

A Blind Date for Valentine's by Dawn M Turner

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Friday, February 14, 2020

Valentine's Day

Sierra Vista, Arizona

"You are a pathetic loser." Christina Seymore glared at her reflection. She was supposed to be doing positive affirmations like her best friend Callie said—repeatedly—but sometimes life called for unadulterated, brutal honesty. Times like *now* when she needed to look into mouse-colored eyes and admit the truth. Who besides a pathetic loser let herself be talked into a blind date on Valentine's Day? Who besides a pathetic loser *needed* a blind date on Valentine's Day? At what amounted to a sports bar, no less. So romantic. Not!

"Pathetic. I'm telling you." She shoved her glasses back on her face, slapped the compact closed, and dropped it into her purse. Shouldering the strap, she climbed out of the car and strode toward the restaurant's front door. If a person had to face a firing squad, they might as well do it with good posture and a show of courage, even if it was one-hundred-percent faked. She snorted. *For pity's sake, the guy's not going to shoot me.*

Her steps faltered.

What kind of guy let himself be talked into a blind date on Valentine's Day? Did he have some annoying or disgusting habit, so he couldn't get his own date? Or had he hit every branch on the way down when he fell out of the ugly tree? Worse, was he a psycho?

Her stomach twisted around itself. So much for an appetite. *Good grief. Callie's right. You read way too many murder mysteries. You haven't even met the guy yet, and you've already decided he's a serial killer. How unfair is that?*

Just as she reached for the door, it flew open, and a big guy barged out, almost barreling over her in his haste to leave. She scurried out of his path, nearly falling off the sidewalk.

He didn't so much as acknowledge her existence. A dark scowl wreathed his face as he pulled a cellphone to his ear, muttering darkly about being "stood up". Without a word or glance in her direction, he marched to his car, already yelling at someone over the phone about how "she" hadn't shown up. Four-letter words liberally sprinkled his rant.

Yikes! Whoever stood him up sure dodged a bullet. So much for good posture and courage, though. *Nothing like being reminded you're invisible to bring you back to Earth.*

Go back to the car, good sense said. Go home. Curl up with a good book or one of your favorite movies. Pretend you were never here. Ignore Callie's phone calls for the rest of your life.

But... John was waiting. It would be rude to ditch him, particularly when she hadn't even met him yet. Besides, how would she feel if her own date never showed up?

With a deep, steadying breath, she made sure her glasses were straight, pulled open the door, and stepped inside. *So help me, if Callie set me up with a psycho named John Smith, I'll hurt her. If he doesn't kill me first.*

"I'm meeting someone, but I'm a bit early," she told the smiling hostess. "His name's John." She so hoped the woman didn't ask for his last name or a description. The world didn't need to know how pathetic she was. It was bad enough *she* knew.

"Of course. He's already here. Please, follow me."

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The hostess led her to a table in a back corner away from the bar. The noise level dropped. As they approached, a guy in a dark suit over a white button-up shirt slid out of the booth, his expression anxious but expectant.

"John?"

"Jonathan, please." Faint annoyance dashed across his face, replaced almost instantly by a smile as he met her gaze. If he was disappointed by what he saw, his dark brown eyes showed no sign. He waved her into the booth, resuming his seat after she was seated.

Old world manners. What's not to like about that?

No sooner had the hostess walked away than a server appeared at their table as though he'd been waiting to pounce. "What would you like to drink?"

"Uh... Coke or Pepsi, whichever you have." Christina set her purse beside her on the booth, her gaze settling on the bouquet of flowers on the table in front of her. Gerbera daisies. Magenta, even. Her favorite. Callie must've told him. The fact he'd apparently made an effort to find out what she liked, and then tracked them down, warmed her. *Maybe this won't be so bad.*

As he spoke to the server, she took the opportunity to study him. Medium brown hair was cut short but long enough to feather back. The short beard and mustache was unexpected, and not something she generally liked, but they suited his bone structure. Dark chocolate eyes turned on her as the waiter walked away.

Okay. I can rule out the ugly tree. Completely. Which leaves psycho on the table.

A self-conscious smile curved his lips, and his gaze fell away.

Wow. He's no more confident about this than I am! She swallowed and smiled. *Lord, please let him have some annoying or disgusting habit and not be a psycho.*

"Um... I... uh... don't know your name."

"Really?" She stared at him. Callie hadn't told him her name? Why?

Jonathan nodded. "I was told I'd be surprised."

She frowned. That made no sense. Surprised by what?

His brows rose in clear question.

"Oh, uh, my name's Christina. Christina Seymore."

"Do you go by Chris?"

"Absolutely not." She grimaced. "I hate it when people shorten my name."

