

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY, CATHERINE

Janet Rivenbark

“How long did you say that you and Mom have been married, Dad?” Maggie asked from where she sat at the kitchen table doing her homework.

Vincent wiped his hands on the dish towel and turned to face his youngest.

“It will be 28 years next Winterfest,” he told her.

“Then why do you figure your Anniversary from April 12... what year was it?”

“1987. You’ve heard the story. That was the date that I found your mother and my life changed. She insists hers changed too, but I’ve never been convinced that hers was changed as much as mine.”

“So that’s 30 years tomorrow?” Maggie asked. “And you’ve actually been married for a little over 27 years, 28 next Winterfest?”

“That’s right.” Vincent turned back to the salad he was preparing for dinner.

“But Jake will be 28 before your real 28th wedding anniversary,” she pointed out. Vincent knew that if he turned around and looked at her, her head would be tilted to one side and one eyebrow would be raised. For all that she looked like her mother, she had picked up a lot of his mannerisms and was the only one of their three children who was left-handed.

“That’s correct. I can see that the math education you are getting in that private school is paying off.”

“But you and Mom weren’t married when Jake was born,” she was quick to point out.

Vincent gripped the edge of the sink and took a deep breath before he turned around again.

“Nor when he was conceived... No, Margaret, we weren’t married, but we were both adults, and we knew what we were doing, and the risks we were taking.”

“Mom was 32 when Jake was born. How old were you?”

“I was 35.”

She went back to doing her homework, and Vincent thankfully went back to his dinner preparations. All their children were intelligent, but Margaret’s favorite word had always been *why* followed by a very adamant question mark.

“And Mom was almost 40 when Charlie was born,” she commented in an offhand fashion a few minutes later.

“She was.”

There was a long pause, and Vincent again thought the conversation was over. He carried the salad to the refrigerator and checked the roast in the crockpot before she spoke again.

“She was 44 when I was born... I overheard someone saying that I must have been a mistake.” Her voice had changed and had become almost inaudible by the time she finished. Anyone but Vincent probably wouldn’t have heard her.

He went to the table and sat down across from her.

“Margaret... I know you’ve heard that eavesdroppers seldom hear anything good or meaningful. People like to gossip, and if they don’t have anything to gossip about, they will make something up.”

He put his hand over hers where it rested on the table. She looked up at him and nodded.

“But you both were kinda old...” she began.

“I hardly consider 44 and 47 old!” he retorted. “But that isn’t the issue here. We don’t consider any of our children to be mistakes. Not Jacob who was born before we got married, not Charles who didn’t arrive until his older brother had been an only child for seven years, and not you. You are all blessings! I’ll admit that Charles was a surprise and that you were even more of a surprise, but you were both... all three of you were the best kinds of surprises.”

“Truth?” she asked looking him in the eye.

“Truth!” he assured her, just as the cell phone that was laying on the table next to her books buzzed.

“I thought we agreed that there would be no cell phones from the time you got home from school until after dinner,” he cautioned.

“We did, but this is important, or it would have been in my backpack. I’m waiting for one of my teachers to get back to me about the subject of my French lit term paper.”

She picked up the phone and read the text. She punched the air and grinned at him, their earlier conversation all but forgotten.

“Yes! She’s OK with me using a fairy tale for my analysis instead of the usual Victor Hugo or Jules Verne. She just wants me to make sure that I use a French fairy tale.”

“What fairy tale are you using?” he asked, as he watched her gather up her things and stuff them all into her backpack.

“*La Belle et la Bête*, of course.” She circled the table and hugged him before she left the room “Thanks, Daddy,” she whispered and then was gone.

Both his boys had called him Daddy when they were little, but somewhere along the line they'd grown too big for that and had started to call him Dad, or Father if they were upset with him over something. Margaret had never stopped calling him Daddy, and he loved the sound of it.

He was just removing the pot roast from the crock pot when he heard Catherine come in the front door.

"Oh, goodness that smells good," she said as she entered the kitchen. "Where did you ever learn to cook like that?"

She waited for him to finish covering the roast on the platter before she grabbed him and kissed him.

"The same place you did," he said when she came up for air. "William. I like cooking, and I'm almost sorry I only get to do it once a week when you work late at the office..." He hugged her tightly. "Did you skip lunch again today?" he asked.

"Not exactly," she hedged.

"Either you ate, or you didn't," he pointed out.

"I had a protein drink. I had a client over lunch because that was the only time he could take from his job. I was booked pretty solid today.

