

More Than Friends

Janet Rivenbark

Sequel to 'Old Friends'

Catherine woke and could feel the sun warm on her back. She rolled over and stretched and was pleased to see Vincent sitting on the side of the bed holding two mugs. He held one out to her. He wore nothing but the worn gray sweatpants he'd worn to bed Below the night before. Without a shirt, he was glorious in the sunshine. With or without a shirt; he was glorious any time.

She pulled herself up against the headboard tucking the sheet under her arms to maintain her modesty. She took the mug and smiled at him over the top of it.

"You made coffee?" she asked unnecessarily, then took a sip.

"After I figured out the intricacies of a Mr. Coffee and calculated the amount of coffee grounds and water to use. I hope it meets with your approval," he said, then took a sip from his cup. "The tea was easier to figure out, even though I'd never used an electric kettle before."

"Any coffee made for me and served to me in bed meets with my approval." She took another sip. "It really is quite good."

"William makes coffee in an old metal coffee pot on the stovetop. He leaves it on the back of the stove, and it gets pretty strong by the end of the day."

"I can imagine..."

She watched him as he turned his head and looked out onto the sunlit balcony.

"Are you OK, Vincent?" she asked. "You seem, well... a little subdued. I mean, it's not as if you are ever really loud and boisterous, but you are quieter than usual."

He looked back at her and surprised her with a fang displaying smile.

"As Mouse would say: 'OK, good! OK, fine! Better than best!'"

Catherine giggled at his imitation of Mouse.

"That's good to hear. I was a little worried." She extended her hand to him, wanting the contact. He still hadn't touched her this morning.

He put his cup down on the nightstand, moved closer, and took her hand. He raised it to his lips and kissed it. She leaned across and put her cup down next to his, then reached up and cupped his cheek.

"This is real... I'm not dreaming." He could hear the awe in her voice and feel the clamor of emotions flowing to him from the Bond.

"If you are, then we are sharing a dream again. I don't know if it's mine or yours."

He leaned down and kissed her. She raised her arms to put them around his neck, and the sheet she'd tucked under her arms slid down. Breasts caressed bare chest, and she sighed. So many times, she'd dreamed of this, but the dreams had nothing on reality.

"Can we just spend the whole day in bed?" she whispered when he finally broke the kiss.

He pulled back and looked at her. "Is that what you want?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes. We need to catch up; make up for lost time." She nuzzled his jaw and nipped his chin.

"Catherine, you're very greedy," he said, then returned the nuzzle and nip.

"Insatiable," she agreed, as she pulled him down to the bed next to her.

"Your coffee will get cold," he warned, as he kissed his way across her collarbone to her shoulder.

"That's what microwaves are for."

Her hands had found their way to the drawstring of his pants, and she untied it. She let go of him long enough to roll to her knees and pull the pants off. She completely lost the sheet as she sat back on her heels and admired.

"Vincent, you are even more beautiful in the sunlight than you were by candlelight."

"I could say the same." He moved so that he was on his knees in front of her.

Catherine laid down on her back, her arms outstretched to hold him. He laid down with her and began to worship her body. His hands stroked every inch of her. His mouth covered first one nipple, then the other. As he licked and suckled her, she moaned with delight.

Vincent could smell the sweet, musky scent of her arousal, and his mouth was soon drawn to it. She trembled with anticipation as he kissed and nibbled on her thighs; she spread her legs in invitation.

Moving slowly, Vincent made his way to her center. He hadn't been anywhere near this bold the night before. When he kissed her there, she gasped. She whimpered in disappointment when he moved away and kissed his way back to her mouth.

"I don't want to disappoint you, Catherine," he whispered, "but no matter how much I would like to try, I'm afraid that act will take a little coaching and practice. My teeth are sharp."

"As long as you're not saying *never*," she said.

"I've learned that I should never say never," he said, "at least not with you."

The attention he paid to her breasts more than made up for what he had decided not to do. And he was becoming very 'take charge'. The night before, their first time, he'd been ardently innocent, letting her take the lead, but now...

She reached for him, but he intercepted her hands. He meshed his fingers with hers and moved them to either side of her head; then, he kissed her.

"Vincent, please, I need you inside me," she breathed.

Vincent moved back up her body and positioned himself between her legs. He felt at home there now, not like the interloper or intruder he'd once thought of himself. But he just rested against her as he continued to concentrate on her breasts. Her skin was so smooth and soft. He stroked his nose up the valley between her breasts, breathing in her scent. It was something that he knew he'd remember all his life — the scent of something sweet... roses, vanilla, and Catherine.

