



Once Upon Another Time...

Judith Nolan

"You must give everything to make your life as beautiful as the dreams that dance in your imagination."

~ Roman Payne

The last strains of the spirited music died away into the lofty shadows of the Great Hall's vaulted granite ceiling. In the centre of the hall, the dancing came to an end amid appreciative applause. Smiling musicians nodded their thanks as William and his helpers began moving among them handing out sustaining mugs filled to the brim with his best libation, along with platters of food. Everything was quickly consumed by the hungry players and the level of conversation in the huge chamber picked up steadily, increasing with enough volume to create faint echoes. Everywhere, Winterfest candles flickered and trembled, throwing dancing shadows onto the walls and tapestries around the hall, adding their own air of mystery to the darker places beyond the pools of revealing light.

Off to one side out of the main crowd, Sebastien cast an assessing eye over his audience as he began to create a new trick for Jamie, watched by Lou and a small crowd. Among them, Mouse peered closely, sure he was being deceived, but unsure exactly how the magician achieved the end result. Mouse believed in what his eyes and senses told him, what he knew and understood. He didn't like surprises, much less being taken for a fool. He knew he would discover the trick, *if he just looked hard enough...*

Beside him Jamie shook her head and frowned. "If you really think you're the greatest magician in the world, how come you do all your tricks in the subways? Why aren't you up on Broadway with your name in lights?"

"Good one, Jamie." Lou laughed. "Go on then, the little lady's certainly gotcha good there."

“A mere *bagatelle*.” Sebastien shrugged with an eloquent wave of his free hand. “No, no, no. If I wanted to perform on the stage, I would be accepted like that.” He snapped his fingers. “I am that famous.” He cleared his throat before continuing on a dismissive shrug. “But I have no need of that. I *love* the subway. And the streets...”

He spread his hands wide. “What Broadway theatre can compare with New York City streets? I get to see it all. The men rushing to work, the children at play, the girls in their beautiful summer dresses.... And everyone wants a little magic, a little something extra to get them through their day. That momentary chance to believe...”

Smiling, he turned his wand into a handkerchief, and then that changed into a bunch of flowers. “And Sebastian is there, to give it to them. To make them all smile and wonder — just a little — about the magic. How *did* he do that?”

“That’s what Mouse wants to know,” the tinker opined darkly. “It’s not natural.”

“It’s as natural as breathing. For me, anyway.” Sebastien chuckled. “Like, where did this come from?”

He reached quickly beneath Mouse’s floppy blond hair before the boy could protest or pull away, to produce a small chicken’s egg. He held it up to the crowd in his fingertips, looking around, vastly pleased with their confused and stunned expressions. Mouse couldn’t resist doing a swift body search on himself to make sure he wasn’t carrying any more.

“How’d you do that?” he demanded to know, dropping his hands with a scowl.

“Easy...” Sebastien flourished the hand holding the egg, passed his other hand across it and the egg vanished. He then spread his hands wide with a shrug. “But a great magician never tells his secrets.”

“Okay, I give up.” Mouse’s mouth turned down at the corners. “You’re good. Too good.”

“Thank you, Mouse.” Sebastien inclined his head, accepting his due. “But then, could you explain the workings of the combustion engine to me in terms I would understand? How does it convert gasoline into forward motion?”

“Oh, that’s easy!” Mouse brightened. “Mouse knows that! Doesn’t everyone?”

“No, everyone doesn’t understand it, Mouse. That’s my whole point. So there you are then...” Sebastien smiled. “You know what you know, and I know what I know.” He tapped the side of his nose conspiratorially with a forefinger before holding his hand out. “Does that make us even?”

“Oh...Okay good, okay fine!” Mouse accepted the magician’s hand with alacrity, pumping it up and down until the older man winced. “Mouse gets it now! Very, very good joke. Ha, ha...”

“I’m so glad...” Sebastien snatched away his abused hand, shaking it briskly to regain some feeling in his numbed fingers.

Just then the reassembled musicians began to strike up the opening strains of a haunting Strauss waltz. A few people among the crowd began to take the floor, neatly marking the three-quarter time with the ease of long practice, watched closely by those more unsure of their

level of ability. But the music was infectious and soon more dancers began to swirl around the floor in laughing harmony.

On the edge of the crowd, Catherine and Vincent stood together, listening to the music, watching the dancers as they steadily increased in number and confidence. Father, clutching the box containing his beloved chess set beneath his arm, detached himself from trying to persuade Peter to have a game with him, and drifted to stand beside them.

Observing Catherine, with her arms crossed at her waist, swaying slowly to the music and tapping her foot, Father remarked, "It's going rather well, wouldn't you say? One's first Winterfest is always special. And Catherine, you do seem to be enjoying the music."

"Oh, yes..." Catherine lifted one hand to move her fingers in time with the tune. "Yes, I am, very much. My parents loved to dance to this piece. I've always especially enjoyed the waltz..." She began to hum the tune, lost momentarily in times past.

