

Sweet Surrender: A Valentine Story

By Linda S. Barth

Introduction

"Sweet Surrender" is a light, humorous, romantic story that was a lot of fun to write. I have always enjoyed wondering about everyday life in the Tunnel community and often wished the series had explored additional aspects of it, so I decided to do that on my own in several of my stories. I seriously doubt, though, that there was ever a possibility of a story like this being televised.

"Sweet Surrender" was first written at the request of Rita Davies of Wales for inclusion in a special Valentine's Day issue (February 1995) of her letterzine "Chatterbox." Slightly revised versions later appeared in CABB's series "Sanctuary" and in Remember Love, a limited print anthology of my short stories, as well as online. This version, however, is the final revision with the original ending restored. I hope you enjoy it!

If you would like to contact me with any comments, I would appreciate it very much. I can be reached at azurite412@gmail.com

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The spacious kitchen chamber, typically a place of great efficiency and orderliness, suddenly erupted into chaos.

"But William can't be sick - he promised he'd help us!" Samantha's eyes widened in panic as she reached out to grasp Mary's arm. "We can't do it without him!"

"We need him," Geoffrey joined in, nervously shifting from one foot to the other. "We don't know how to do this by ourselves!"

"Everything depends on him! Everything!" Ellie's distress triggered an echoing response in her younger brother.

"Yeah, everything's gonna be ruined now!" Eric's eyes clouded with tears behind the smudged lenses of his glasses.

Samantha's voice rose to a quivering wail. "What are we going to do?!"

Mary sighed heavily. This is absolutely ridiculous, she thought, shaking her head in amazement, as she gently disengaged Samantha's grip. What on earth has gotten into these children? It's only a Valentine's Day project, not the end of the world. This nonsense must stop right now!

Her love for the children gave her the patience she needed, and although she doubted anyone could possibly hear her above the noise, she made a valiant attempt to soothe their rapidly escalating distress.

"Now, now, children, try to calm down! Surely there's some way we can solve this problem." But as the children's high-pitched clamor only increased, even Mary's serene demeanor was close to the breaking point. "Just please just give me a moment to think!"

Samantha pivoted toward the older woman, her dark eyes bright with sudden hope. "You can do it, can't you, Mary?"

The others joined in immediately, crowding around the woman who had become a mother to them all. "Yes, Mary, please! You can help us!"

Her gentle face tensed in a frown. "Oh, children, I wish I could, but it's impossible. With Brooke, Mouse, and Lena down with the flu now, too, there's only Jamie to help me take care of the babies. As it is, I've had to leave her alone with all of them, and it's far too much for one person to handle. No, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid my helping you is out of the question."

"What about Cullen or Father?"

"Can we ask Rebecca?"

One after another the children called out the names of adults in the tunnel community. With a tired sigh, Mary patiently explained why their various duties would keep them from assisting with this latest problem, especially since those who were not yet suffering with a respiratory flu had already taken on extra tasks essential to keeping their world functioning as normally as possible.

As their voices slowly tapered off, Mary shook her head sadly, hating to further disappoint her young charges, but she knew there was no other choice. "I'm sorry, children, but I'm afraid you'll have to give up your plans this time. There's no adult who can supervise you today, especially with the ovens. I know you're disappointed, but there's nothing more to say. You just can't do it all on your own, and there's simply no one else available to help."

"Will I do?" A rich, husky voice rumbled from the chamber entrance, and as if on cue, everyone swung toward the sound.

Vincent walked into the midst of the unhappy group, smoothing Samantha's tangled hair with a gentle hand, offering Eric a clean handkerchief, immediately bringing calmness and control to the chaotic situation simply by his reassuring presence. He stopped in front of Mary and reached down to clasp her hands warmly in his.

"I heard your voices as I was passing by on the way to my chamber," he said. "It sounds like there's quite a crisis going on. Is there something I can do to help?"

Mary smiled in gratitude, gently squeezing his hands as she spoke. "Oh, Vincent, I wish you could, but you have more than enough to do as it is, and I don't think you want to get involved in this. In fact, I'm sure -- "

Before she could continue, the overly excited children interrupted. "He can help! He can do it!"

