good trade, indeed."

"I wasn't sure I could do it," she admitted quietly. "Mouse is not easy."

"You listened. You understood. You saw him as he is."

"And he saw me," she said, touching the carousel's wooden lions.

Vincent's voice softened. "He sees your kindness."

"And I see his caring heart."

They shared a long, warm silence as around them the gift exchange continued amid lots of laughter, pleasant surprises, along with delighted gasps.

When it was Vincent's turn later, Catherine clasped her hands nervously as he unwrapped a hand-stitched leather journal, its cover embossed with the image of a rose. Mary had drawn his name.

"A place," Mary said softly. "For your thoughts that are too beautiful to be spoken."

"Thank you, Mary." Vincent bowed his head, deeply moved.

Catherine's breath caught. He deserved such gifts. Such love.

And though she had not drawn him, she walked to his side, touched his hand, and whispered, "It suits you."

"Perhaps," he whispered back. "I will write something... for you."

Her heart fluttered like a candle's flame.

Christmas Eve had been a sweet success, wrapped in lantern-glow and the hum of pipes carrying distant carols through stone corridors. It was past midnight before the party broke up, and everyone retired to bed. The carousel spun quietly in Catherine's guest chamber that night. Its little lions circling in a dance of gentle determination.

And somewhere in the tunnels, Mouse marvelled at a swirling tapestry of colours inside a brass kaleidoscope. Colours that lit his imagination like distant, impossible stars.

The next morning, Catherine visited Vincent's chamber before she needed to return Above to keep her date with her father.

Vincent stood at his desk, writing. He closed the journal as she entered. "Something for Mary?" Catherine asked.

"No," he said softly. "Something for you."

She felt her breath catch. "You don't have to—"

"I did not draw your name," he said. "But some gifts... are not bound to tradition."

He handed her a folded page. Catherine opened it, and her eyes skimmed his graceful handwriting. It was a poem.

Soft as snowfall. Deep as the tunnels. Warm as his hand brushing hers. When she finished reading, she looked up, eyes full.

"Vincent," she whispered. "It's beautiful..."

"For you," he murmured. "Always..."

She stepped into him, wrapped in his warmth, his presence, the promise of another Christmas, another year, another moment held in the fragile, beautiful space between worlds.

And deep in the tunnels, Mouse's delighted voice echoed, "Look! Colours! Moving colours! Best gift! Okay, good! Okay, fine!"

Catherine laughed against Vincent's shoulder. It was a very good Christmas indeed.

Snow had begun to fall again by the time Catherine emerged onto her balcony as Christmas Day ticked slowly toward midnight. The city beyond lay softened under its drifting veil. Rooftops blurred, lights smudged into a glow, and the traffic noise was muted beneath the hush of winter.

She wrapped her white winter coat a little tighter, though the cold didn't bite as sharply as it sometimes did. Her heart was too warm for that. The carousel Mouse had made for her still played faintly in her memory, its haunting little melody echoing somewhere behind her ribs. And Vincent's poem... she could still feel the weight of the page in her hand, the tenderness behind each word.

A faint stir of air touched her, lighter than the snow. She turned.

Vincent stood just at the threshold, the shadows parting for him as if welcoming him in. Snow dusted his cloak and hair, melting slowly in the warmth of the lantern glow spilling from her apartment. He inclined his head, a familiar bow that always made something in her chest tighten.

"Vincent," she whispered, stepping toward him. "You came."

"I hoped," he said quietly. "That you might still be awake."

"I dined with my father, and we had a good time." She smiled, brushing snowflakes from his cloak.

"But I was hoping the same about you."

He stepped onto the balcony with a careful movement, always gentle, always mindful of the fragility of the world Above. The city winds curled around him, as though they too recognised his presence.

"Did you... write more?" she teased softly.

"Only one poem," he said, and his voice dropped into that deep, velvet timbre that always sounded like starlight and stone and something unspoken. "For now."

“For me?”

“For the moment,” he corrected gently. “Moments with you often become... poetry.” A pause. “I do not always know how else to hold them.”

Her breath caught. The snow drifted between them, soft as falling feathers.

“Last night was beautiful,” she said. “Everyone was so happy. Mouse especially.”

“He has not let go of that kaleidoscope since you gave it to him.”

Catherine laughed softly. “I’m afraid he’s going to take it apart.”

“Oh, he will,” Vincent said with a hint of amusement. “But he will put it back together more wondrous than before. Your gift was... perfect for him.”

“And yours,” she murmured. “It was perfect for me.”

He looked down, the edges of his mane brushing his cheeks. “I only wished to give voice to what your presence brings to my world. Words are all I have.”

“They’re more than enough.”

Her gloved hand reached for his, soft leather brushing across his flesh. He hesitated only a heartbeat before taking it. Snow whispered over their joined hands.

