

SMITTEN BY THE VALENTINE BEAR

Talk about *off* Broadway.

Fiona McLachlan examined herself in the gold framed mirror of the office building's lobby. The giant cardboard heart adorning her puke yellow bear costume had nearly toppled her twice on the way here from the singing telegram office. The point of Cupid's arrow dipped precariously low, threatening to pierce a hole in the marble floors. And the stupid red bow on her head kept unraveling and blocking the view already limited by the fuzzy oversized bear ears.

This was so far off off Broadway it might as well be another planet. But a musical theater actress aspiring to land a role in a hit play had to pay her dues. And in the here and now, pay her rent.

Most of the suits and high heels laughed or smiled as Fiona made her way to the elevator. Some were so busy staring at their phones or charging straight ahead on their appointed missions that they didn't even notice her. As the elevator doors opened, she stood aside to let the passengers exit before wobbling in balancing her packages. A dozen roses and giant box of Hershey's chocolate kisses.

"That candy for me?" A voice behind her startled her. She hadn't realized there was anyone still in the elevator. She turned, slowly. "Maybe." She eyed the almost-too-handsome-for-his-own-good man trapped behind her costume. "Is your name April?"

"It could be." He studied her face, then her packages. "For a box of kisses."

"Chocolate kisses, you meant."

"Of course that's what I meant." Winking, he took the box from her hand. "Let me help you with that. You seem to be having enough trouble managing your ears."

Fiona realized she'd forgotten to push the button for the fourth floor just as the elevator door magically opened on...the fourth floor. She stepped out.

So did the man. "This is four."

"That's where I'm going."

He cocked his head. "April Stanton?"

She looked at the name on the card. "Yes. Do you know where she sits?"

"Sure." He grabbed the vase of roses with his free hand, just as it tipped and was about to spill water onto the floor. "Follow me."

The fourth floor of the New York City office building was a maze of cubicles. Fiona followed her hunky helper up one row and down the other, like a rat searching for a pellet in a psych experiment. Leading her past an overhead sign announcing the Accounting Department, he finally paused at a cubicle where a blond young woman wearing a dark plaid blazer and black glasses pored over a computer screen.

"April." The man handed Fiona the packages so she could present them to the object of her

client's affection.

"Oh!" the woman exclaimed when she saw the roses. "How sweet." Her astonished gaze took in Fiona and her costume. "And how cute you look." She took the box of chocolates from Fiona's hand and rifled through it. "Is there a card?"

"Actually, ma'am, there's a song. From George Spencer." Fiona took the lyrics out of her bear pocket. "He wrote it himself."

"Aww." The woman looked like she was about to cry. "Like a singing telegram."

Exactly like that. Fiona cleared her throat and waited for the guy who'd helped her to leave. But he plopped himself down in the cubicle next to April's.

"Seriously?" She shot him a glare.

He shrugged. "This is my desk."

She eyed the name plate over the door. Ryan Kelly. Well, that might be his name. But Fiona suspected he was no more Ryan Kelly than April Stanton.

She opened her mouth, warmed up with a few notes, and proceeded to sing the adoring love tribute that George Spencer had penned. The song was, frankly, awful. The words barely rhymed and the music was pedantic, something a first grader could have written. But April Stanton loved it. Tears formed in her eyes and when Fiona finished with a flourishing crescendo. George's girlfriend asked for the lyrics.

Fiona placed the note paper in her hand. "Enjoy your flowers and candy," she said, and turned to leave.

"Wait." April Stanton grabbed her purse from under her desk and rifled through it. "Let me give you a tip." She found her wallet and opened it. And frowned. "I'm sorry, I don't have any cash." She thrust a handful of chocolate kisses into Fiona's hand.

Great, a minimum wage job and she was getting tipped in chocolates. "That's not necessary." She set the chocolates on Ryan Kelly's desk. "Knock yourself out."

The man who might be Ryan Kelly stood, reached into the back pocket of his well-fitting pants and took a twenty from his wallet. Fiona was tempted to throw it in his face but she owed her roommate for last month's rent and she couldn't afford to be snooty.

