



My Secret Valentine

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MY SECRET VALENTINE

BY
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Michelle gazed out the window as malignant thoughts of her ex scrolled across her brain. The jerk had gall. What the hell kind of man dumps his woman right before Valentine's Day? Oh yeah that's right, Brian. There really should be a law against something so—vicious. Now her absolute favorite holiday had been soured for life. She used to love going out and seeing the happy couples all dolled up in their pink and red, glowing with joy. Ha! Now she wished the day would have never been created. Instead of a nice romantic outing, she'd been reduced to watching chick flicks—and wishing murder was legal.

The jerk left her for another woman, which she found totally unacceptable. They'd spent many good years together but toward the end, their relationship took a swift spiral downward, one they'd never been able to recover from. His new little tart must have seen it as an opportunity to slide right in and take what didn't belong to her. Freakin' thief.

Michelle had seen the scheming heifer during some of their friendly get-togethers. Maddie or Maggie or something like that—who cared? The skank stole her man and now she sat alone with nothing but chocolate and TV for comfort. Not good. Apparently being ten years younger meant more than loyalty or depth. Brian clearly thought so. The woman had the brains of a goldfish but she had the double D's to make up for it.

Damn it! Of all times to do this to her, did it have to be around Valentine's Day? A day meant for flowers, pink ribbons and candlelit dinners—not silent moping on the couch. And the jerk knew how she felt about this particular day above all. She would bet

her Miata he'd done it just to spite her because that's the type of person he turned out to be in the end. A sigh drifted from her lips as depression took hold of her casting a tiresome gloom over what should have been the most joyous day of the year.

A knock at the door pulled her from dismal thoughts of doing away with her lousy ex. Everyone she knew had celebratory plans with husbands and boyfriends so she couldn't fathom why there would be a knock at *her* door. Wondering who it could be she slipped from her warm blankets. Perhaps Brian had come to beg her forgiveness. Yeah right! Perhaps she needed her head examined. Even if he showed up and begged her forgiveness she'd slam the door in his face before he could blink. On one hand she would still be dateless but on the other hand she'd have her self respect—and a nice little taste of vengeance.

By the time she made it to the front door of her small two bedroom home, her visitor had disappeared but left a “gift” behind on the porch. She looked around the neighborhood. It resembled a ghost town. Another heavy sigh left her lips at yet another reminder of her new lot in life.

Alone on Valentine's Day.

Frozen currents of air chilled her to the core. The flannel night gown and fuzzy socks did nothing to protect her from the harsh elements of winter. With a nudge from the arctic winds she remembered why she'd come to the icy porch. Her gaze fixed upon the treat left for her and her breath caught as she retrieved the small envelope.

Who could have left this? With the thought fresh on her mind she went back through the house to cuddle under her warm blankets.

Pretty little red and white hearts decorated the envelope. Someone out there had a cruel sense of humor. A funny charge zipped up the skin of her back as she started to throw it away, in the bin by the couch.

Perhaps it was the subtle, masculine sent wafting from the smooth paper that stopped her in her tracks. Or it could have been the barely legible letters scrawled across the front. Something about it touched a nerve—it looked familiar. Maybe she should open it. What could it hurt? Whoever left it hadn't bothered to put a name or any signs that would let her know who they could be. Weird.

Finally, after she worked herself into a tizzy about who could have left it, she ripped into it to find a small note on clean, crisp paper.

I know this must sound crazy, but I couldn't think of another way to do this without scaring you off. I've been into you since the first time we met.

Okay maybe this guy had the wrong girl. She couldn't think of anyone who'd fit the bill on this one. Oh well, the letter started out so nice she might as well finish reading it.

Michelle...

Well there went the mistake theory. Of course there were like a million and one Michelle's in the world but she doubted this person sent the letter to the wrong one. She lived alone and didn't share a name with any of her neighbors. Not even close. She believed in coincidence but the belief only went so far. Shaking her head at the ridiculousness of the situation she read on.

... Brian should be ashamed of the way he treated you. You deserve a real man in your life, someone who can appreciate you for who you are. Meet me at The Pier tonight so I can show you that I am that man.

