

A person wearing a dark suit and a white shirt is holding a large, glossy red heart with both hands. The heart is the central focus of the image. The text is overlaid on the heart.

*Careful What
You Wish For*

Vanessa Jaye

A Samhain Publishing Freebie

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Norah itched to take out her skillet. She could whip-up some crêpes topped with crème fraîche and berries, add a light dusting of cocoa powder, then edge the plates with tiny hearts made out of raspberry coulis.

But she wasn't going to do any of that.

Because her husband hated Valentine's Day. Hated. It.

Rome wasn't a holiday celebration type of guy. And Valentine's Day seemed to be the one that made him break out in hives the most.

She'd tried to change his mind in the five years they'd been married, going crazy with the decorations and traditions. (It was a miracle he hadn't committed her to the Martha Stewart Wing of the local psych ward yet.)

In all honesty, she enjoyed the extra fuss that made each holiday special—the trimming of the Christmas tree, giving out candy at Halloween, and she actually relished all the hassle involved in cooking a big Thanksgiving dinner.

She gazed wistfully at the pot drawer, sighed, then checked the progress of her state of the art coffeemaker—last year's anniversary present. It was Rome's idea of the perfect gift, and she loved it to bits. Who would've thought little Norah Warner would be making cappuccinos at home as an adult?

Growing up, she'd bounced around in the foster home system, and while she hadn't necessarily had it bad, she hadn't had it good either. Nothing like this—she looked around her kitchen with its granite counters, stainless steel appliances and porcelain tiled floors. The bay window behind the sink was lined with lovely little terra cotta pots of herbs, French doors led out to the deck, and beyond that was a pool and landscaped gardens.

Rome had given her a dream house, in turn she tried to make it a real home for both of them and creating special memories was part of that effort.

And they did have good memories here, especially some incredibly steamy ones. Norah felt heat rise to her cheeks as the tips of her breasts contracted. She took a deep breath, let out through pursed lips. Man, did that man know from steamy.

But holidays? Forget it. Which was odd, because Rome had come up through foster care, too. The difference was he'd entered the system at an older age, so he'd never quite fit in with his foster families. Or didn't particularly want to, so he said.

Norah suspected that he *had* yearned to be part of those special times back then and she strived to make them extra special for him now.

So far: Epic. Fail.

Today she was going to give him what he really wanted: No fuss. No muss.

* * * *

Rome hit the snooze button by the third beep and squinted at the clock with one eye.

5:45 AM.

February 14th.

The theme music of Psycho ran through his head and he stiffened, swallowing his groan before it came out and alerted Norah. At least he could have a few more minutes of *normal* before IT started.

He loved his wife like a banker loved a rate hike. If there was a perfect woman out there, then Norah was the one for him. But the woman had a serious problem.

She willingly bought AND wore ugly Christmas sweaters. She baked gingerbread houses from scratch and filled the whole damn house up with tinsel, lights, garland, cinnamon scented potpourri, little Santa's villages, and all other kinds of seasonal crap.

And Christmas wasn't the only holiday she lost a little bit of her mind on.

Thanksgiving meant dried flower wreaths and bowls full of— Hell, he could never quite figure out what was in those bowls, except that some of it would've been edible, if it weren't shellacked to a mirror finish.

Halloween brought out the scare-crows on the lawn, salt n pepper shakers in the shape of tiny ghosts, hand towels with witches embroidered on them and pumpkin flavored everything.

St Patrick's Day came round and it was like a herd of manic-depressive leprechauns wired on Red Bull had been given carte blanche by HGTV to run rampant over his home.

If four leaf clovers were so damn lucky, someone please tell him why his house looked like the site of a pea soup massacre every March 17th? And they weren't even Irish for Pete's sake.

Then there was Valentine's Day. The Worst. Holiday. Ever. Bar none. Demanding his involvement and attention more than all the other holidays put together.

He felt under his pillow now, then flipped back the sheets, sat up and looked around. Rome patted himself down. Nothing.

No cutesy post-it notes, saccharine cards or coupons for specific sexual favors left on the bedside table from his dearly loved, certifiably crazy, wife. He sighed in relief, got out of bed and padded into the adjoining bathroom.

Although he did kinda like those coupons...

There was nothing stuck to the medicine cabinet, inside or out, and no sappy messages, hearts or happy faces showed up on the glass from the steam from his shower.

Hmm. Rome frowned and told himself what he was feeling was a bit of apprehension. She must have something big planned.

As he got dressed for work a bit of guilt made him reach for the tie she'd gotten him last Valentine's Day, the one with the stupid pink and red teddy bears and hearts.

Rome checked himself in the mirror and smoothed back his black hair. A blue tie might have brought out the color of his eyes, but he straightened the stupid teddy bear tie. At least this one lent a dash of fun to his standard white shirt and tailored dark suit.

Before he went downstairs he took a deep breath. What would it be this time? Strawberries dipped in chocolate, heart-shaped pancakes and hand juiced blood-oranges with champagne? Pretty napkins folded into origami love-birds and red foil confetti sprinkled on the table? He checked his Blackberry; there was an early morning meeting he could sit in on. It was the perfect excuse to escape from Norah's Valentine insanity.

