

A Priceless Gift

by Gwen Lord

Catherine Chandler cleared her desk ready to leave for home; it had been another rigorous and nerve racking day. From the moment she had entered the office, until now, Joe had plied her workload without mercy. He had a deadline to keep, the deposition completion date had to be met, or heads would roll. Moreno was on Joe's back with this one and Joe, in turn, made free time and freedom of speech look like they were going out of fashion. Then, when 4:40 p.m. arrived and the ends were all tied up neatly, everyone breathed a sigh of relief and, only then, did the atmosphere of the DA's office return to its normal pace.

Picking up her briefcase, purse and file, she turned to grab her coat off the hook near the filling cabinet and, it was then she caught sight of Joe leaving his office, putting on his mac and straightening his tie, the ever-cheeky grin on his face.

Cathy stood back and watched Joe as he approached. Here was a nice clean-cut all American guy, of Italian parents, dark curly hair, good features, a heart of gold ... and her friend.

"Hey, Radcliffe!" Joe looked edgy.

"Joe?"

"Isn't it time you gave me a break?" His hands were now on her desk as he leaned over towards her. "Yeah! A break. Let me buy you a pizza, hamburger, take away ... or even a meal at my favourite restaurant, the one my Uncle Petro runs." His dark eyes and curling lashes inviting a 'Yes!'

"Oh, Joe! You make me feel awful. Every time you ask, I'm doing something. You have to believe me. I really do have a date. I am sorry." She covered his hand with hers and squeezed it lovingly.

His crestfallen expression betrayed what her rejection did to him, then to hide the hurt he bore, sarcastically challenged : "Bet it's one of those high brow types you seem keen on ... Funny, that one of them hasn't captured your heart, Cathy!" He now smiled nervously.

"Joe, he's not like that, believe me."

Then, as she moved to pass by him, a noise in the now empty office made them both look up at once.

"Hi, Cathy! Sorry I'm late. I got off on the wrong floor," he apologised, weaving his way towards them, between the disarray of office furniture and effects.

They watched as he strode towards them, a welcoming smile crossed her lips. Joe just stood back, a stunned look on his face; he was actually, at long last, seeing one of Radcliffe's dates ... This he must not miss!

Her arms went around him, Joe noted, in a very familiar way. They clung together a few moments, then with a kiss on her cheek they pulled apart.

"Joe, this is Devin Wells ... Devin, I'd like you to meet Joe Maxwell, my boss, my number one tormentor. He's also my best friend." Her face was beaming.

Joe held out his hand to take Devin's in a warm and welcoming manner.

"Pleased to meet you, pal."

"And you ... er ... Joe."

"Shall we go, Devin? I'm all in, this place has been a workhouse, I need to become a part of the living world outside. I hope it's still there," she quipped.

Joe leaned over and switched her desk lamp off, as he watched them make their way towards the door.

Suddenly Cathy stopped and hurried back. "Forgot my keys," she giggled.

"Hey, Radcliffe," Joe's voice was low. "I thought Mr Wonderful was called Vincent?" There was a grin on his lips.

"You're right, Joe, Devin's his brother," she smirked. "Good night, Joe."

"Nice one, Radcliffe, go wheel 'em in, cheaper by the dozen!"

Both laughed, but his smile hid the puzzle he felt. This wasn't the kind of person he knew Cathy to be. Something here didn't add up, it didn't add up at all!

* * *

It was late the following day, outside the lights were coming on all over the city, as the promise of evening drew nearer.

"File this, kiddo." Joe dropped a large overstuffed file on her already full desk.

"What's this?" Cathy questioned him.

"Oh! Just the Malison case. Steve won in court, so now it wants ..."