Below them, the city thrummed faintly. Sirens sounded while distant horns blared. A burst of laughter, and yet somehow it all seemed far away. Here, on this balcony, the world balanced gently between Above and Below, between what was possible and what was hoped for.

“You seemed thoughtful earlier,” Vincent said, watching her with those impossibly blue, tender eyes. “When the gifts were exchanged. Were you... disappointed you did not draw my name?”

She touched his cheek. “I would have loved to. But I got something better.”

His brow furrowed. “Better?”

She stepped closer, so close she felt the warm curl of his breath in the cold. “I got the chance to give someone something they’d truly cherish. Something that made his world feel bigger. That felt right.”

“And my gift to you?” Vincent asked softly. “Did it feel... right?”

Her heartbeat fluttered like the wings of a winter bird. “It felt like you,” she whispered. “Every line. Every word. Truthful. Gentle. Strong.” She slipped her free hand to the edge of his cloak.

“Beautiful.”

Vincent closed his eyes for a moment, overwhelmed in that quiet way she knew so well. Emotions held with care, reverence, and humility. When he opened them again, the city lights reflected in their depths like constellations.

“I wondered,” he said. “As I wrote... how much one heart may give before it breaks. How much beauty one soul may hold before it aches. These questions, we live them, Catherine.”

His voice trembled faintly with meaning. “And yet you give me the courage to write them. To feel them.”

Her own eyes warmed. “And you give me courage to dream.”

A gust of wind drifted across the balcony, stirring her hair. Vincent lifted a hand and touched the loose strand that brushed her cheek. He didn’t tuck it back. He simply held it between his fingers as though holding a fragile truth.

“My Catherine,” he breathed.

Her soul melted at the sound of those words. "Vincent..." She leaned closer.

The world outside fell further into hush, the snowfall thickening into a luminous drift. Catherine stepped close enough that her forehead nearly brushed his chest. Vincent's cloak enveloped her in warm shadow, smelling faintly of candlewax, parchment, and the clean cold of the tunnels.

She felt his heartbeat. It was slow and steady like a deep winter drum.

"If I could," she whispered. "I'd spend every Christmas like this. In this moment."

Vincent bowed his head, his breath stirring her hair. "And every moment after?"

"If you wished," she murmured.

The wind stilled. Time listened.

Vincent's arms rose with infinite care, enveloping her. She slid easily into his embrace, her cheek resting against the warm rise of his chest. Snow kissed her eyelashes.

"I wish," he said softly. "For moments. Many moments. As many as this world will allow... with you."

She held him tighter.

His cloak wrapped around them both, the city lights glowing like a distant hearth. Snow flurried around them, luminous, gentle, as though blessing the closeness neither dared name but both lived in every glance, every touch, every breath.

"Vincent?" she whispered into the quiet.

"Yes..."

"Read your poem to me. One more time."

His breath trembled. Then he drew her closer, his voice low and warm as he recited the words he had written. Words meant for her alone, words that wrapped around her heart like winter light.

When he finished, Catherine lifted her face. He touched her cheek with the backs of his fingers, tender and loving. She brushed a soft kiss across his palm.

And in the quiet, under the falling snow, a promise passed between them. It was unspoken, undeniable, and bright as the city lights reflected in the winter darkness.

A promise of more nights. More moments. More beginnings. Together...

Chapter Three

Vincent Discovers Christmas

December in the world Above meant rushing feet, bright windows, and breath that rose like small, momentary ghosts. Below, it meant something quieter, something warmer. A world of candles, of woollen scarves hanging to dry by the great pipes, of whispered plans and secret gifts wrapped in scrap paper and string.

It was the week before Christmas, and the tunnels hummed with a kind of mounting excitement that even the youngest children felt. But one quiet, thoughtful child was almost three. He possessed spiky tufts of golden hair, more fluff than substance, and solemn, luminous blue eyes. He watched

all the activity and wondered. He began to sense that something mysterious and slightly puzzling was going on, something he must try to understand.

Vincent hurried after Mary, who was carrying a basket of knitted goods she'd made to give away as gifts. His warm boots pattered softly over the stone floor.

"Careful how you go, little one," Mary murmured without turning. She always knew exactly where he was. "You should always walk, not run."

"I'm not running," Vincent replied in his small, breathy voice.

They entered the warmth of the dining chamber. The smell of fresh-baked bread and the sound of communal laughter reached out to him. The warm glow of lantern-light painted the stone walls a golden hue. Vincent stopped within the wide archway and inhaled deeply.

"Something smells... beautiful," he whispered, tasting the word with fascination.

"It's William's spiced ginger biscuits," Mary replied, as she settled at the nearest table. "He makes them every year for us."