"Please, Vincent, say you will! Oh, please!" Samantha's big, dark eyes glowed as she looked up at her hero, her belief in his ability to perform minor miracles transparently clear in her hopeful expression.

Vincent smiled down at her. "Of course I'll help you, Samantha, but first you must tell me what disaster has occurred. Then we'll see what we can do about it."

Eric tugged at Vincent's sleeve, eager to obtain a share of his attention. Vincent turned toward the younger child and crouched down to his eye level. "Eric, would you like to explain?"

The boy nodded excitedly, all traces of his tears now gone. "It's the cookies, Vincent!"

Vincent's expression grew puzzled. "Cookies? I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Over here," Ellie called, eagerly pointing to a large book lying open on a nearby counter. "We need to bake lots of cookies for the Valentine's Day party. William showed us this recipe, but now he's sick and we can't do all of it on our own."

Vincent rose to his feet and walked slowly in Ellie's direction, a sinking feeling churning in his stomach. "And you're sure there's no one else to help you?"

"We don't need anyone else, 'cause now we've got you! You can do anything, Vincent!" Geoffrey chimed in quickly.

"Come on, take a look," Ellie urged, gesturing again toward the open book. "This will be easy for you. It'll be great!"

Vincent's gaze swept over one eager upturned face after another. There was no question of their unanimous agreement, and in that moment he knew his fate had been sealed.

Trying to quell a sensation suspiciously like fear laced with nausea, Vincent looked down at the book, quickly scanning the directions for pink-frosted, heart-shaped sugar cookies. He knew that even if the recipe were simplicity itself for the most inept cook, it would be quite another thing for him. He could teach a class on nearly any subject, lift heavy burdens that would crush another man, tame Father's temper when no one else could, and offer words of compassion to touch a troubled heart that others might deem unreachable. But when it came to cooking, Vincent was -- and always had been -- completely hopeless.

"Surely there must be someone more qualified who can help you," he began, looking past the children to catch Mary's eye. The quick shake of her head and ominous look of concern told him the answer in an instant, and it contributed to his growing sense of dread.

"With so many of the adults ill, there's truly no one else, and the children's party is the day after tomorrow," Mary told him with a sympathetic shrug as she began to make her retreat. "I'm sorry, but I did try to warn you. And now I must get back to the nursery."

Feeling just a tiny pang of guilt and a large measure of heartfelt sympathy, she paused at the threshold and looked back at Vincent. The expression on his face as he found himself surrounded by eager children all more than ready to begin their baking project, made her bite her lip as she tried to suppress a small smile. "Good luck, Vincent," she called before hurrying away from the kitchen chamber.

"I'll need it," he muttered under his breath before turning his attention to the enthusiastic brood surging around him, already wielding an assortment of mismatched bowls and spoons, bulging bags of sugar and flour, numerous cookie sheets, and far too many jars of candy sprinkles. "I'll need a lot of it!"

Four hours later, Vincent collapsed on his bed, grateful for the soothing peace and quiet of his softly lit chamber after what seemed like spending an eternity in chaos. He felt as if he had been on a long, strenuous test of strength and courage, and, he admitted with a wry, self-effacing smile, that's just what it had been. The children had looked to him for leadership,

instruction, and guidance, but his lack of expertise had left him no more capable than they, and it wasn't long before he deeply regretted his impetuous, albeit generous, offer to help.

He winced as he pictured the condition of the kitchen as they had left it. Only moments after Mary had left, a twenty-pound sack of flour had fallen from a countertop, splitting its seams and spilling its contents in a powdery cloud that now coated nearly everything in the room. Seconds later, Geoffrey had dropped an entire jar of bright pink candy sprinkles all over the floor, and before Vincent had been able to warn him away, Eric had stepped on them, slipping and sliding helplessly before upending the pitcher of water he had clutched in his hands. There was now a small pink lake drying into a sticky glaze on the stone floor.

