

VALENTINE KISSES

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It had taken Catherine two attempts to convince Vincent to come Above to her apartment for dinner. She'd been Below for a children's concert on Saturday evening, and she'd been invited back for dinner on Sunday; she'd used both opportunities.

"Why don't you come Below for dinner, instead?" he'd suggested after she'd extended her invitation, as they'd sat in the study listening to the musicians tune up.

"But I want to cook for you," she protested.

"You can cook?" asked Jamie. Then her eyes got big, and she slapped her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry, that didn't come out the way it sounded in my head," she'd said through her fingers.

Catherine had laughed good-naturedly.

"Contrary to the rumors, rich girls can cook. At least this one can. We had a housekeeper who cooked dinner for us 5 nights a week when I was growing up, but she thought it was a good idea for everyone to be able to cook at least a few basic things. I usually cooked at least one meal for us on weekends. She made learning fun. She always said that if you can read, you can cook, you just have to learn a few basic techniques and the meaning of some terms."

The conversation had swerved off into a discussion of cooking in general, and then the concert had started. She hadn't had another chance to bring it up that night.

Her second attempt had been in Vincent's chamber after dinner on Sunday.

"You never did say if you would come up to dinner at my place next Wednesday," she'd said as she'd taken the seat across from him at his table. She had volunteered to help him grade the history exams from his class on Friday.

"No, I didn't. You wound up talking about cooking with Jamie," he'd pointed out with a smile, as he'd handed her half the stack of papers.

"OK, then let me start over. Will you please come to dinner on Wednesday? I'd love to cook for you." She'd smiled sweetly and batted her eyelashes, making him laugh.

"But it's the middle of the week; you have to be up early for work on Thursday," he'd pointed out.

"You don't have to wait until late to come up. It's February, and the sun sets early. And it's only dinner, so we don't have to be late."

"But there are still a lot of people around, even if it is dark."

"You can use the threshold below my building and go up on top of the elevator. I've always thought that was safer anyway."

“The elevator is in use by other people in the building at that time of the evening. I could wind up riding up and down for quite a while before it goes to the top.”

“Use that elevator trick I told you about. You’ll go straight to the top floor regardless of who else pushes the call button.

Apparently, Vincent had run out of arguments. He’d just sat looking at her across the table. “I should know better than to argue with a lawyer,” he’d finally said with a shake of his head.

“I thought that spending three days in my place while you were sick might have broken that aversion to going inside,” she’d suggested.

“I have no aversion to going inside your home,” he’d argued.

“Then why won’t you come up for dinner? Father pronounced you well and fit months ago, but you haven’t visited my place the entire time. Not even the balcony.”

Vincent had sighed deeply and finally accepted, asking what time he should be there.

She had to smile at his reluctance, but she didn’t comment on it. She had checked ahead of time and the sun officially set around 5:30 pm, but it wouldn’t be completely dark until about 7:00, so she told him she’d see him at 7:30.



Now it was Wednesday. It had been an unusually warm day for mid-February. It had reached 61°, but it had been overcast all day and had started to rain late in the afternoon.

Catherine had taken the day off work to make sure everything was perfect. She’d cleaned the apartment, and opened the French doors in both her bedroom and the living room to air out the winter mustiness. She knew that winter would likely give them at least one more blast before it was officially ushered out, but she was determined to get the most out of this one warm day, even if the sun didn’t shine.

She’d had a hard time making up her mind what to fix for dinner. She’d started out planning the typical male favorite of steak, baked potato, and a salad, but then had told herself that Vincent wasn’t the typical male, not by a long shot. Maybe he’d enjoy something different. She’d dug out her recipe for Chicken Marsala. But once she’d reached the grocery store she’d changed her mind again. She finally settled on a good, old-fashioned pot roast with potatoes and carrots, dinner rolls from the bakery section and apples for an apple cobbler. She added vanilla ice cream and just knew she had the makings of a perfect meal. It wouldn’t take a lot of fussing, so she’d have plenty of time for Vincent.

She listened to the weather report while she prepared dinner, and the weatherman promised that the rain would stay light and only last a couple hours.

