

~ Expectations ~

by KG MacGregor © 2005

This one was written for the 2005 Valentine's Special at the Royal Academy of Bards.

"...and I'm a very detail-oriented person. People at work appreciate me for that, I know. I've helped them all get better organized. I remember once when I had to look in someone else's file cabinet for something, I just couldn't believe how crooked all the tabs on the folders were. I thought, 'How can anybody find things with such a mess?' So I got out some new tabs and sat down at my desk..."

Leo sat quietly, trying her best to smile as she tamped down the urge to lunge across the table and mess up her date's perfect hair. The waiter had taken their plates over a half-hour ago, but Susan-the last blind date she would ever let Nora talk her into-showed no signs of being ready to leave.

"...but I think it's because people don't realize what sort of impression it makes. I mean-I wasn't going to say anything-but I noticed earlier that you have two buttons open at the top of your shirt. You probably aren't even aware that something as small as that throws off your symmetry, because your collar hangs unevenly on the left side. You could probably fix that by just leaving one button open...but to be absolutely certain, you should consider buttoning your shirt all the way up."

"Okay, stop looking at that pretty girl in the red dress and look at me instead." The children near the front of the line hooted as she clicked the shutter, capturing a blushing smile that Nate Wallace's parents were going to love.

"That's a keeper! Who's next?"

One by one, Leo worked the crowd of third-graders like a comic in a lounge act, pulling out all the stops to get the right reaction, the perfect expression. She loved photography, especially portraits. It was behind the lens where she felt the most confidence, and where she managed to hide most of her insecurities.

There was no good reason for Leo Simms to feel insecure about who she was and what she had to offer. She was attractive, a college graduate, and ran her own successful business. She had lots of friends, but at twenty-seven, had never even come close to finding the right girl. With each passing year, she found it harder to accept the assurances of her friends that some day, that

special person would come along. And even if she did, Leo doubted she would ever get the nerve to even ask her out.

"All right, say... 'cheese frogs.' Leo snapped the portrait of Alissa as she laughed at the silly phrase, and got another keeper.

School pictures were a staple of her business, an enormous money-maker for only a few days' work. But to Leo, this was anything but easy money. Shooting three hundred raucous kids in one day ought to qualify her for combat pay, she thought. For some reason, most of the teachers here at Melrose Elementary disappeared once they delivered their class to the media center for pictures, leaving her to deal with twenty-five children who acted like they were at recess. They grew louder by the minute, they pushed and shoved in line, and they popped each other with the complimentary plastic combs.

She was running thirty minutes behind schedule already, which meant she probably wouldn't get lunch today. Add to that the fact that she was now finished shooting Mrs. Tyler's class, but the teacher was nowhere in sight. And Miss Galloway's class was due any minute, no doubt another rowdy group of eight-year-olds.

"All right, settle down, kids. I need for all of you to stand quietly by the door and wait for..." Leo's pleas for calm were having no effect. She could barely hear herself speak above the din of ten simultaneous conversations. This was definitely not something she was good at.

"Excuse me, what is your name?" A quiet voice-an adult voice-came out of nowhere.

Leo whirled to see a young woman approaching the third-graders, especially interested in one of Mrs. Tyler's students, a little girl who wasn't even causing any trouble. Leo thought the girl was going to be scolded by mistake and was about to intervene when the class suddenly grew silent.

"Bethany Culbertson," the girl replied shyly.

"Well Bethany, I really like the way you follow directions. I bet Mrs. Tyler is very proud of you." At once, the other third-graders straightened their line. "It's especially nice the way you keep your hands to yourself and listen to Miss..."

The woman turned to Leo and flashed a brilliant smile. It was all Leo could do to remember her name. "Simms."

"To Miss Simms. I wish you were in my class, Bethany."

Leo wanted to be in this woman's class too, just to hear that sweet voice all day. Whoever she was, she had brought the ruckus to a halt with only a few quiet words. Every single student in Mrs. Tyler's class seemed to want to please her, and so did Leo.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Mrs. Tyler is late."

"I'll be happy to wait with them if you want to start on my class. I'm Claudia Galloway, by the way. This is my first year here at Melrose."

"I'm Leo Simms. I've been shooting here for about five years. I have a studio in town." *With an apartment upstairs.*

"On Beckley Avenue?"

"That's the one."

"I drive by there on my way home. It looks like a nice place."

