

Red Velvet Love

by Angie

"I've never met a problem a proper cupcake couldn't fix."

– Sarah Ocler

Jamie wanted to do something special as a Yule gift to Mouse and had no idea what would 'work' to get his attention. The man was obsessed with gizmos, something she had never quite understood, although she found what he produced fascinating. Whether it worked or not, she qualified her thought.

The women in the tunnels were always saying that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach, but Mouse seemed more or less oblivious to food, although he certainly ate his share of it between whatever was obsessing him at the time. So Jamie decided a special treat would probably work best, one she could give Mouse that need not be shared. She knew he had a sweet tooth, but was often too busy to indulge it.

Jamie didn;t want to approach Mary with her problem, because although the older woman knew more about anyone and everything domestic than most, confessing her purpose seemed ... too personal. So she went to the one person she knew would understand and say nothing – Catherine.

Jamie knocked on Catherine's apartment door one Saturday morning when she knew her friend would be there. She was scheduled to come below to help Vincent decorating the Great Hall for the Yule celebration. Jamie timed her visit to come a half hour or so before Catherine was to arrive, hoping she would not be in the shower or half undressed,.

Catherine answered the door quickly and on seeing Jamie, she immediuately got a worried look on her face. Jamie immediatly quelled the obvious fear.

"No, Catherine, nothing's wrong. I just need your help."

"Come in," Catherine said, now obviously puzzled, but also relieved. "Would you like something to drink?"

Jamie shook her head and sat on a dining room chair after Catherine did so. Without preamble, she explained her problem and what she wanted to do.

Catherine's brow furrowed.

"You know I'm not much of a cook," she temporized.

Jamie smiled. "Neither am I. That's why I came. I figured any recipe you knew would be not only very good, but very easy to make."

Catherine laughed. "You are SO right," she said. "And I think I might be able to help you. My friend Nancy gave me a recipe she made last time I visited her. A cake recipe. It was absolutely delicious. And so simple. I know because I helped her – and didn't screw it up."

Jamie chuckled. "Sounds perfect."

“And we can even make it here,” Catherine offered. “It makes quite a lot, so maybe we can give some to Vincent. I wondered what I should make him this year. Thanks for the inspiration! I'll need to buy some hardware, but that's not a problem.”

“Thank you,” Jamie said with heartfelt relief. They set up a date for the following week, one of the days Catherine had off for the Christmas break. She had demanded it and Joe had decided the AGs office deserved a break like every other government office and had given everyone time off. Whatever piled up, piled up, he said – but given the slowdown, he didn't expect much. He told Catherine he was planning to visit his brother and his family and planned to eat himself into the New Year.

A few days later, early on Yuletide Eve, she and Jamie were in her kitchen laying out their supplies. Catherine had brewed some coffee for them both, knowing Jamie preferred it to tea, and had reserved what was needed for the recipe.

The result, an hour later, made both their jaws drop.

“Wow,” Jamie exclaimed. “Can we try one? Just to make sure they turned out, you know?”

Catherine laughed. There were more than enough for two gifts and why not. She made them a new pot of coffee and they took their cups and a cupcake to the table.

Jamie gave one a reverent bite and closed her eyes.

“Mmmmm ... even Mouse will have to say something good about these,” she exclaimed.

Catherine took a bit of hers and nodded through a mouthful.

“And Vincent,” she agreed, after reluctantly letting the cake travel to her stomach. “Maybe we need to make more ... for everyone,” she added, looking covetously at the remaining cupcakes.

Jamie laughed and nodded through another bite. “And they don't need icing either. I hate that stuff. Makes my teeth ache,” she confessed.

“I think if we wrap them attractively, no one will care that they don't have icing,” Catherine remarked. “Nancy didn't ice them either. “*No need to guild the velvet*,” was the way she put it, if I remember correctly. She was right.”

“Um,” Jamie replied, finishing off the last mouthful of hers. “How many do you think we should make?”

“Enough that everyone can have one, I guess, but our two guys get a half dozen for sure. Sound reasonable?”

“Sure. I guess we'll be busy for a while.”

“Yep. We'll just put another of these aside for each of us ... as fuel for the work.”

“No arguments from me,” Jamie stated, her eyes lighting up at the prospect of another.

“Well, we'd better get to work. I bought plenty of supplies, just in case.”

Hours later, both women were hot and tired, but they had an impressive array of cupcakes nicely laid out in two huge flat boxes (former costume boxes purloined from Catherine's closet) - and two Christmas gift boxes for their loved ones - ready to take below in time for dinner. The community dessert would be presented then, and the gifts given to their men

privately, later.

“This means Vincent and Mouse will get an extra one,” Jamie remarked.