She was squirming and moaning when he finally stroked his erection in her moisture and slowly began to ease his way inside. They'd made love the night before; he hadn't counted the times, and he sensed that her sensitive tissue was a bit tender. Using short, slow strokes, he advanced. When he was all the way inside, he leaned down to kiss her. They stayed like that for a while, joined but still, enjoying the loving Bond they shared, expressing it only with lips and tongues.

"I love you, Catherine," Vincent whispered.

Very slowly, he withdrew, then just as slowly, pushed himself inside her again. They had all the time in the world, and he wanted this, their first lovemaking in the sunlight, to last. They moved together; his slow thrusts answered by the easy movement of her hips to meet him. It was a long time before she wrapped her legs around him. He released her hands, and she moved them around his body; when she did, their pace increased a little. Her breathing became more rapid, and her muscles began to pulse around him, but they still didn't rush. They had too great a need to express their love.

It took some time for Catherine to climax, but when she did, the wave-like clamping of her muscles around him pulled him over with her.

As they cuddled afterward, Catherine said, "That was the best morning coffee I ever had."

Vincent kissed her and held her tight against him.

"Catherine, I love you. I hope we have many more mornings like this."

"And nights like last night?" she questioned, as she rubbed her cheek contentedly against his chest.

"Absolutely!" he agreed enthusiastically. "And it's only Saturday. I told Father I wouldn't be home until late Sunday night."

"Make that Monday morning," she mumbled against his chest.

Vincent was right; her coffee was cold when they finally got up about an hour later.

She groaned when she stood by the bed and stretched.

"Are you all right?" asked Vincent from the other side, where he was pulling his sweatpants back on.

"Fine. I'm just not used to mattress dancing; I'm a little out of practice."

"Mattress dancing?" Vincent queried.

Catherine looked across the bed at him and gave him a wicked smile. "Horizontal Mambo? Hiding the salami? There must be a million euphemisms for making love. The English have some good ones. You should ask Father sometime."

"Shagging," he chuckled. "I've heard a few of them."

"I'm going to take my aching muscles to a hot shower," she told him. "Then I'll have some more of that wonderful coffee you made."

She went into the bathroom, and Vincent circled the bed to pick up the cups from the nightstand. Both of them were cold. He stopped in front of the French door in the bedroom and looked out. The sky was impossibly blue, and there wasn't a cloud anywhere. It was as if the universe was smiling as broadly as he was. It was a warm spring day, and he pulled the doors open. It would be a pity to waste the sunshine and fresh air. He did the same with the doors in the living room, before taking the mugs into the kitchen, where he dumped and rinsed them. He refilled his and left Catherine's sitting next to the coffee pot.

Catherine stepped under the hot water and sighed. Heavenly! She never realized that there were muscles that she only really used when she was *mattress dancing*. She giggled. Vincent's reaction to the euphemism had been as priceless as all his reactions in the last twelve hours had been. But he'd surprised her by adding a few of his own.

She started soaping her body and hissed when she got to the tender tissue between her legs. She definitely was out of practice; luckily, that area recovered quickly. She had something that would help it along. She'd just have to work on keeping her hands off Vincent for a while, at least until later.

Vincent was nowhere to be seen when she came out of the bathroom. She noticed the balcony doors standing open and peeked out. Vincent was sitting on one of the cast iron bistro chairs. His tea mug was cradled in his hands and resting on his stomach; his eyes were closed, and his head was back against the wall as he soaked up the sun.

She quickly dressed, went to the kitchen, filled her mug, and joined him.

"You should have a place where you can do that every day," she commented, as she sat beside him.

He rolled his head against the bricks and looked at her. She was shocked to see the old Vincent looking at her.

"Did I hurt you, Catherine?" he asked in a pained voice.

"Hurt me? Where did you get that idea?" she asked.

"When you were in the shower, I sensed a sharp pain in... well... you know."

"An ordinary pain, Vincent," she assured him. "It's nothing serious, just from... um... overuse. It's been years since I last made love. And never with a man who was quite as gifted as you. It'll be OK in no time."

"Perhaps I should go back Below when it gets dark," he suggested, still not convinced.

"Not on your life!" she told him adamantly. "I've got something we can use for a little extra lubrication if I need it, but I'm not letting you leave until the wee hours of Monday morning!"

"You're sure?" he asked.

"Positive. Ask Father or any of the men you know. I'm sure they've all been through this. It just takes time."

Vincent drew in a deep breath. She watched him relax as he let it out.