But Rome wasn't half way down the stairs before he realized there weren't any tantalizing scents hitting his nostrils. Feeling decidedly grumpy, he still braced himself as he reached the kitchen. Maybe she had a picnic set up on the living room floor, or-

"Hey, baby." Norah met him just inside the doorway with his usual travel cup of coffee and a light peck on the cheek. Her brown eyes twinkled up at him. She was dressed in a white yoga outfit that hugged her bod like a second skin and made the natural warmth of her exposed tanned flesh glow enticingly.

The white outfit. Not the candy-red one with the little stenciled hearts all over it.

Which, incidentally, also fit her body like *ta-dow!*

Hmm. Rome did a quick surveillance of the immediate area. The kitchen was spotless. Aside from a vase of tulips on the island, there were no fancy foods, no balloons, no streamers. Nothing. He let out the breath he'd been holding and snagged an arm around her waist, pulling her closer

"Not so fast. Is that any way to greet your husband?" He took a more leisurely kiss and she opened eagerly, her tongue sliding over his.

Damn she made him hard without even trying. She'd already taken a shower and smelled of soap and shampoo. Her shiny, brown corkscrew curls, still damp with tendrils sticking to her nape and temples, was pulled back into a pony-tail that he wanted to loosen, but she'd kill him if he did.

Rome set his cup on the counter as he started kissing down her neck; he checked the clock on the microwave over her shoulder without breaking pace.

"Time for a quickie?"

"In here? Now?"

He wasn't fooled for a minute by the thread of doubt in her question, not when her voice had gone all husky and he'd felt her shiver. Not to mention she was showing no signs of letting him go.

"Next time don't be in such an all fired rush to get out of bed in the morning," he murmured against her lips before he turned her around and started pulling down her pants.

She took over and got them down her thighs while he was unzipping his trousers. He pushed aside her thong and delved two fingers deep inside her, twisting and scissoring; she did that little sighing and gasping thing that made him crazy. She was already wet.

"Com'on, baby. What're you waiting for?" She arched her back and raised her ass; the sudden fervor in her voice making him just that much harder.

He aimed himself at her entry, rubbing along her folds to spread the moisture and then he pushed it home. Rome hissed out his next breath.

"Ah, goddamn baby. That's so good."

Norah moaned in agreement, bracing her hands against the wall as she bounced back to meet each stroke. Christ, he wanted to make this last but he couldn't. Rome bent his knees, adjusted her hips and surged upwards, lifting her to her tippy-toes as he went for broke, hammering into her until the spiraling pleasure suddenly kneed him in the groin with a spike of honest to goodness kingdom come nirvana. And come he did; heard her cry out as he groaned her name, telling her how much he loved her, how good it was with her, how beautiful she was and every other errant thought that streamed through his head in those too brief moments.

Finally he caught his breath. "Think the neighbors heard us?"

She giggled, setting off a series of milking pulses inside her that squeezed him lightly.

"You're killing me, babes." He tried to push in a little deeper but he wasn't hard enough now.

"Hold on a sec." Norah reached for the paper towel. Several minutes later they were both cleaned up and their clothes back to rights.

"What time are you getting home?" Norah asked casually; she was at the sink with her back to him.

Ah-ha! He knew it! But at the moment he was feeling a mite bit more receptive to any Valentine ideas she have. "The usual. Got something planned?" he asked equally casual, reaching for his coffee.

"Nope. They have a new yoga session at the gym, it's a little later in the day, but I thought I'd catch it."

Rome snorted.

Norah spun round. "What's that supposed to mean? I'm going to lose those ten pounds I put on over Christmas if it kills me."

"First off, you don't need to lose weight. I like everything on you just the way it is. Secondly, yoga class? Come on, honey. What do you really have planned for tonight? It's Valentine's. You always have some—," he waved his hand, his mouth twisting to the side. "Whatever, planned."

"My husband, the diehard romantic." Her voice was heavy with sarcasm. "And to think you swept me off my feet with that killer charm. Well you'll be happy to know, I've quit."

"You? Quit?" He took a sip of coffee and quirked an eyebrow. This was all some trick to make him let his guard down.

"Yup. Quit. I give up. You haven't got a romantic bone in your body, Rome, and I've decided to accept that. So no notes, no cards, no fancy dinners. I know how much that stuff annoys you." Her steps were light as she crossed the kitchen towards him, but there was a tightness in her expression as she said that last part.

Suddenly he wanted to assure her. Lie, lie and lie some more. Anything to get rid of that look. "I don't really hate it..." he trailed off as she rolled her eyes.

"And I won't even pout if you come home without flowers. Promise." She gave him a light kiss, then smiled up at him. "You should get moving or you're going to get caught in rush hour on the parkway. And I need to book a spot in that yoga class."

She left him there with his mouth hanging open. Rome was almost convinced she meant what she said. No more pressure. No more cutesy crap. No more cards with sweet sentiments...

No more coupons.

No more expectations of flowers. He looked at the vase of tulips. Not that she'd ever voiced those expectations. She never asked for flowers.

Now that he thought of it, everything she did seemed to be more about making the day special for him.