“Well, they won't know that, and I think they'll appreciate a reprise later,” Catherine laughed.

Jamie nodded, wondering how she would get Mouse to stand still long enough to accept his present. Maybe she could kidnap Arthur – and come to think of it, if she didn't, the raccoon might eat the cupcakes. Mouse was notoriously lenient with his pet. Maybe she could get Pascal to send an urgent message for Mouse to go to his chamber. That might at least get his attention.



Later that day, as everyone was gossiping as they finished their meal, Catherine and Jamie rose and retrieved the boxes they had left with William. There were exclamations of delight as the cupcakes were passed around, and appreciative noises as they were tasted. Vincent's disappeared before Catherine had a chance to even see him eat it, and suspecting her own would be at risk, she held onto it. She glared at him and he merely looked smug and satisfied.

When they returned to Vincent's chamber, Catherine presented him with the Christmas box, and he hefted it in curiosity.

“Catherine, this seems remarkably light. I guess I didn't get pieces of coal again this year.”

Catherine laughed. “Did you ever?”

“Father threatened it often, but I can only know of one person ever getting a stocking full of that.”

“Who?”

Vincent looked momentarily serious.

“One year someone put up a stocking over the Great Hall fireplace for Paracelsus. No one admitted to it, but in retrospect, it was probably Winslow. He had hated John for a long time and blamed him for the privations the community suffered in those early days – an opinion his mother drummed into him. Winslow probably found the coal which filled the stocking on Christmas Day. Father said nothing and pretended it wasn't there. It was gone by the end of the day.”

“Well, aren't you going to open the box?” Catherine asked, wanting to change the subject to something more pleasant.

Vincent did it slowly and smiled as he caught a whiff of the contents. He extracted one of the

cupcakes, peeled off the paper cup and bit off the cap. The rest followed in short order. He closed his eyes and sighed.

“What are these called, Catherine? You didn't say.”

Catherine grimaced. True, she had not. Jamie knew of course, and she was sure to tell everyone.

“They're called *Red Velvet Cupcakes*,” she told him.

“Well named,” Vincent remarked, trying to talk around a second one. “Scrumptious!”

However, sensing that Catherine would not stand watching him eat a third, he carefully placed the box on his table. Then he turned and picked up his love to plant a kiss on her lips.

Catherine decided the taste of the cupcakes on his mouth added another pleasant dimension and sighed when he at last let her back onto her feet.

She already had Vincent's heart, so it was nice to know she had conquered his stomach too.

Jamie had not had the success she had hoped. She had helped Catherine and William hand around the cupcakes after dinner, but somewhere along the way, Mouse had exited the dining hall without her noticing. Frustrated, she gathered the decorative box with his cupcakes and went looking for him. She had not, after all, made any arrangements with Pascal, trusting that she could collar Mouse without anyone's help. Idiot – she berated herself as she headed to the mousehole, hoping he would be there. She ran over what she would say, and was so engrossed that she was not as aware as she should have been and nearly got bowled over by Mouse hurrying in the opposite direction.

“Urk,” she grunted, trying to hold onto the box and not topple over.

Mouse stopped, abashed, and grabbed an arm to steady her. He was carrying something and seemed to be struggling not to drop it.

“Sorry, Jamie. Found this and wanted to give it to William now, for next time. Cullen said it's cake plate. Mouse found above.”

Jamie was speechless momentarily and gazed at the thing he was holding. Suddenly, she smiled and used one arm to pivot him back the way he had come.

“Great idea, Mouse, but first lets go back and you can see your gift.”

“Okay good, okay fine,” he replied, and led the way back to the mousehole.

Once there, Jamie suggested he put the plate down, which he did, and then she put the box on top of it. It stood several inches above the table on a pedestal, and although it was unlikely to discourage Arthur's curiosity, at least the box would be separated from other detritus.

“For me?” Mouse asked.

“Who else?” Jamie declared and watched as he lifted the lid. His reaction was everything she could wish, and when he grabbed one and stuffed it in his mouth, she was sure the gift would be appreciated. With Mouse, there was no telling. She sighed with relief.

“Good?” she asked him, hoping he wasn't going to eat them all in front of her.

Mouse turned and looked at her, his eyes shining and his mouth stretched in his best smile.

“You are amazing,” he told her, a phrase she had never heard him use, but suspected he had

overheard from Vincent. “Jamie make them?”

“With Catherine,” she admitted.

“Mouse can’t cook,” he told her, “but glad Jamie can. Thank you for cakes.”

He gave her a big hug, then let her go to assess the reaction. Jamie smiled at him. Mouse was not demonstrative, so this was a wonderful first step. She wanted more hugs – but realized she could not demand them.

Maybe she could get him under the mistletoe during the Yule celebration.

END