Leo planned to go there immediately after school and give the whole building a new coat of paint so it would look nice the next time this woman drove by. "It's a good setup. You should come by for a sitting sometime." Leo reined in her imagination of where Miss Galloway might sit. Things like that existed only in her fantasy world.

"Not me. I don't like cameras."

"Maybe not, but I bet the camera likes you." *Uh-oh. That was flirting.* But it was undeniably true. Miss Galloway was a looker, petite with straight red hair that hung to her shoulders. Leo wanted to pose her on a bearskin rug.

"Sorry I'm late," Mrs. Tyler announced without a trace of sincerity.

"It's all right. I was just admiring the way Bethany leads your class," Claudia said. "And I'm really pleased to see what good listeners they all are."

"Too bad I don't have more like her. Most of the others can't seem to follow directions, no matter how you many times you tell them." No sooner did she disparage her class than the whispering and fidgeting started again. "See what I mean?"

Leo watched in astonishment as the class filed out noisily behind their frazzled teacher. Over her shoulder, she could see Miss Galloway's class standing quietly as they waited to have their pictures taken.

"That was...I don't know what it was. How did you do that?"

Claudia smiled and continued to whisper. "We all have our tricks."

"Can you teach me that one?" Leo had a few tricks of her own she would like to trade with Miss Galloway. "It sure would make my job easier."

"Not much to it, really. I expect the boys and girls in my class to behave like Bethany." She lowered her voice even more. "And Mrs. Tyler expects her class to misbehave..."

"...and that's exactly what they did when she came back!" Leo looked again at Miss Galloway's class, amazed at the contrast between the two groups. "It's like magic."

"Not really. It's a teaching philosophy that's based on something called the Pygmalion Effect."

"What's that?"

"We studied it in college. It's a principle that says students usually do what you expect them to do. So on the first day of school, I told my class how pleased I was that they had given me all the top students."

"So that's it. You got the cream of the crop."

"No, actually I didn't. They're just a randomly assigned group, but they think they're the top group so they act like it."

Leo looked at the youngsters again, amazed at how well-behaved they were. "Pretty sneaky. Does it work on grownups?" Leo was rapidly compiling a list of expectations for Miss Galloway.

"Actually, yes, but not as well. Adults are a little more resistant."

Not this adult. There was no way she would resist a woman like Claudia Galloway.

Claudia stayed with her class throughout the picture-taking process, standing beside Leo to help coax smiles from the children's faces. When they were finished, Leo enlisted the children's help to encourage the teacher to sit for a photo.

"For that special someone," Leo said coyly as she clicked the shutter.

"Yeah, I'm sure Mom will love it. Maybe I can talk her into replacing my old third grade picture with this one. At least now I have all my front teeth," she joked.

Leo had taken thousands of pictures like those. She would give just about anything to see Miss Galloway's.

The rest of the day passed quickly, and Leo even got the chance to try Miss Galloway's approach when an unruly group of second-graders was left in her charge. It was nothing short of a miracle to see them settle down immediately when she praised them for being the best-behaved class she had seen all day.

She tucked the last of her gear away in the protective pouch and stacked it on the cart to take to the van. One nice thing about shooting school pictures was that her work day ended at two-thirty.

And that gave her plenty of time to pay a visit to Denise, a longtime friend who just happened to be the physical education teacher at Melrose.

"Leo! Don't tell me-let me guess. You have film left over and you're wondering if I'll pose for you in the nude."

Leo laughed. "Somehow I don't think your girlfriend would like that."

"At least not without her being in it too." Denise's office was a supply room next to the playground, so they didn't have to worry about being overheard. "How have you been?"

"Not bad. But three days of school pictures wears me out. I don't know how you do this."

"You get used to it. And the medication helps," she added with a grin. "We line up for our injections every morning."

"I guess I got here too late for that. I did the second and third grades today." Leo picked up a red kickball and began to bounce it, trying to appear nonchalant. "They drove me nuts...except for Miss Galloway's class."

"Oh, yeah! Galloway's kids are great. I hear she's really a good teacher. It's hard to believe it's only her first year."

"Yeah, that's what she said." Leo continued to bounce the ball, not meeting Denise's eye. "You wouldn't happen to know if she's...uh..."

"Jewish?"

Leo rolled her eyes and tossed the ball into Denise's chest.

The phys ed teacher caught it without effort and grinned back at her friend. "So Claudia caught your eye, did she?"

