

A Valentine's Date

Stephen brushed a speck from his jacket and turned this way and that in front of the bathroom mirror, liking what he saw. He smoothed his hand over his freshly washed and dried blond hair and noted how the summer sun had turned his skin golden brown. His blue eyes looked clear and, as he inspected his teeth, he saw they gleamed white. All in all, he was ready for his special Valentine's date.

He'd first seen Michelle when he went to the coffee bar near the office for his morning cappuccino, three months ago. Normally the office boy brought it up for him, but he'd called in sick that day, so Stephen had to fetch his own coffee. She was new since the last time he'd been there, and her long dark hair, brown eyes and perfect features quite took his breath away.

Deciding to drink his coffee there, instead of taking it back to the office, he gave her his order, and took a seat. He couldn't take his eyes off her as she manipulated the hissing machine, filling a cup with the strong black liquid then frothing the milk to top it up.

When she brought it to the table he thanked her with a smile. 'You're new here, aren't you,' he asked.

'Yes, that's right,' she replied as she walked away.

Stephen took to going out for coffee each day, making an excuse that he wanted to stretch his legs. Each day he tried to engage Michelle in conversation and each day she gave him a polite reply and walked away. He became determined to break her reserve. It became a challenge. He meant to get to know her, and more.

One morning, a week or so later, David, from the office next to his, joined him for coffee.

On noticing Stephen's eyes following the object of his desire, he shook his head. 'You won't have much luck there, mate. Others have tried. She's an ice maiden.'

'Is that so?'

'Absolutely!'

How do you know? Do you know her?'

'No, but I hear things.'

'Well, I'm determined. I'll wear her down.'

David grinned. 'Want to bet?'

'What do you mean?'

'I'll bet you a hundred dollars you can't get a date with her by, say, Valentines Day.'

'You're on.'

From then on Stephen redoubled his efforts and finally Michelle seemed to recognise him as a regular and smiled as she took his order and passed a quick word with him when she brought his coffee to the table. But Valentines Day was looming, and he still hadn't made much progress.

One day he brought her a bunch of violets and asked her if she would come to dinner with him, but she shook her head and hurried away to resume her place behind the counter.

By the 13th of February he was desperate. It looked as if he would lose his bet. He bought the best Valentines Day card he could find and made sure it would reach her next morning.

When he came in for his coffee she greeted him with a smile and didn't rush away as usual when she placed his coffee in front of him. Stephen was sure she guessed the card was from him. This was his last chance.

‘Michelle, I hope you won’t be offended when I tell you I think you’re wonderful,’ he said. ‘And I’d be honoured if you’d come to dinner with me tonight.’

‘I’m not at all offended,’ she told him. “And yes, I’ll come to dinner with you.’

After making arrangements to meet her at a leading restaurant at 7.30pm, he made his way back to the office, whistling jauntily. He went straight to David’s office and told him of their arrangements. “So it looks like I’ve won the bet, old mate. Where’s my hundred dollars?’

‘You don’t get it until tomorrow, until we know for sure that she’s going through with it.’

‘Okay, I’ll fill you in then on how the night goes. And I’ll have great pleasure in relieving you of one hundred dollars.’

So here he was now in his bathroom, showered, shaved and dressed, ready for a big night out. He looked at his watch. Six thirty; time to go. Taking one last look in the mirror, he turned and walked to the door and turned the knob to open it. But it didn’t open. It seemed to be stuck. He tugged at the knob but the door wouldn’t budge. He tugged again, harder this time, and the knob came away in his hand. Bloody Hell! Now what was he going to do?

He threw the knob across the room. Useless thing! But how was he to get out. He looked at the window, but remembered he was three storeys up. He looked around for something to prise the door open. He needed a screwdriver or something similar. But he didn’t keep tools in his bathroom!

Opening the cupboard door he spied the dust pan his mother left in the bottom for when she came to do some cleaning for him. He took it out and pushed the corner into the crack between the door and the jamb, but as soon as he put pressure on it, it broke. Cursing, he tossed it aside. He had nothing else he could use. What was he going to do? His watch showed him he’d already lost ten minutes. If he didn’t get out soon he’d be late.

It needed someone on the other side of the door to give it a good shove. But there was no-one else in the flat.

Suddenly he remembered the phone in his pocket. Taking it out, he punched in the numbers for his parents’ phone. They had a key to his flat; his father could come over and open the door from the other side.

‘Hullo, Mum. Look, I haven’t got time to talk but I need Dad to come over right away. The handle’s come off the bathroom door and I’m locked inside.’ Stephen’s eyebrows shot up at his mother’s unexpected response.

‘It’s not funny. Stop laughing and send Dad over right away. I’m running late for an appointment.’ He frowned. ‘What! He’s gone down to the shop. Oh no! Well, send him over the second he gets back.’ He grimaced as he remembered his father’s habit of taking forever when he went to the shop. Who knows how long he’d be. ‘Yeah. Well thanks Mum. Bye.’

Stephen paced back and forwards in the small space, checking his watch every few minutes, until finally he heard his father call to him through the door. The next minute there was a mighty thud on the door and it flew open and his father staggered into the room.

Rushing out he called a quick ‘thanks Dad’ then raced downstairs and into his car.

By the time he walked into the restaurant he was nearly an hour late. Thank God, there was Michelle sitting at the table waiting for him. But who was that sitting opposite her? As he reached the table he saw it was David.

‘Sorry I’m late, Michelle but I was unavoidably detained.’ He turned to David “I’m surprised to see you here, mate, but thanks for looking after Michelle for me till I arrived. I can take over now.” He motioned for David to get up from his chair.

Michelle looked up at him with shining eyes. “Oh, I can’t possibly have dinner with you now, Stephen. I’ve just agreed to marry David.”

Suddenly Stephen noticed the glasses of champagne on the table. He glared at David. ‘But you told me you didn’t know Michelle,’ he accused.

David shrugged. ‘Well, you see, afternoon coffee time’s not nearly as busy as the morning, and we’ve got to know each other real well in the last few weeks.’ Then he winked at Michelle before turning back to Stephen and saying, ‘When Michelle told me you’d asked her out to dinner for Valentine’s Day, we thought we’d surprise you - together.’ He paused. ‘And by the way, old mate, you owe me a hundred dollars.’

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