



A Rose by Any Other Name...

Juggling her briefcase and a precarious stack of files, Catherine pushed her way backwards through the swinging doors leading into the frantic chaos that was the D.A.'s office bullpen. Unavoidably delayed by yet another annoying continuance in the frustratingly complicated Burns fraud and extortion case, her nerves were frayed, pushing her way past the boiling point. Burns' expensive and devious legal team was surely headed for the record! Joe wasn't going to be pleased.

"That makes two of us." Catherine shrugged. But there wasn't much more she could do about that. More importantly right now, she had missed lunch...again! Her stomach growled in honest protest, but she determined to ignore it. She cast a longing glance at the coffee machine as she hurried across the outer office. She saw a lopsidedly crude cardboard sign depicting a stick man pointing a shotgun at it advertised the irritating fact that the hated machine had given up the ghost for the fifth time this week. She grimaced. It was like there was something dark and malevolent living within the coffee machine that knew just when she was dying for anything that could pass for caffeine. And now Catherine didn't even have time to order takeout. Fuming inwardly, her face set and determined, she headed for her allotted place at the back of the bullpen and the dubious comfort of a chocolate bar she'd stashed somewhere in her desk.

It was already late on Friday afternoon but even if it meant she'd be working until midnight, she was going to get through the pile of files and cases she knew Joe had already stacked up on her desk in her unavoidable absence. He said he liked to spread the love. He recently told her he wanted her to feel indispensable, even if she was a rich man's daughter and not used to the gruelling hours. Catherine's boss had long ago decided she had finally graduated and now was just another foot soldier to be used in his war on crime.

Midnight was a distinct possibility and Catherine sighed fatalistically. All she could do now to mitigate the problem of so many wasted hours of endless depositions and witness preparation, was to plan how she was going to wipe the smirks off the collective faces of the opposing counsel. *Dreams are free, aren't they?*

She was fully determined to give herself the gift of a free weekend where she would sleep late, eat breakfast in bed while reading her stack of neglected newspapers, and only rise to dress in time for the evening ahead, and to see if Vincent...She stopped dead in her tracks, staring open-mouthed at the enormous bunch of red roses planted squarely in the middle of her desk like an exclamation mark, a bold statement of possession. A swift calculation of the cost of three dozen roses brought her to an uncomfortable conclusion about the sender. She sighed, wishing she could just shove them into the trash bin, but its slender confines wouldn't hold such a wealth of expensive profusion. Besides, they were truly lovely, their heady perfume drifted through her tired senses like a benediction, beckoning to her sinfully.

"Someone sure has the hots for you..." Joe murmured as he strolled past, looking pointedly at his watch, before frowning at the pile of files hidden behind the mountain of roses. "Ten to one gets you its Burch. You gotta admit, the man has style." He halted, his mouth wryly twisted as he looked back, leaning in closer, lowering his voice conspiratorially, "So when are you going to make an honest man of him and let him take you away from all this?" He waved a hand expansively at the surrounding chaos and noise. "I mean, you just gotta see all the man has to offer you. How can us poor *schleps* ever hope to compete with that?"

"Don't go there Joe," Catherine snapped, shoving the roses aside to make way for her bag and the files she was carrying. "Elliot knows my feelings. He just doesn't give up easily. He's far too used to getting his own way for my liking."

"Yeah, it sure looks like it. Still it's that time of year after all. Guess you can't blame him for trying." Joe leaned sideways to see the flowers beyond Catherine's disapproving stance. "The man's got guts, I'll give him that. Oh, by the way, there's a card," he offered hopefully, raising his eyebrows at her. "Yeah, okay, I looked, so sue me." He grinned unrepentantly. "You could, at least, read it. Find out what he wants. It might be important. Like a weekend away from all this..." He waved an all-inclusive arm, "Watcha got to lose?"

"Thanks, Joe." Catherine dropped into her chair, yanking open her desk drawers, searching for the elusive chocolate bar. "I think I've got this."

