

# “Happy Birthday, Vincent”

A Story of “Beauty and the Beast”

By Judith Nolan ©

## Catherine...

Catherine turned over in her warm, comfortable bed. She stretched lazily and burrowed deeper into the yielding softness. *Just another two minutes or so more and then...*

It was a crying shame she would soon have to get up and face another action filled, exhausting day. Another day spent trying to avoid watching Joe consume chocolate covered cheese nuggets as he feigned enjoyment and smirked at her disgusted expression. The joke was getting way too old and tired. Then there was the problem of trying to overcome the sporadic bouts of light-headedness due to the lack of decent food and from consuming cup after cup of the sludge that passed for coffee in the Justice Building, which were interspersed with hectic rounds of court dates, depositions and interviews with people who couldn't talk, didn't have time to talk or who'd already lawyered-up and decided not to talk...

Releasing a long, reluctant sigh, she rolled back to grope blindly for her bedside alarm clock and frowned, finally half-opening one sleepily reluctant eye to stare at it in consternation. *Had she heard it ring? She must have. She couldn't afford to be late; it was such an unforgiveable sin in her boss's eyes and...* She peered closely at the illuminated numbers it displayed, and gasped in horror. *It had already gone well beyond nine o'clock, and she was seriously, seriously, late for work! Joe was going to flay her hide and nail it to his office wall as an example of what happened to those who came in late...again! And she couldn't blame him — there was just so much to do and so little time and —*

She shot upright into a sitting position, tossing the covers aside before scrambling frantically, feeling around the floor with her bare toes, hunting for her slippers, trying to calculate how long it would take her to fit in a shower, wash her hair, dry it, get dressed and manage her make-up one-handed while consuming something that approached any kind of sustenance before brushing her teeth and — *Saturday!*

Slipper-less still, she stopped abruptly in mid-flurry half-way across the bedroom, her arms flailing in a dozen different directions at once. Her braced shoulders slumped with relief. She shoved the tumbled

hair out of her eyes before passing a tired hand over her face. Her whole body trembled as her heart hammered uncomfortably within the cage of her ribs, pumping with the sickening surge of adrenalin.

*All the saints be praised, it was actually the weekend...*

“Oh, I don’t believe it...” She fell backwards onto the bed, spread-eagling her limbs and sighing with heartfelt relief. After a few moments of calm breathing she got up to scurry back under the covers, snuggling down and feeling like playing truant for the whole weekend. *Maybe she wouldn’t even get out of her pyjamas.* Suddenly she felt as if she was floating. She stretched on a long, relaxing moan of contentment and wriggled deliciously. *Two days...two whole days in which she planned to thoroughly enjoy herself as she —*

She shot upright again. *Oh, help! She was supposed to be seeing her father this morning!* She’d promised to meet with him before he went out of town for a much needed, long weekend break in the Hamptons with Kay! He’d telephoned her at work the day before, complaining he never saw her anymore and how about they meet for a catch-up. He’d already booked an eleven o’clock brunch for just the two of them at his favourite uptown Italian restaurant *and his loving daughter was going to be late if she didn’t move it!*

Casting the covers aside again with renewed haste, she gave up the hunt for her slippers, hurrying barefoot into her bathroom to hustle through a shower, washing her hair and drying it, dressing and completing her make-up in record time. *At least I don’t have to worry about the food,* she thought wryly as she checked the final result in the mirror and nodded with rueful approval — *not bad, Radcliffe* — before starting a frantic hunt for her purse and door keys. She knew she’d tossed them on the couch last night after coming in, dog-tired, from work... *They have to be around here somewhere...* She finally closed her hand on them gratefully, down the back of the cushions. “Things are looking up,” she reasoned as she shrugged into her woollen coat and headed for the door.

That was when she saw the note, taped to the inside of the front door. The note she’d written to herself so she wouldn’t forget something very important in the hectic rush of her life...taped where she knew Vincent wouldn’t see it. He still refused to enter her apartment unless it was too cold or raining outside. Or she specifically asked him to come inside. And even then he would often reply with a request of his own — that she meet him in the tunnel entrance below her apartment building rather than step inside her personal space where he was not yet entirely comfortable.

“Oh, Vincent...” She took down the note and smiled. Suddenly all the rushing caused by her lateness, the adrenalin and the frantic pace rampaging within her, stilled. She held up the note, studied it for several heartbeats before closing her eyes and sighing as she pressed it to her lips then folded it carefully. She pushed it into the side pocket of her purse. Pressing one hand to the slowing pace of her heart, she smiled a secret smile and shook her head, before wiping away the single tear that traced a

path down her cheek. But it was a tear of happiness and heart-warming memories. *It was going to be all right...*

It was Saturday after all, and it was going to be a wonderful day. She would share and enjoy a long overdue meal with her beloved father, catch up on all the gossip and news. And then, after bidding him *bon voyage*, she would go shopping for something *simply-gorgeous-must-have* to wear. The note was a welcome reminder not to forget a very important date that was imminent. A very important date indeed...

## **Father...**

Father held the slender volume of poetry up to the burnished light of his kerosene lamp and blessed Sebastien for being such an excellent treasure hunter and an even more generous friend that he had not kept the gift for himself. Father caressed the soft binding and admired the cover, so very old, but still in such great condition. He had not hoped to ever find such a rare prize or to secure it for the unbelievable price of a complete second set of Shakespeare's collected works which, thanks to Mouse's excellent skills in unearthing discarded treasures Above, he already possessed in their entirety.

"If I were an avaricious man..." Father smiled, turning the book over. It naturally fell open at a very familiar poem. He read it slowly once more, even though he already knew it by heart...

*No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thy friend's  
Or of thine own were:  
Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind,  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.*

"John Donne certainly had the right of it..." Father shook his head. The world of the tunnels was all intertwined. Every person who dwelled there, every place they lived or worked was inextricably linked. And the great lynch-pin holding it all together and ensuring it all worked was Vincent. They would truly be *the less* without him...

