

# The Pen

*By Judith Nolan*

*"Writing ink is the magic that allows nothing to become something. It catches the fleeting idea and seeks out the glances of those who wish to see. Even a random ink splat will mean something to someone."*

**~ Fennel Hudson**



Vincent stared at the small, narrow box he had just unwrapped. Freed from its ribbons and elegant, foil-paper covering, the gift itself looked second-hand, already well-used and worn. Despite this obvious flaw, Vincent smiled, slowly tracing the badly-faded words on the lid with a reverent fingertip. Even in the flickering candlelight of his chamber, his sharp eyes could discern the stencilled legend.

“The Conway Stewart Pen...London,” he whispered, his smile widening. He gave the box a slight shake and something rattled inside. He looked up. “Thank you, Catherine. I shall treasure it always.”

Catherine sighed, watching his reaction. It was all she had hoped for, and more. “I’m so glad. It’s very old. It belonged to my mother’s father. The family legend is that he wrote long love letters to his wife with this pen, every night he was away from her on business.” She had known he would truly appreciate the beauty of the gift.

She lifted one shoulder. “My father had been clearing out an old desk, and he was going to throw this pen away. He said no-one uses them anymore. Besides he discovered it was broken, and the nib had been almost completely worn down.” She looked up. “From writing all those letters, I’m guessing.”

“My father will be envious.” Vincent nodded, studying the box lid. “And I have a few ideas on how to make full use of such a fine instrument.”

“But you haven’t opened it.” Catherine came forward to take the present from him. “I was at a loss to know what gift would be best. The moment I saw this I knew it was meant for you. I had it repaired and personalised.” Lifting the lid, and slipping it beneath the box, she offered the gift again. “I know it’s a day early, but Merry Christmas, Vincent.”

“I need nothing more than to see you.” Vincent leaned down to kiss her cheek. “But this is truly special.”

He made a soft sound of appreciation as he took the box from her in one hand, dipping careful fingers in with the other, lifting out a rose-brown tortoise-shell and gold-mounted pen. It fit neatly in his large hand, as if it had always been meant for him. He tested the balance and feel of it, and it didn't disappoint. He held it up to the light, assessing it from all angles. It was then he saw the pen had been engraved in gold, along the barrel, with his name.

"*Vincent For Always...*" He read slowly. "It's beautiful." He frowned as he looked back to Catherine. "I'm sorry. If I had known you were bringing me such a gift..." His lips compressed with obvious disappointment. He shrugged his apology. "There was no time..."

"It's all right, Vincent, really..." Catherine hurried into speech. "My father insisted on a family get-together on Christmas Day, so we had to do this now. And all I will ever need is you. You know that. What we have together is truly everything." She clasped both hands around his forearm to emphasis her forgiveness. "You don't need to give me something in return."

"*The lady doth protest too much, methinks...*" Vincent mocked her gently with a Hamlet quotation. "I never said I do not have something for you..."

"It's not that." He sighed. "I'm afraid the method of delivery may be faulty," he continued cryptically. "And somewhat tardy, to say the least. There were promises made some months ago that have not been adhered too. But then, perhaps I asked too much of them."

“I’m sorry, but you’ve lost me.” Catherine came closer, sliding one arm around Vincent’s waist, dropping her head back to look up at him, raising her free hand to cup his cheek in her palm. “We can do this another day, I promise. I’m so happy I found the pen for you. I couldn’t wait until next weekend to give it to you. We can sit and talk for a while, before I need to return Above.”

Vincent was about to reply, when there was a commotion behind his back, the combined sounds of shouting and running feet, before someone burst into the chamber, skidding to a breathless halt. Turning, Vincent’s bulk effectively cut off Catherine’s view of the intruder, but she recognised his voice immediately.

*“Catherine! Vincent’s Catherine! Seen!”* Mouse stumbled over the words, his arms waving in agitation. “Coming down! From Up Top! Be here soon! But Mouse made it on time! Yes?” The tinker’s voice rose hopefully on the last word. “Vincent not mad at Mouse?”

“No, I am not mad at you, Mouse,” Vincent was quick to reassure his friend. “But Catherine is already here.” He stepped aside to show his love watching them both with amusement.

“Catherine, here? Oh...” Mouse’s mobile face immediately dropped into melancholy, his bottom lip quivering. “Mouse late, after all. Mouse bad. Mouse sorry.” His whole body slumped.

“Oh no, Mouse...” Catherine put out a hand towards him. “Truly it’s all right. You’re not late, I’m early. I cannot be here tomorrow, that’s all.”

“Catherine, early...” Mouse brightened. “Okay good! Okay fine, then! Mouse did all right?” He looked to Vincent for confirmation.