"Thanks." She shoved it in the pocket of the bear costume, then glanced down the long hallway with possible turns to the left and right at every third or fourth cubicle. "What's the shortest way to the elevator?"

"I'll take you." He stood, shrugging out of his suit jacket, and hanging it over the back of the chair, revealing a cardinal red shirt and a red and white tie that sported pictures of Cupids and hearts. As well as a taut chest and flat abs. And he didn't look like he was sucking in his gut to achieve the effect. The man worked out.

Well, good for him.

He waited with her at the elevator bank, apparently not in a hurry to get back to his desk. One of the cars was stopped at floor fifty-six, heading down, and the other was at ten, going up.

"You have an amazing voice," the man who was possibly Ryan Kelly said. "Have I seen you on Broadway?"

"Not yet." She might have left it at that but the elevator would be a long time coming and Fiona hated awkward silences. "It's my dream," she admitted. "I have an audition this afternoon, in fact. For an off Broadway musical."

"Well, with pipes like those, you've definitely got a shot at it." He grinned. "Especially if they're redoing *Cats* as *Bears*."

Fiona rolled her eyes. "Ha. Ha. Ha."

“Okay, that was bad but I really meant it about your voice. You even made that corny song sound good.”

He did sound sincere. “Thanks.” She stuck out her paw. “I’m Fiona McLachlan.”

“Ryan Kelly.” His hand was almost as large as the big yellow paw and even through the fur, she felt his strong grip.

“So that really was your desk.”

“Yep. And I’m going to eat those chocolate kisses too.” He grinned, “So what do you do while you’re waiting for your big break? Besides delivering singing telegrams?”

“I’ve sung in a few clubs. Some chorus work in off off Broadway productions. And a few stints in dinner theaters. Actually I’m doing a show tonight.”

He lifted a brow. “On Valentine’s Day?”

She shoved her hand deep into her pocket for the flyer. “We’re doing a special performance this evening. Especially for lovers.” She unfolded the flyer and pressed it into his hand. “You should come. Bring your girlfriend.”

With perfect timing, the elevator arrived and Fiona stepped in. He was never going to come to a show in the west village on the invitation of a woman wearing a stupid bear costume. But as the doors closed behind her, she enjoyed watching the confused expression on Ryan Kelly’s face.

* * *

“You’re smitten,” April said when Ryan returned to his cubicle. “With a cute-as-a-button valentine bear.”

“Smitten?” He swiveled his chair to face her. “Besides being out of date by about two hundred years, that word would more properly describe an infatuation of physical attraction. I don’t even know what the woman looks like.”

“Would you like to?”

Trying not to fantasize about the face and body inside that costume, Ryan changed the subject. “What’s going on with you and George? I thought you two broke up weeks ago.”

“We did. He was an ass.” April wrinkled her nose. “Can you believe he ditched me on my birthday? To play in a poker tournament with his friends?”

He definitely could. “Didn’t he do the same thing last year?”

She opened her mouth to protest, then shut it again, her cheeks flaming. With embarrassment? Anger? Undoubtedly the former. April never got angry

“So,” he said, looking at the showy vase of roses, “you’re going to give him another chance?”

“How can I not? This was so sweet of him.”

Ryan tried not to roll his eyes. George Spencer was a turd, and April deserved so much better.

“Besides, what other options do I have? I’ve lived in the city two years and even in this huge pool of single men, I haven’t met anybody I can have a real conversation with, much less spend my life with.”

Now that hurt. “What am I, chopped liver?”

Grinning, she stood and embraced his shoulders in a platonic hug. “You’re a wonderful, amazing friend and I couldn’t have gotten through these last two years without you.” She winked. “And besides, you’re smitten with that Valentine bear.”

* * *

“Wow, nice dressing room.” Fiona’s roommate, Jan Carter, sat on the sofa with her new boyfriend, checking out the amenities.