Father thought of the note he'd first received from Catherine some months ago now. Geoffrey had hurried it to him in his chamber, looking determinedly furtive, as if he were about to explode with

excitement at any moment. But then, at Catherine's request, he was on a very secret mission and Vincent mustn't know...

The note had been accompanied by the reward money they'd received for returning Cleopatra's diamond-studded collar to its rightful owner. Catherine had generously doubled the money with a contribution of her own, so Father had not felt too guilty about diverting a portion to the birthday project she proposed in her note. Those who needed hard-to-source items they couldn't acquire through gifting, bartering or exchange would be able to apply to Father for the funds.

He sighed now, closing the book and laying it down, running his gloved hand reverently over the cover. The gift was perfect, exactly what he had searched a long time to secure, and to have it fall into his lap through the kindness and grace of an old friend...Father chuckled...*he might even let the old scoundrel beat him at chess for a change...*

The gift was for a very important person in Jacob's life and the date for giving was imminent. Very imminent indeed...

## **Mouse and Jamie...**

"Last one..." Mouse held the polished piece of granite up to the light. "What do you think?" He looked at Jamie anxiously, holding the stone out for her to admire.

"I think they're all very beautiful..." His companion nodded, carefully adding the rock to the rest of their collection. "You have done a wonderful thing here, Mouse."

"Think so too." Mouse sighed with contentment, wriggling with delight like an overgrown puppy. "Gonna be good, for everyone."

He'd spent the best part of a year burrowing and digging, searching through rock-falls, delving into hidden caverns and tunnels. He had truly gone where no man — or woman — had gone before, in search of just the right stone. Jamie had helped where she could, but Mouse was a solitary creature, and he would often disappear for days at a time, losing track of the passing hours, sometimes even the need for food, in his quest for perfection.

"Okay good, okay fine...!" He clapped his hands now, dancing from foot to foot with excitement. "All done..."

Arranged on the table before them were two dozen fine examples of beautifully polished stones. There

were quartz and xenotime crystals. Among the few Jamie could name was a magnificent specimen of artinite sitting beside a serpentine muscovite crystal, a find Mouse was especially proud of. Next to a rare trapezohedral almandine crystal, a beautifully carved example of Manhattan schist looked somewhat drab, but Mouse couldn't bring himself to discard it. He wanted all the minerals he'd been able to uncover represented in the collection. There was even a small lump of alluvial gold gleaming like warm butter in the lamplight. Mouse had dug around for more, but found none. He decided it must have been dropped long ago by a previous, careless owner, and it had been covered over by the rising detritus of the growing city.

"Now all we need is the box..." He rubbed his hands together anxiously. "Hope Cullen is doing it. Hope Winslow can make the hinges in time. Need to have the best glass for the top..." His anxious blue eyes flew to study Jamie's sympathetic look. "Need to see through it good."

"It'll be all right, Mouse. You'll see. It'll be all right on the night."

"Mouse hopes so..." The tinker's face settled into a morose pattern. "But maybe I should go and check one more time?"

"No, Mouse." Jamie put a firm hand on his arm, before he could dart away out of the Mousehole and go in search of his friend. "You've already checked half a dozen times now. Cullen told you the last time it would be done when it's done and don't pester him again or else. Just trust for once. You can't control everything..."

"Maybe not, maybe so..." Mouse ran an agitated hand around the back of his neck. "Maybe check again tomorrow..."

"All right..." Jamie laughed. "But only if I can come with you. To stop you driving poor Cullen out of his mind."

"Okay great! I like you a lot. *A lot!*" Mouse seized her hand and squeezed, pumping it up and down, causing an unaccustomed flush of deep colour to flood the clear skin of his friend's cheeks. "Thanks, Jamie."

"You're welcome..." Jamie managed to mutter, frowning at him direfully to cover her confusion. "Just don't think you can go anywhere without me."

She glanced back at the table, with its collection of polished stones. They were for a very important person in both their lives, and the date for giving them was drawing ever nearer. Very near indeed...

## Devin and Charles...

"We gonna get there soon, Dev? Are we? Not long now..."

"Yes, Charles, we're going to be getting there soon. It won't be long now before we land at JFK."

"Whhhheeee, I like flying, Dev. Big plane, flying over the sea. Lots and lots of sea. Now lots and lots of land, mountains too. God bless America, right, Dev? Australia is long way from New York, eh? We gonna land soon, Dev?"

"Yes, Australia is a very long way from New York. But you enjoyed it all the way down there, didn't you? Everyone accepted you and wished you well when we left."

"Loved it, Dev. But you must've dug halfway to China in that mine. It was the best of times. And we made lots of money. We rich now, Dev, eh? Can't wait to tell my friend Vincent all about it. Lots of sunshine, Dev. Gonna be cold in New York, maybe snow too."

"Oh, I'm sure Vincent will be pleased to see you. But don't go telling everyone we're rich. We're not that rich, just comfortable. But where we're going there won't be a lot of snow. It will be good to be home again. And maybe after this visit we'll try our luck down in New Zealand. I hear it's a great place for tourism..."

"Okay, Dev, whatever you want. And everyone's gonna be happy to see you too. You're Vincent's big brother. Gotta get a visit from your big brother on that special day. He'll like that."

"Yes, I think he will. And the old man. It's been too long since I last saw him. I haven't been to Vincent's birthday for years. I was always off somewhere else. I have a lot of ground to make up. But back then when we were kids, we used to go a bit mad, created a lot of havoc. Father used to give us hell afterwards, but Vincent always enjoyed it, and that's what mattered."

"Ha ha! We should put big red bow around your neck, eh, Dev? Good present, you be. Make Vincent laugh. Father, too. Maybe shove you in the box with all the rest of the stuff we bought! Make you jump out and go, boo!"