"If I ever hurt you or even do anything that displeases you, I want you to tell me," he told her.

"I won't have to tell you. The Bond will probably let you know before I have a chance. You worry too much."

"Devin says I overthink everything."

"You do, but that's one of the things that makes you who you are. You wouldn't be the same if you weren't always so concerned for everyone else."

They spent the day in slightly less exciting pursuits. Catherine had a box of clothes in the closet destined for Below, and most of them just happened to be in Vincent's size. He picked a pair of jeans, underwear, socks, and a t-shirt out, so he wouldn't have to spend the day in his old sweatpants and nightshirt.

Catherine even made the bed, so that it wouldn't quite as much of a temptation. Vincent read while she did some laundry. After lunch, she dressed and left to walk to a market a few blocks away to get the ingredients for their dinner, and when she came back, she found him sitting on the bedroom floor polishing her shoes.

"What are you doing?" she asked, after she'd put away her purchases and gone looking for him.

"You left the closet open, and I noticed that your black boots had white marks from walking in the slush. They would have been ruined if they'd been left much longer. After I took care of those, I decided that I might as well do the rest of them."

She sat on the side of the bed and picked up a plain black leather pump. "This shines so much it looks almost like patent leather."

"William was in the Army, and he taught some of the boys how to shine shoes. They were looking for a way to earn money for something they wanted. I learned just for something to do."

He dipped a cotton ball in a small dish of water and used it to work the polish he'd applied to the other black pump into a high gloss. She watched in fascination.

She went back to the kitchen to start their dinner. She'd finished sautéing some onions and celery and was starting to brown the chuck roast, when Vincent came into the kitchen.

"That smells good!" he said, as he stood to the side and watched her. "What is it?"

"Burgundy beef. We had a housekeeper who taught me how to make it." She finished browning the beef, then started adding herbs, finishing with a can of tomato paste and a large can of beef stock. She brought it all to a boil then added carrots, mushrooms, and a good portion of red wine.

"It can simmer for a couple of hours and will be ready whenever we are."

He leaned over the pot and sniffed again. "It does smell wonderful... I didn't know you cooked."

"I love to cook. It's relaxing. Sometimes I'll cook a big pot of something like this on Sunday, then eat it two or three times during the week."

"If this tastes as good as it smells, I might need the recipe to give to William."

The pot was boiling again. She turned it down to the lowest setting, put a lid on it, and they went back to the living room, where they sat on the couch.

Catherine cuddled close to Vincent, but he didn't seem to know where to put his hands. Every place they seemed to fall naturally was a spot that he'd never let himself touch, until last night and again this morning.

"Relax," she told him. "You can touch me."

"It just seems rather like I'm assuming that I have the right to touch you," he said with a frown.

"You do!" She sat up and looked at him. "Don't you realize that? I would think that after last night, you would."

"I don't want to..."

"You're doing it again," she said in a warning tone.

"Doing what?"

"Overthinking it. We love each other. We have made love; we've touched each other in nearly every way possible. If you put your arm around me, and your hand accidentally falls over my breast, I'm not going to be shocked. Even if it isn't an accident, I won't be shocked. I like to feel your hands on me; I love your touch. Are you going to be upset with me if I do this?" she placed her hand lightly over the bulge in his jeans and smiled at his gasp.

"Maybe a little shocked at your boldness, but not upset... definitely not upset."

She cuddled close again and put her arms around his waist.

"What are you going to tell Father?" she asked, after a few minutes.

"I'm not sure. He's probably realized that things have changed as soon as he got my note this morning. I thought that it might be a good idea if I let him know that everything is all right."

"Doesn't Peter go Below to play chess on Saturday evenings? You could call him and ask him to tell Father that everything is OK."

Vincent agreed that it was a good idea, and while he was on the phone, Catherine went to the kitchen to stir their dinner.

The conversation was quiet and didn't take very long, and it left Vincent looking thoughtful.

"Did you catch him before he left?" she asked, when she came back to the living room.

"I did. He said he'd be happy to pass the message to Father."

"Did he say anything else?" she asked, as she picked up a book and walked to the couch.

"He congratulated me."

Catherine smiled and almost laughed. She went to him and hugged him.

"I know it can be a little embarrassing when it seems like everyone knows what you've been doing. I remember when I moved in with Steven while I was in Law School. Everyone assumed that we were... intimate before then, but once we moved in together, then it was like hanging out a sign that announced it to the world."

"I suppose," he agreed. He looked down at her. "If I was to ask you, would you live with me?"

