

# *Birthday Girl*

*By Cindy Rae*



I, Catherine Chandler, do solemnly swear to make mistakes this year. I vow and affirm that I am flawed, and imperfect, and that those flaws and imperfections are as much a part of me as my strengths and virtues. No more trying to look perfect on the outside to avoid the failings on the inside. No more fashion law. Cathy Perfect has left the building, and good riddance to her. I liked her, don't misunderstand. I liked her. But I'm not sure I ever loved her.

I carry a scar on my face. I carry a few on my heart.

But I've learned so much in the last year, so much in this first year since He stepped back into my life, just as He stepped onto my balcony. Learned so much about scars, and strengths, and the gifts those bring you. So much about giving, and accepting. So much about the gifts that come from the inside, as much as the out. Gifts of the heart. Gentle gifts.

Gentle gifts. Birthday gifts.

It's my birthday.

My father and friends had a party for me. And as I sit here among the aftermath of it all, the lovely boxes full of trinkets and treasure, the thoughtful tokens from all from the people who love me, I wonder...

Is any of it worth anything, really?

There's a silk scarf worth a small fortune in one of these boxes. I can't even remember who it's from. I think it has a matching umbrella. Such a thoughtful gift. Perhaps it's from my Father. Perhaps it's from Nancy. The scarf is big.

If I tie it a certain way, over my head, you can't see my scar.

Is that what the giver meant? To give me a way to hide it? Not that they'd ever *say* that, of course. You can never say such a thing to someone who's been marred. And perhaps they weren't even aware they thought it. But deep down, was that what the scarf is for?

Jenny gave me a beautiful gift certificate. A salon, where they'll treat me like a queen and give me a make-over. Jenny likes their foundation. She had a touch of acne in high school, and it left a mark on her chin. She uses the make-up to cover it.

Perhaps she thinks I need some, too? Something thick, and smooth, to hide the long scar near my ear? A way to pretend it never happened, and Happy Birthday to me?

It's all right, Jenny.

It's all right, Nancy.

I'm flawed, now. And *all* of it is all right, I promise you.

I'm impulsive and a little reckless. A little late and a little stubborn. I spent too many years looking into a mirror, and not enough looking out into the world. I don't do that, now.

You'd be surprised at how much a reflection will show you. And how much it won't.

Now, I don't just look "at" myself. I look inside myself. And now, I look outside, to everything that lays beyond what I thought I knew.

There's a world, out there. Down there...

There's the world you know about, and the one world you don't. Not some distant planet, mind you, not some far flung star. But still, another world, just the same. A different world. And it's right beneath all our feet. Did you know, my friends? Could you? I didn't. I couldn't.

They keep each other warm. They keep each other safe.

The kind of warm and safe you all wanted for me, but I never found it. Never found it until an April night, when I was at my coldest. Never found it until... Him.

Have you ever felt safe, Jenny? Ever felt truly, truly safe? Ever felt your bones warm against the cold, knowing you were wrapped in something that would never, never fail you?

Well I have. And I can tell you, my dearest friend, that there is nothing, nothing like that feeling. Nothing in all the world. I am safe. I am safe, now, my dearest loves. Safe in a way I'd never been. Safe enough to dream. Safe enough to hope.

I know where hope is, Jenny. I know where they keep it.

If you cross the park to a drainage tunnel, or go through my basement down a spiral staircase that looks like it winds forever, you find it. So much hope you can't imagine. So much of it there's enough for everyone, for all of them. There's enough for you. And enough for me.

There's so much power in that hope. So much strength in a wish. Birthday wish.

Make one. Make a wish. Even if it isn't your birthday. Go ahead. Be brave. Be braver than you've ever been. Use my wish, if you have to.

Do you think you'll never find true love, my dears?

You mustn't think that.

Do you think the world is a dreary place, full only of struggle, and loss?

You must never hold such a dark thing as true. Because I know. I *know* that the world is touched by candlelight and lanterns. That the struggles and the losses we all suffer can lead us to something better. Something kinder. Something warm, and full of soft words. Full of poetry, and music. Something that shelters all of us, in the dark.

I used to be afraid of the dark.

Now I can't wait for the sun to set.

In high summer, the sun is up too long. I think He can feel my impatience, as I wait for the twilight to deepen, for the darkness to come.

But this isn't summer. This is September, and far closer to the end of the month than the beginning. We're just a few days off the equinox, and He can come to me earlier and earlier. The nights are growing longer. Good. That is a good thing, my dears.

The dark is a sheltering thing. Like a huge cape, made of patchwork. Patchwork and promises. Promises He'll keep. The cape keeps Him safe. There's that word, again.

Here's a bottle of perfume from Kay. It smells lovely, like something from springtime. Like roses. Beautiful Kay. She knows I like roses. She just doesn't know why. I think I'll box most of the gifts up, perhaps give them to someone who will enjoy them. But the perfume I'll keep. Perhaps it will remind him...

He gave me a book of sonnets, with a rose pressed between the pages.

Have you ever felt like a rose, Jenny?

Have you ever felt like the most beautiful woman in the world, Nancy?

Have you ever felt rare, and unique, Kay? Special, like a bush with two different blooms? Have you ever felt treasured, that way?

I hope you do. I hope you have. I hope you get your chance to, my dear, dear friends. I hope you find a man who loves you for your

flaws, just the way he loves you for your strengths. I hope you find that. All of that. All of that, and more. I hope you find what I have found...

He's tapping at the glass. I have to go, now. Have to go down to where hope flows like a nameless river and where soft light pushes back every darkness. Where my virtues and my flaws are all accepted as one, and where everyone, everyone is safe. I have to go collect more gifts, only these don't come in a box, and never have.

They come from the heart.

Acceptance. Compassion. Integrity. Understanding. Love.

It's my birthday, and I have to go, now. There are so many more gifts waiting for me.

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*Happy Birthday, Linda Hamilton. Thank you for being Cathy. One night in 1987, you gave us all the gift of her. It's a present I'm still opening, years later.*

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*No matter what gifts come into your life, I wish you love. ~ Cindy*