Vincent's eyes widened. "For... for Christmas?"

"For everyone," she said. "Sharing is part of the celebration."

Vincent considered this with the exaggerated seriousness only toddlers possessed. He looked at his own small, furred hands, flexing them carefully, as if wondering whether he too could make something worth sharing.

Mary saw the thought flicker across his face and softened. "Even you share, Vincent."

"I do?" he asked eagerly.

"You share kindness and love," she said, tapping the tip of his unique nose with her forefinger. "And your smile, which is a gift all on its own."

Vincent blinked, surprised to learn this. Then shy delight warmed his cheeks.

"Is that really what Christmas is?" he asked in a hush, as though afraid of breaking something delicate.

"It's only the beginning," Mary said. "It's the season for giving and receiving the best of yourself and everyone. It's about being kind to everyone you know."

She gave him a quick hug. "And Santa Claus always knows if the children have been naughty or nice. So you had better be on your best behaviour."

"Oh..." Vincent looked toward the glowing hall again.

For the first time he felt the stirrings of awareness. He felt as though something wonderful was waiting for him. And he wanted to know everything about it.

That evening, Father lit the last Christmas of the candles in the dining chamber. The flame glowed softly and reflected in Vincent's enormous blue eyes, as he sat beside his adopted parent.

Father looked down and noticed the quiet intensity on the child's face. "My boy," he said gently. "You look as though you're thinking very hard. That's a little unusual for someone your age."

Vincent blinked slowly. "Mary says Christmas is... being kind to everyone."

“Yes,” Father said, smiling behind his beard. “It is. Soon all of us will celebrate —songs, warmth, our gathering in the Great Hall.”

Vincent nodded solemnly. “But... Father?”

“Yes, Vincent?”

He leaned close, lowering his voice as if revealing a great secret. “How... does Santa Claus come down here?”

Father’s eyebrows rose. There were many questions that Vincent constantly asked with the boundless curiosity of the very young. But this one held a special tremor, as if it mattered very much.

“Well,” Father began, shifting slightly on his seat. “That is something many children wonder.”

Vincent’s ears pricked. “But... nobody *knows*.”

“Perhaps not *exactly*,” Father conceded. “But we have our theories.”

Vincent frowned. “If he lives Above... How does he find all of us Below?”

Father opened his mouth and then closed it. He had prepared explanations about snow, reindeer, and chimneys. All the things Vincent had only seen in picture books. But chimneys were scarce in the tunnels. Reindeer did not trot their hooves along stone corridors and tunnels.

And Vincent was not like other children. He deserved an answer that felt true.

So Father cleared his throat, folded his hands carefully, and said, “Well... we believe Santa comes wherever love lives.”

Vincent blinked. “Love?”

“Yes. Love guides him. The same way candles guide us through the passageways. The same way your heart knows ours.”

Vincent’s small hand found Father’s sleeve. “But is that enough? It’s so dark down here.”

Father touched the child’s cheek tenderly. “He will find you, Vincent. Without fail.”

“How?” Vincent pressed.

Father considered, then leaned very close. “Because we tell him.”

“You... talk to him?” Vincent whispered in awe.

“Every year,” Father said gravely. “We send word Above. Sometimes through helpers. Sometimes through letters. Sometimes through the winds that travel down the old shafts.”

Vincent looked upward instinctively, toward the timbers darkened by time. “At night?”

“On Christmas Eve,” Father said. “He listens. And he always comes.”

Vincent pondered this with all the seriousness a little lion-boy could muster. Very slowly, he nodded. “I want him to find all of us,” he murmured.

Father settled an arm around him. “He will.”

But Vincent was not finished. He climbed into Father’s lap, pressed close, and whispered, “Will he bring something for everyone?”

Father smiled gently. “Yes. Everyone.”

Vincent relaxed at last, lulled by the soft halo of candlelight and Father’s quiet heartbeat. But the question stayed with him. And he intended to make certain Santa found his way. No matter what...

Vincent awoke the next morning with a mission. He swung his little feet over the side of his wide bed, and hurried to put on the small hooded cloak that Mary had sewn for him. It trailed behind him like a cape as he padded along the corridor.

He found Pascal Senior at the pipe chamber, tapping messages with his usual precision. Vincent tugged on his sleeve.

"Yes? Oh, good morning, Vincent!" Pascal said warmly. "Up early, aren't you?"

"I have a message," Vincent declared.

Pascal smiled. "Very well. Who is it for?"

Vincent took a breath, straightened importantly, and said, "Santa."

Pascal blinked. "Ah..."

"Father says that you can send messages anywhere," Vincent said softly. "Even to the North Pole."

Pascal puffed up a little, pleased. "Well, perhaps I *can*. One never knows where our sounds travel."