"I thought she was nice." Leo fidgeted nervously. She was self-assured behind the camera, but couldn't seem to muster her confidence for anything else-especially when it came to meeting new women.

"Yeah, I bet that's what you noticed first."

Leo sighed. "Why do you guys always terrorize me?"

"Because it's fun," Denise admitted. She tossed the ball into a bin and leaned against the corner of her desk. "But to tell you the truth, I don't know much about her. It wouldn't surprise me though...I mean, if it turned out she really was Jewish." She smirked again. "You want me to find out?"

Leo definitely wanted to know. "How would you do it?"

"I'll just ask her. I'll tell her that the school photographer wants to know but she's too chicken to ask herself."

"No! What if she isn't? She'll freak out."

"I doubt it. She seems pretty cool to me."

"That's not the same as being gay. Seriously, don't freak her out. I need this job."

"I think I can be a little more subtle. She came to the Christmas party by herself, I know that much. I'll ask around and see what I can find out."

"Thanks...and, uh"-Leo scuffed her foot self-consciously on the concrete floor-"if you could do it without the whole world finding out, I'd appreciate it." Mostly, she meant without Nora finding out.

"You got it," Denise agreed. "Are you coming to Nora's party?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No, probably not. Knowing Nora, she's already planning on fixing you up."

Nora was Leo's best friend, and famous in the lesbian community for her matchmaking. But if Nora was famous, Leo was infamous as the first person Nora turned to in order to match someone else.

"I'm done with that. There's only so much humiliation a person can take."

Leo stepped down backward as she swept the stairs on the front porch of her house, where customers entered the portrait studio. Until three days ago-when Claudia Galloway mentioned that she drove by the place on her way home from work-she hadn't cared much that the leaves had gathered in the nooks and crannies. But now she wanted to spruce up her home, and maybe even catch a glimpse of the teacher as she drove by. She looked up at practically every car that passed.

A quick call to Denise last night had turned up nothing. No one knew about Claudia, but a friend of a friend who had gone to the same college was going to ask around. Leo hoped Claudia might tip her hand before that, and that's why she was out here on a blustery February afternoon sweeping, hoping that the teacher might drive by and wave, or even stop to say hello.

"What are you doing out here?"

Without even turning her head, Leo knew it was Nora, whose ancient Renault couldn't sneak up on the dead. "I live here," she shouted over her shoulder.

"But I've known you twelve years and I've never seen you sweep before." She parked at the curb and got out. "What's up?"

"Nothing is up. I just wanted to make the place look nice." *For Claudia*. "It is, after all, also my place of business." It was almost four o'clock. Leo figured that the teacher must have taken another route home. "You're the one that shouldn't be here. How come you're not at work?"

"Dentist. And you'd never believe what I heard from Holly Ritchie." Dr. Brown's hygienist.

"How's Holly?" Leo knew Holly only slightly, from a party at Nora's several years ago, and from her regular trips to the dentist. She and her partner lived in a neighboring town and didn't usually socialize with the locals.

"Not so good. She and Silvia broke up."

"You're kidding! I just saw them a couple of months ago at the dance club. They were hanging all over each other."

"Yeah, Holly wouldn't say why, but I got a feeling it was about money. They had a big fight and Silvia left."

"Money, huh? I thought lesbians only fought about sex." Leo would have relished the opportunity to fight with somebody about sex-as long as it wasn't about her not getting any.

"Shows what you know." Nora made herself completely at home, opening the front door to lead Leo into her own photography studio. "Anyway, I came by to ask a favor."

"Should I say no now or should I wait until you've asked me for something ridiculous?"

"It's not ridiculous. It could work out really well. Holly's cute, and she likes you. And she works hard and has a good head on her-"

"Oh, no! I know where you're going with this, and the answer is no." Leo was well into the double digits with dating disasters that Nora had arranged. Only one had made it to the third date. That's when Leo discovered that the woman had recorded practically every moment they were together on a digital recorder in her shirt pocket.

"At least hear me out. All the other girls I've set you up with were younger than you, and immature. You're twenty-seven years old and you already have your own successful business. That means you need to go out with somebody older."

"You're blowing smoke up my ass. The answer is still no."

Nora was unfazed by the initial rejection. Practically all of her setups started like this, especially those involving Leo. "Holly's different. She's thirty and she has a really good job. She's mature—that's a new trait, you have to admit."