"Okay, sure, suit yourself." Joe shrugged "But I want to see a clear desk before you try to escape tonight, roses optional." He ambled away, whistling tunelessly, without waiting for her reply. He knew he had her and there was nothing she could do about it.

Her questing hand finally closed around the chocolate bar. Catherine drew it out and bit into its forbidden pleasure moodily. The silver envelope containing Elliot's card hovered only inches from the tip of her nose. She sighed, finally reaching to snatch it away. This close the roses smelled like heaven and she couldn't resist inhaling their headiness warily. She fingered a silken petal. It just wasn't fair...

How Vincent would love to inhale their exotic scent...touch their velvet softness and appreciate their intricate simplicity... and she would love to watch his face, knowing she'd shown him something truly beautiful and magical, just like him. A rose by any other name...wasn't that something the Bard had once said?

Catherine frowned, moving her slim shoulders disconcertedly. *More unfulfilled dreams...* Now wasn't the time to dwell on what wasn't to be. Opening the envelope, she drew out the card and quickly saw it wasn't a card at all. It was an ornate, gold embossed holder containing a pair of utterly impossible to

obtain, best seats in the house, theatre tickets. An invitation to go to Broadway on Saturday night and see the newly-opened Phantom of the Opera in Elliot's company, with a late dinner thrown in at one of New York's most exclusive eateries. No strings attached, all expenses paid. All she had to do was agree and show up looking lovely.

Catherine rubbed a weary hand over her eyes. Trust Elliot to be able to obtain the unobtainable and make it seem so easy. She also knew with painful certainty how much Vincent would love to see the musical and how much she would adore showing it to him. A magical tale of love and loss, and the ultimate redemption of the Phantom's troubled soul when he sacrificed everything for the woman he loved with every fibre of his being. She had read the glowing reviews and gushing critical acclaim, and everything reminded her of the secret love she shared with Vincent.

It just wasn't fair! She threw the chocolate bar into the trash bin, suddenly finding the taste too bitter. She almost tossed the card after it, but at the last moment, changed her mind. Her curiosity had been piqued by a small arrow drawn in the bottom left corner, indicating she reverse the envelope. Frowning she turned it over to see what Elliot had written in a sweeping flourish...*Be My Valentine...*

"Valentine's Day!" Catherine inhaled a horrified breath. Her whole body sagged.

Oh Lord, how could she have forgotten such an important date? This was her very first since she'd been saved by Vincent, and she'd failed the romance test miserably.

Of course, her old flame, Tom Gunther had never bothered about the day, saying it was a waste of time and money. "Just a commercial ploy to get you to buy flowers and make a sappy fool of yourself eating too many chocolates, and then having to put in extra hours at the gym to pay for it," he'd said dismissively. Besides Catherine already knew how much he loved her, and wanted to make her his bride...*didn't she?*

Catherine stared dully at her desk calendar. Today was the twelfth. She had no doubt Vincent would remember and come to her balcony with a special gift on Sunday night. She didn't have anything for him, or the free time to run out and purchase something meaningful. That luxury was long gone. Heat began to flow into her cheeks, making her squirm with embarrassment.

Even after Elliot Burch had sent her a florist's shop full of flowers, she still didn't get the clue. It was disturbing to think how low she had sunk. She was supposed to have an IQ of 137, for *Pete's* sake! But her shoes only knew the well-worn path from the D.A.'s office to the courthouse and back again. There had been clues on all sides of course, but with her head down, concentration fixed on her impossible caseload and that annoyingly frustrating continuance, she'd missed every one of them.

"Jeez, Radcliffe, you need your head examined and you really need to get out more." Her hunting gaze quickly encompassed the bullpen looking for Joe. He'd enjoy the joke that she wasn't about to share with him. He had assumed she knew what the roses had been for, and jumped to all the wrong conclusions. He was always ribbing her about her lack of a serious love-life and any decent taste in music. He dismissed the classical, he loved Billy Joel. *If only Joe knew the truth...*

The files before her loomed large and unforgiving. Drawing in a steadying breath, Catherine stripped off her trench-coat and rolled up her sleeves. Even if it took all night, she was going to have a free weekend if it was the last thing she did...