"Filing! I know." Both grinned. This relationship Cathy and Joe shared was easy and enjoyable, but Joe hoped for more ... one day! As Cathy made her way across the floor to the filing cabinet, Joe watched every move of her body ... boy did she have good packaging; lucky the guy who caught this chick! He wondered yet again who this Vincent character was, why was he surrounded in such mystery? Maybe he was married, a senator, who couldn't risk a scandal ... nah! Maybe he's - oh! What the heck, if she was married to one of these high flyers, Cathy wouldn't work her little tail off with him in the DA's office. Perhaps he was the lucky one after all, at least he saw her daily and, when things got too much, he was always there for her. But this Vincent guy got to him, and the lawyer in him wouldn't let these loose ends remain loose for much longer.

"Joe ... Joe ... are you okay?" Cathy's hand was on his shirt sleeve.

"Eh! Oh yeah, sure, Radcliffe."

He turned and walked away, his feet dragging, a sure sign to Cathy that all was not okay, not okay at all. As Joe turned to enter his office, a commotion at the far side of the room disturbed his reverie. He ran his hands through his thick dark curly hair. Advancing towards Catherine Chandler's desk was a huge flower display in a basket, complete with massive satin pink ribbons attached to the handle. It was so large, the carrier couldn't be seen, just two legs beneath it explained it wasn't an aberration.

"Elliot!" Joe heard Cathy's voice exclaim in amazement.

"Cath!"

"These are beautiful, Elliot." She threw down her pen and studied them, a head now looking at her from above the display.

"Thought you'd like a few flowers to brighten up your office," he grinned. Then, placing them on the floor where both could see them, he straightened up, arranged his tie and ran his hand through his hair, which was just over the collar of his jacket.

"A few flowers, Elliot? What's the occasion?"

His face, unable to remain serious, was every woman's dream: his blue-grey laughing eyes, framed with dark curling lashes and teeth so perfect it all became unfair. The dimple in his chin offset his roguish appearance when his face became alive with his very attractive smile. No wonder he was known as the catch of the century. Every available female in New York knew and desired the Elliot Burch.

But he had only one love in his life who, so far, had evaded all his attempts to capture her heart. He had become used to her refusals, believing in the end he couldn't lose. He was

willing - for now - to play the waiting game.

"The occasion Cathy, is ... your birthday!" he grinned and moved closer. Cathy was well aware of his attractiveness. If there hadn't been Vincent in her life then, yes, Elliot was a very eligible suitor!

"Elliot, my birthday is six months off!" she smiled.

"I know, this is for your last birthday!"

Joe turned away to hide his grin. Could this really be the fast-hitting and hard-dealing Elliot Burch now before him, grovelling very persuasively for the heart of Catherine Chandler? Jesus, what chance did he, Joe Maxwell, have against the likes of this wealthy, powerful and debonair mogul, hell bent on claiming her for his own!

"Oh Elliot ... please, I can't accept them. Please take them back, there is no need for any of this, truly."

Looking past Elliot's face, Catherine noticed more large expensive flower arrangements heading towards her. She stared in disbelief as one by one they began to fill her corner of the office. In all, eight more baskets.

"Elliot!"

"Well, these are for all the other birthdays I omitted to remember." Taking her hand, he raised it to his lips and kissed it, as his eyes were still locked with hers. Then he waited for her reaction, just like a small boy before his Headmaster, awaiting whatever lay before him.

"Please, Elliot, I really cannot allow you to do this, I work here. Look at this place, it's like Interflora. Please, I can't accept them."

"Yes you can, Cath, I'll have Manning get the men to collect them and deliver them to your apartment right away."

"No, NO!"

"YES and this, Miss Bossy Boots is not open to discussion!"

For now she was defeated.

"I've got to admit it, Burch, I like your style," Joe said as he shuffled past him, embarrassed to be caught up in all of this, but his comment went by unnoticed.

"What do you really want, Elliot, won't you tell me?" Her voice was softer now.

Elliot pushed his hands deep into his trouser pockets as he paced the office floor, while

collecting his thoughts; also allowing Joe to reach the privacy of his office.

"You, Cathy, please ... at least let me take you out for a meal ... a concert? Anything at all, you name it!"

"Go for it, Radcliffe," murmured Joe within his office, to himself.