"Geeze, no thanks. I'll keep it simple, if it's all the same to you. But I guess my coming home is the perfect gift for the most important person in my life, next to you, Charles. But a few gifts won't hurt, either. And this time we're going to be there on the day and in time. And I'm going back as Devin Wells again. It feels real good. That's the most important thing..."

## Winslow and Cullen...

"I think that about does it..." Cullen carefully placed the box he'd created from the heart of an ancient piece of buried oak on Winslow's work bench. "Mind you, I almost ran into Vincent getting it here. I had to duck down a side tunnel, and I know he nearly caught me. He called after me, but I didn't dare stop. A moment later and he would've seen what I was carrying. I prayed I wouldn't break the glass from holding it so tight. We gotta be more careful. He's not stupid, ya know."

"As long as you got it here, that's the important thing." Winslow left tending his fire to admire the piece of woodwork with its framed glass lid through which he could see into every neatly-squared inner compartment lined with black velvet. "Say, this is just beautiful. You've excelled yourself, old man."

"Who you calling old, *Old Man*?" Cullen grinned his appreciation. "It is some of my best work, I'll admit. I think he'll like it. Mouse says he's finished with the stones. He's been at me day and night to see the box. I think he'd sleep in my chamber if he could. I had to shush him up at dinner a couple of nights ago when he nearly spoiled the surprise. He was bouncing all around like some crazy-mad Mexican jumping bean. Like his pants were on fire. That boy just cannot keep a secret."

"Well, I've had him in and out of here like some damn revolving door. I think he's even been in here, poking around, while I've been asleep. You'd think the boy was giving birth or something." Winslow chuckled. "I threatened to lose that stupid raccoon of his if he didn't leave me alone. Haven't seen him since. I've had five days of peace and quiet."

"Great idea. Maybe I'll try it." Cullen nodded. "Okay, so what do you have for me?"

"I think these will do the trick nicely..." Winslow held up a pair of delicate wrought iron hinges he'd spent weeks crafting, each shaped as two stylised dragons, their wings spread flat on either side of their bodies to create the flanges. At the front their claws came together, interlocking neatly to take the hinge pins. He put them down on the bench beside a lock that was shaped as a dragon's head with its fanged mouth wide open to take the old fashioned, long-shanked key hung with a black silk tassel.

"Oh, man..." Cullen stared in open-mouthed wonder. "Geeze, this is beyond your best work. These are just something special. He's gonna love them. And Mouse is gonna go into orbit."

"Yeah, well, I always said that boy was a space cadet anyway." Winslow laughed, clapping his friend on the shoulder, his face flushed with more than the heat of his fire. "I think we've done good work here. Real good. I'm so proud of the both of us."

"Good...?" Cullen shook his head. "Better than good, better than anything. In Mouse's oddball words,



we done real okay fine.”

He shook hands with his good friend before pulling him close to hug him fiercely, slapping him on the back. Each thought about his own part in the gift that was his special way of saying thank you to a very important person in both their lives. Cullen thanked the gods of woodworking he could get it done in time and that the antique glass lid he'd manufactured from an old subway car window had survived intact. Winslow turned away to stoke his blacksmith's fire, nodding his appreciation that the flames allowed his large hands to craft such delicate pieces.

And the date for giving was drawing closer all the time. They both prayed and hoped that Mouse wouldn't blow it for everyone in his breathless excitement. Maybe they should just kidnap the damn raccoon anyway — *that would slow him down...*

## **William...**

William had gone through all his recipes, pulling in a lot of favours and plainly begging for some of the items he needed. But it was all slowly coming together. He'd used as little of the reward money as humanly possible, but he'd made sure this would be a feast to end all feasts. He'd recycled a lot of stuff from Winterfest and Christmas, so he was well ahead of the game on the decorations front. He was going to ensure the tables groaned with delights and specialities he'd pulled from every corner of the Tunnels and Above. But the most wonderful help and supplies had come from the inimitable Lady May. She had come to his rescue with the most hard-to-source items. He owed the old lady big-time and no doubt she would be along someday soon to collect. Lady May never forgot a debt or a promise.

But William was fine with that. It was all in the most excellent of causes and he was going to make sure everything came off perfectly. *Or die in the attempt.*

“It might yet come to that...” He grimaced, wiping the sweat from his flushed brow, as he turned to scowl down at Cleopatra who sat at his feet with the look of a cat who was about to expire from the advanced stages of hunger. “Aw, come on...” He groaned in honest disgust. “I only fed you an hour ago. Go catch a mouse or something...”

Cleopatra yowled plaintively, shuffling her furry body closer, reaching to place a pleading paw on William's boot. Her penitent look would have done justice to the greatest martyr who ever lived.

“Oh, for Pete's sake...All right, all right...You won't let me rest until, right?” William threw up his hands in disgust. “*Women!*”



The planning for the feast could wait a minute or two. But the event was imminent. Very imminent. And he needed to get on with the extensive preparations...

## **Mary and the Children...**

Mary looked around her crowded chamber and smiled happily. Nearly every child of the tunnels had been gathered in here, all coming and going about their appointed tasks. It had been hard sneaking them away from Vincent's all-seeing over-view, but she'd managed it so far. The set of clothes was almost finished. Each child had brought, in their turn, something special of their memories with their dealings with Vincent, their good friend and mentor. They were being crafted by Mary and her gathering of women into a vest and a new cloak for Vincent. Clutching some of the reward money Olivia had volunteered to go Above to buy a whole roll of the best black woollen cloth. On her return Mary and she had unrolled it and stroked the fabric with loving hands, marvelling at its quality.

Samantha had been trusted with the important task of cutting the cloth to shape under Olivia's supervision. Eric and Ellie had been especially eager to contribute to the gift.