The beautiful words in the letter would have been music to her ears, if only it didn't feel so creepy. Hell, the guy was probably ugly as sin and out of his mind. *But what if he isn't?* The thought bounced around her mind. God, when had she become so desperate? Even considering going to meet some random guy for Valentine's Day should've been out of the question. On second thought maybe she did know him? The mesmerizing fragrance wafting from the letter triggered a feeling inside her. But why? And apparently he knew plenty about her, enough to get a letter to her house.

A warm shiver floated down her spine. Nervous excitement filled her and forced a smile from reluctant lips. What harm could it do to meet the guy? He'd invited her to a public place which would be extremely crowded anyway. Something so outrageous had never even crossed her mind before. Meeting a possible stranger, for a date, the world had to be coming to an end. She didn't crave adventure in her life. Not like other people. Michelle Curtis played it safe.

Well maybe she needed to change that. Brian probably left because of her inability to take risks. The thought of her ex added more fuel to the fire. She had a chance for a date. Maybe it would turn out to be a good one.

Better than staying here with bonbons and old movies.

"Damn it! I'm going," she announced to the empty walls of her den.

* * *

By the time Michelle reached the crowded pier, her practical side had surfaced full force. The fear of puking became more of a reality as millions of butterflies proceeded to flutter around her stomach. *So this is what rock bottom feels like. What was I thinking coming out to meet a stranger? Why else would she be out there in the freezing cold with no one to keep her warm?*

She stopped and gave herself a mental shake. Could she be more pessimistic? It took every ounce of willpower not to roll her eyes at the cynical thoughts assaulting her brain. No one should be irritated with their own behavior, but she managed to pull it off.

Seriously, get a grip!

If she couldn't be happy with herself how could she expect anyone else to be?

"Michelle," a familiar voice rumbled from behind her.

She whipped her head around so fast she stumbled right into Don Williamson. Brian's ridiculously fine friend.

His deep, dark eyes captured hers in a silent hello and a sinfully delicious smile lingered at the corners of his full lips. The setting sun played off his brown skin as if he were glowing. God, she could sop him up with a biscuit. In his black slacks and grey overcoat he had her ready to melt all over the pavement.

Why couldn't I have met you first? "Hi," she said, dismissing the thoughts running rampant across her obviously disturbed brain. So what if he looked like a sweet and scrumptious delicacy, that didn't mean she needed to drool all over him...much.

"How are you?"

She wanted to focus on the words coming out of his mouth instead of what it might taste like, but success eluded her. Keeping her chin from hitting the ground took too much energy away from making coherent thoughts.

“Fine,” she replied after a long pause. If she didn’t calm down soon she’d make a fool of herself for sure. She took a few deep breaths and willed her heart so slow down to a reasonable pace.

“Happy Valentine’s Day.” His voice flowed over her like warm honey and she bet he tasted like it too. *Okay where did that come from?* No man should be so damn fine a woman lost her mind as soon as she came in contact with him. How could she manage to keep her attraction on the low when he stood there looking better than a sweet potato pie at Thanksgiving?

“Thank you.” She tried to smile, but fell short. Today had been more of a disappointment than the day she became involuntarily single. Every time she saw another happy couple in love she wanted to vomit. Okay, she needed a change of subject.

“Who are you here with?” *Great going. Some change of topic.* The urge to smack her forehead with the heel of her palm increased exponentially.

“You look cold. We should get you inside.”

She had been so engrossed in how his perfect eyes mesmerized her she’d forgotten they were in the freezing cold until he’d mentioned it.

“Okay.”

He parked his arm around her shoulder as he led her into a local restaurant. A deep, spicy scent wafted from his body and the sweet familiarity of it almost buckled her knees. She knew the fragrance, but her scrambled brain just wouldn’t work well enough

to figure it out. Oh God, why did life have to be so unfair? Speaking of unfair why hadn't her date shown up yet? After the nice sweet letter he better not have been standing her up.

Once inside the restaurant she noticed two things, the warm, toasty temperature and the silence. The amount of pleasure she found in these small details surprised her. A couple moments alone with extreme man candy would make any woman's day... even if she couldn't keep him.

"Do you want something to drink? I think they have hot cocoa."

"Sure," she replied, going for her purse.

"Don't worry about it. I'll get this one." He gave her a wink before he turned and strolled to the register.

Is it getting warmer in here or is it just me? I should leave before I do something I may regret... like talking the most gorgeous man I've ever met into going home and getting into bed with me.

"Here you go," Don said, breaking into her thoughts as he placed a steaming mug of cocoa in front of her.