“Mouse did more than all right, if he has brought with him what I requested.” Vincent looked down at the tinker’s empty hands. “Or did you leave it behind in your rush to tell me about Catherine?”

“Catherine...Vincent’s Catherine...” Mouse bobbed his shaggy blond head. “Got it, of course.” He patted a bulging pocket in his ragged jacket. “Vincent asked. Mouse said ‘can do’. Cullen carved it. But Mouse did all the rest. Used only the best wire,” he confided cryptically. “Good stuff.” He drew himself up to his full height. “Found, not taken,” he concluded proudly.

He grinned at Catherine. “Everyone asks Mouse. All the time. Mouse, can you do this? Mouse, can you fix that? Mouse, come here now, I need you. Everyone wants Mouse.”

His wide blue eyes flew upwards to his best friend. “Even Vincent needs Mouse.” He nodded wisely, very pleased with his observation.

“Sometimes...” His candid gaze slid past to assess Catherine. “But now, not always...”

“Right now, Vincent needs what he asked for,” Vincent replied patiently, shaking his head as he held out his free hand. “Do you have it?”

Mouse frowned, jerking his head from side to side for a long moment, before his confused expression suddenly cleared. “Oh, the present!” His open hand dived into his copious pocket, jangled among unseen items

for a moment, before he suddenly produced a small, rather grubby, cloth-wrapped package. “Yes!” He held it out, winking and nodding. “For Catherine. Vincent said, ‘secret’. Said, Mouse, you are not allowed to tell anyone.” He intoned Vincent’s speech patterns perfectly.

“Thank you, Mouse.” Catherine couldn’t help laughing. She reached to draw the tinker closer, before kissing his cheek. “You did really great.”

“Okay, good! Okay, *fine!*” A rosy flush of colour mantled the boy’s cheeks. He giggled as he ducked his head, before whirling on one heel and vanishing back through the doorway and into the tunnel beyond.

“You know...” Vincent looked after him. “I have lived with that boy for many years, and he still manages to surprise me.”

“What is that?” Catherine indicated the package Vincent was holding, after he didn’t speak for several moments.

“My gift to you.” Vincent looked down, studying the two presents, one in each hand. The slim box with its faded blue legend and then the carelessly-wrapped bundle sitting on his broad palm. He placed the pen carefully beside his diary on the table behind him, before turning back to his love.

“Merry Christmas, Catherine.” He held out the package Mouse had delivered.

“Thank you, Vincent.” Catherine watched him as she reached to take his gift. Vincent seemed unsure of her reaction to whatever was concealed

beneath the scrap of ragged material tied together with a length of frayed, blue string. Mouse obviously believed in functionality of purpose over beauty. But, whatever it was, she knew she would love it.

The string, and then the cloth, fell away easily as soon as she tugged at them, revealing a simple, oval frame made from plaited gold wire that nestled neatly in the palm of her hand. Within the frame a rose cameo portrait of her likeness had been carved in stunning and exquisite detail. She was smiling, looking at something — or someone — just out of sight beyond the edge of the frame. The deep love mirrored in her expression was plain to see.

“Oh, Vincent...” Catherine breathed, stunned into immobility. “It is beautiful...” Tears made her vision swim. She brushed them away with one finger. “I don’t know what to say...”

“It is not as beautiful as you...” Vincent came closer, looking down at his gift. “But it is incredible. I had not seen this until now. Mouse and Cullen refused to show me. They said it was to be a surprise for both of us. They have excelled themselves.”

Catherine ran an appreciative fingertip around the gold frame, shaking her head in wonderment. “They both have amazing talents. True artists.”

“Yes, but please don’t tell Mouse that.” Vincent chuckled, drawing her in against his side with one arm around her waist, before lowering his head to kiss her with incredible tenderness. With her free hand, Catherine reached up to thread her fingers into his mane, pulling him closer still.

There was silence in the chamber for some time before Vincent finally raised his head. "Mouse thinks very highly of your opinion of him. There would be no living with him if he heard you had said he was amazing."

He chuckled as he looked down into her green eyes, smiling up at him with that same look of deep love as portrayed in the cameo. "You haven't looked at the back of my gift," he continued softly, kissing the tip of her nose.

"Is there something more?" Catherine asked shakily, before she looked down, turning the cameo over to study the other side. "Oh, Vincent, I don't believe it. How did you know?"

"Because it is how I wish it to be for us." Vincent cupped her hands within his, lifting the cameo into the light. "How it will always be, if only we believe..."

Written neatly, using thin gold wire pinned across the reverse of the cameo's frame, were the words *Catherine For Always...*

**~ END ~**





*Wherever this festive season finds you, I hope you will also find your  
own Always...*

*~ Judi*