With dinner in the oven, she went to work on herself.

Catherine stood in front of her closet contemplating her wardrobe. She wanted to dress up. She wanted Vincent to know that she considered this to be a special occasion, but she was going to be cooking and serving dinner, so she wanted to be comfortable.

She'd noticed that Vincent liked fabrics with texture, she'd observed on one of his early visits to her when he'd almost unconsciously rubbed his palm over the ball of her shoulder when she was wearing a satin robe. When he'd realized what he was doing, he'd stopped and dropped his hands to his sides. It had happened several more times before she'd realized it was fabric; he was apparently a very tactile person. After that, when she knew she was going to see him, she always made sure she wore something interesting: satins, silks, cashmere or velvet. She loved to feel his hands on her, even if the touch wasn't intimate.

She pulled out a turquoise chiffon halter dress and held it up in front of herself at the mirror.

Too much skin, she commented to herself as she looked at the plunging neckline and non-existent back. *And I'll probably be cold. Gooseflesh is not attractive, or the skin texture Vincent might like to touch.*

She pulled out a full, floor-length black satin skirt, and a long-sleeved cashmere turtleneck.

Comfortable, she observed as she held them up in front of her, *but way too somber!*

As she was putting them back in the closet, she noticed a dress she'd had for several years. She'd bought it for the Chandler & Coolidge office Christmas party her first year there. She'd only worn it once. It was a deep red velvet; it was Valentine's Day, after all, and it was perfect.



Vincent had been anticipating dinner at Catherine's since Sunday when he'd accepted her invitation. He mentally used the word *anticipating*, because he wasn't really sure if he was looking forward to it.

He'd considered trying to explain to Catherine why he had what she'd called an "aversion" to being inside her home, but he wasn't sure he could. He wasn't sure he understood it himself.

He'd been inside only twice. The first time had been when she'd been attacked and badly beaten in her own home, and he'd stayed and cared for her. The second time had been when he was sick. Needless to say, his memories and associations with her apartment weren't exactly pleasant.

On top of that, there was the embarrassing fact that he'd all but demolished the place when he'd been delirious with fever.

He'd only seen it once in the daylight, and that was after he'd destroyed much of it, but he remembered that it was bright and soft and feminine; he felt like the proverbial bull in a china shop when he even thought about going inside.

But he was determined to do this for Catherine. She asked so little of him. She'd invited him in numerous times since his first visit, and he'd always found a reason to go no farther than the

balcony. Tonight, he was determined he would go inside and enjoy dinner if it was the last thing he ever did.

He stopped in Father's study on his way up.

Father looked up from the medical journal he was reading, took in his younger son's attire, and the fact that he had his cloak over his arm.

"You're dressed up. Are you meeting Catherine?"

Vincent had taken extra pains with his appearance. He'd spent a good portion of the afternoon trying to tame his hair, then picking out something to wear. His choice had been limited because laundry was behind due to the cold weather, and his one fancy shirt, Catherine's favorite with the cravat-like tie was being repaired. He'd split the shoulder seam.

"Yes, I am." He looked down at what he'd finally decided to wear. Plain, dark cords, black leather boots Devin had sent him for Christmas, and a white sweater. "She's invited me to dinner."

"Are you going Above?" Father asked. "It's still early." The clock read a few minutes to 7.

"Catherine has invited me to dinner, and since it gets dark so early this time of year, I'm going up early."

"But there are still plenty of people about at this time," Father pointed out with some alarm.

"I won't be going through the park. I'll use her threshold and ride up to the roof on the top of the elevator. It's really safer than the other way, no matter what time of day or night it is."

Father had to agree with that. "What time do you think you'll be back?"

"Catherine has work tomorrow, so I shouldn't be late."

Vincent stopped a moment, deep in thought. He was suddenly reminded of the question Catherine had asked when she'd been Below after her father's death.

She'd asked, "Do you think that someday... Will we ever be together? Truly together?"

At the time he'd thought he knew what she meant by the words "truly together," and his answer had been driven by that.

"Only if and when we understand how great the sacrifice and how large the fears and are able to move through them," he'd told her.