“It’s not mine.” Facing the makeup mirror, Fiona twirled mascara over her eyelashes. “Usually it’s for the show’s star, but Vanessa’s not here tonight. For this special Valentine show, only four of us are performing.” Fiona would actually get more stage time than usual, and though it wasn’t likely some Broadway producer would bring his significant other here tonight, one could at least be hopeful.

“I’m looking forward to the show,” Jan’s boyfriend said. “What’s it about?”

“The first half, we’ll be performing some romantic scenes from popular movies, and singing medleys of timeless love songs. After intermission, there’s going to be kind of a quiz show. The emcee will have questions for each couple to answer to see how compatible they are.”

“Uh oh.” Jan made an emoji-type frownie face.

“You’re worried?” Grinning, her guy looped his arm around her shoulders.

“An ad exec and a firefighter don’t have much in common,” Jan said, but her adoring gaze into her man’s eyes belied her cautionary words.

Jan had met her handsome firefighter on the subway on New Year’s Eve. Fiona bit back an envious sigh. Why did nothing romantic like that ever happen to her?

“You two are perfect together,” Fiona said with an assuring smile. Her petite roommate and burly Steve Gianelli looked like Mutt and Jeff in photographs, but what they shared in every Instagram photo were blissful smiles. A little green jealousy monster perched on Fiona’s shoulder. It sucked to be alone on Valentine’s Day.

Her mind returned, as it had half a dozen times that day, to the cocky, handsome hunk she’d met delivering singing valentines that morning. Fiona hadn’t noticed if Ryan Kelly had been wearing a ring, but she could barely see out of that oversized bear costume. He hadn’t responded when she’d suggested he bring his girlfriend to tonight’s performance. So maybe he wasn’t dating anyone. More likely he was, but had already made big plans for this most romantic night of the year. Or maybe...

It was a five minute flirtation. If that. Get over it. You have a show to do.

“So how did the audition go this afternoon?” Jan asked.

“Like all the rest.” Fiona pursed her lips, trying not to sound too disappointed. “You have a beautiful voice but it just doesn’t mesh with the other voices in the chorus, blah, blah blah.”

“You should have told them then to consider you for a lead.”

“I did.” Fiona grinned wryly. “We’ll see how that goes over.”

“I guess we should go find our table,” Jan said, opening the door of the dressing room.

Tightening the belt of her robe, Fiona stepped into the wings and peeked through an opening in the curtain. For tonight’s performance, the tables had been reconfigured to cozy two-tops, covered with white tablecloths with red runners. Roses and candles stood as centerpieces on each table. Most of the patrons already seated were young, and all of them looked to be in love. None of them looked like the young man she’d met earlier.

“Looking for something?” Jan grinned. “Someone?”

Fiona hadn’t mentioned her morning encounter with Ryan Kelly and she’d look like an idiot if she acted like she might be expecting someone. “No, just...checking out the house.” She hugged her roommate. “Thanks for coming. I hope you enjoy the show.”

Steve raised his palm for a high five. “Break a leg.” He swallowed. “That is what they say, isn’t it? I mean, I wouldn’t really want you to...”

“No, it’s fine. It is what ‘they’ say.” She stole one last look at the people arriving at the tables, then turned back toward her dressing room.

The aroma of barbecue and mashed potatoes wafted in from the kitchen, reminding Fiona

that she hadn't eaten since breakfast, but eating anything before a performance unsettled her already butterfly-filled stomach. Ignoring its rumblings, she listened to the sounds of chairs scraping as they were pushed back by patrons swarming to the buffet.

Juno Davis rapped on Fiona's open door, already dressed in the assembly line worker's costume she'd wear for her first scene. "Are you nervous?"

"No more than usual. You?"

"About six on the anxiety meter." Juno patted her hand over her heart as if to slow its beating. "But John's freaking out."

Like Fiona, John and Juno were normally minor players, given the opportunity to display more of their vocal chops tonight. "He'll be fine. Get Gary to calm him down."

Gary Weber, who normally played the male lead, had logged more performances than the other three added together.

"Will do, Break a leg." Juno darted away.

Fiona finished applying her makeup and stepped carefully into the red velvet dress she'd be wearing for her first number.