Same way as he got unqualified pleasure just from seeing her initial happiness at receiving flowers from him. He loved the way her eyes lit up just before she buried her face in the blooms, and then later, catching her secret smiles every time she looked at the arrangement during the following days. He decided then and there he'd still do the flowers. No matter what she'd just said.

He walked over to the tulips for a closer look. Maybe he'd add some to the bouquet he was bringing home later. Idly he wondered when she'd gotten these. They were fresh and he didn't remember seeing them last night.

A small white card sat beside the vase. He picked it up, put his coffee cup down.

To Norah, thanks for making my dreams come true. Love Kardeem.

Kardeem? Who the hell was Kardeem?

He was out the kitchen and down the hall, card clutched in hand, before he knew it. He heard Norah's voice in the living room and veered in that direction.

“So I’ll see you later, Kardeem.”

—He heard her say. She hadn’t spotted him yet. How come? How could she not see the smoke billowing out around him? Feel the heat of his wrath?

“No, nothing planned except spending an hour at your mercy.” She laughed. “I can’t wait—”

Rome plucked the phone from her hand. “Stay the hell away from my wife,” he snarled into the mouthpiece then slammed the phone down.

Norah stood there, doing a pretty good imitation of a guppy. “I-I can’t believe you just did that.”

“Who’s Kardeem?”

“This is ridiculous. You’re being an ass.” She made to pass him.

Rome stepped in front of her and waved the card in her face. “Who’s this Kardeem? He sends you flowers and cards with stuff only I should be writing to you—” Rome faltered on that admission. Norah raised an eyebrow, but he plowed straight ahead.

“And now I catch you on the phone with him making a date.”

“It was not a date! Are you crazy? Kardeem is the new yoga instructor. He was a temp; I thought he was better than our usual instructor and suggested several times to the manager that she should hire him full-time. I guess she mentioned what I’d said when she did, because he sent the flowers in thanks.”

“And he just happens to send them on Valentine’s?”

“He sent them three days ago. I brought them into the kitchen this morning to change the water. I can’t believe you’d think I’d cheat on you!”

“I didn’t. I don’t.” And he didn’t. It was just... he hated to admit it, but her abdication of all things Saint Valentine wasn’t sitting so well with him. She didn’t think he was particularly romantic, and maybe she was right. *Yeah, she was right.* But like hell would another man be romancing her either.

“I’m a dumbass.”

“Yes you are. A big one.” She poked him.

He caught her finger and tugged her closer. “The biggest.”

She sighed. “And I love you, you big, dumb, jealous dumbass.”

“Make that the biggest, *luckiest*, dumbass in the world.”

“Agreed.”

"You know what?" He wrapped her in his arms for the third time that morning. "I'm not going into the office today."

"No?" She ran a finger down his lapel, then smoothed his tie, a tiny smile playing about her full mouth. God he loved that smile. Would do anything for it. And was about to.

"No. I've got more important things to do."

"Go on." Those big baby browns peered up at him from beneath thick black lashes.

"Like wine, dine, pamper and make love to my wife. All." He kissed her. "Day." Another kiss. "Long." This one left them both panting.

"It is Valentine's Day, after all. And I'm nothing if not a romantic."

"And a dumbass."

"A romantic dumbass," he corrected.

At least that's what he would be from now on. He cut off her laughter with a hungry kiss. She wasn't laughing when he was done.

Later that evening, after a lot of effort and attention on his part, including some great new creative uses for that fantastic teddy bear tie...

Rome rolled over, raising himself up an elbow. Norah was still flat out on her back in the tangle of sheets, and flushed. All of her. He smoothed a hand over the slope of her breast, pausing to lightly flick his finger back and forth over a nipple. She gasped and he smiled with satisfaction.

"I've decided that Valentine's is the best holiday ever."

"You may... *uhmmm*..." She lost her train of thought when he slid his hand between her thighs. "... be onto something there, sport."

"I've also decided that I love you very much."

"Just decided that—" he rubbed his thumb over the still swollen nub of flesh between her folds and her voice rose to a squeak. "*—now did you?*"

"Huh-uh."

Norah grabbed his wrist, pressing his hand against her. "I've just decided something, too," she said breathlessly.

"Oh yeah?"

"You're not such a dumbass after all."

Rome just smiled. "Happy Valentine's, baby."

“By the way,” he mouthed against her lips, “where’s that back massager I gave you last Christmas. You know, the one that vibrates...”

Biography

The lone survivor of a Tibetan plane crash, Vanessa Jaye was rescued by a now extinct rogue sect of shape-shifting monks. As the only female in this revered group she can categorically state that the sound of one hand clapping was how those sexist Neanderthals asked her to get another beer from the fridge.

After the incident officially known as The Breaking of the Sanctity of the Sanitary Napkins, the prank playing chauvinistic monks were never seen again.

Coincidentally, Vanessa Jaye is the only survivor of, and eyewitness to, the Shangri-La Massacre. And she ain’t talkin’.

She now spends her time contemplating the meaning of life—and whose job, really, is it to do the dishes—in between making stuff up, writing it down, and sending it into her editor.

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