"Will you send one for me?" Vincent asked, earnest eyes shining.

"I might..." Pascal considered him. "What's the message?"

Vincent thought a moment. Then, he said, "Please come. We live Below. It's dark, but we have candles. And we're good. Love, Vincent."

Pascal swallowed the lump in his throat. "That," he said. "Is a perfect message."

He tapped it onto the pipes. It was a soft, slow, secret rhythm meant only for the ears of magic, and Vincent stood on tiptoe, listening with reverence, as if expecting sleigh bells in reply.

When Pascal finished, Vincent let out a relieved sigh. "Now he will know," he whispered.

"Yes," Pascal said. "He will."

But Vincent wasn't done. He went next to the dining room, where Rebecca and the older children were sorting candles and making decorations.

He tugged Rebecca's hand. "We need more candles."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"For Santa," Vincent said gravely. "So he can see. It's dark."

Rebecca's eyes softened. "Then we should help him, shouldn't we?"

Within minutes, she had set aside a small box. "These," she told him. "Are special ones. Beeswax. They burn bright and steady."

Vincent touched the smooth wax reverently. "Can I carry them?"

"Of course." The girl knelt to eye level. "Where will you put them?"

Vincent considered. "At the top tunnels. Near the windy places."

Rebecca smiled. "That's a very clever idea."

So Vincent, assisted by Rebecca and two older Tunnel children, placed candles at key junctions. By the old iron gate and the echoing junction where drafts whispered through cracked bricks. Then, near the abandoned storm drain that Father said once connected to the world Above.

By midday, the tunnels glowed like a secret night sky. Vincent beamed. Surely Santa would not get lost now.

But later that day, Vincent discovered something else about Christmas. People made gifts. Real gifts. With their hands.

He watched as Samantha and Kipper painted wooden toys. As Rebecca wrapped the soaps she had made from lavender. Mary had stitched yet another scarf for someone cold and in need.

Vincent felt suddenly shy. He, too, wanted to give something.

But his hands were small and didn't always obey him. And he did not know how to sew or carve or paint. He sat on the stone bench in the nursery, shoulders slumping, claws curling unhappily.

Olivia found him like that. "What troubles you, sweetheart?" she asked, brushing his mane gently.

"I can't make anything," Vincent whispered.

"Of course you can."

He shook his head. "Not like the others."

Olivia thought for a moment, then smiled. "Come with me."

She led him to Father's study. It was quiet, warm and lined with books. She pulled out a stack of thick paper and a bundle of felt pens.

"You know how to draw," she said. "I've seen your little suns and tunnels and cats."

Vincent's wondering blue eyes warmed. "They're not good."

"They're *yours*," Olivia said. "And that makes them special."

Vincent looked at the many coloured pens. "Can I make a gift?"

"You can make anything you wish."

Slowly, Vincent chose a dark blue coloured pen. It reminded him of the night sky he'd only seen in pictures. He began to draw very carefully, with his tongue poking slightly from the corner of his mouth.

He drew a great round moon. Then small houses. Then candles. Then tunnels—his tunnels—warm and safe beneath it all.

Olivia fetched her knitting and sat to watch him as he worked. It was simple. It was childlike. And yet something about it was unmistakably Vincent. A feeling of shelter and wonder, of quiet light in darkness.

When he finished, he held it up timidly. "For Christmas," he said. "For Santa."

"It's beautiful," Olivia whispered, hugging him. "Truly."

"Do you think...Santa will like it?" he asked shyly.

Olivia's heart melted entirely. "Oh, Vincent. He will treasure it."

"I hope so..." Vincent's expression shone with quiet pride.

Christmas Eve came with a hush.

The tunnels were brighter than ever, their candles flickering in golden rows. The scent of William's cooking drifted everywhere. Roasted vegetables, warm bread and lots of cinnamon.

Vincent wore a small knitted vest Mary had saved just for this night, and he clutched the drawing wrapped in brown paper and tied with red yarn.

"Do you think he'll come?" Vincent asked Father for the fifteenth time as they walked toward the Great Hall.

"Yes," Father said patiently.

"Do you promise?"

"I do."

"Even though we're Below?"

Father knelt and took his shoulders gently. "Vincent... Magic does not stop because of stone. It simply finds another way to reach us."

"Okay..." Vincent breathed out, long and slow, letting those words settle into him like warmth.

The Great Hall glowed with hundreds of floating lights shaped from tin reflectors and candles. The community gathered around long tables, exchanging secret glances and smiles. Babies fussed softly, while the older children whispered behind cupped hands. It was a night of expectation.

Vincent climbed onto Father's lap during the storytelling. He listened to Father's voice recount tales of light in the darkest seasons. Stories of hope, kindness, and unexpected gifts. Each word wound around Vincent like a blanket.