"Five minutes," the stage manager warned as he walked by.

Sucking in a breath, Fiona walked to the wings and peered out at the house. She'd been able to score Jan and Steve a table in the first row, and they looked happily absorbed in their food and each other. The house was full, with only one empty table in the back of the room. Okay, so even without Vanessa as the star, they'd sold a respectable number of tickets for this performance.

"Showtime," the stage manager whispered and Fiona backed into the wings as the curtain opened.

For the opening number, Gary sang the predictable 'My Funny Valentine,' descending from the stage to wander through the audience and get up close and personal with individual patrons. Then Fiona and Gary did a duet of 'All I Ask of You' from *Phantom of the Opera*, and next she and Juno did the romantic scene from *An Officer and a Gentleman* where John, as the Richard Gere character, swooped up Juno in his arms while Fiona and Gary sang 'Up Where we Belong.'

They were halfway into the first act before Fiona looked out at the audience. She could barely see in the darkness, but the Exit sign illuminated the table at the back that had been empty before. Seated at it now was a man wearing a cardinal red shirt and a red and white striped tie. And across the table from him was...an empty chair.

* * *

At intermission Ryan was standing at the dessert bar, filling his plate with brownies and chocolate covered strawberries, when he heard a rustling noise behind him.

"You came," a soft voice said.

He turned. Wearing the red dress from her *Phantom of the Opera* number, Fiona looked like an exquisite valentine, the heart-shaped bodice outlining her breasts and cupping her small waist. The taffeta skirt pouffed out over her hips, concealing whatever delicious attributes lay beneath.

"Of course I came." He returned his gaze to her face. "I was curious to know what you looked like without that bear costume."

"You mean in normal clothes," she clarified.

He winked. "That too."

The flush rising to her cheeks almost matched the color of her dress.

Ryan filled his plate with an assortment of desserts for two. "How did your audition go?"

She looked surprised that he'd remembered her mentioning it. "A nice rejection. But still a

rejection.” She shared with him the director’s comment and her reaction.

“It’s their loss,” he said, taking her arm with his free hand. He led her to this table, “Do you have time to sit?”

“Just for a minute.” She hesitated before taking the seat opposite him, craning her neck as if searching for someone in the room. Finally she said, “You’re here alone?”

He nodded. “I know you said to bring my girlfriend, but as it happens, I’m not seeing anyone now.” Fact was, he hadn’t dated anyone in a long time. After a while all these single women chasing dreams and single men began to look the same. No one had stood out until the Valentine bear he’d met this morning.

“Thanks for coming.” She flipped her head back and smoothed a hair that didn’t need smoothing. “Are you enjoying the show?”

“Very much.” He pointed to the plate between them and she selected a chocolate covered strawberry. “I especially enjoyed the love song from *Phantom*.”

She bit into the strawberry and chewed slowly and thoroughly, the juice from the strawberry dribbling from her lip. Ryan couldn’t take his eyes away from her mouth. When she dabbed at her lips with a cocktail napkin, he found himself envying the napkin. “You’ve seen *Phantom of the Opera*?” she asked.

“Three times.”

She arched a brow.

“I’ve always thought that love song was wasted on Christine and Raul,” he said. “I would have loved to have heard the phantom sing it.”

“Me too!” She smiled full out. “But to tell the truth, I don’t think Christine was worthy of him.”

He nodded in agreement. “Such a tragic hero. The man was so full of passion but he didn’t know how to express it in socially acceptable ways. A sad, doomed character from the start.”

“Yet you saw it three times.”

He smiled sheepishly. “I kept hoping the ending would change.”

“Me too!” Her ingenuous smile lit her face from ear to ear. She touched his hand. “It’s kind of unusual to meet a man—at least a straight man—who likes musical theater.”

Ryan laughed, entwining his fingers with hers. “Actually, I grew up on musical theater. And classical music. My brother sings with the Met.”

“The Metropolitan Opera?” Her eyes widened. “That’s impressive.” Her gaze lowered to their enmeshed fingers but she didn’t pull her hand away. “How about you? Do you sing as well?”