"Cath, my plane is fuelled up and ready to go. Let's take off, have a weekend away from this rat race. You only have to say the word, I'll take you shopping, I'll buy you everything your heart desires ... Please, Cath, give us a chance."

"Can you buy me the moon, Elliot? Can you buy me the wonders of a rainbow? The magic of a promise shared? You can't put a price tag on these things and Elliot, there is no *US*, you know that. My heart belongs to another, it has for over two years now. I do love you, but I'm not in love with you, there is a difference, believe me," she sighed deeply.

"Cathy, I know I could make you happy. I can give you the world and I do love you." His arms now held her and her face was level with his. "This is very important to me," he said, almost to himself.

"Elliot, you haven't heard a word I've said."

"Sure I have, honey, but I'm trained in the art of persuasion. I'm used to having to fight for what I want; everyone has a price!"

"I don't," she snapped.

"I've taken a lot of knocks on my climb to the top. Friends I loved, needed, trusted; all left me in the end, 'til finally it was me up there ... alone."

"Elliot, please." A tear now escaped and ran down her cheek. She brushed it away.

"But it is no longer enough. I need to share it all with you, Cath, I'm asking you to give me a chance ... please."

Joe had now returned slowly from his office, carrying his mac' and daily paper.

"Elliot, I'm sorry, truly sorry, please at least believe me; somewhere out there is the perfect girl for you ..."

"It's you I want," he pleaded.

"You think you do, but I'm not for you ... now or ever ... I am deeply in love, Elliot. His name is Vincent, he is my life. We share a bond beyond all reasoning or understanding, I'm not free to love you."

The grim realisation of defeat spread across his handsome face, as he knew once more his well-laid plans had failed.

Looking into his face, Cathy saw the unshed tears, the pain her rejection had caused him. He took a deep breath and shook his head slightly, as if to rid himself of this mantle of regret and heartbreak he felt.

Then, he held both her hands in his.

"Forgiven?" he asked.

"Of course! Still friends?"

"How could it be otherwise?" he smiled. Then, turning quickly to leave the office, he clicked his fingers to summon his body guards and Manning to follow. With the swish of the door they were gone, swallowed up into the hub of activity as everyone made their way to the lifts and stairs at the end of the working day. Finally, Cathy and Joe were alone in the empty office.

"Are you okay, Radcliffe?"

"Yep, Joe, I'm fine!"

"Do you realise what you have just turned down ... we're talking big, here!" He grinned in disbelief.

"Not for me, Joe. I've already found my 'pot of gold', my 'Shangrila'; there is no treasure on earth that could ever tempt me away from Vincent."

"Gee, Cathy, what is it that this guy has that is so god-damn special?"

A few more moments passed and then quietly, she heard herself explain.

"He asks nothing of me ever, yet he gives me everything. Because of him I finally know who I am. Through his eyes I see things so clearly now, the magic of a sunset, the beauty of a moonbeam, the wonder of being alive. These are treasures money can't buy, and to share these treasures with him - there are no words. What we feel is beyond words."

"You're serious?"

"I'm serious, Joe. I have no need for all the trappings of a successful life, I have the entire world in his arms and in his love."

"I give in, I believe you. What you have, Radcliffe, I envy!"

"Thanks, Joe."

Then picking up her things, she joined Joe as they headed out of the office, past the impressive array of flowers. Cathy stopped and pulled out a single stemmed red rose. "I'll give this to Vincent," she murmured to herself; tonight was only a heartbeat away.

The following day, around 3.30 p.m. Joe was standing near his office door, playing nervously with a rubber-band, a habit he was well-known for. He was trying to mentally untangle a testimony, which didn't ring true. A movement caught his eye; that of a tall, good-looking young man, wearing a blue jacket, jeans and cream polo neck sweater, making his way without hesitation to Cathy's desk.

This, he must see ... so, leaning to the left, he watched as this person came to a halt in front of Catherine Chandler's desk. Sensing someone was there, she looked up into a very familiar face; threw down her pen, spun round in her chair and hurried into his arms for a long and beautiful embrace.