She had quickly declared that she wasn't afraid, and just as quickly, he'd qualified his earlier statement.

"Catherine, we are something that has never been, and our journey is one that none have ever taken. We are just now setting out. We must go with courage, and we must go with care." That had been almost a year ago. Were they still on their journey, or were they nearing this particular destination?

“Vincent,” Father called, sounding concerned. “Where did you go? You were completely lost in thought. Nothing has happened to Catherine has it?”

Vincent shook his head.

“No, I just thought of something, that was all. A conversation that Catherine and I had almost a year ago.” Vincent folded his cloak over the back of the chair in front of Father’s desk and sat down. “When she was here after her father died we talked about her possibly staying Below. She eventually decided to go back Above, but not before we’d both done a lot of soul-searching. Initially, she said she didn’t want to go back, and I agreed that I didn’t want her to go.”

Father had given up on the idea of keeping the two of them apart. He’d concluded that it was inevitable that they would be together. And he knew that if he tried to stop it from happening, he’d lose Vincent forever.

After what she’d done during Vincent’s illness, he knew Catherine loved his son, and with what Vincent hadn’t done, he was convinced that Vincent wasn’t capable of hurting Catherine. His only concern now was that he’d cautioned Vincent so strongly that he’d never take the next step.

“But she went back, anyway,” Father observed.

“Yes, but that was only because we both realized that if she stayed, it would only be because she was running away from the world Above. Eventually, she would have to go back. She knew, and I agreed, that she had to go back and face everything if she was ever to come to terms with that world, and her father’s death.”

Father removed his glasses and put them on top of the journal he’d been reading. “I always knew that you were both bright young people,” he said with a little smile.

Vincent had to chuckle at that. “Well, Devin always did say that ‘Pops didn’t raise no fools.’” He mimicked Devin’s voice and inflections perfectly, drawing a laugh from Father. “But seriously, at that time, Catherine and I talked of many things, and that was almost a year ago. Perhaps we are both ready to move to the next waypoint in our journey.”

Vincent was surprised when Father didn’t even look concerned at that statement. He only smiled and nodded. Vincent rose, picked up his cloak and started for the entrance.

“Perhaps I’ll be later than anticipated, Father,” he said without looking back when he was halfway across the chamber.



Promptly at 7:30, Catherine heard a light tap at the French door in the living room. She closed the cabinet door where she’d just turned on the classical music station on the radio. She picked up a small, heart-shaped candy box and went to open the door.

Vincent almost took a step back when he saw her. He'd always liked the color red, but on Catherine, it was perfect. The draped neckline showed off her flawless, creamy skin and the long sleek lines of the dress and sleeves made her look taller somehow. When she turned to draw him into the room, the draped back dipped past the middle of her back took his breath away.

"Catherine, your dress... it's very much like the one in Kristophers painting. Did you buy it because of that? he asked.

She looked down at herself and was smiling when she looked back up at him. "No, I've had this for several years... before I met you. I didn't realize..."

He blindly followed her inside, accepted the small box and relinquished his cloak, all without saying another word.

Catherine had a moment to take in his appearance. She liked the look; he looked leaner, less bulky, although his shoulders were still impressively broad.

When Catherine returned from putting his cloak on her bed, he was still standing on the same spot.

"Happy Valentine's Day!" she said with a smile.

He looked down at the box in his hands.

"I forgot," he admitted. Even with all the giggling and preparation among the children Below, he'd let his anticipation... almost dread... of dinner tonight, put the reason for the dinner entirely out of his mind.

"That's all right," she assured him. "You're here, and that is the best Valentine's Day gift I could wish for." She invited him to sit on the sofa, and on his way there, he noticed she'd made some changes.

"This is new," he commented, as he sat on the single long sofa that had replaced the two loveseats.

"When I replaced a few things last spring, I decided to do some redecorating. What do you think?"