“Thanks, Bernie.” Catherine slipped a five dollar bill into the ready palm of her building super, after he’d laid the enormous bunch of roses down on one of the apartment’s tiny damask couches alongside the boxes of deli delivery, and the few remaining files she didn’t manage to get through. Joe had grudgingly given her his permission to come in late on Monday morning, providing she finished them at home. Catherine had jumped at the opportunity to escape, and fled the office before Joe changed his mind.

“Someone sure likes you...a lot.” Bernie sighed, unconsciously echoing the essence of Joe’s dry comment from earlier in the day. “Please don’t tell my missus about the roses. She’ll never give me a moment’s peace. She’s always harping on me about how I don’t appreciate her and every year when Valentine’s Day rolls around...” He threw up his hands expressively. “She would put me in the poorhouse if I let her.”

“I won’t tell, I promise.” Catherine smiled as she shut the door behind the man and locked it securely.

She’d debated long and hard throughout the never-ending afternoon and evening at her desk but in the end she decided the roses were just too lovely to simply throw away. Vincent would enjoy them for their beauty, despite the identity of their giver. If he asked, of course she would tell him, they had no secrets between them and she guessed he would fully understand Elliot’s motivation. The roses had given her an amazing idea...she just prayed it wouldn’t rain on Sunday night...

She had finally summoned the determination to phone Elliot, to thank him for the roses and turn him down flat. She offered to return the tickets by messenger, but he told her to forget it. “Take a girlfriend, enjoy the evening on me.” It was all right, his satisfied tone really said. He could wait, forever if needed. “There will be other times...” he assured her silkily.

Catherine sat staring at the phone long after she’d broken the connection, reflecting on Elliot’s urbanely smooth certainty. As Joe said, the man had guts, and she was forced to admire his tenacity, and his nerve. It made her tired just thinking about the next round. Elliot hated to lose at anything...

She took precious minutes to messenger the tickets over to her best friend, Jenny, with a note of explanation and a request. Jenny phoned breathless with delight and profuse appreciation. She promised faithfully to fulfil Catherine’s request, before demanding final reassurance her friend hadn’t completely lost her mind. Surely there was someone other than Elliot she could take to the musical...

Catherine had laughed. “No, there isn’t anyone and, no, I haven’t gone mad. Not yet anyway. Enjoy.”

Then she called her order in to her favourite deli to be delivered to her apartment building. The stage was all set, all that was required was the final major player.

“But for tonight...” Catherine sighed, pushing tired fingers through her hair. It was tangled and none-too clean.

She decided on a long hot shower, followed by a plate filled with hot, buttery toast and a mug of cocoa, before the longest lie-in she’d had in a very long time...tomorrow would just have to take care of itself without her...Sunday was the important date. She was going to have a lot to do before Vincent arrived...

Vincent dropped down easily onto Catherine's balcony. He'd suppressed his natural caution, barely waiting until it was dusk, having taken the calculated risk against being seen. He felt compelled to come here. Excitement flowed along the bond he shared with Catherine, a bubbling sense of restless energy that intrigued and fascinated him. She hadn't been this excited for some time. Usually she seemed overtired and stressed from working far too hard. Tonight he felt she needed him, but in a good way. The early evening was cool and clear, with only a hint of snow in the air. It was a perfect Valentine's night for lovers.

"For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings..." He smiled, pausing to consider the quote. He felt wealthy beyond all imagining.

There were people Below and some close friends like Mouse, wistfully hoping they would one day find a Valentine of their own. There were the couples who enjoyed the pleasure of offering each other small gifts, holding hands at the meal table, sharing long looks of mutual love and appreciation, stolen kisses when they thought themselves unobserved, and whispered conferences in out of the way corners. They had tried not to make their communion so obvious when Vincent was around, but their pleasure in each other's company was undeniable.