Seriously, why is he being so nice to me and even more important where is his date? No way would a man of his caliber be without a date on Valentine's Day.

"So where is your date? You're not here alone are you?" Just name her Nosey Rosie because no matter how hard she tried she couldn't keep her big mouth shut.

"No, I'm not here alone," he replied glancing at her before he took a sip of cocoa.

"Well where is your date? Did she take an extended trip to the ladies room?" She chuckled in spite of herself.

"Right here."

“Where?” Michelle asked, looking toward the door then craning her neck to see behind her.

“Right here,” he said, a little slower with a deliberate glance into her eyes.

Michelle gasped while taking a sip of her cocoa and almost choked. It couldn't be. Don worked at a prestigious architectural firm. His high powered career coupled with his mouthwatering good looks created a fierce, woman magnet. Men like him didn't need to send out anonymous letters to their friends ex-girlfriends.

“Yes,” he said, with a nod as if reading her mind. “It was me.”

“But—but...”

Crap, his words seemed to have paralyzed her vocal chords. It all made sense. The familiar scent, the crappy penmanship, which she'd seen so many times at their old poker games were his. But, what did a woman say to something like that? On one hand it felt like a dream, on the other hand damn awkward. Sure they'd joked around and hung out on a regular basis but she should have seen this coming...right? There had been no hints, no stolen glances or discrete whispers.

“I wish I could have been more upfront about my feelings before.” He looked down at his hands then back up before he continued. “But you were with Brian.”

“And now?” she asked, finally finding her voice.

“I saw opportunity and couldn't let it slip away.”

“What about Brian?”

“What about him?” A vicious frown appeared upon his face as he spoke. “Why do you care about him after the way he treated you?”

“I don't.” *Do I?*

“So why did you bring him up then?”

“It just seems weird. You two are friends. Won’t it be awkward to date his ex?”

“One man’s ex is another man’s gold.”

Gold? Did he just refer to her as gold?

“I like everything about you. That dark beautiful skin makes me want to do all sorts of *things* to you. And your mind, I think it turns me on more than your body.”

The look in his eyes said things his mouth didn’t, which already said a lot. Her pulse raced and her body ached to touch and be touched by him. With every word, every breath and every look he stripped her bare until she felt raw and exposed. Right then she didn’t know how she should feel about all this but the expression on his face kept her locked in place. The temperature over their little secluded booth skyrocketed since they sat down. Or it could’ve just been her.

“It’s not like we’re that close anyway,” he said, breaking into her thoughts once again. “Most of the time I only came around because I knew you’d be there.”

“Really?” she whispered, unable to believe what he’d been revealing.

“Maybe, I hoped one day you would see him for the jerk he was and drop him.”

Images of their past meetings blazed a trail of sickening confusion through her mind. Every time she’d seen him it had been with Brian. How could she separate the two? He was sexy, and wonderful, and sweet—and one of Brian’s friends. The thought made her head spin and her stomach lurch.

“I can’t do this.”

So what if he could make her melt like warm butter with just a look. This couldn’t be allowed to happen. They were friends. She didn’t know why it mattered so much but it

did. Not to mention, Don was all chocolate satin and defined muscle why would he be interested in an average Jane, like her? If he'd wanted her in the beginning why hadn't he approached her then? Sure he *seemed* to be into her, but so had Brian—at first. How did she know he wouldn't end up treating her just as badly—or worse? God she needed to get out of there before she suffocated.

“Why n—”

“I have to go.” She stood and hurried from the restaurant. The whole thing reeked of weirdness and she felt like her lungs were going to burst. She had to get a grip on the situation and fast. How could this be happening? Oh no. Dizziness crept upon her and those annoying butterflies were making another appearance. None of this made any sense and her brain hurt trying keep up.

After walking for a few seconds, her heart returned to normal and her breathing evened out. On so many levels Don had been right about a lot of things. Brian never treated her right. Sure he loved her body, he couldn't get enough of it but nothing else seemed to matter to him. Everyone and everything else meant more to him than she did. She'd been a fool to stay with him, but being miserable with him seemed a much better option than being alone. *Not!*

Don could turn out be a fantasy compared to Brian but hey, she'd been wrong before. Still fresh from a crappy relationship and she could've just been drawn to the next attractive man she saw. Didn't that happen to people all the time? The “rebound” relationship?