“Only in the shower. And I don’t think there’d be much of an audience for that.”

Her lips widened into a flirty half smile. Was she imagining him in the shower? Lord knows, he was. Showering with her, scrubbing her back, soaping her breasts...

The lights flashed off and on again, and the man who’d sung the duet with Fiona appeared on the stage. “Who’s ready for a Valentine quiz?”

“That’s my cue,” Fiona said, pushing back from the table. “See you after the show?”

He nodded. Wild horses wouldn’t have stopped him from waiting for her. He’d never had romantic thoughts about a bear costume, but he just might be smitten with Fiona McLachlan.

* * *

Gary gave Fiona a bemused look as she walked from Ryan’s table to join him, John and Juno on the stage, but made no comment.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, everybody,” Gary proclaimed to the audience. “We hope you’re

enjoying the food and the show. For the second half of our special Valentine's Day program, we're going to have a Valentine quiz. Since some of you are in long term marriages or relationships, and others may be on a first date, this will not be about how well you know your partner. Instead, you're each going to answer twenty questions about yourselves—likes and dislikes, tastes and preferences. And then you'll compare your answers to your partner's and see how well you match up."

He motioned for Fiona and the others to distribute pens and answer sheets, as well as cardboard dividers to shield the couples from seeing each other's answers. "It looks like we have a man here alone," he said as his eye caught Ryan's. He caught Fiona's arm as she prepared to descend from the stage. "Perhaps one of my lovely assistants can be your partner for tonight."

Ryan grinned from ear to ear as if he'd planned this. But he couldn't have, could he?

She resumed her place opposite him at his table. "If the question is 'coffee, tea, or Fiona?' guess what I'm going to pick," he whispered.

"Coffee," she answered drolly, keeping her pleased smile inside.

The man might be psychic. The first question Gary asked from the stage was "Do you prefer coffee or tea?"

Fiona tried to keep her eyes on her paper as she marked the second choice but couldn't help looking up to see Ryan's wink.

"This next one should be a 'gimme,'" Gary said, "since you're all here tonight. What is your idea of a perfect date? Drinks and dancing, a quiet night at home, or--" He paused dramatically and then said with emphasis, "Dinner and a show?"

Fiona marked the third answer, smiling to herself. They might actually be two for two. So far.

Most of the questions, unsurprisingly, were about romance and relationships. To the question of a perfect Valentine's gift, Fiona chose 'time spent together' over the other options of candy, flowers, or even jewelry. She could buy any of those things for herself, but what good were things if you had to spend important holidays alone?

On the other hand, she wouldn't want to spend *all* her time with her significant other. Fiona's parents had been joined at the hip, spending all their non-working moments together. Until Daddy announced he'd met the love of his life at the office, and filed for divorce. Mom had been devastated, not just at losing her husband, but because in all those years as a cozy twosome she hadn't bothered to make supportive friends.

So on the question about how much time to spend together, Fiona chose 'some time with partner, some time with friends or family' instead of the 'two of us against the world' answer. But on the follow-up, 'Where should a relationship rank in the order of family, friends, relationship and job?' ranked relationship as number one. She loved her family, and there was nothing she wouldn't do for them, but she wanted to have her own family some day, and hoped her partner would choose her as number one as well.

As the questions got deeper and more intriguing, she almost forgot that Ryan was sitting across from her. She wished she'd taken this questionnaire years ago. It might have kept her from wasting so much time on men with whom she had nothing in common. In the past, Fiona had dated guys just because they were good-looking or charming. And those relationships had always fizzled out after a few months. Maybe if she'd known more about what she wanted out of a relationship before getting into one...

She glanced up at Ryan. Charming and good-looking. Her usual mistake. But just because she was attracted to him, didn't mean she had to go down that dead end path again. He might be

funny, and sure, he liked music and theater, but the chances of the two of them agreeing on anything else were astronomically stacked against them.

Question number twenty seemed easy at first. “What do you believe to be the most important part of a successful relationship?” Gary asked the room. “A: communication. B: trust. C: compromise.”