He felt safe. He felt loved. And yet... He kept glancing toward the high ceiling that disappeared into whispering shadows. He was expecting a jolly red figure to appear at any moment.

After the feast came the carols. The voices were soft and carried by echoes. Vincent hummed along, leaning back against Father's chest. He tried to stay awake to see the next day in, but it was a battle he slowly lost.

As the hour grew late, his eyelids grew more and more heavy. "Father... Can we go back to the home tunnels now, please?" he whispered. "I'm tired."

Father gathered him gently. "Of course, we can."

They walked quietly back through the tunnels, past the candles Vincent had placed earlier. Their flames danced as if in farewell.

"Do you think that maybe he's already been?" Vincent murmured sleepily.

"Perhaps," Father said, smoothing his tufts of unruly mane. "But, even if not, he will come when you're asleep."

Vincent nodded, trusting that to be the truth. He curled up in his bed, still clutching his drawing.

The candle by his bedside flickered and danced. He watched them until sleep finally overcame him.

As the inhabitants retired to bed, the tunnels grew silent. Very few walked at this hour. The sentries were stationed at distant posts, keeping watch. Pascal Senior was also asleep. He'd allowed his young son, Pascal Jr, to monitor the messages in the pipe chamber. Under strict instructions, he was to alert his parent the moment any danger alert was sent out.

But, in one remote passage, where the old bricks touched a forgotten shaft leading far upward, a cold breeze slipped through the cracks.

And with it came the faintest sound. Not quite bells. Not quite wind.

Something between. Something soft and impossibly distant.

In Father's chamber, something stirred him from sleep. He lit a candle and stepped into the corridor.

There, by the arch where Vincent had placed his brightest beeswax candle, lay something new. A small bundle that was wrapped in red cloth.

Father looked all around but saw nothing but shadows. He crouched and lifted the bundle. He carried it back into his chamber and opened it on the table where he was teaching Vincent to play chess.

Inside the bundle was a tiny wooden horse, carved with exquisite care. And beside it, a small bell stamped with a snowflake. Father's breath caught.

He looked upward. "Magic finds a way," he whispered.

He carried the treasures to Vincent's chamber. The child was fast asleep, with his cheek pillowed on the back of one hand. Father placed the gift on the bedside table beside the drawing.

Then he paused. The bell had sounded a single, clear chime.

Father smiled as he wrapped the parcel again and secured it with the red string. And left it at that. Tomorrow, he would return to watch his small, adopted son open it with all the wonder of childhood and a belief in Santa.

Vincent woke with a gasp. He sat up, mane tousled wildly, and eyes enormous.

Father was waiting in the doorway. "Come," he said softly. "I believe someone has left you something."

"Where is it?" Vincent tumbled from bed, almost tripping in his excitement, and scurried to the little table.

He froze and stared at the wrapped gift. He swallowed tightly before he untied the red string that held it together. He admired the small wooden horse without touching it. Then he saw the shining bell.

His breath hitched. "He... he found us."

"He did," Father said warmly.

Vincent picked up the wooden horse reverently, tracing the carved mane with his tiny claws. "It looks like me," he whispered.

"Yes," Father said, pride and tenderness thick in his voice. "It does."

Then Vincent lifted the bell, and it chimed, bright and pure.

His eyes filled with wonder. "Father?" he whispered. "Did Santa come *into the tunnels*?"

Father knelt, resting his hands gently on Vincent's shoulders. "I believe," he said. "That he goes wherever a child waits with hope."

Vincent leaned into him, overwhelmed. Then he took his rolled drawing and held it up. "This was for him," he said. "But... but he left before I could give it."

Father smiled softly. "You can still give it."

"How?"

"By keeping it. By remembering tonight. By sharing it with those who love you. That is a gift Santa would be proud of."

Vincent considered this. Slowly, he nodded.

Then he picked up the wooden horse and held it close. He whispered, "Thank you, Santa."

The words carried softly into the candlelit room. And perhaps... just perhaps... they were heard.

Later, Vincent carried his new wooden horse through the tunnels, showing it proudly to Mary, to Pascal and his young son, and to Rebecca. Each one marvelled over it, and each one also hugged him.

And everywhere he went, candles flickered warmly. The candles he had placed, the candles made for Christmas and the candles of community and love.

The tunnels felt brighter that day. Not because of wax and flame. But because a small boy now believed something wonderful. That magic could find him. Even Below.

As the day wound down, Vincent sat beside Father before the fire, wooden horse in his lap.

"Father?" he said, voice soft with sleepy wonder.

"Yes, my boy?"

"Is this... Christmas?"

Father stroked his mane. "Yes, Vincent. This is Christmas."