No, she didn't buy that and Don probably wouldn't either. He was into her like a sports fan at a football game, she could feel it, and she wanted him just as much. Panic

caused her to run away from him. Tall, dark Adonis type men usually didn't make a habit of confessing their affection for her. But how could this ever work? What would she look like dating one of her ex-man's friends?

"Michelle," came the sweet, familiar voice from behind her. "Please wait."

She tried to rush off again, but he caught her before she could get away.

"I'm not letting you leave," he said, pulling her into a firm, warm embrace. "I know you feel it too."

His intense, dark gaze drew her in and her mind got hazy. The commanding lure of his emotions reeled her in making her forget why she ran from him in the first place. Deep inside she felt something for him, a big something, and it made her body warm and languid, even in these frigid temperatures. His eyes searched hers and she wondered what he saw. If the saying the eyes never lie held true, he already knew she wanted him. Hiding her feelings proved impossible with him pressed up against her that way.

Air rushed in and out of her lungs at a hurried pace and her muscles clenched at the feel of his masculine strength touching her through the thick material of his coat. The way he felt wrapped around her consumed every part of her mind, body and soul. He licked his full, decadent lips as if he anticipated the enjoyment of a rare delicacy then leaned in and touched his mouth to hers.

She sighed light and airy at the pressure of their flesh finally touching. The desire to be one with him took over and she clutched him to her as he feathered his lips across hers. A groan tore from his throat before he moved in to claim a deeper, more primitive kiss. This wasn't your run of the mill smooch either. His tongue swept into her mouth stealing her breath as he explored with expert skill. Heat singed her body leaving her

trembling at the feel of his soft mouth pressed against hers. Passion roared through her bringing to life sensations she'd never hoped to experience. She came alive with his touch and it scared and invigorated her all at once.

I never knew it could be like this.

The kiss ended almost as quickly as it began and puffs of cloudy air emerged from their lips as they gazed at each other once more. She could sense something happening between them. When she'd left her house that afternoon she hadn't expected to experience anything measuring up to intensity of their situation. The deep hooded look in his eyes told her she'd only received a sample of his smoldering heat. At any moment she could likely turn into a puddle of need right there in the middle of the street. Smoothness oozed from Don like fudge from a chocolate lava cake. And she bet the rest of him tasted just as good.

A chill zipped up her spine as the realization hit her. Maybe she'd been a little hasty when she labeled him as a rebound guy. He seemed to have all the makings to be something more. But would she be willing do what it took to find out? This situation held way too many complications and fear had a cold grip on her heart. She barely knew him, in the personal sense anyway. Sure she knew he could play cards and whip everyone at the table or that his eyes crinkled at the corners whenever he laughed but what did that mean? She'd known the same things about Brian and look where it'd gotten her.

"Hey," he said, lifting her chin and meeting her eyes. "I know you felt something when we just kissed. Don't let Brian hold us back from something that could be real."

"That sounds good and all but..." She couldn't finish. What reason could she actually give? The man had laid everything out in plain view and it sounded wonderful

compared to her last relationship. Once again fear had been allowed to come in and take over. She needed to put a stop to her self-destructive behavior immediately. At this rate she would end up lonely and scared for the rest of her life, just like Brian told her on his way out the door. Bastard! Why did she care what he thought?

“Look, I just want to take you out. Show you what a *real* man is like.” He gave her face a soft caress that went all the way to her toes. “Is that alright with you?”

A smile spread across Michelle’s face before she could stop it. “Yeah, I think I can do that.”

“Good, if you’d have said no I would’ve been forced to leave anonymous letters at your door until you changed your mind.”

“Is that so?”

“Oh yeah,” he said with a sideways grin. “I’d have taken off work and everything.”

Michelle shouted with laughter at Don’s antics. Yeah this was one special guy. With him she could tell there would never be a dull moment. Now with a renewed taste for adventure burning through her, she had to admit this had turned out to be the best Valentine’s Day of them all.

AUTHOR BIO

Lauren Johnson is a mother, wife and writer, not always in that order. When she isn't working her day job she can be found parked in front her computer, working with glee on one of her many manuscripts. She enjoys cooking up delicious tales for her audience to devour that challenge the mind and titillate the senses. Her affection for the coveted happily-ever-after carries her through endless journeys of love and inspiration.

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