At the very start, he had tried his best to hide his misgivings about his abilities from the children. Instructing them to organize themselves into small groups, he'd grabbed a few minutes to read and re-read the recipe directions. This doesn't look too difficult after all, he had told himself, his trepidation lessening. It looks like sequencing and timing are the most critical factors. I'll just keep the book right here where I can refer to it and –

Angry screeching and an ominous metallic crunching sound had interrupted Vincent's noble attempts to make something positive out of what could only prove to be a disastrous situation. Emotions already on edge, Samantha and Ellie had argued over who would cut out the first batch of cookies, the result being tears, hurt feelings, and a crumpled tin cookie cutter, its former heart shape mangled into something indistinguishable under Ellie's stomping foot. Then, arriving late to the festivities, Kipper had raced into the chamber carrying three dozen eggs newly donated by a Helper, most of which never made it to their destination on a work table after his collision with a misplaced crate of apples.

As if by instinct, several of the other children had learned of the adventure unfolding in the kitchen chamber and swarmed in to join them. Rather than providing a much needed source of assistance, the newly arrived bakers had only added to the confusion as each wanted a turn breaking eggs, sifting flour, and measuring sugar -- until they discovered the far more exciting allure of smooshing chunks of cookie dough into an unsuspecting victim's hair, tossing globs of frosting at one another, and pilfering samples of the few cookies they'd actually managed to bake.

At last, Vincent had herded all the children toward the bathing chambers, first extracting promises from them to shampoo eggshells and icing from their hair and to scrub globs of dough from beneath their fingernails. He knew it would be hours before he'd be able to make his way to his private bathing chamber to rid himself of the cookie ingredients that now seemed to be coating his hair, face, hands, and every inch of his clothing.

When he'd turned back to survey the disaster the children had left behind, he could hardly believe his eyes. The kitchen chamber looked like a bakery turned battle zone, and only the sight of eight dozen completed cookies safely displayed on a nearby shelf helped him suppress a weary roar of frustration. Right before his eyes, a group of usually well-behaved, polite, cooperative children had turned into untamed "Cookie Monsters," each and every one determined to enjoy a rare escape into wildly enthusiastic mayhem. It was something Vincent had never experienced before -- and which he vowed he'd never experience again.

At least, he reminded himself weakly, no one had burned their fingers on the oven or drawn blood or made themselves sick eating raw dough and fistfuls of icing. It was small comfort, but he could not think of anything better, and all things considered, it was something of a miracle they'd all survived.

Groaning, he rolled over onto his stomach, feeling gritty dried sugar rasp against his skin as he buried his face in a well-worn pillow. Every muscle in his body ached and he felt the pounding in his head increase as he remembered he would soon have to rise and return to the disaster area for clean-up duty. On any other occasion, he would have instructed the children to do their part in it as well, but this time, he admitted to himself, he had wanted nothing more than to be rid of them before anything worse happened.

Rolling onto his back, he fought a deep desire to drift into sleep but felt his eyes closing as he promised himself he would get up in just another minute or two. Or three. Maybe just a short nap... But when he heard a soft, breathy voice calling his name, he let himself drift into what must be a wonderful dream sent to help soothe away memories of his recent culinary nightmare.

"Vincent? Vincent, are you awake?"

"Mmm-hmm," he murmured contentedly as he snuggled deeper into his bed, curving his muscled arms around a pillow and cuddling it to his chest. "Catherine...."

Catherine's mouth curved into an understanding smile as a tingling warmth rippled through her. In recent months their relationship had advanced, but not far or fast enough for either of them. Now, as she watched him in his half-waking state, she loved knowing that he dreamed of her in his arms and in his bed, which was exactly where she wanted to be.

Catherine was aware that the adults in the tunnel community were exhausted from shouldering a much greater work load than usual, and she hated to wake him, but their time together was always so measured and far too brief. Clearly, he had been working hard and needed his rest, but she could not resist. She came closer and reached out a hand to stroke through the tangled mass of his bronze hair, frowning slightly at the unexpected stickiness and grit she felt there. "Vincent, please wake up," she coaxed gently. "Please, Vincent."