"I'll grant you that. She is more mature than the ones you usually dig up." And she was undeniably cute. Leo walked through the studio as Nora followed, both of them turning out lights as they prepared to go upstairs to the apartment. She looked back suddenly and glared at her friend. "And she's also on the rebound. Have you forgotten about Mary Pat?"

Nora drew back and winced. "I don't know why you're still so upset about all that. It wasn't a real gun."

"And what about that last one—Symmetrical Susan! If she had brought a gun, I would have stolen it from her and killed myself."

"I know, both of them were nuts. But Holly is a really nice girl."

Leo shook her head. "Why do you do this to me?"

"Why? Because in all the time I've known you, you have never—not once—gotten up the nerve to ask somebody out on your own. You talk about it, and then you make up excuses about why you shouldn't. If I leave you to your own devices, you'll be alone forever."

"There are worse things." She wanted to tell Nora about Claudia, about the outside-way outside-chance that she might actually invite her own date to this year's Valentine party. But she had to admit that Nora was right. Despite all her flirtations and false bravado, she would never get up the nerve to ask Claudia out, even if it was confirmed that Claudia played for her team. She would have to be content to daydream about it.

"Please, Leo. I think you'd really like her. And like I said, I know she likes you. It's just one date."

"Every time I listen to you, I end up swearing off dating forever. This has disaster written all over it." She opened the refrigerator and grabbed the orange juice. "Being by myself isn't so bad. I can drink out of the carton..."

"Now who's being ridiculous?" Nora sighed. "Have you ever stopped to think that all these dates turn out bad just because you expect them to?"

Leo opened her mouth to answer but stopped short. *Expectations*. "What did you just say?"

"I said maybe they all turn out bad because you're so negative. What if you went into just one date thinking you might have a good time and that you might actually like somebody? Then maybe you would."

Never one to put much stock in all that psycho-babble, Leo wanted to dismiss her friend's words. But she had seen proof positive that such a principle could work. Maybe it could work for her too. She just wished it was-

"Please do this for me, Leo. Even if it doesn't turn out to be the perfect romance, it would mean a lot to Holly to be able to spend Valentine's Day with somebody. And I really think you'll like her."

And Leo knew that Claudia Galloway was just a fantasy. Holly was real, and she was interested. And nice...and cute. *Shit*. It was rationalizations like these that sucked her into Nora's crazy dates. "Fine."

Nora threw her arms around Leo's waist and squeezed. "It'll be fun, you'll see."

Leo grunted.

"But you have to promise me you'll try to keep an open mind."

"On one condition."

"Name it."

"This is the very last time you'll ever ask."

"It's a deal," Nora agreed readily. "That's how sure I am that you and Holly will hit it off."

"...junk mail...bills..." Leo walked slowly from her mailbox back to the porch. She was trying to keep her head busy so she wouldn't start worrying about her date, also known as her fiasco-in-waiting. Tonight was the Valentine party, and she had been having second thoughts-and third, and fourth-almost from the instant she agreed to go.

Off the top of her head, she could think of sixteen reasons to call Nora back and cancel her plans for the date with Holly. First was Silvia, who was capable of kicking her ass into next week if she decided that she wanted her girlfriend back. Second was Holly, who was too nice a girl to be paired with a miserable failure like Leo Simms on her first foray back into dating. Third was Nora, who-

"Leo?"

Startled, she dropped the mail on the sidewalk. In all of her nervousness about the party, she had forgotten about Claudia Galloway, who was now parked in front of her house, hanging out the

window of her car. "Hi."

"Hi, yourself! I saw you and wanted to say hi again, and to thank you for doing such a good job with my kids the other day."

"You're welcome." Leo couldn't believe the teacher was actually right here in front of her. She laid her hand on the hood and leaned against the car.

"I drove by the other day, but you were talking with somebody-a woman with black hair-so I didn't stop."

Nora. "That was just a friend of mine." *Not a girlfriend or anything.* Leo couldn't imagine why she was explaining herself. The witty conversations she had enjoyed with Claudia in her fantasies seemed to be buried deep inside her stupid head, and nothing clever was coming out. "Nice car."

"Yeah, right." Claudia shook her head in disbelief. Her ride was an eight-year-old Toyota Corolla, rusted along the fenders.

Shit. "No, really. I like these. They go forever. I have my uncle's old Nikon that I love. I go to seminars and all the new photographers laugh at it, but the ones who've been in the business a long time want me to pass it around." Her confidence was edging back, but only because she was talking about photography. "I think of Corollas like that-classics."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. I've been tempted a few times to trade it in, but it's like an old friend."