"At least you had that," he said as he turned to start the gravy.

"Are we eating in here or the dining room?" she asked, as she went to the cabinet to take down the plates.

"It's just the three of us. I think the kitchen will be fine."

Catherine started to set the table, and it was a few moments before either of them spoke.

"Margaret and I had quite the conversation when she finished her homework," he began.

"You did? What about." Catherine and her daughter were close, but there was a special bond between Maggie and Vincent.

"I think it finally dawned on her that some of the dates that figure so prominently in our lives don't quite add up."

"Oh, and what date would that be?"

"More than one, really. Like Jake's birthday, as it is *before* our wedding date, and our ages when she and Charles were born. She overheard someone commenting on the fact that you were 44 when she was born. They said that she must have been a mistake."

"A mistake? An *oops* maybe or an *afterthought*, but never a mistake!" Catherine insisted.

"I put it more like a happy surprise, but I assured her, never a mistake."

Maggie clattered into the kitchen about the time Catherine finished setting the table. She hugged her mom then went to get glasses from the cabinet and add them and a pitcher of ice water to the table.

“So, what are you and Daddy doing for your anniversary tomorrow?” she asked innocently, as she took her chair.

Catherine turned red, and Vincent almost dropped the roast, but they both recovered without Margaret noticing.

“Well, we thought we’d take a little vacation,” Catherine told her daughter as she helped Vincent put the food on the table. “I’ve taken the rest of the week off, and we are going up to the lake house in Connecticut. Mary is going to stay with you. Your dad and I will be leaving around 4am tomorrow, and we will be back around midnight on Sunday.

She and Vincent sat and started passing the food.

“There’s not a lot to do up there this time of the year,” Maggie commented as she helped herself to the pot roast. “Especially since there was so much snow this winter. I bet there’s still snow on the ground!”

Catherine looked over at Vincent with a smirk. “Oh, I’m sure we’ll find something to do,” she said as they both managed not to laugh.

“Yes, there’s always wood to chop,” put in Vincent with a wink at his wife.

“Doesn’t sound like much of a vacation to me,” commented Maggie. “It’ll be too cold to swim. Nothing will be blooming or even growing in the woods. It’s supposed to rain and be cloudy here until the middle of next week.”

When dinner was over, everyone helped clear then Maggie stopped to hug her mom before she went up to her room.

“Since you guys will be gone before I’m even up in the morning, I’ll say goodbye now.” She hugged Catherine then Vincent. “Will Mary be here in the morning?”

“She said she’d come tonight after she’s kissed all the children. Good night. Since I’m going to bed early, she said she’d just go to her usual suite off the kitchen. She’ll be up long before you are in the morning.”

“Yeah, I know, and she’ll make French toast for breakfast.” Maggie grinned. “And I *love* French toast! Be careful and have a good time.” She dashed out of the room.

Once the kitchen was spic and span, Catherine kissed Vincent and said good night.

“I’ll finish packing and try to get some sleep before we have to get up at 3 am,” she told him.

“Don’t stay up too late.” She knew he seldom slept more than 6 hours a night, but she was used to him going to bed with her and just getting up earlier.

“I won’t be long, I promise,” he told her. “I just have a few things to take care of in the study.”

He didn't tell her that one of those things was wrapping her anniversary gift. The other was the mundane chore of going online and paying bills.

But, when he was done with that, he decided to check his email, since he wouldn't get a chance to do it again until Monday. He answered a few emails from friends who had moved away, then there was Facebook, where he kept up with others, especially his younger former students.

Before he knew it, the clock in the hall was striking half-past something. He looked at the clock on the computer and was surprised to see that it was half-past one. He quickly shut everything down and headed upstairs. He finished his packing, took a shower and was crawling into bed as the clock struck two. At least he could sleep while Catherine drove.

Catherine was warm, and she smelled good. He cuddled close and felt his body respond to hers when she wiggled her bottom into the curve of his body.

He put his arm around her and nuzzled her hair.

"You're late," she whispered. "Did you fall asleep reading in the study?"

"No, I have to confess I was on the computer. After I paid the bills, I answered a few emails; then I got lost on Facebook."

She chuckled, and the sound went straight to his groin. He nuzzled her hair again.

"By the way... Happy anniversary, Catherine. I was wondering if you'd be interested in starting our celebration a little bit early."

She chuckled again and turned in his arms.

"I thought you would never ask."