Fiona started to check ‘communication.’ Everyone knew that was critical to a relationship, the ability to talk to each other and listen to the other’s concerns. But with her pencil poised above the ‘a,’ she hesitated. Communication was a good thing, but people could communicate all day long and never resolve a disagreement. Compromise was essential to a good marriage, at least it had been that way for her parents. Except in her parents’ case, she remembered ruefully, her mother had always wound up giving in to her father. Then later he had come to her and agreed to everything she’d wanted, sometimes throwing in an extra trinket or two for good measure. It had worked for them—at least for many years, but it was essentially dishonest.

Trust. That had to be the most important. Compromise was transactional and could be manipulated, communication was helpful but what if you couldn’t always believe what your partner said? If you trusted one another, Fiona decided finally, you could achieve and resolve anything.

“Pens down,” Gary announced just as she circled her last answer. He’d insisted the participants use pens so they wouldn’t rethink and change their responses.

Fiona put down her pen, folded her arms and looked across the table. Ryan was smiling at her with that no-holds barred grin she’d first noticed this morning that made her feel like sunlight leaped from his lips to her face.

“Well, that was fun,” he said.

She mumbled a half-hearted agreement, then helped Juno and John gather up the cardboard screens so the couples could check their answers together.

Gary explained the scoring. “There’s no right or wrong answers, of course,” he said. “For every question where you both checked the same letter, you get a point. After we’ve announced the winners and checked their scoring, we’ll hand out the questions for you all to take home and talk about.”

Fiona climbed the steps leading up to the stage and sat on the edge, her legs dangling over the apron. Gary had every couple who matched at least seven answers raise their hand. More than half of the hands in the room went up. She tried not to look at Ryan but she couldn’t help it. His hand stayed at his side.

Why did she feel so devastated? This test was just a stupid game, dreamed up by some nerd desperate for a topic for his PhD thesis. Who entered or rejected a relationship just because of some marks made on a piece of paper? Fiona was perfectly capable of deciding who she wanted to be with, regardless of what their scores said. What about chemistry?

She tried to smile and applaud as Gary asked for those who had ten matches, then twelve, as more and more hands went down. Two couples faltered at thirteen, one at fourteen, one at fifteen, until only three couples were left, including her roommate Jan and firefighter Steve.

Jan and Steve had sixteen matching answers, winning third place. Fiona clapped delightedly for them. Didn’t somebody deserve a happily ever after?

The second place winners were a couple of newlyweds with seventeen matching answers. And the grand prize, for nineteen points, went to a couple celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary tonight. Fiona jumped to her feet to hug Jan and Steve and congratulate the other winners, feeling happy for everyone but herself.

She walked back to Ryan's table, trying not to drag her feet. "How bad did we do?" she asked as if the outcome didn't matter at all.

Smiling sheepishly, he held up the score sheet, pinching his thumb and forefinger over the top edge. Beside his thumb, a large number Two glared tauntingly.

She sank into the chair across from him. "Even worse than I'd thought," she murmured. After such a promising start. But the first and second questions, about coffee and dinner and the theater, were the only ones they'd agreed on.

"It's only a game," Ryan said, not letting go of his smile. And then set the paper flat on the table between them. In the place his thumb had covered was a bold Zero.

Fiona looked at the number, then at his grin, then back at the paper. "Twenty?" she whispered, barely able to pronounce the word. "We answered all the questions the same?"

He nodded like a boy who'd robbed the cookie jar and gotten away with it.

"Seriously? You didn't copy my answers, or change the results, or--"

"Seriously," he said. "According to whatever robot created this test, you and I are perfectly suited to each other." He winked. "Or maybe it was just the luck of the Irish. You are Irish, aren't you?"

She nodded. With a name like Fiona McLachlan, could she be anything else? "But you didn't raise your hand. Not even when Gary asked for seven and above?"

Ryan shrugged. "You work here. I didn't want anyone to think this was rigged and I didn't want to upstage anyone."

The quiz hadn't asked any questions about kindness and consideration, but she would have awarded him an extra point for that.