"I would jump at the opportunity, but it would be challenging and might put your world in jeopardy. I have to come Above to work five days a week, and someone would eventually notice that something wasn't quite kosher. But if you were to ask me that, then we could work together to find a way to make it work."

"How?" he asked, and she wondered if he was really thinking in that direction.

"Maybe a house with a threshold, like Peter's. That would be the easiest solution. I know you'd miss the balcony, but..."

"The balcony isn't as important as it once was," he rushed to assure her. "I can climb to the top of any number of buildings and get a wonderful view of the city or the park. It was just a place where we could be alone, but I could still feel the freedom of being outside."

"Then a house with something like a roof garden or terrace would work for you?" she asked.

He nodded and looked at her. "Do you have something in mind?"

"I might. When Daddy died, he left a lot of real estate. I've sold all of it except for one place. It's not far from where Peter lives, and it's similar to Peter's place, only I think it's a little older. I was exploring the basement. It has an access panel that goes down into a small sub-basement where all the utilities come into the house. I didn't climb down into it, but it looked promising."

"That whole neighborhood around Peter's is honeycombed with old tunnels," he told her. "What's the address?"

She told him, and he closed his eyes and pictured one of the maps they had. "That's two blocks over and one block up from Peter's," he told her. "There's a good chance that we could connect it, if it isn't already connected."

"If it does work out, and I move into it, you'd stay there with me?" she asked.

"I could stay there with you during the week, and you could stay with me on weekends," he suggested.

She looked up at him, and he was surprised to see a tear roll down her cheek. He wiped it away with his thumb, then cradled her cheek in his hand.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'm just a little overwhelmed; that's all. Only a few days ago, I was despairing of ever having anything close to this, and now, almost overnight, all my dreams are coming true."

"And mine, Catherine," he told her, then bent and kissed her.

Several minutes later, he pulled her close as they relaxed on the couch.

"I think I'm a bit overwhelmed too," he told her. "All my life, I've been told that this life wasn't for me, and now I'm on the brink of having everything I've ever dreamed of, and more."

"I know that Father always told you that because he didn't want you to be disappointed, but I wish he hadn't been as adamant about it as he was. He once told me that my love could only bring you unhappiness."

"He told me much the same thing, several times. He's always stressed that only part of me is a man."

She felt his body tense up as he said that.

"Is that his scientific opinion?" she asked.

"I don't think so. Peter has often suggested certain tests, but beyond typing my blood, which seems to be a nearly normal O+, he's never agreed to any of them."

"How about you? Do you want any of them done?"

"I probably should," he said, suddenly thoughtful.

"What kind of tests did Peter suggest?"

"One to check if I'm sterile or not. Father seems to think that I might be a hybrid, and that would probably render me sterile. And if I'm not, then Peter has suggested genetic testing." He was suddenly very tense. He sat up, took Catherine's upper arms in his hands, and held her away from him. "What if...?" He couldn't seem to say the words.

"We don't have to worry about that," she rushed to tell him. "I've been on birth control for years. I went on it when there was a need for it and then found that I liked that it made my cycle so predictable, so I've continued to use it."

She watched as the relief washed over him and he relaxed and closed his eyes.

"But Vincent, I want you to know that I want children. Preferably your children, if that's possible."

She was surprised at how shocked he looked. He started to shake his head.

"Why not?" she asked.

He removed his hands from her arms and turned away from her. He gestured at himself.

"I wouldn't wish this existence on anyone, much less my own child," he told her.

"Assuming that it's possible for us to have a child, there's no guarantee that a child of ours would be like you. I didn't pay that much attention in high school biology, but didn't Gregor Mendel's experiments say that most genetic traits have only a one in four chance of being passed on to offspring?"

“Depends if the traits are dominant or recessive and if they are present in both, or only one of the parents,” he said. She knew that he taught biology Below and would know this.

“And there was something about half the time the offspring being a blend of the two parents.”

“That’s a bit of an oversimplification, but yes,” he agreed.

“And that doesn’t mean that if we were to have four children, one would be like me, one would be like you, and the other two would be a blend of the two of us,” she pointed out. “It means that with each pregnancy, there is a 25% chance that the child would be like you.”

He nodded. “So what are you trying to say?” he asked.

“I know it’s kind of early for us to be thinking about this, especially since I’m taking birth control, but what I’m saying is I want your children, our children. Granted, it would probably make life easier if they all took after me, but even if they all wind up like you, they will have one advantage that you didn’t have. They will know both their parents and know that they are loved, and they will have you to guide them. They won’t be alone. They will never know that *aloneness* that you knew.”

END