A wide smile lit his whole face. "Me, too. I can't even tell you how often I have to remind people that my given name is Jonathan, not John or, worse, Johnny." He shuddered visibly.

Christina laughed. "I hear you. I hate it when someone calls me Chrissy. Makes me feel two years old."

"Exactly!"

Oh, that smile... gorgeous. Her heart slammed hard against her ribs. "Are you a psycho?"

The moment the words had left her mouth, her brain locked up. She stared at him in horror. *Did I really—*

His brows shot up, and he blinked at her, his expression blank with shock.

Heat rushed into her face. All the way to her hair. "Oh. My. Word. I can't believe I just— I'm so sorry." Christina reached for her purse and hastily explained, "I'm sure you weren't warned that I don't have a very good filter on my mouth. I'm so, so sorry. I'll just go home and crawl under my bed now." Sliding from the booth, she got to her feet, unable to even look at the man.

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She'd seen *way* too many angry expressions over the years, thanks to her stupid, runaway mouth. She didn't need to catalog another one. *I should've stayed home with my books and movies.*

A hand on her arm stilled her retreat. She glanced up at him over the top of her glasses without fully lifting her head.

Amusement rather than anger showed in his expression. "Please, stay."

"You're not totally offended?" she asked, dubious despite all evidence that he wasn't.

"Of course not." Jonathan motioned her back into her seat.

Once she'd slipped back into the booth, he returned to his seat.

"For the record," he said with a big grin, "I am not now, nor have I ever been, a psycho."

"Wouldn't a psycho say that, though?" She smiled, albeit weakly, to let him know she was teasing.

Jonathan chuckled. "Probably, but in my case, it's true." He shrugged. "I guess you'll have to take my word for it. At least, until you get to know me better."

Christina lightly brushed a petal of one of the flowers with a fingertip. "Thank you for the flowers. They're beautiful."

"You're welcome." A self-conscious smile appeared. "I figured a lady should always get flowers for Valentine's Day."

Way too charming and sweet. She frowned slightly. *It can't be real. Can it?* Shaking her head, she sighed softly. *Callie wouldn't set me up with a bad guy. I hope.*

"Did I say something wrong?" What appeared to be genuine concern erased his smile and furrowed his brow.

"No. I'm sorry." She grimaced. "Don't *ever* tell Callie I said this, but she might be right about me watching and reading too much about murder and mayhem."

That ready smile returned. "Seeing serial killers everywhere, huh?"

"Yeah...." Shaking her head, she lifted it and met his gaze squarely. "So... uh... Callie said you're a lawyer. What kind?"

"General practice, but I handle mostly bankruptcies, real estate, and wills."

"No criminal cases?"

"No." He shook his head and sat back so the server could set their drinks down. "I have enough to keep up with in following changes to laws in the areas I handle. Any more, and I'm concerned I'll spread myself too thin. Not do justice for my clients."

"No pun intended?" She grinned.

Jonathan laughed. "No, but good catch."

"Have you decided what you'd like,"—the server smiled—"or do you need more time?"

"Uh... give us a few minutes, please." Christina picked up the menu tucked under her flowers. "I haven't even looked at the menu yet. Sorry."

"No problem," the guy said with an easy smile. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Picking up his menu, Jonathan leaned closer and winked. "We better figure out what we want before we get sidetracked again."

He's funny, charming, and doesn't overreact when I'm stupid, so... "Why aren't you married?" She pressed her lips together. *Why do I keep doing that?*

His smile dimmed.

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"Never mind me." Christina buried her burning-hot face in her menu, mortified. *Would it be too obvious if I crawled under the table?* "You don't have to answer that. I'm sorry."

He studied his menu again.

By the time the server returned and then left again with their orders, Christina couldn't even remember what she'd ordered. She stared down at the flowers.

"I was engaged until about six months ago," Jonathan said softly.

Lifting her head, she met his gaze. The lack of humor in his brown eyes seemed so... wrong. "Did something happen to her?"

He snorted. "I suppose you could say that. She took off with my sister's boyfriend the night of her bachelorette party."

"Ouch." Christina winced.

"Yeah." A scowl darkened his features. "My younger sister... her name's Megan. She deserved better than that. I wanted to hunt him down for hurting her. He broke her heart."

"What about *you*? That can't have been any easier for *you* than it was for your sister." *Not that I'd know either way, since I've never had a steady boyfriend or a fiancé. What other twenty-five-year-old can say that? Eesh. I truly am pathetic.*

Shaking his head, he smiled faintly. "I'm doing okay, for the most part." He picked up his soda and took a drink. "I probably should warn you, though, that I have trust issues."