However this year as Vincent had passed along the tunnels on his way Above, there were many cheerful greetings and smiles of encouragement. Mary had kissed his cheek and wished him well, asking to be remembered to Catherine and saying he must bring her Below again soon. Even Father hadn't objected to his son venturing once more into the dangerous cityscape. He had not spoken about Margaret since her death, but Vincent could see the wistful expression in his parent's grey eyes and the sad curve of his mouth. The memories of the seven days they'd spent together were all he had now, and he held them close. They told their own story of love and loss.

He had discouraged Vincent when he would have stayed before rashly asking Mouse if he cared to indulge an old man in a game of chess. The tinker had leapt up, delighted at the offer, and immediately set off to collect the chess board and pieces before Father had a chance to come to his senses and change his mind.

"We know not what we do, eh, Vincent?" Father had raised his eyebrows before waving his son on his way. "Go on, I'll be fine. Go to Catherine. Tonight is the night for lovers and those of us with wonderful memories to keep us warm. I'll be fine." He sighed deeply and squared his stooped shoulders for the dubious battle ahead as he could see Mouse running back clutching his prize.

"Thank you, Father." Vincent pushed back the hood from his hair, turning to glance at Catherine's French doors. They were closed and all the lights were out. He wondered momentarily if she wasn't even at home to receive him, but the softly vibrating layers of the bond they shared rippled with awareness and a growing sense of his presence. She would come outside when she was ready. He could wait.

Vincent looked around the balcony, noticing what seemed to be an array of food neatly laid on the little outside table, all covered by a red cloth. Perched on one of the chairs a huge crystal vase held an impossible number of red roses, whose heady perfume was richly evident, even in the chill of the evening. Vincent moved closer, admiring each perfectly furred, half-open rose with its burgeoning promise of incomparable beauty. He touched one silken petal lightly with his fingertip. Their glorious perfection spoke of man's deliberate intervention with nature's more random will, but he appreciated the overall effect of stunning simplicity.

Below the table sat a filled ice bucket from which protruded the neck of an unopened bottle of wine and two inverted wine glasses. Then, beyond the table, in their usual sheltered corner, where Vincent often read to Catherine while she leaned against his shoulder, was a deep pile of scattered cushions and blankets. It seemed as if his love had dragged everything useable into the open and piled them up. The mystery deepened. It seems she was prepared for the evening after all and had some kind of entertainment planned.

He looked at everything she had created and thought of the gift he carried in one of the pockets of his cloak. A small, elegantly carved bowl from Cullen's workshop, made from an ancient piece of dark, red hardwood Mouse had found somewhere in his extensive travels. Cullen thought it may have come from an old ship, but he couldn't be sure. There were nail marks and other discoloured intrusions into the wood which told their own story. Cullen had banded the bowl's scalloped rim with beaten gold wire, adding a stunning effect against the patina of the wood. Vincent knew Catherine would like it. He'd debated with himself for some time before deciding it was the perfect gift.

"Catherine...?" Vincent turned to rap his knuckles on the closed doors.

They opened almost immediately and Catherine stepped through. "You're early." She quickly closed the doors behind her back, smiling up at him. "But it is so good to see you again." She stepped forward into his arms, hugging him fiercely, as if to reinforce his solid reality. "I've missed being with you. I've missed this." She rubbed her cheek against his vest, sighing as she inhaled the smoke and candle wax scents of his clothing.

"I have missed you too. You have been so busy with your work." Vincent was only afforded a momentary glimpse of the darkened interior, but that was enough for his keen eyes to detect that the lounge had been entirely rearranged. Everything close to the doors had been pushed aside, and now the cleared space was dominated by Catherine's sound system set up before the doors like a small theatre. He wondered what was going on, but was too polite to ask.