Joe's expression was priceless as he watched the picture before him, curiosity was eating away at him. Acting on the spur of a moment decision, he advanced towards her desk, bearing a couple of files and a smile.

"Joe?"

"Can you file these away, Cathy?" he asked, then hung about hoping to be introduced. He didn't have to wait long.

"Michael, this is Joe Maxwell, my boss. Joe, this is Michael, a very close and dear friend." Joe held out his hand, this, he smiled to himself, was getting to be a habit.

"Nice to meet you, pal!"

"And you, Joe." His voice was gentle, warm and held Joe captive.

"Are you visiting, or do you live locally?" he enquired, eying him up and down.

"Hasn't Cath told you ... Sorry, I live with Cath at 21E. We share the same ... doormat!" Both laughed.

On the other hand, Joe's eyes grew larger and larger as his mouth refused to stay shut. He nearly choked on his intake of breath. Cathy felt the air become electric with unsaid words as she smiled to herself at the pictures that were now forming in Joe's mind.

"Can I take an early coffee break, Joe?"

"Sure, but have that file ready before you leave tonight!"

"Yes, Sir!" Cathy saluted him military style, then smiled as Joe sauntered back to his own office. She put her arm through Michael's and directed him to the coffee bar just down the passage from their office.

During the next few days both Michael and Devin reappeared; each time Cathy looked radiant in their presence. By the following weekend, Joe could stand it no longer, he had to find out what was going on. It wasn't going to be easy, as he could sense Cathy knew already how curious he was and she would be evasive on purpose.

He walked over to Cathy's desk, as she sat deep in thought about Vincent, enjoying their bond as they opened it wide, to share their feelings. She sat, eating her rye bread and salad as Joe approached.

"Radcliffe ... Radcl..."

"Sorry, Joe. I was miles away," she apologised.

"Who were you with, THIS time?" He didn't mean it to sound so razor sharp.

"Oooh! Nasty, Joe," she grinned.

"Is there any space in your packed diary for ... me?" He now perched on the edge of her desk and looked directly at her.

Cathy put her lunch away, then covered Joe's hand with her own. The contact made his blood turn to fire.

"If your offer is still open, I'd love a coffee and a walk by the lake in Central Park ... tomorrow?" Her question hung suspended in the air.

"Fine!" He ran his fingers through his hair. "Great, gee, Cathy, I can't believe this." His cocky attitude had now vanished.

"I'd like that Joe, really!"

"I'll pick you up about seven o'clock?"

"Hmmm, lovely ... I'll be there!"

Well, at least he was one up on Elliot Burch now!

A couple of days later, Joe was still on a 'high', he'd finally had his date with Cathy. They had met at the gates of Central Park, Joe was early but Cathy was on time for once. Even so, their greeting was awkward, this was out of office hours, office tactics didn't work here. They walked side-by-side, picking up on things as they passed by; a dog chasing a bird, a child crying, until the hot-dog stand came into view.

"Buy you a hot-dog, Cath?" he asked.

"Sure, Joe."

"Two hot-dogs, pal, with lots of mustard on mine!"

"Chili on mine!" Cathy's eyes were aglow with the prospect of this treat.

They walked along eating and enjoying their hot-dogs, the tension now eased. Once the hot-dogs were eaten, Joe threw their rubbish into a trash can near a tree then, turning to Cathy, took her hand as they went deeper into the park, heading for the lake.

Cathy smiled to herself. This area was 'their' special place. It was here on this very spot that Vincent had point out the moon to her and asked her if she remembered when she had first seen the moon.

"Penny for them, Radcliffe."

"I was thinking about the moon."

"The moon?"

"Yeah! Can you remember when you first saw the moon, Joe?" she asked as she turned to face him.

"Pass," Joe grinned. "Why, can you?"

"Nope, but I know someone who can!"

"Vincent, I bet!" and he grinned.