He looked around. The mirror he'd broken that had hung by the French door had been replaced with a painting of a woman, one who looked a lot like Catherine. The pastel loveseats had been replaced with a single long sofa, in a dark taupe fabric. A wingback chair in the same fabric and a club chair in a lighter shade faced each other across the wooden coffee table. The fireplace mantle had been replaced with something in a dark wood. Even the walls were a darker, richer color. She'd redone the whole room. The table that was set for their dinner was still small, but it was wood instead of glass. It made him feel less like the bull in the china shop he'd likened himself to, earlier.

"I like it," he told her. "Did you change the entire apartment?"

“I had the whole place painted, but I didn’t replace the bedroom furniture, just the bedspread. I was tired of the florals and pastels everywhere.”

When she was sure he was comfortable on the sofa, she asked him, “Are you ravenous yet, or would you like something to drink?”

“Whatever you’d like,” he said agreeably. “I’m not starving.”

Catherine went into the kitchen and came back into the room a bottle of red wine and two glasses. She poured wine into both glasses and left the bottle on the dining table.

“Dinner is done and ready to be served,” she told him, as she handed him his glass and joined him on the sofa. “But I always find that a little wine whets my appetite.”

He accepted the glass and took a sip. “Hmm, it’s very good,” he commented. He knew he was reaching for a topic of conversation. A neutral one. “Father appreciates a good wine or brandy, but we don’t see much of it, Below.”

“I thought Peter kept your wine cellar and liquor cabinet stocked,” she said.

“He does, but it gets distributed. William occasionally likes to cook with wine, so some of it goes to him. Some of the women get together about once a month, and several bottles of white wine go to them. Father keeps a good brandy in his desk, and we share some, occasionally.”

As Vincent became more comfortable, the conversation felt more natural. After a while, when Catherine served dinner it continued in the same light vein., and it continued in the same light vein. Vincent was finally able to relax, and the meal he’d been dreading went down with relish. When they got to dessert, Vincent had two helpings.

He insisted on helping her clear the table. After she showed him how to use the dishwasher, he loaded it while she put away the leftovers.

“That didn’t take long. We make a good team,” she said, as they went back to the sofa with the last of the wine in their glasses.

She toed off her shoes and tucked her feet up under her, turning so that she could face Vincent.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Catherine urged.

After a moment of what looked like serious thought, Vincent set down his wine glass, pulled off his boots and put his feet up on the coffee table. He picked up the glass and relaxed back on the sofa, slouching a little.

“Are you tired?” she asked, touching his arm.

“A little,” he admitted, looking over at her. “I was guilty of *anticipating* this dinner a little too much. It kept me awake last night.”

“Anticipating or *dreading*?” she asked with a chuckle.

“Will you believe me if I say, a little of both? I was looking forward to spending time with you where I knew we wouldn’t be interrupted, but there was also a little dread because I remember the havoc I created the last time I was here. Your redecorating was a delightful surprise.”

“Was that your reason for not coming inside? You didn’t like the way it was decorated.” The words might have been accusatory, but the twinkle in her eye and the Bond told him otherwise.

“No, and you know it. It was lovely, and it suited you; light, elegant, and feminine. I just felt out of place, and then the only times I was ever in here something bad had happened. The associations were not good.”

“Then it had nothing to do with being worried that I might try to seduce you?” She’d decided to push the envelope a bit.

The question took him by surprise. “Ah... well... No, not really.”

“Not really?” She had to laugh that time.

“Catherine, is this how you are in the courtroom, using a person’s words against him?”

“Well, they do teach that in law school.” She grinned at him. “So why aren’t you worried that I might try to seduce you?”

Vincent was afraid that their conversation might come to this, but he knew they had to have an honest dialog.

“Perhaps, I just don’t think that I’m that... desirable?” It came out as a question. He swirled the wine in his glass so he’d have something to look at besides Catherine.

“I can’t speak for anyone else,” she told him seriously, “but I love you, and I find you very desirable... but you don’t have to worry, I won’t do anything that I know you aren’t comfortable with. I’ll let you make the first move.”

Vincent had been taking a sip of his wine and almost choked on it. *She was waiting for him to make the first move?* He swallowed the last of the wine, carefully put the wine glass down, and tried to relax.