Vincent leaned against him with a contented sigh. "I like it," he murmured. "Can it come every year?"

Father smiled, eyes glistening. "Yes," he said. "Every year. One day, you may find someone you will love as much as we love you now."

"I would like that..." Vincent nodded... and drifted into a peaceful sleep, wrapped in warmth, love, and the first spark of a tradition that would shape his heart forever.

The tunnels glowed softly. And Christmas... the real Christmas... had truly come Below because one small, blue-eyed and unusual boy dared to believe...

Chapter Four

The Winter's Tree

The heavier snows of the darkening New York winter began to fall the week before Christmas. The drifting flakes of cold were quiet and unannounced, soft as a held breath.

Young Catherine Chandler stood at the window of her family's apartment on Park Avenue and watched the snow gather on the ledges and the bare branches of the trees far below. She felt sorry for all the birds, who looked cold and defenceless.

She pressed her forehead against the cold glass. She was ten years old and had learned, in the months since her mother's death, that winter could arrive without warning and stay as long as it pleased. Like the pain of loss buried deep within her sorrowing heart.

Behind her, the large apartment was too tidy and silent. Her father had been organising things again. He was trying to look as if he was too busy to notice the absence of sound.

Catherine knew the signs. The cushions were arranged just so with the books lined up on the coffee table instead of scattered where her mother used to leave them, open and face-down, as though interrupted mid-thought. The faint smell of furniture polish lingered in the air, sharp and false, like something pretending to be comfort.

Cathleen Chandler had always played music. Especially around Christmastime. She loved the holidays and had laughed and sung a lot. Her warm, physical presence in the apartment had always made Catherine feel safe. She missed her mother's snuggle hugs more than anything.

"Cathy...", Charles called softly from the open doorway. "It's cold today. You need to go back to your bedroom and get dressed. That nightgown won't keep you warm."

She did not turn. "It's Christmas Eve," she said in a defiant tone.

Her father smiled at the back of her head, though his eyes were tired. "That's not a reason to stay as you are."

She considered this, then said, "If I get dressed, as you say, then I want to go down to the park." She pointed down at the vastness of the park below. "The snow has stopped and the sun will come out."

Her father's smile faded. Central Park had become dangerous in his imagination since summer ended. There would be icy paths, bare branches and shadows that stretched too long, too early in the afternoon. And Catherine, who had always climbed trees as though born to them, now seemed heartbreakingly fragile to him, as though grief itself might make her slip and fall.

"There's still lots of snow," he said. "We can go back there in the spring. Promise..." He made a cross with one finger over his heart.

"That's why I want to go *now*," she replied, finally turning to face him. Her eyes were too serious for ten. They had been since the spring. "Mum loved snow. She loved making angels in it."

Charles swallowed. "She also liked to keep you safe. Now that's my job."

Catherine lifted her chin, a familiar gesture already forming, stubbornness inherited whole. "She liked me happy too."

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Snow thickened beyond the glass, turning the city soft and indistinct. Charles saw, with painful clarity, that refusing her would not protect her from loss. It would only add another small grief to the pile she was already carrying.

"All right," he said at last. "We'll go after lunch when it's warmer. But just for a little while. And *no* climbing any trees."

She grinned, bright and sudden, like sunlight breaking through clouds. "Okay, I promise."

"I'll give you a treat if you're good," her father promised as an extra caution for her to follow his wishes.

By the time they drove into the park, the snow had settled into something deep and forgiving. It muffled sound, softened edges, turned the world into a place that felt briefly new.

As soon as her father cut the car's engine, Catherine jumped out and ran ahead. Her thick winter boots crunched on the snow, and her breath puffed white clouds of steam in the air.

"*Cathy!* Please, don't go up too far!" Charles called, struggling to keep up, his boots sinking deeper into the snow than hers.

She laughed and spun, arms outstretched, letting the snow dust her coat. For the first time in months, her laughter sounded like itself, unshadowed, unguarded.

Charles stood still for a moment and simply watched her. The ache in his chest loosened slightly. Perhaps this had been the right decision after all.

She led him to one of her favourite trees, an old oak with branches that reached outward as if inviting the world closer. In summer, she had climbed it effortlessly, vanishing into its green leaves and bright sunlight. Now it stood bare, its limbs etched dark against the pale sky.

"I used to sit up there," she said, pointing. "Mum could always see me from the bench."

Charles looked up, heart tightening. "You won't go that high today."

"All right." Catherine frowned. "Just a little way up. I won't go too high."

Her father hesitated. Every instinct screamed '*no!*' And yet, this was a memory she was reaching for, a thread connecting before and after. He saw that now.

"Ten minutes," he said finally. "And I stay right here to catch you if you fall."

"But, I won't," she replied solemnly, already moving.