The touch of her hand blended with the sound of her voice, and the delightful combination suddenly told Vincent that this was not a dream at all. His eyes shot open to see Catherine gazing down at him bemusedly. He quickly pushed himself up to sit at the edge of his bed, confusion and delight mingling in his expression.

"Catherine? I thought I was dreaming," he began, his voice husky with fatigue and pleasure. "How long have you been here?"

"Not long," she answered, settling herself on the bed next to him. Tilting her head, she looked up at him, noting with growing curiosity the puffs of white powder that dusted his golden-stubbled nose and several smudges of a buttery, pink substance that streaked his cheeks, chin, and forehead. He was obviously unaware of his appearance, and Catherine decided she wouldn't embarrass him by immediately asking questions.

Knowing that the news she had come Below to tell him would only lead to disappointment, she decided to get it over with as quickly as possible, and then find a way for them to enjoy what little time they might share.

"I know we'd planned to spend Valentine's Day together," she began, "but I don't think it's going to work out. Joe just told me that I'll have to substitute in court for one of the other attorneys and I'm afraid it will take up the entire day. After that, we'll have debriefing and planning meetings and by the time I can come Below, it will be very late."

The expected look of disappointment that clouded his face mirrored hers. "I'm sorry, Catherine. But I know your job is important."

"It is, but nothing is as important as you," she told him firmly, edging a bit closer. "And of all days, too."

Vincent sighed softly, looking down into her eyes with a glimmering of hope. "Perhaps we can just postpone our plans," he suggested. "There will be another time."

"I suppose so," Catherine agreed resignedly. "But I promised Mary I'd help with the children's party. And most of all, I had so looked forward to being with you on such a special night."

No matter how special any night with Catherine might be, the mere mention of the children brought an extremely unwelcome reminder of Vincent's recent misadventures, and he could not suppress a tired groan at the very thought.

That was not the response Catherine had expected. "What's wrong?" she asked immediately. "Is everything all right?" She took his hand and noted that it, too, had an odd, gritty, sticky feeling to it.

What has he been up to, she wondered, but before she could finally verbalize the question, Vincent answered it for her. He described the catastrophe in the kitchen chamber, and within minutes they both were weak with laughter.

"Oh, Vincent, you're not serious -- Samantha actually put a raw egg down Kipper's shirt?"

"Yes," he admitted, able now to laugh at the remembered sight, although it was far from funny at the time. "It was right after he told her that her baking was going to make everyone sick. And that was about when I gave up any hope of regaining control of them. I honestly don't know how it happened, but it was total chaos in there." He shook his head ruefully. "Unbelievable!"

As his tangled amber mane settled around his shoulders, something small, round, and pink tumbled onto his shoulder and then rolled into Catherine's lap. She picked it up between two fingers and held it toward him. "What is this," she asked, "and how did it get into your hair?"

Vincent tilted his head as he looked down at her. "I believe it's called a candy sprinkle, and it probably got there sometime between Geoffrey dropping a bowl full of them on the floor and my scrubbing them off Eric as he wallowed in them."

Catherine laughed delightedly, and then leaned forward to pop the little candy into Vincent's mouth, lightly caressing his supple lower lip as she did. Seconds later, the look of surprise in his bright blue eyes deepened to something more, and before he could warn himself to think better of it, he parted his lips and captured one of Catherine's fingers in the moist warmth of his mouth. Her eyes grew wide as she felt his tongue swirl over the surface of her skin, and when he slowly pulled away, she gasped in disappointment.

The tip of his tongue skimmed over his lush lower lip. "So very sweet," he murmured, and both knew he was not referring to the tiny candy she'd offered him.

Catherine felt her heart flutter wildly, knowing it matched the rapid pace of Vincent's. She reached up to touch a pink smudge on his forehead, her eyes sparkling with laughter and desire. "And I've always known you were very sweet yourself, Vincent. You didn't have to go to the trouble of adding icing and candy sprinkles."