"Look, whenever you're done here, let's go out for a drink. "You know O'Reilly's tavern?"

Fiona shook her head. "I live in Brooklyn. I don't go out in Manhattan all that much." The last time had been New Year's Eve and that had turned out to be a disaster.

"And you call yourself an Irish lass?" he said with a sexy brogue that made his grin even more irresistible. "Well, there's a first time for everything, yes?" He reached for her hand and squeezed it.

"I'd love to. But I'm kind of with my roommate and her boyfriend." She nodded toward the couple heading their way.

"Ask them along."

The inclusion was a good sign that he didn't intend to rape her, kill her and dump her body in the East River. Fiona gave him one more point for that. Maybe five.

Jan practically danced over to the table, hugging her PRIZE to her chest, dragging Steve with her free hand. "We got sixteen out of twenty!" she exclaimed.

"Congratulations," Ryan said. Casually, deftly, he flipped the score sheet face down on the table. "Have you two been together long?"

"Just since New Year's Eve," Steve answered.

Fiona made the introductions.

"Nice to meet you, Ryan," Jan said with a not-so-subtle wink at Fiona. "So how did you two do on the quiz?"

"Oh, you know." Fiona answered blithely. "We only just met today." She averted her eyes from Ryan's grin.

When Ryan invited the couple for drinks at O'Reilly's, Steve said, "Sounds gr—oof--" Jan gently elbowed him in the ribs. "But we already have plans," he added.

"You two go on," Jan said with a sly wink at Fiona.

“Another time then.” Ryan shook hands with Steve and Jan, then, as they left, turned to Fiona. “I guess it’s just you and me, then,”

It was a little late for coyness, but she went there anyway. “I never said I’d go out with you.”

Ryan smiled confidently. “You have no choice. The Irish gods have ordained it.”

She let go of a chuckle. “And how’s that?”

“Come on, twenty out of twenty? You can’t pass that up. We could probably go our whole lives without meeting someone we sync up with so well. Is that not the luck of the Irish? In fact, I think I’ll buy a lottery ticket on my way home.”

Fiona grinned. “I’ll get my coat.”

When she returned with her coat and purse, Ryan took out his cell phone and asked for her number. But when he punched it into his phone and dialed, Fiona’s phone didn’t ring.

“Oops, I turned it off before the performance.” When she switched her cell phone back on, Fiona noticed she had a voice mail waiting. When she listened to it, her heartbeat sped up, and she clasped her hand to her chest to still the palpitations.

“Something wrong?” Ryan’s face was all concern.

“Everything’s fine.” She got her breathing under control and squeaked out. “The show I auditioned for this morning. They rejected me for the chorus but they want me to come in and read for the lead!”

“Good things happen on Valentine’s Day.” Ryan grinned. “I am definitely buying that lottery ticket tonight.

“You must be my lucky charm.” She placed her hands on his shoulders and hugged him. “I could just kiss you!”

“So what’s stopping you?”

Normally, making a spectacle of herself in a public place still occupied by a dozen couples. But tonight, Fiona didn’t care. She pressed her lips against Ryan’s, hesitantly at first, until he met her kiss and deepened it, circling his arms around her waist. He tasted like chocolate and strawberries and she wanted to drink in all of him. Savor him from the tip of his perfect nose to the length of his...,well, the length of him.

She didn’t know how long the kiss lasted, but when they finally pulled apart, the room was a lot emptier.

“You know what the Irish say about Valentine’s Day?” he asked, his voice raspy and sensual.

Fiona stepped back, still in the aura of his mouth and his arms. “What’s that?”

“If you kiss an Irishman on Valentine’s Day, you’ll kiss him again on St. Patrick’s Day.” He helped her on with her coat and steered her toward the theater exit.

She giggled. “You just made that up.”

Ryan shrugged. “Maybe.” He curled his arm around her shoulder. “But the luck of the Irish is a real thing, And I feel lucky enough tonight that the prediction will come true.”

Do you think Ryan’s prediction will come true? Find out in the March short story. *The Leprechaun’s Love Song*. Click [here](#)