"After that, I don't blame you." She set her elbow on the table and rested her cheek against her upraised fist. "So... what are you doing here tonight?"

"Truth?"

Christina nodded.

"I was sort of bullied into it by a well-meaning but really annoying friend."

She giggled. "Boy, does that ever sound familiar."

Melancholy lifting, Jonathan grinned. "You, too?"

"Yep." Gently caressing the petals on one of the flowers, she smiled. "I guess that makes *two* things we have in common."

"Suppose there are others?"

She nudged the bottom of her glasses with a knuckle, shoving them higher up her nose. "Who knows? Maybe."

"Are you willing to find out?"

"Hm... well... we haven't gotten our food yet, so there's still time to explore it." Christina grinned. "Assuming, of course, that you truly are *not* a psycho."

Jonathan laughed, the sound warm, deep, and rich. "I guess you'll have to stick around for dinner to find out for sure."

"Psychos are gifted at blending in, so I doubt a single meal will settle the point." She gasped. "Not that I'm fishing for another date or anything. Good grief. My mouth...."

The humor on his face didn't slip in the least. "Don't worry about it. I find your honesty refreshing."

"Well... there's honest, and then there's blunt, rude, and socially inept. At least, that's what my mom and Callie have been telling me for years." Christina grimaced. "I think I was born without that filter mechanism most people seem to have embedded in their brains."

"At least I won't have to wonder where you stand or what you're thinking." He shrugged.

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"You probably can't keep a secret to save your life."

"No, I can't. If I ever commit a crime, I'm doomed. All a cop will have to do is walk into the room, and I'll confess everything."

He chuckled. Jonathan glanced only briefly at the server who set their plates in front of them with a muttered, "Thanks," before refocusing on Christina. "I guess you won't be masterminding any murders then, will you?"

"Definitely not. Even if I *could* keep it secret, I get queasy at the sight of blood."

He laughed even harder than before.

Christina's heart pattered away in her chest. *Wow, he's gorgeous when he smiles, but when he laughs like that... I can't breathe.*

As his laughter faded, he met her gaze. "Mind if I say grace?"

"Not at all." She bowed her head. *Thank You, Lord, for Callie and her wisdom in sending me here tonight.*

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Several minutes passed in silence as they ate.

*I'll have to thank Eddie for setting this up.* Jonathan chewed a bit of shrimp and parmesan steak and watched his date take dainty bites of the grilled chicken Caesar salad she'd ordered. *Does she always eat so carefully, or is it for my benefit?*

A large barrette secured straight, medium brown hair at the back of her neck, revealing a face that some people might describe as unremarkable, but he wouldn't have overlooked her, even in a crowd. Round-lensed, wire-rimmed glasses were large enough many people might think them too big for her face. He liked them. They allowed a clear view of caramel-colored eyes that seemed to reveal every emotion with crystal clarity.

She'd dressed conservatively for their date in a long, plain, denim skirt, an even plainer white button-up blouse, and black, flat dress shoes. It certainly didn't fit the sense of humor and impulsivity he'd already witnessed in their short acquaintance. The double-pierced ears with their glittery, sparkling studs suited her, though.

He smiled, recalling her obvious horror when she'd asked if he was a "psycho". Her equally obvious lack of confidence in meeting him had settled his nerves and left him wondering why he'd been so adamant in arguing with Eddie *against* the date. Eddie's "surprise" made total sense now, though. As often as the man had teased him about his annoyance over someone shortening his name, Eddie had probably found great pleasure in setting Jonathan up with a woman who felt the same way about *her* name.

A cellphone rang, and Christina set down her fork and picked up her purse, grimacing at him. "Sorry. I thought I shut it off." She glanced only briefly at it before silencing it and shoving it back into her purse.

"No problem." He grinned. "At least we're not sitting in church or Bible study."

"Oh, tell me about it, isn't that annoying?" She rolled eyes the color of caramel. "What's wrong with people? I mean, come on. It's like they're so obsessed with their tech, they forget why they're in church. Doesn't God deserve their full attention for at least that hour or two a week? I mean, give me a break." A flush colored her cheeks, and she lowered her gaze. "Sorry... I

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didn't mean to rant."

Jonathan chuckled. "I couldn't possibly agree more, though. It's inconsiderate, and honestly makes me wonder about their commitment to the Lord. Not much is more annoying than listening to a good sermon and the person in front of you starts texting or talking on the phone. I guess that's another thing we have in common. What else do you suppose we'll find?"

Her eyes brightened. "How about pets?"

"I have a Maine Coon named Harriet."

A grin showed her straight, white teeth. "Harriet?"