She climbed carefully, snow dusting down around her, her gloved hands clinging to the branches. Charles stood below, tense as a coiled wire, eyes never leaving her. When she settled onto a low branch and looked out over the park, her face softened into something like peace.

"I can see everything from here," she said quietly.

Charles said nothing. He watched her breathe. He watched the snow start to fall again.

They stayed longer than he intended. The light shifted, afternoon edging towards evening, the cold sharpening. At last, his worry outweighed his resolve.

"All right," he called. "It's time to come down now. For my sake."

His daughter sighed but obeyed, brushing snow from her coat when she reached the ground. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright.

"You were good," he said, relief flooding his voice. "Very good."

She smiled up at him. "Do I get my treat?"

He laughed, the sound rusty but real. "Yes. I think you deserve a hot chocolate with extra marshmallows."

Her eyes widened. "Really?"

"Really."

They walked back towards the car. Catherine skipped ahead, then suddenly stopped.

"Daddy, wait..."

Before he could ask why, she dropped to the snow at the edge of the roadway and flung her arms wide, moving them in and out. She lay there for a moment, staring up at the falling flakes, breath steady, eyes shining.

Charles watched, smiling despite himself. "Come on, puss. Time to go home."

“Okay, Dad...” She stood, brushing herself off, leaving behind the perfect shape of a snow angel.

“That’s for Mum,” she said simply. “I want her to see it.”

Charles said nothing. He took her hand and led her to the car. They drove away, unaware of the boy who had been watching from the shadows beneath the trees.

Vincent waited until the sound of the engine faded. He was young, long-limbed and deeply curious about the world Above. He was given to scaring his adopted father with tales of his various adventures in that world.

He smiled as he moved slowly now, as though afraid the moment might break if he hurried. He knelt beside the imprint in the snow, then lay down within it, fitting himself to its smaller shape. It still held a small warmth.

He stared up at the grey winter sky and wondered what it must be like to belong to a world where angels were made openly, where grief could be shared instead of hidden, where Christmas meant warmth and promises kept.

He got up and stayed there until the snow began to fill the shape again, erasing it gently, as though it had never been. He sighed as he turned away and walked back to the drainage tunnel that led to his hidden home.

Christmas morning arrived pale and cold. Catherine woke before dawn, the way she always had, but the excitement that usually carried her out of bed hovered uncertainly now, as though it were waiting for permission. She lay still, listening to the city beyond the windows, to the distant hush of traffic softened by snow.

Excitement finally got her out of her warm cocoon. She slipped quietly from her bedroom and padded into the living room. The tree stood in the corner, large and carefully decorated with expensive, antique ornaments that were to be looked at but not touched. Any breakage was treated as a family disaster.

Her mother had always hung them there. They were her cherished heirlooms. Now Charles had arranged the ornaments this year, each one placed with a deliberate gentleness, as though he were afraid they might break simply from being remembered. He took extra care and only seemed to breathe once he was done.

Catherine dropped to sit cross-legged on the rug, as she studied the presents beneath the branches. There were as many as before. But there were no brightly-wrapped parcels bearing her mother’s looping handwriting. No ribbon-tied surprises hidden behind furniture.

She traced a finger over a small package labelled *For Cathy* and felt the familiar ache bloom behind her ribs. “I miss you, Mum...”

“Morning, puss,” her father’s voice came softly.

She turned to see Charles standing in the doorway, tie already knotted, hair neatly combed. He looked older than he had a year ago. Not dramatically, just enough that she noticed.

“Merry Christmas, Dad,” she said and gave him her best smile.

He crossed the room and sat beside her. “Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”

They opened the presents together, one by one, speaking more than necessary, filling the space with sound. A book. A scarf. New gloves for winter climbing, though neither of them said that aloud. Gifts from aunts and uncles and school friends who still had mothers to care for them. Catherine tried not to feel jealous.

When it was done, Catherine leaned against her father's chest with her head tucked beneath his chin. "Daddy?"

"Yes, puss?"

"Is Mum an angel?"

He closed his eyes. "I think... I think she might just be."

"I'm glad..." Catherine nodded, satisfied.

She pictured the snow angel she had made the day before, imagined it still there somehow, untouched. It helped to ease the pain in her young heart.

Vincent watched that Christmas unfold in the tunnels. There was the usual gathering in the dining hall. There were candles, lots of laughter, many stories, and the sharing of food scavenged and saved. Someone sang, softly, an old carol whose words Vincent half remembered from another life, one that belonged to books and voices overheard rather than experienced.

He listened, but his thoughts drifted upward, to the world above the snow. He thought of the girl in the park, her careful climbing, the way her father's worry had wrapped around her like another coat. He had seen joy there, and sorrow, standing side by side without flinching. It had stayed with him, that image, long after the snow angel itself had vanished.