Unclamping her tongue from the concentrated grip of her teeth, Ellie had looked up from her stitching-work. "He and Catherine saved us, you know. It was a miracle. He was just like an angel, coming down from heaven. I'll never forget it. Not as long as I live."

"I think Vincent would like that, being called an angel." Mary smiled. "He is a very special person and we're very lucky to have him. He looks after us all. And we look after him."

Ellie nodded vigorously. "I hope he and Catherine will get married one day. I'm gonna be a bridesmaid. She said I could be."

"Well, I think we should leave that to the future and to them," Mary said, in her soft voice. "For now, let's concentrate on the work in hand. You are sewing that new piece very nicely, dear."

Eric looked up from his task of cutting narrow strips for laces from a piece of buckskin. "I'm gonna be just like Vincent, when I grow up. I'm gonna be a guard, a sentry. I'm gonna look out for people and I get a staff and everything. He said so." He pushed his over-large glasses back up over the bridge of his nose and grinned.

"I'm sure you will be." Mary nodded. "But right now we need to get this finished. Time is running out and we don't want Vincent to catch us in the act now, do we? We have to make sure he sees us around and doing things he expects. So, Eric, when you've finished that I think you need to go out and walk

around, like you know where you're going and what you're doing. Make sure Vincent sees you. If he asks, you're on a mission for Father. Okay?"

"Okay." The boy nodded importantly. "I know what to do. Then it'll be Ellie's turn next. Then Samantha's..."

Mary smiled at them all. They were such sweet children and her ladies were giving every bit of spare time they had. The clothes were for a very important person in all their lives, and the date for giving was drawing ever nearer. Very near indeed...

## **Pascal...**

Pascal frowned over the notations he'd made. Every code he could think of was written down in the code book he was creating. He hoped Vincent would like it. He knew Vincent would already be aware of most of them, but he thought he would add some more complicated ones and he'd even managed to get in some of Vincent's favourite poetry. When the idea arose of everyone thinking up some special gift to give Vincent for his upcoming birthday, Pascal had scratched his balding head and kept silent within the secret gathering in Father's chamber. He felt he had nothing to contribute right then.

Catherine had proposed the whole idea in a secret message to Father. She'd suggested the affair could be a big surprise. Father had delighted in the idea and had done his best to organise everything he could behind his son's broad and, hopefully, still unsuspecting back. The reward money from the cat's diamond collar had helped a lot. But Pascal didn't need any of the precious money...

He shook his head now. How could anyone surprise a man who saw everything and knew everything, often before anyone else was aware or even thought of it? Only Mouse came close to being as knowledgeable as Vincent. That was when he'd hit on the idea of the code book. It was a world he knew and a world he knew Vincent loved being a large part of.

He bent over his notebook by the light of a pair of guttering candles. Around him the Pipe Room clattered and muttered with the messages being asked and answered for the moment by Zach. Pascal felt happy with the gift he was crafting — a gift for a very important person in his life — and he was excited to a small part of the greater whole, making his contribution to a wonderful event that would soon unfold...

## **Sebastien...**

"And there you are. It was behind your ear all the time!" Sebastien produced the dollar coin from the back of the child's ear with a flourish.

“How’d that get there?” The boy’s eyes grew wide with disbelief. He felt his ear.

“Ah, a good magician never tells his secrets. They wouldn’t be secrets then, now would they?”

“Is the coin magic? Can I keep it, please?”

“Well, I guess so, since you asked so nicely.” The magician dropped the coin into the boy’s open palm and stood, stretching out the cramp in his limbs. *I must be getting old...*

“Thanks, Mister...” The boy closed his hand with a wide, gap-toothed grin. But when he opened it to peek at his prize, the coin had disappeared. He stood in stunned silence, staring at his empty palm.

“Behind your ear...remember...?” Sebastien took pity on the boy whose wide eyes began filling with tears.

Hesitantly the child put his hand to his ear and then a smile split his face. “How’d it get back there again?”

“I told you, a good magician never tells you his secrets.” Sebastien shook his head. “Now this time make sure you keep a good, tight hold on it.”

“I’m gonna be just like you when I get big,” the boy avowed breathlessly, before he darted away across the crowded subway platform, running to his mother’s side, clutching his coin as if he dared never let it go again.

Sebastien smiled, thinking of another young boy who had vowed the same oath some years before. A child with a unique face and such a loving, giving nature, despite the cruel hand nature had dealt him.

The gift Sebastien would bring to the gathering was his talents and the very best of his skills. He would dazzle and entertain and make it a night to remember. For that young boy with the unusual face he could not show to the outside world, for the man he had become. A wonderful man whom the magician had loved like his own flesh and blood from the very first time he’d seen him, a tiny babe-in-arms who someone had not cared enough about to keep. Now that baby was a very important person in his life, and the date for giving the greatest performance of his life was imminent. Very imminent indeed...He couldn’t wait to begin...

## **Lou...**

"But I don't have any idea what to give." Lou had spread his hands wide when Catherine first approached him. "As you can see the only thing I truly love is food." He patted his ample girth. "I'm an old fashioned barber, pure and simple. But I doubt you'd want me to give Vincent a birthday present of a short back and sides."

"Oh no, please don't..." Catherine's green eyes had flared wide with shock at the unwanted image his words invoked. "Don't ever suggest it. That would be...that would be...Oh, Lord, no."

"Exactly." Lou chuckled. "See my problem? I'm good at what I do, but that's all I do."

"Chocolates..." Catherine breathed hopefully. She indicated the massive box of expensive imported Swiss confections tucked almost out of sight behind a neatly folded stack of white towels at Lou's back. "You can bring everyone chocolates. I know Vincent has a sweet tooth."

"Great!" Lou's face took on a look of immeasurable relief. "That I can do. I'll bring six big boxes of the best Swiss money can buy."