"Yes, I see..." Father smiled. "Well, you know in its time, the waltz was considered quite scandalous...wicked, even. It was thought to be suitable only for the lower classes; those who knew no better than to cavort so shamelessly. A pity really, I think. It is such wonderful fun."

"Oh, dear..." Catherine glanced at him, smiling. "Imagine that. How terrible. What a waste of a perfectly innocent dance."

"Yes, well, I certainly have trodden many a measure in this hall in my time." Father shrugged, tapping his hip with the head of his cane. "Alas, my leg now confines me to merely observing, and trying to find someone willing to play chess with me."

He glanced hopefully at Vincent, who shook his head with a smile. "I'm sorry, Father, but you need to find someone you can still beat."

"Yes..." Father huffed a rueful laugh. "I'm afraid you're right. Lord knows there are not many of them left for me now. Perhaps, Catherine...?"

"I'm very sorry, Father." Catherine smiled at him in sympathy before turning her attention back to the centre of the hall. "That would require too much thinking right now. But I am in the mood to be a little scandalously wicked..."

Shifting her attention from the dancers, who seemed to be enjoying themselves hugely, she slanted her head, considering Vincent. "Vincent, can I...may I ask you something very...personal?"

"Um, well, please excuse me..." Father blinked, clearing his throat, as he turned away, preparing to leave them alone.

"Of course..." Vincent smiled, moving closer and inclining his head. "You know you can ask me anything, Catherine."

"I wanted to ask you..." She extended her hands towards him. "Do you dance?"

"Oh, I see." Father turned back toward them. He appeared to be about to speak, before his son's swift sideways glance halted him. "Yes, of course..." The old man nodded as he assumed a carefully composed, bland expression, studying his son's face closely, waiting for his reaction. But his eyes sparkled with wicked amusement.

"Well..." Vincent turned his attention back to Catherine, considering her for a long time before replying. "I have been known to take a turn or two around the floor, if the music moves me."

“Excellent. Consider yourself moved then...right now.” Catherine approved with a small laugh. “Vincent, I would very much like to dance with you.”

“Why, of course. You only had to ask...” He bowed formally, extending his hand with a courtly flourish. “Catherine, may I have this dance...?”

“I thought you would never ask...” Catherine smiled as she dipped a small courtesy before placing her hand in his. Together they walked to the edge of the swirling dancers. Turning to face each other, Vincent placed his hand on her waist, clasping the other at his shoulder, and they stepped neatly into the rhythm of the waltz.

On seeing the pair taking the floor, the band didn’t pause at the end of the first dance, but swept on into another waltz, an intoxicating melody that made the dancers swirl and turn. Then, before they could pause to gather their collective breath, the beat changed again, becoming an elegant foxtrot.

“Oh, I love this too...” Catherine approved, laughing up at Vincent’s smiling expression. “I could dance all night. And I am pleasantly surprised how good a dancer you are, Vincent. You never told me.”

“But then you never asked before. Happy Winterfest, Catherine...” Vincent dipped his head closer to hers as they circled the floor. “Are you ready...?” he whispered.

“Ready for what...?” She looked up, deep into his blue eyes, seeing twin devils of deep merriment dancing there. “Oh...” Secure in Vincent’s suddenly tightened hold, Catherine found she was being expertly dipped before being taken around in a half-circle and back up again to rest briefly against Vincent’s chest, before reassuming the correct position. She gasped in delighted shock as they continued to

dance, but she noticed Vincent's expression was filled with a beguiling look of mischief.

"Wow! I'm impressed, Vincent. Where did that move come from?"

"I have a secret." Vincent shook his head. "I'm afraid Devin is responsible for that particular pass. He taught me to dance when we were children. As you know, my big brother never does anything by halves. Jeff Radler is only one of his many faces."

As they passed around the hall within the circle of dancers Catherine frowned up at him with deepening suspicion. "Go on..."

"Well, when he suddenly decided he couldn't have a little brother with two distinct left feet, he went Above and enrolled in a dance academy. He took lessons himself so he could then teach me. But, Devin didn't always make the best of partners. Unfortunately, he'd also decided it was his place to lead, citing he was older and therefore in charge. He insisted I needed to learn to dance, but would not allow anyone else to help me. Long ago I decided that ladies made far better partners."

"That brother of yours never ceases to astound me." Catherine laughed. "So, dare I ask what else you have in your repertoire?"

Vincent leaned close to whisper a quotation from Shakespeare's, *The Tempest* in her ear.

"Before you can say come, and go, and breathe twice; and cry, so, so. Each one tripping on his toe will be here with mop, and mow."

Have you ever tripped the light fantastic, Catherine?"

~ FIN ~

*"You've gotta dance like there's nobody watching,
Love like you'll never be hurt,
Sing like there's nobody listening,
And live like it's heaven on earth."*

~ William W. Purkey