Struggling to focus his thoughts, Vincent looked down at the fingertip full of frosting Catherine held out to him. He watched in fascination as she slowly brought her hand toward her mouth and stroked the sugary stuff across her lips in blatant invitation. Heart pounding, Vincent hesitated only a moment before leaning forward to press his mouth to hers, nuzzling and caressing the softness he had dreamed of for so long. In a heartbeat, Catherine melted into his arms as he pulled her close in his strong embrace. Taking her mouth in heated abandon, Vincent deepened their kiss until their tongues danced together, tasting and stroking warm hidden places, before they finally parted, gasping for breath.

Vincent's voice was deeper than she had ever heard before. "Catherine, I – I never dreamed you – this –" He took a deep breath, struggling to regain his usually well-ordered thoughts but quickly gave up the fight, willingly losing himself to a swirl of sweet sensation.

Catherine's entire being melted with sensuous pleasure. Framing his face in her hands, she trailed hot, searching kisses over his skin, licking away the traces of frosting, leaving trails of fire in their place. When she finally reached his lips once more, both were trembling with a desire that would not remain controlled a moment longer.

Groaning hungrily, Vincent urged Catherine backward, lowering her to lie upon his bed. Her tight hold brought him with her easily and both moaned with the delicious sensation of his hard body pressing into the pliant softness of hers. Their mouths devoured one another until even the most passionate kisses were not enough. Raising up slightly on his elbows, Vincent stared down into Catherine's desire-glazed eyes. "Oh, please don't stop, Vincent," she urged. "Don't stop!"

"I won't," he promised, his breathing heavy and labored. "I can't." He reached one slightly trembling hand to the buttons of her suede jacket, swiftly unfastening them and sliding open the edges of the garment before lowering his head to nestle his face against the softness of her neck. Eagerly he traced a path of warm, moist kisses down the tender skin revealed by

the deeply curving neckline of her silky blouse, relishing the breathy gasps he evoked from her as he nuzzled his face into the warm curve of her breasts.

Emboldened, he reached out a hand to caress her and then suddenly stopped and raised his head, rolling his body slightly to one side. His heavy-lidded eyes opened in confusion as he watched his hand still lightly stroking her silken-covered breasts as if in search of some hidden treasure, but not certain of what he had discovered.

Catherine gasped in pleasure, arching up into his hand, and then whimpered as he withdrew the seductive caress. Opening her eyes in dismay, she watched as Vincent stared down at the palm of his hand and then raised it to his mouth, sniffing appreciatively as his tongue flickered out to taste some intriguingly irresistible substance.

Squirming impatiently, Catherine demanded an explanation, and watched his eyes twinkle with laughter and lust as he answered her. "Catherine, did you bring me a Valentine's Day gift?"

"Yes." She nodded dazedly, all thoughts of it having long since vanished under the unexpected and far more desirable gift of their shared kisses and caresses. "Why?"

"Was it candy?" he continued, his low, warm chuckle making her melt a little more.

"Yes, a chocolate candy heart," she answered. "I know how you love chocolate. It was supposed to be a surprise, but how did you know?"

He turned the palm of his hand toward her. "And you'd hidden it in the breast pocket of your jacket?"

Grinning with sudden awareness, Catherine pushed herself up just enough to see the sweet, sticky mess that had melted from the lining of her jacket onto her pink silk blouse and lacy lingerie, all the way through to her creamy skin. "Well, I thought it would be safe there until I surprised you with it."

"It was a surprise after all," Vincent told her, his rumbling laugh turning to a low, heated growl. "I love it -- and now I'm going to enjoy every bit of it."

With a hand that no longer trembled, he unbuttoned the delicate pink blouse and spread apart its sweet, sticky edges. Feeling her fingers entwine eagerly in his tangled hair, he lowered his head toward her breasts once again. The touch of his hot, searching tongue sent surges of molten desire through the lovers, and all thoughts but one slipped away in a heartbeat.

"Mmmmm," Catherine murmured in delight, gasping at each new touch as he continued to unwrap his gift. "Happy Valentine's Day, Vincent..."

Vincent, however, didn't say another word for a very long time. With his impeccable manners, he knew it would be quite rude to talk with his mouth full. And after all, the language of love was far more appropriate for wishing his Catherine a very "Happy Valentine's Day."