"Thank you." Catherine put an unsteady hand to her forehead. "Short back and sides..." She groaned, shaking her head in disbelief. "It doesn't bear thinking about." She sat down hard in a convenient chair.

"Hey, this week I can give you a great deal." He looked her over, assessing her hairstyle. "You get the second cut for half price..."

"Just the chocolates will be fine." Catherine sighed. The gift would be appreciated, she knew that. And the date for giving was almost at hand...

## **Rebecca...**

Rebecca slipped around the curtain closing off a back portion of her candle-making chamber. Hanging neatly in row upon row, and well out of sight of any casual glance cast over the rows of every day Tunnel candles hanging in front, were the ones for Vincent's upcoming birthday party. She had laboured long and hard to achieve the exact colour of Vincent's blue eyes. Now she took the time to admire her work, feeling pleased with the final result. And also very pleased that she hadn't yet been detected in her work. Now all that remained was to shepherd the tunnel children through the delivery process for those attending the party. If only they could manage to slip in and out of the tunnels without being seen. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth and smiled. "I'm sure we can do it..."

The party was for a very important person in all their lives, and the date for delivering the candles was drawing ever nearer. “This is going to be so much fun...” She rubbed her hands together before she turned to pick up the list of children’s names...

## **Peter...**

The moment Peter saw the antique silver and ivory chess set he knew he would buy it. The board was made up with thinly sliced squares of black ebony and white marble on a wooden base bound in a silver frame. It was as if he were meant to find exactly the right gift for Vincent. If he hadn’t been held up at the Justice Building and then missed the taxi he’d tried to hail, if he hadn’t decided to walk the five blocks back to his office, instead of taking the next cab, he wouldn’t have stumbled across the tiny antique store tucked away in a side street that was sadly going out of business due to the elderly owner being recently deceased.

But he wouldn’t have been looking at all if Catherine hadn’t met him quite by chance outside the Justice Building as she’d been rushing off in the other direction while Peter was arriving, having been asked to attend an important patient who had become unwell after being arrested for solicitation. *All a huge mistake, of course...*

A hurried conversation had ensued, before a request was made, and a crumpled note shoved into Peter’s hand as Catherine managed to juggle court papers, her handbag, and a precariously balanced cup of cold coffee. And then she was gone in a swirl of perfume and a breathless smile, waving her thanks with the only two fingers she had free. Peter had stood looking after her, shaking his head in bemusement. He was so proud of her. *If only her mother could see her now...*

He knew Charles had a sneaking admiration he tried not to show. She was his beloved daughter after all and he didn’t like to see her so stressed and overworked. But she was making her own way in the world and that was what mattered.

Peter had unfolded the note and read it slowly. It was a request for a gift for a very important person in Catherine’s life and the date for giving was imminent. Very imminent indeed...

Peter looked up, staring into the middle distance. He would enjoy going Below again so soon. At the recent Winterfest celebrations, he and Jacob had raised a glass of William’s excellent beverage to absent friends and great times. Christmas had come and gone in a flurry of patients and their illnesses. But now they were going to have an extra special celebration, thanks to Catherine’s superb party planning skills, well honed in the service of her father after Cathleen had died.

*But a gift...? What could he possibly get...?*

## **Elliot...**

Elliot sat down to study the last of the maps. They were spread all around him on the huge mahogany desk in his office, spilling over the edge in a tumbled flood onto the carpet. He had spent months collecting or copying every map of Manhattan and its subterranean heart he could get his hands on. The collection now stretched to nearly two hundred, large and small. He'd taken great pains to verify their accuracy. People had accused him of planning to rebuild the entire city, so intense was his interest in the underpinnings of the island. The city's geologists now gave him a wide berth and the library workers groaned every time he set foot inside the building.

What he couldn't get done himself he set Manning's people to work on. Cleon had stared at him as if he'd finally lost it, but he didn't question his boss's latest tangent. He knew when to keep his mouth shut, but his curiosity burned brightly. This had to be one hell of a project, maybe even bigger than the aborted tower Elliot had planned all those long months ago — *years maybe* — Cleon wanted to know why that had been stopped too. *There was so much he wanted to know...*

But the media was having a field day with all of it — dubbing Elliot's map search as The Great Burch Manhattan Project. They were all waiting impatiently outside on the pavement to see what he would do next. Of course, Cleon wasn't going to tell them anything... *Vultures...*

Elliot thought now about the reporters still camped outside his office building. "If only they knew..." He shook his head. "Now that would be a headline."

Sometimes all he wanted to do was submerge himself in Vincent's secret world and forget his own. He vividly remembered the first night they had met. He'd been trailing Cathy for weeks, watching her every move, and she often went to the drainage tunnel in Central Park, sometimes re-emerging after a short time, sometimes not again until early the next morning. Those nights had been the longest to endure, wasting precious time huddled against the cold in the shelter of some waving trees. Finally Elliot had taken his courage in his hands and followed her all the way in.

It was Catherine who had flown at him, seemingly wanting to do him actual bodily harm. It was Vincent who'd intervened, saying it was already too late and they could only make the best of the situation. Elliot had stood there with his mouth wide open for several seconds. He had not known what he would find down the tunnel... *but a man with the face of a lion and an unforgettable voice he had not expected. Had he somehow strayed into Alice's Wonderland?*

“How *could* you...?” Catherine had accused with a stabbing finger. “I trusted you. You have no business being here. There’s nothing here for you.”

“I needed to know...” Elliot had shrugged. “You wouldn’t talk to me, return my calls. And then after that crazy request of yours for plastic explosives and drill bits, I thought we had an understanding...”