The music on the radio shifted from the program that had been playing to Beethoven. Catherine recognized “Moonlight Sonata.”

“That reminds me,” she said, referring to the music. She wanted to distract him from what they’d been talking about since he appeared to be uncomfortable. “Have you heard from Rolley lately? I’ve been worried about him.”

“We have.” Vincent sounded relieved at the change of subject. “Father got a note. Rolley has been in some trouble, Above, but the judge was lenient. He considered that Rolley is only 19 and gave him the option of jail or a rehabilitation center, to help him overcome his drug habit. Rolley chose rehabilitation. He has asked if he could come Below when he finishes. He feels that he will be less tempted to go back to using narcotics if he’s with people who actually care about him, and will help him to feel like he has a purpose.”

“That’s wonderful!” Catherine said with enthusiasm. “When does he get out?”

“It’s a three-month program, so it will be around the end of March.”

“Send him my numbers, and if he wants me to, I’ll pick him up and take him Below.”

“He hasn’t been allowed visitors yet, but several people he knew Below are planning to visit once it is allowed. I’ll make sure that someone passes on the message and one of your cards. Thank you.”

The music continued, and Vincent hoped that Rolley would be able to overcome his demons and be able to go back to his music once he was Below. Rolley had endured much in his life, but he’d come a long way since the first time Catherine had met him. That brought back the memory of the evening just before Catherine met Rolley. The thunderstorm, her joy in the music and the rain. The memory always made him smile and this time was no exception.

They were quiet, listening to the music, then Vincent stretched his arm across the back of the sofa and invited Catherine to come closer.

She happily moved over and cuddled against his side. His hand settled on her shoulder.

She noticed that his fingers were lightly caressing the velvet. She wondered if he even realized he was doing it. She didn’t comment on it, for fear he’d stop.

After a few minutes, he turned toward her, gripping her upper arms in both hands, his thumbs still caressing the velvet. They tightened slightly as he leaned toward her. He stopped a hair’s breadth from her lips and inhaled as if he was breathing in her essence. Finally, he closed the distance and pressed his lips to hers.

He released her arms and slid his hands down and around her waist as her arms went up around his neck. She was surprised when the kiss went on... and on. He left her lips and trailed light touches down, but eventually made his way back to her mouth, and kissed her as if he’d been starving for her. She was pulling him closer when the phone rang, and they jumped apart.

She immediately fell back into his arms and buried her face against his chest. He was breathing hard, and his heart was pounding.

She smiled as she listened to the machine pick up. After the beep, Joe’s voice came on the line.

“Just thought I’d let you know, Radcliffe. There is an electrical problem in our building. Something shorted out, and the whole east side of the building is without power. John sent everyone home early. Maintenance doesn’t think it will be fixed anytime soon. Heat’s off, no lights. John said to let everyone know not to come back to work until Monday unless they are supposed to be in court. Since you don’t have court, I’ll see you on Monday...” Joe paused as if gathering his thoughts. “...By the way, if you need to get anything from your desk... that is if you want to do any work at home... you’ll have to use the west side entrance and elevators. Those on our side are down. I thought I’d be all macho and take the stairs. I haven’t worked that hard since boot camp. See you Monday.”

There was a click when Joe hung up.

“Joe’s been sitting behind a desk too long,” Catherine observed with a laugh.

Vincent’s heart had calmed to almost normal, and she pulled back to look at him.

“Was that the first move?” she asked, smiling.

“I think it was,” he said with a slight nod. “It seemed the right thing to do.”

“Oh, believe me, it was! It was lovely.” She paused. “Looks like I have a mini vacation. Two days and the weekend.” She cuddled back into his arms.

“You don’t have to be up early for work,” he observed.

“Nope, we could just sit here and cuddle all night, if we want to.”

“Or... you could come Below,” he suggested.

“Your chamber and just about any place you are Below is like Grand Central,” she pointed out.

“That it is. I suppose it might be best if we just stayed here.”

“At least for a while,” she agreed. “Now...” She tilted her head back and looked up at him.

“... where were we?” he finished for her, as he lowered his head. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Catherine,” he said, just before his lips met hers again.