Their walk was nice and easy, both felt at peace, the moon sent shafts of dancing light across the gentle ripples of the lake; it was beautiful. Cathy hugged the knowledge to herself that Vincent was also enjoying this walk, as he silently kept up with them in the shadows that were his world. Finally, it was time to leave Central Park; it was almost 1 a.m. They had walked and talked non-stop, each dipping into tales from their past to explain the present and they touched on the future briefly.

"Thank you, Joe ...it's been lovely."

"Yeah, I finally had a date with you, how about that? Dare I ask for another, or am I coming on too strong?" He waited.

As Catherine wondered how to answer him she felt Joe's arms pull her to him and his lips found hers, warm and tender.

A rustle in the undergrowth brought Joe back to reality.

"Joe!" Cathy said breathlessly.

"Oh, Cathy!" Joe felt he'd died and gone to heaven.

"I really must go, Joe. I'll never be up in time for work, then my boss and number one tormentor will be cross with me," she teased.

"I promise you Cath, i won't," he teased back.

"But I really do have to go."

"Okay, but at least let me see you to your apartment," he pleaded.

"No, Joe. really, please."

"But Central Park isn't safe. You know that, come on - be realistic!"

"Joe ... trust me, please."

"Okay, but ring me when you're home please, at least do that," he asked.

"Okay, I promise. Good night, Joe."

She planted a peck on his cheek and then he pushed his hands in his pockets. At the park gates Joe went left and Cathy went right. Once he was out of sight, Cathy doubled back and headed straight for the drainage tunnel.

"Catherine." His velvet voice purred from the far corner of the tunnel. In an instant she was enclosed in his arms, his kisses covering her hair and face.

"You had a nice evening? Joe is a good friend, I trust him."

"Joe kissed me," she admitted.

"I know, I felt it and saw it," he murmured.

"I'm sorry, Vincent, I couldn't he..."

"Sssh, my love, no need to apologise. I know you, I know who you are and what you are. I love you with all that I am. You did right to allow Joe to kiss you."

"Vincent, what are you saying?"

"Joe is in love with you, Catherine, he is holding his feelings in check, it is not good to do this and the kiss helped unlock some of his pain," he explained tenderly.

"Oh Vincent, you know of this pain too, don't you? Thank you for trusting me, I will never hurt you ... I love you so much."

"And I you, Catherine."

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A few days later, Joe was returning to the block that housed the DA's office and he passed the 52nd Street Jewellers. He looked up and saw inside the plush shop, Catherine Chandler with both Devin and Michael. Joe's hurrying feet ground to a halt as he tried to focus on the window display, but was really looking beyond at what was going on within the shop. All at once, Cathy spotted Joe and waved to him, then beckoned him to come inside. Joe felt very uncomfortable at this request because this jewellers was the classiest pad he had ever seen, the likes of which the Joe Maxwell's of this world would never experienced.

The door opened up a whole new world to him. The carpet felt feet deep, like walking through oceans of whipped cream. Crystal chandeliers hung low and glistened with quality and twinkling lights.

"Hi, Joe! Come over here," Cathy begged.

"Devin ... Michael."

Both greeted Joe warmly.

"Joe! We've been searching New York for days. Devin and Michael are helping me choose a very special gift. It is now time to make the final choice, your opinion is vital ... Please, Joe?"

How could he refuse those eyes; that mouth!

"Yeah sure, count me in."

"Which do you like best, Joe? The diamond pin set in gold? Or the diamond pin set in platinum, or the cluster of diamonds set in a network of platinum?"

All three heads turned to Joe to await his answer.

"Well, doesn't the price have something to do with it? I mean there are no price tags on any of these pins, Cath!"

"Joe, they are all expensive, but cost doesn't come into it. I only want to know which you like the best, okay?"

"Sure," he shrugged.

"So?" Cathy urged him on.

"Well, I like the cluster of diamonds."

"You would, Joe Maxwell. That's the dearest one and also the one we like the best!" They all laughed together at this revelation.

"Phew, well I did that right," he grinned.

"Chivers, we'll take the cluster, please."

Catherine handed the beautiful piece of jewellery to the old man.

"Very well, Miss Catherine."