He did have the good sense to feel and look somewhat ashamed, but he hadn’t been able to stand the not knowing what she was doing — *or who she was meeting* — any longer. He couldn’t sleep, eat, or even think, and it was affecting his ability to function. *His work was suffering, and that he couldn’t allow any longer...*

“Well, now you know...” Catherine had snapped at him. “So, what do you intend to do with the knowledge? I will not allow you to hurt Vincent or those he cares for and protects. Be very sure of that.”

“Vincent...so that’s your name.” Elliot traded acknowledging stares with him. “Okay, so now I know. Now I will keep your secrets. All of them...” He waved a hand at Vincent. “Just don’t try and shut me out — of any of this. I care for you, Cathy...I always have. I would never hurt you. You know that.”

“I know that.” Catherine nodded slowly. “Very well, if Vincent is prepared to trust you, then I will trust you. But I still don’t like it.”

“I think that choice has already been made for us.” Vincent folded his arms beneath his mantle and leaned back against the side of the tunnel. “But we still have a lot to be thankful for. Without Elliot’s generous help that day...I would not be here now.” He shook his head. “The proof of his words will be in what Elliot chooses to do next. With the new information he now possesses.”

“All I want now is to go home and get a good night’s sleep...” Elliot huffed a laugh as he ran a tired hand up around the back of his neck. “Keeping track of you two is wearing me out...” He approached Vincent, holding out his hand. “I will keep your secrets.” He frowned critically at Vincent’s face. “Though I’m not sure anyone would believe me anyway. You are truly amazing...”

Elliot smiled now. The two men had shaken hands, curiously falling into a conversation neither had expected to conduct. About the city they both loved. Like they were old friends meeting by chance in the park. *It had been...an interesting evening.* Catherine had looked on in bemusement, appearing none too pleased but powerless to act.

Elliot shook his head now. He’d finally gotten the answers he wanted and some semblance of peace. Of course Catherine still denied his phone calls. She’d refused to speak to him at all for nearly a month afterwards.

Elliot shrugged. “So be it. I can wait...”



But he thought about Vincent often...and Catherine. Of how they trusted him. Of how little they asked in return. Of how much he could have loved Catherine, if only she'd allowed him to show her. But her choice had been made, even before they'd first met on the night he'd gifted the art collection to the Met. And he found he couldn't begrudge her the love she'd found with Vincent. He was an unusual man and someone Elliot was proud to call his friend.

"God help me, I don't have too many of those. Not genuine ones, anyway." He shook his head on a grim laugh. "Am I getting old and maudlin, or is it just the whiskey talking?" He lifted the cut crystal tumbler at his elbow and drained it of the rich amber liquid in one long swallow.

The slowly spreading warmth drove the chill from around his heart. It had been a while since he'd ventured Below. The first time he'd tried it on his own, he'd gotten totally lost. He'd banged on the pipes, and finally they'd sent that strange Mouse character to find him, to help him stumble out again. Now he knew to wait for instructions and a guide. And finally the invitation had been issued. Catherine finally trusted him enough to ask him to attend the party. It was well past time he ventured back and renewed some old acquaintances.

He began to gather the maps, rolling them carefully and returning each of them in turn to their stainless steel tubes bound in tooled navy leather. Each container had been marked with steel identity disks pressed into the leather and secured with tiny brass pins. The gift was for a very important person in his life and the woman the man loved beyond everything. Elliot longed to see Catherine again, if only to make sure she was well and happy...and the time was almost upon him. He could hardly wait...

**Joe...**

Joe frowned at the battery-powered tape deck. It was the best his money could buy. It had been Catherine's idea for his secret gift for Vincent. She'd organised the whole shebang and everyone knew their part. He had to admit, even if she was a rich, up-town girl, she had considerable class and great skills as a lawyer, an organiser and a friend.

*But there was still something missing.* His frowning gaze skipped to the stack of tapes beside the machine. He leaned closer to read the spines of each in turn. *Chopin, Mozart, Grieg and Schubert...* He grimaced, praying he hadn't been seen by anyone he knew when he was in the music store buying all these weird guys, half of whom he'd never even heard of. *So what's wrong with a little Billy Joel or Bruce, the Boss, Springsteen to lighten the mood...?*

"Okay, Radcliffe, I get it, I don't have a classical appreciation bone in my body and I'm proud of it. But, for Pete's sake, there is life beyond the nineteenth century..." He shrugged and mumbled on. "Yeah, but orders are orders. And she'll kill me if I change a single thing..." And Vincent had saved his life, after all,

that night in the park nearly two years ago now. Saved him from being neatly skewered and gutted like some damned fish. “So I owe him, right?”

Radcliffe had grilled him like the great lawyer she was the moment she’d found out his secret. She’d cornered him in his office — that first Monday back after Christmas — shut and locked the door before demanding he tell her everything...*right now! God*, she’d made him sweat! He thought he was going to have a heart attack when she said she knew everything about what he’d been doing and he couldn’t hide it from her any longer.

“Everything...what?” He’d risen from behind his desk, mind working overtime, arms flailing in an attempt to divert her from her purpose. He’d given her his best disbelieving frown. *Deny, deny, deny*. “What gives, Radcliffe...?”

“I’ll tell you what gives, Joe...” Chandler had walked right up to his face then, staring deep into his eyes. That’s when he thought his heart would give out on him for a second time. But right then — right when she had him squirming and hunting for the way out — she’d smiled wickedly, like a kid who’d just gotten the keys to the candy store and everything was for free. That’s when she told him it was her secret too. Joe had dropped back into his chair again with a heavy thump, stunned beyond words, his mouth hanging open like a fly trap. Finally he gasped, “Where did you....how did you...?”