Later, when he was alone in his chamber, Vincent found a large piece of paper and a stick of charcoal. He drew the shape from memory and the face of the girl. Her outstretched arms and the sense of openness. It was delicately rendered, and he took his time finishing it. Then, he stowed it away in the bottom drawer of his large armoire, where he kept all the precious things for the sweet memories they gave him.

Thirty years later:

Time passed the way it always did. Quietly, steadily, layering memory upon memory. Father had always said there was nothing as constant as change.

Catherine grew up and became a lawyer like her father. She climbed fewer trees but never lost the instinct entirely. Winters came and went, each Christmas gentler than the last, though the absence never truly faded. Her father learned how to let joy return without guilt, how to speak her mother's name without flinching.

Vincent grew, too, though in different ways. He learned to move unseen, to listen more than he spoke. He learned that the world Above could be cruel, but also kind, in brief, shining moments.

His beloved Catherine changed with the years. Her love watched her become true to herself as she blossomed into her new life as his wife and the loving mother of their four wonderful children. He loved her as a caring and compassionate woman who was always stubbornly hopeful.

Whenever Vincent walked through the park, he never forgot the little girl and her snow angel. He had often made them himself when he was alone and unseen. It gave him a tenuous connection with a sweet moment from his lonely childhood.

Snow fell again on Christmas Eve. It dusted the rooftops of the city and softened the edges of the world, just as it had long ago. Tucked away inside their hidden home, the people of the tunnels enjoyed the warmth that glowed from the entrance to every rock-carved chamber. Lamplight and

laughter gave the hum to lives lived fully and joyfully. The season was easier now than it had been before Vincent brought a wounded and dying Catherine to their world.

The helpers Above were many and dedicated. Charles Chandler was one of them, and he took his daughter's unusual family to heart. His grandchildren were a constant source of delight.

It was early evening, and Catherine was seated in her husband's great chair beside the cheery brazier fire. She was looking down at a ragged piece of paper someone had torn from a journal long ago.

Around her, the home tunnels breathed with the quiet chaos of family and friends. Jacob's laughter echoed from the tunnel outside as he walked with those of his age. Her twins, Mary and Cathleen, were huddled together on their parents' bed, whispering fiercely over something important and secret. Teenage Vincent lounged near the doorway, pretending not to listen while listening to everything. He looked like a coiled spring, waiting to run down to the dining hall and the promised gifts and hearty meal.

Catherine's husband was seated, cross-legged, on the thick floor rug beside her chair. "It will soon be time to go." He raised one hand to caress her cheek. "Father is waiting to begin the ceremony. You know how impatient he gets when people are tardy."

"I know..." Catherine indicated the old drawing that she had found in the bottom drawer of the armoire. It had been buried beneath many curious treasures. "You never told me about this one before," she said softly.

He turned his head slightly. "It's an old story. I'd forgotten all about it until you found the drawing."

She smiled. "Those are the best stories. Tell me now, please."

He considered her request and then nodded. "When I was very young," he began, his voice low and steady. "I watched a little girl make a snow angel in Central Park. She lay down without hesitation, as though the cold didn't matter. As though the world were safe enough to claim, even for a moment."

Catherine stilled. She watched his unique mouth shape the story from her youth and wondered. *'Could it be?'*

"She left the shape behind in the snow," he continued. "And when she was gone, I crept out of hiding and took her place. I lay there and wondered what kind of life could make someone so brave. So... open to the earth and sky."

"Oh, Vincent..." Catherine's breath caught. Memory surged, sudden and vivid. The tree she'd climbed, the snow and her father's hand in hers.

"That was me," she whispered. "I always wanted to climb trees and make snow angels. My mother had died that year, and I felt so lost. It was my way of connecting with her again."

Vincent looked at her fully now, blue eyes intent, searching. "I know that now."

The room seemed to hush around them.

"I realised it years later," he said. "But tonight, it finally felt right to say it aloud."

Catherine reached for his hand, lacing her fingers through his. She smiled, eyes bright with unshed tears.

"I always thought Mum sent that angel," she said. "I didn't know she sent you too."

He leaned closer, resting his forehead against hers. "Perhaps she did." He kissed the tip of her nose, then her mouth with slow deliberation.

Across the room, their children watched without quite understanding, sensing only that something gentle and important was unfolding. Snow continued to fall beyond the shelter of the tunnels, soft and endless. There would be more snow angels to make whenever they ventured Above to visit their grandfather or just to run in the snow.

Outside, somewhere unseen, the city remembered the shape of an angel pressed into winter's cold ground. A shape made once by a grieving child, held for a breathless moment by a lonely boy, and carried forward into a loving life freely shared in darkness and in the light.

END