"That's exactly how I feel about my Nikon."

Both women nodded in silent understanding, Leo feeling lucky to have wormed her way out of that awkward moment.

"I guess I should go. I just wanted to say hi."

Leo straightened up and put her hands into her pockets self-consciously. "I'm glad you did. Stop whenever you want. I'm almost always here." *Except tonight-don't come tonight.* "I'll give you a tour of the studio if you like."

"That'd be fun." Claudia flashed her that killer smile. "See ya."

Leo felt like she was ready to explode with excitement. Not only was she excited that Claudia had stopped by, but also that she had actually had the nerve to invite her to come back. That was practically like asking her out.

And that smile! Leo was going to remember that smile for days.

Except that she had a date with Holly tonight and she had promised not to sabotage it before it ever started. Her giddiness gave way to dread, then resignation. Claudia Galloway was Reason Number 17.

"Leo!" Nora motioned for her friend to come with her into the bedroom, out of earshot of the dozens of guests who were steadily streaming in.

Leo fished the corkscrew from the kitchen drawer and grabbed the bottle of wine before she followed along. "What?"

"I was right about Holly, wasn't I?"

"Well...yeah, she's nice."

"Nice? Leo, she's practically falling out of her top and everybody in the room wants her bad!"

"Okay...she's very nice." Leo had definitely noticed that Holly was dressed to kill tonight. In fact, a quick check in the mirror before they left Holly's apartment confirmed that they made a pretty fetching couple; Holly in her black dress and Leo in her usual Valentine outfit, a starched white shirt with pink suspenders and bowtie.

"Just remember, you promised to keep an open mind."

Leo held up her hands in surrender. "I am. I just wish you wouldn't talk about it. It makes me feel like everybody's looking at me."

"Okay...anyway, what I dragged you in here for was to tell you that Silvia's coming, and she's bringing a date."

"Silvia! Why would you invite both Holly and Silvia to the same party?"

"I invited them back when they were living together. I couldn't very well call one of them and say you can't come."

Leo shook her head and sighed. "I sure hope they can be civil to each other. Boy, is this going to be prickly!"

"Yeah, but most people here don't know them, so at least it won't be prickly for everybody. Let's just hope it doesn't get ugly."

"No kidding. I'd feel safer if you'd gotten a metal detector for the front door."

"I don't think it's that bad, but we should try to keep them away from each other. If you see Silvia go into the kitchen, take Holly out onto the deck...that sort of thing."

"You know, playing referee all night isn't going to make for a real good first date." Leo could feel her already-tiny strain of optimism fade.

"The rest of us will help. I've got to get back out there. Good luck."

Leo returned to her date, who was charming and sweet, seemingly oblivious to the impending appearance of her former girlfriend. As the party progressed, Leo began to think she might be spared an uncomfortable incident, as Silvia was nowhere to be seen. But she knew her luck had run out when Holly turned toward a couple walking in the door and stopped talking.

"Hey, it's getting stuffy in here. You want to step out on the deck for a few minutes?" Leo groaned inwardly at her lame attempt to avert the crisis. *Subtle as a cat throwing up.*

But Holly was unable to tear her eyes from the door. "She sure didn't waste any time," she muttered, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Neither did you, Leo thought, following her gaze to the entry. Silvia was a striking Hispanic woman, tall and fit, with short dark hair and piercing black eyes. Those eyes quickly scanned the room, and Leo felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up when they met hers with an icy glare. "She doesn't look happy."

It was then that Silvia's date stepped around to stand beside her-and it was none other than Claudia Galloway.

Leo dropped her jaw in dismay, but Claudia gave her a tentative smile.

"Put your arm around me...please," Holly said.

Reluctantly, Leo complied, draping her arm loosely around Holly's waist. The last thing she wanted was for Claudia to think Holly was more than just a casual friend. "Let's go get another drink." She led her date into the kitchen and proceeded to fill their wine glasses.

Holly craned her neck around the door to keep an eye on the living room. "Who's that she's with? Have you ever seen that bitch before?"

Leo felt her anger rise, but she wasn't about to give away anything on Claudia. Jealous exes could be dangerous. "Forget about her. Think about who *you* are with."

"Sorry...you're right. That was rude."

"It's okay. I understand. It must be difficult for you, but we should try to have fun, and not

let...her"-she almost said *them*- "get to us."