*And so she told him...everything...*

“That Van Gogh painting of the sunflowers signed *Vincent 87* has a lot to answer for...” Joe grinned now. Vincent had liked that, he’d loved the colours, just as Joe knew he would. *So Joe Maxwell does have some taste, after all...see, Radcliffe...I’m not the total plebeian you thought I was...And yes, I actually do know which knife and fork to use in polite company, thank you, very much...*

Now he planned to enjoy himself hugely. He’d never been into the subterranean world beneath the streets of Manhattan before. He’d met Vincent a couple of times in the tunnel entrance in Central Park, but mainly they arranged meetings for the basement of his apartment building if Joe needed his help with something or Vincent needed information. He felt a rush of excitement that he finally got to go there, to see everything.

He reached to tap a forefinger on the tape deck. Without Vincent he wouldn’t be here at all. It was well past time to pay it forward...and the gift was a fair trade for his life and the date for giving was imminent...But maybe he’d still slip in a little of his favourite Billy Joel and maybe even some Elvis...liven things up a bit...*What could it hurt...right, Radcliffe?*

## Lady May...

Lady May turned the piece of Greek statuary over in her thin hands. She was old enough, but this piece of artwork could give her a good couple of thousand years and then some. It had been an acquisition of her late husband, one of many he'd bought to show off his buying power. Of course he'd bought it only for its monetary value and guaranteed appreciation in worth. He didn't care if it was as ugly as sin, or a thing of exquisite, breath-taking beauty. He never did have an eye for the item's true quality, for its clean lines and pure symmetry of simplicity.

It was a small marble statuette of a young javelin thrower eternally balanced on the point of releasing his missile towards some long-vanished target. The boy's free arm was stretched toward the heavens, forefinger pointing the way, the javelin hand clenched and firm, knuckles stark with tension around the shaft. The workmanship was so good even the thin leather strap could be seen looped across the child's fingers to balance the weapon for accurate flight. Every muscle, every straining line had been lovingly carved and the patina of age had imbued the statuette with a sense of life and movement.

The piece had been found, carefully wrapped in the crumbled remains of a linen shawl covered with a piece of disintegrated goat skin, buried in the rubble of a house on the outskirts of ruined Pompeii. Her husband had rushed to buy it the moment it had been unearthed. It was exquisite and unbelievably intact, cocooned as it was in a special cavity that had been carved for it within the bedroom wall of the ruined Roman villa. Presumably the previous owner had looted the piece in the first place from some ancient Greek city or maybe even Olympus itself.

Every time Lady May looked at it or thought about it she could almost see and hear the crowds at the ancient site of the Olympic Games, willing the young boy to succeed, to bring honour and wealth to his city state and allow him to stand proudly in the great temple, before the towering statue of the god, Zeus and be showered with praise. *To succeed against all the odds...*

A shiver passed through her at the thought of the long line of unknown hands that had guarded the statuette and miraculously ensured its survival. She brought her thoughts back to Vincent, a man who had succeeded against all the odds. She didn't care for the monetary value of the piece, and she was well aware he would not either. But the joy and pleasure it would give would be beyond price. She smiled as she reached for the box she intended to wrap the statuette in.

The gift was for a very important person in her life, someone she had known from almost the very point of his birth and whom she loved dearly, like the son she was destined never to have. And the date for giving was drawing near indeed...

## Vincent...

Vincent had the deep suspicion that everyone in the tunnels was avoiding him for some unknown and puzzling reason. There had been unexplained desertions from projects half completed, and whenever he saw someone in the distance, they were usually moving away from him, not lingering to talk or exchange more than a hurried greeting and farewell almost in the same breath. Only yesterday Cullen had fled his presence muttering fiercely and hadn't stopped, even when Vincent had called his name.

And the children kept appearing and disappearing like revolving ducks in a sideshow shooting gallery. *Now you see them, now you don't.* They came for their lessons, did their chores, did everything that was required of them, but there was also unexplained absences when the usual childish chatter and bustle of the tunnels was unaccountably stilled. The silence was becoming unnerving. He'd asked Eric where he was hurrying off to just yesterday...

"Father needs me." The boy had nearly jumped out of his skin at the sight of his good friend, his eyes big and wide behind his glasses. "Got to take a message...to Richard on the...on the 59<sup>th</sup> Street gate. That's what Father said. It's very important. Can't stop. Gotta go, Vincent. Sorry."

*If he was a naturally suspicious man, he would say something very mysterious was going on. Was there some new project he was not yet aware of?* Vincent sat back in the chair before his writing desk, frowning. Cleopatra was curled up into a contented ball on the Persian rug beside him, one green eye lazily tracking his movements.

Vincent intended to make a diary entry before retiring for the night, but the pen rested — forgotten — clasped in his left hand. He stared at the date at the top of the diary page. He discovered he'd forgotten tomorrow was his birthday.

"January 12<sup>th</sup>..." He turned the page to stare at the blank space it offered. *What would he write in it this year?*

After the excitement of Winterfest and then the Christmas celebrations, his birthday usually passed in quiet contemplation with little fuss. He couldn't say he preferred in that way, but he'd become content with spending a peaceful evening playing chess with Father and sharing time with some good friends. There were always small gifts and warm words of appreciation that he valued highly. It was enough. Then a few months ago, Catherine had questioned him about his birthday celebrations and what gifts he was looking forward to receiving. He'd frowned — listening to his own quick reply that he preferred to keep it simple and mentally shrugging against a vague sense of discontent.

But he had gone on to say that when Devin had lived among them he'd made sure his little brother Vincent's special day wasn't forgotten in the rush of the other two larger celebrations. Back then, amid the party chaos and over-excited children who often ate too much — and were therefore violently sick afterwards — Father had expressed a fervent wish for some measure of blessed peace and quiet to

reign...

Vincent smiled at the memories. It had been several years before Father had his wish granted, after Devin had left the tunnels. Two nights ago at the evening meal table Vincent had tried to ask Mouse about the work in progress on a particular project, but before the tinker could answer, Cullen had swooped in and pulled the boy away, saying they had an urgent consultation that just couldn't wait.