"But we are here...now..." He held her against his heart, allowing her warmth and softness to flow through his senses. If Catherine wished to keep whatever she had planned for this evening a secret, then that was fine with him. He pressed a kiss into her hair before sighing deeply, drawing in and expelling his breath in a flow of contentment. This was all he needed.

"I'm sorry, but I had forgotten all about Valentine's Day," Catherine confided to his vest. "Until Friday, when Elliot reminded me." She lifted her head to nod in the direction of the roses. "He asked me to go to the theatre with him. Those were waiting for me when I got back from court. He likes to make a statement."

"Elliot..." Vincent breathed, picturing the newspaper clippings he'd seen of the man and frowning. "You work too hard, Catherine. But I know how important it is to you. Elliot, in his own way, was trying to ease your burden. I cannot deny there would be great pleasure in that task."

"Yes..." Catherine drew back. "I turned him down, of course. Elliot also reminded me of what's important. That you are important to me." Her hand slid down his arm to entwine her fingers through his. "He gave me a marvellous idea as I wondered what I could possibly get for you to make amends."

Vincent stepped closer. "You are enough. To see you, to hold you, to be here with you like this, is all I could ever ask for. I do understand Elliot feelings and how he dreams."

“Ah, Vincent, you are so easy to please...” Catherine teased lightly, reaching to cup his cheek. “But I wanted to make tonight something special, for both of us. Our first Valentine’s Day together.”

“I am blessed...” Vincent’s gaze swept over the roses, the laden table and the wine, then back to his love, dressed in a figure-hugging, peacock blue gown with her hair drawn into a chignon at the back of her head. He had never seen anything more breathtakingly lovely, nor would he, even if he lived a thousand lifetimes. There was not a rose created, nor a vision imagined, that could ever compare to his Catherine...

“So...” Catherine slanted her head toward him, her green eyes dancing with mischief and barely suppressed excitement. “I gave Elliot’s gift to Jenny and in return, she sent over what I had asked for by messenger.”

Before Vincent could react or formulate his next question, Catherine hurried to fling open the lounge doors, switching on a couple of small side table lamps as she went. She returned almost immediately carrying a large black book in her hands. The cover was adorned with a white mask and a single red rose. Vincent studied it with interest.

“Elliot sent me two tickets to Phantom of the Opera, and I immediately knew how much you would enjoy seeing it with me. I then realized the impossibility of such a dream.” She sighed, offering him the book in her hands. “Then I remembered Jenny telling me over lunch a couple of weeks ago, that she had seen Phantom for the first time while in London on one of her book tours, and how she’d loved it. It made her cry. She brought back the libretto”...Catherine opened the book in his hands... “And some tapes of the musical. Jenny said the whole show is on them. I asked if I could have them, for you, for us, tonight.”

Her hands drifted up his forearms to clasp his cloak with delight. “I thought we could listen to the tapes and read the libretto, and then it would be almost like being there, seeing it for the first time...together, just like we do under the park. I’ve set out everything. I know it won’t be as good as a live concert, but--”

“It will be magical,” Vincent replied softly, slowly turning the pages of the libretto, studying the story and the musical score. “I have wished to hear Lloyd-Webber’s interpretation of Leroux’s classic novel.” His deep blue eyes looked searchingly into hers. “A tragic tale of obsession and unavoidable loss, before the ultimate redemption of a man’s tortured soul through his unselfish love for the heroine. What could be more romantic on a night such as this?” He smiled, slowly closing the book before clasping one hand over hers where it rested on his forearm. “*Love is something eternal. The aspect may change, but not the essence,*” he quoted softly. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Catherine.”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Vincent.” Catherine went up on tip toe to kiss his cheek with lingering awareness. Their gazes locked, communicating wordlessly, before she leaned closer to rest her head on his shoulder. His arm went around her waist, drawing her in close against his side, his head lowering until wild, tawny gold mingled with soft, ash-blond. And they stayed that way for some time...

THE END