"He knows your name?" Joe was impressed as well as stunned.

"We have been coming here since I was a little girl, Joe. My silver teething ring, my first bracelet; my graduation present; everything came from this jewellers. You see, Joe, Daddy and Chivers roomed together at Harvard - many years ago."

Joe leaned near to Cathy and whispered in her ear, "You are loaded, lady, why work in the DA's office, eh?"

"It's where I can do most good, Joe." she whispered back.

"Here you are, gift wrapped and ready to give to the lucky man in your life!"

"Chivers, that is perfect. How much did you say it was?"

"\$2,750, Miss Catherine. Shall I charge it to your account?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you," and she promptly planted a kiss on his cheek, as you would an old friend.

Once outside, Joe seemed to vaguely remember Devin and Michael saying 'good bye' and he knew that he and Cathy were heading back to work. But he was deep in shock at the cost of the tiny pin that Radcliffe had just bought, and was so very happy to part with all that mountain of lovely green money.

"He's one lucky guy, Cathy ..."

"No Joe, I'm the lucky one."

* * * * *

Vincent and Catherine sat close together in the tunnel below the bandstand in Central Park. The music flowed over them like a vintage wine, intoxicating them with the magic of its mood.

"Vincent, I have a gift for you. I wanted it to be something from my world that was expensive and extravagant; something you would never dream you could, or would, ever possess. Because you deserve everything I can give you so much, my love. Happy Anniversary, Vincent."

"Catherine, you are my greatest treasure. I want for nothing; now you are mine."

"I know, but this is special. Please Vincent, open it."

With great care, Vincent's large hands and menacing claws undid with ease, the delicate bow and finally the lid was raised and the pin lay exposed as it dazzled him. The lights within the tunnel caught the many facets in the cluster of exquisite diamonds.

"Oh, Catherine ... such beauty!"

"You like it?"

"Oh, it is beyond words."

Then Cathy flung her arms around her massive lover. Their embrace was total, no words were needed, their bond said it all. After a few moments - or was it a life time - Vincent spoke.

"I have a gift for you, Catherine, but it is not of the riches of your world of mine."

"Oh Vincent, what is it?" She pleaded like a child, her eyes alive with happiness.

Vincent pulled a small box out of his brocade vest and with a kiss, handed his gift to her.

"What is it, Vincent? It's so small."

"Perhaps you should open it, my love."

Catherine lifted the lid of the box to reveal a small locket.

"Vincent! It's beautiful," her voice was so tender.

"It belonged to Margaret. When Father gave it to me, he said I would know when the time was right to pass it on. Catherine, that time is now. Please ... look inside."

A gentle touch on the catch at the side and the locket flew open to reveal a coil of hair. Catherine gazed in wonderment at the golden brown hair, which had been bound perfectly with

strands of red-gold hair to form an unbroken circle;

"Vincent ... it's hair!" she gasped.

"Yes, it is, Catherine. Yours and mine."

"How did you get my hair, Vincent?" she asked, amazed at this disclosure.

"Over the past few months, Catherine, I have collected the odd stray off your coat, jacket or dress and saved them until I had enough to fashion a coil. For once my claws served me well when I used them to bind my hair with yours. Although it was not a task I would like to do often," he smiled.

"This is a treasure beyond anything, Vincent ... anything!"

"It did take many weeks to fashion the circle, Catherine, but it is a symbol of our love, no beginning, no end. I wish I could give you treasures accepted Above, wealth and position, but it is not within my power."

Vincent moved to take Catherine in his arms to hold her close as he whispered, "What I can give you, Catherine, is my heart, my all ... the promise of my everlasting love."

"To me, Vincent, there is no money on earth that could buy this, or our love ... riches like these are beyond price."

"Catherine," he breathed into her hair.

"Oh, Vincent!" She hugged him so tightly.

"I love you, Catherine Wells. Happy First Wedding Anniversary."

Then their lips met in a beautifully long and tender kiss, promising them both the fulfilment of their passion; reserved only for lovers.

The End.