"Sorry, Vincent..." Cullen had shrugged, dragging a protesting Mouse behind him.

Vincent had stared after them in consternation. There had been a strange nimbus of barely suppressed excitement glowing in Mouse's guileless blue eyes, as if he were sitting on some enormous secret and he would explode in the very near future if he didn't share it with someone. Vincent could only pray the boy was not bent on one of his solo efforts seeking to improve the lives of the tunnel folk, which could erupt into chaos and mayhem at any moment...

Vincent shook his head. Even Catherine seemed to be avoiding him, citing the pressure of work when they had last spoken on her balcony nearly a week ago. Something was going on. Ever since Winterfest there had been all that furtive scurrying and a decided lack of progress in any direction. Vincent determined to approach Father and talk the issue out first thing in the morning.

Birthday or no birthday, he wanted to get to the bottom of it all. *Find out exactly what was going on...*

## **Happy birthday, Vincent...**

"Happy birthday, Vincent..." Catherine stood in the middle of Vincent's chamber. She held out her hands towards him as he entered the room.

"I have no words to thank you..." Vincent whispered, as he came near to close his fingers around hers. "But I think I love you more in this moment than any other."

"That's a good start...I can work with that." Catherine's generous mouth curved with pleasure, as she dipped her head to glance up at him through her lashes. "It was my pleasure to arrange it all for you. It wasn't easy, I can tell you. But I wanted to do something special for your birthday...for you." She carried one of his hands to her lips, kissing the back softly. "I thought we could have our own, private celebration in here as my final gift to you. I'm sure Devin and Charles are quite capable of controlling the party down in the Great Hall. Lord knows when or how it will end. The last thing I saw was Joe challenging Elliot to a bout of arm wrestling. Lady May decided she should act as the referee to ensure fair play."

Vincent laughed. "Yes, I heard them arguing about that. And Father has already commandeered my new chess set and demanded a rematch from Sebastien. He hasn't forgiven him for the last drubbing

he received, but I fear he will never learn. Peter counselled him most strongly not to do it...”

“So, since all the children are occupied, I thought we could make good our escape and have a quiet meal together. Just the two of us.”

“Have I told you recently how marvellous you are...?” Vincent spread their linked hands wide to admire the picture she made. “And you look wonderful.”

“It’s just something I slipped into at the last minute...” Catherine smiled as she glanced down at the draped velvet beauty of her peacock-blue evening gown she’d bought after her lovely Italian brunch with her father. “But thank you.” She brought him close to her, reaching to press a soft kiss against his lips. “I owe you everything...”

Behind them William cleared his throat in apology as he slipped quietly into the chamber carrying a covered tray. Behind him came Mouse and Jamie also carrying trays. Vincent’s table had already been set with a linen tablecloth and cutlery. William produced a lighter to ignite the tall, blue candles of the candelabra in the middle of the table. He then moved to extinguish all other illumination in the room, bringing the focus down to the table in the centre of the room.

“Happy birthday, Vincent...” Jamie came forward to quickly kiss his cheek, before turning to her task of setting out the food and hurrying out of the chamber again.

“Thanks, Vincent, for finding me. For making me into Mouse. I’ll never forget...” The tinker ducked his head shyly before scurrying back to his task.

“It’s all here, Catherine...” William approached them. “Everything you asked for. The dessert’s on the sideboard. Help yourselves when you’re ready.” He turned to Vincent. “Happy birthday, and thanks for being my friend, Vincent. I owe you more than I can ever say. And Cleo will be sleeping with me tonight...”

He sniffed sternly as he shook Vincent’s outstretched hand before turning away to gruffly command Mouse to move himself and *stop standing there gawping like a prize fool...*

They both hurried out, William turning to close the privacy curtain over the doorway behind him, pausing to give Catherine a wink and a grin. She nodded her thanks, returning his smile before the leather fell neatly into place and they were alone once more.

“Milady...” Vincent drew out Catherine’s chair with a small bow.

“Thank you, Vincent.” Catherine seated herself, waiting for him to take his place.

The meal was simple yet delicious, as Catherine had expected it to be. She had come to know William's skills as a chef very well. It was only later when she and Vincent had finally finished their sweet that Catherine remembered something Joe had told her earlier in the evening. She reached to take Vincent's hand to draw him back into the middle of the room.

Standing in front of him she grasped the front of his shirt with both hands, bringing him closer still. Vincent placed his own on her waist, sliding them around to link his fingers in the small of her back bringing her against him from chest to thigh. "What is it?" he questioned softly. "What do you have for me now?"

"Just something a little extra..." Catherine went up on tiptoe to run a questing kiss across his lips, smiling against his mouth. She lifted her hands to the glorious length of his mane — *which Lou was never going to touch* — tangling her fingers there briefly before pulling back fractionally to look up into his loving eyes. "Joe said he asked Mouse to lead him to your chamber earlier in the evening. He said he wanted to show me he wasn't totally without class and he could appreciate fine music as well as the next guy. Meaning you, I suppose..." She shook her head. "He said he's put something in the tape machine he gave you. He thought we might enjoy it."

She turned to depress the play button and the cassette tape clicked then engaged. There was a pause before the chamber was suddenly filled with the voice of Billy Joel singing *Uptown Girl*...

"Oh, no..." Catherine groaned, dropping her head forward to rest against the broad strength of Vincent's shoulder and feeling the quiet laughter rippling through his body in appreciation of a master-stroke of considerable genius. "I am seriously going to kill that man in the morning..."

Vincent pulled back to look down at her, tipping up her chin on the back of his fingers. "I could get used to this..." He smiled. "In small doses..." He leaned down to brush his lips softly across hers.

Catherine laughed against his teasing mouth. "Happy birthday, Vincent," she whispered, moving deeper into his arms as she lengthened the kiss, and together they began to sway slowly to the music. And, for a long time, there was no need for words...



END