"Not my fault." He shook his head. "My oldest sister's daughter came up with the name after my mom got her hooked on *Harriet the Spy*."

"I've read that!" Her eyes widened briefly. "Not recently, of course, but when I was a kid. My mom gave me a copy she'd gotten and read growing up. I still have it."

He raised a brow. "Suppose that's the book responsible for your love of mysteries now?"

"You know... now that you mention, it just might be." She giggled. "Wait 'til I talk to my mom again. I'll have to tell her my obsession is *her* fault."

"Obsession, huh?"

Her cheeks colored again, and she nodded. "Afraid so."

"So... getting back to pets, do you have any?"

"Birds. Finches, to be exact."

Jonathan grimaced and barely restrained a shudder.

Christina cocked her head. "You don't like finches?"

"Birds of any kind in groups, actually."

"That's weird." Her eyes widened again, then she sighed. "Stupid motor mouth," she mumbled. "Sorry."

"No need to apologize. You're right. It's weird. Even I know that."

"So... why do you dislike birds?"

"It's not so much that I don't like them." How was he supposed to explain without her thinking he's was worse than weird? "It's more like... well... a phobia, actually."

She blinked at him as though not comprehending the words. "Phobia? You're *afraid* of birds?"

"Only when they're in groups."

"Why?" Christina pursed her lips as annoyance flashed across her face. "Sorry, it's really none of my business. Ignore that question."

Glancing around to make sure no one appeared to be listening to their conversation, Jonathan leaned his elbows on the table and lowered his voice. "Ever seen Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*?"

"Oh, yes! It's one of my absolute favorite films of all time."

He narrowed his eyes teasingly. "We'll discuss your bad taste in movies later."

She grinned.

"I was like five years old when I first saw it over at a friend's house. It freaked me out so badly, I called my mom, crying for her to come get me."

"It's not really a movie I'd let a small child watch," she said, her tone sympathetic.

"I agree." He shook his head. "A few weeks after that, we went to San Diego to visit my aunt,

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and my older brother decided it'd be fun to lure in a flock of seagulls while I was at the end of a pier."

"Oh, wow...." Christina frowned. "I've heard they can be aggressive in large groups, if there's food involved."

"I was sure a million birds were descending on me and were going to eat me, but I couldn't get past them to leave the pier. Harry thought it was hysterical. I ended up falling into the water. Almost drowned before my dad jumped in after me." He allowed a grin to curve his lips. "On the upside, Harry got in a boatload of trouble for that prank."

"Trauma all the way around. No wonder you hate flocks of birds." She shook her head. "I guess you'd better steer clear of my spare bedroom. I have a large aviary in there."

He grinned wider. "So, you think I'll visit your house, huh?"

"Maybe." Christina laughed softly. "Figured I'd better warn you, just in case."

"In case I'm not a psycho, you mean?"

"Yep." Humor made those caramel-colored eyes sparkle behind the lenses of her glasses.

He laughed. *Eddie, my friend, you're brilliant!*

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"So...." Jonathan stood beside Christina's car as she opened the door and tossed her purse across the seat, still clutching the flowers in her other hand. "I really enjoyed tonight."

"Me, too." Surprise and pleasure dashed across her face, visible in the illumination of the streetlight near her car. "I didn't expect to, but I really did."

"So, can I call you? Maybe we can have dinner again soon?"

A teasing grin lit her expression. "Or we could go see a movie."

He grinned. "Only if I pick it."

Christina laughed. "Chicken."

"Hey, I admitted to being afraid of birds, so I'll own that." Tugging his cellphone from a pocket of his suit coat, he navigated to his contact list. "What's your number?" He punched in the series of digits as she rattled them off. "Excellent."

Silence fell and quickly grew awkward.

Jonathan stared at her. It was too soon to be trying to kiss her goodnight, but a handshake seemed... lame. *What am I supposed to do? I have no idea how to handle this.*

"Um... I'll talk to you soon, maybe?" Christina gave him a suddenly weak smile and lowered herself into her car.

"Absolutely. Goodnight, Christina."

Her smile brightened. "Goodnight, Jonathan. Be safe going home."

"You, too."

After another quiet moment, she tugged her door closed.

He stepped back and watched her back out and drive away, waving when she glanced his direction. With a brief wave, she left.

Heading for his car, he scrolled through his contact list again and hit the CALL icon. The phone at the other end rang as he unlocked his sedan and climbed behind the wheel.

"Hey, bud," Eddie said the moment he picked up. "How'd it go?"

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“You’re a genius, my friend. An absolute, utter genius, and I’m not afraid to give credit where it’s due.” *That includes You, Lord. You’re the one who ultimately drove this. I know that without a doubt. Thanks!*