"Maybe we should take our drinks out on the deck like you suggested."

They squeezed through the crowd in the living room on their way to the sliding glass door. Across the room, Leo spotted Denise, who was giving her a "thumbs up" sign. When they reached the center of the room, Claudia stepped out and blocked Leo as she tried to pass.

"Hi."

"Hi, yourself." Leo couldn't help but smile, and she wanted nothing more than to dump her date and pull Claudia off into a corner so they could get to know one another better.

"Nice outfit."

"Thanks."

A sharp yank on her wrist ended their unexpected reunion, but Leo never dropped her gaze as she exited onto the deck.

"So you know her."

"Yeah," Leo nodded. "I met her last week. She's a very nice person." *Definitely not a bitch, and that's all you're getting out of me.*

Holly sighed heavily and plopped into a deck chair, wrapping her arms around her waist to ward off the February chill. "I'm sorry I'm being such a jerk about this. I just didn't expect to see her tonight."

"It's all right." Leo could see Holly shiver, but was reluctant to leave her alone long enough to go back inside and get their jackets.

"It's hard to see someone you care for with somebody else."

"I'm sure." Leo was feeling the same way about Claudia, and they had never even gone out. *How ridiculous is that?*

"Would you mind going back in and getting my jacket? I really don't want to be in there right now, but it's too cold to stay out here."

"Sure." Leo nodded and set her drink on the rail. "I'll be right back."

She returned to Nora's bedroom, where dozens of coats and jackets were piled high upon the bed. She and Holly had arrived early, which meant theirs were near the bottom. One by one, she set the others aside in search of her own black blazer and Holly's leather coat.

"Hi again."

Leo whirled at the familiar voice and met another bright smile from Claudia, this one less guarded than the earlier one. She was bringing her own coat in to add to the pile.

"Leaving already?"

"No, just..." Leo finally located the two wraps and pulled them out. "I don't know if you realize it or not, but you and I are here with a couple of women who just broke up with each other."

There was a brief look of disbelief before understanding dawned. "That explains a lot...like why Silvia got so possessive when we walked in the door. So your girlfriend used to be with Silvia."

"Right. I mean no-Holly's not my girlfriend! She's just a friend. I hardly know her. I was doing somebody a favor...a friend of mine asked me to come to the party with her so she wouldn't have to spend Valentine's Day by herself."

Claudia nodded and laughed. "That's exactly how I ended up with Silvia, through a friend. I had never even met her until she showed up at my house tonight to pick me up." She sat on the bed and sighed. "I guess you take your chances any time you say yes to a blind date."

Leo snorted in agreement. "Just be glad you weren't set up with me. I have the worst luck of anyone I know." And on top of her usual bad luck, here she was finally talking to someone she really liked-someone interesting-but both of them were here with other people.

"Well, I think we're at least tied for worst tonight."

"I guess I should..."-Leo gestured with the two coats she was holding. What she really wanted to do was toss Holly's coat back on the bed and slip out the front door with Claudia.

"Yeah...and I should go find Silvia."

Leo felt an uncharacteristic surge of bravado, but before she could form the words to ask Claudia if she could call sometime, the other woman had dropped her coat on the bed and left.

"Hey, Leo." It was Nora. "Where have you been? Silvia just went out onto the deck-where Holly is! "

"I just went to get our coats." *Great! Here comes the dyke drama.*

"What's this?" Claudia joined them.

"Leo's date and your date are out on the deck together-unless one of them has already killed the other one."

"I'd better get out there," Leo said, her voice filled with dread.

"I'll come with you," Claudia offered.

Together, they walked to the sliding glass door, both taking deep breaths as they opened it and stepped outside.

"Well...they certainly aren't killing each other," Leo said.

Claudia nodded slowly and added, "Unless one of them is trying to suffocate the other one with her lips."

Silvia and Holly were wrapped in a tight embrace, their lips locked in a passionate kiss. Only when Leo cleared her throat did they come up for air.

"Oops," Holly said sheepishly. "I-I'm really sorry, Leo. I didn't-"

"Claudia, I-"

"It's all right," Leo and Claudia answered in unison.

"Uh...here's your coat." Leo held out the leather coat, which Silvia took and draped around her girlfriend before pulling her back into a hug. "We'll just...go on back inside and...give you two some..."

Claudia tugged her through the doorway before she could get it all out. "I guess we can add this to our list of miserable blind dates."

"Maybe not." Leo could feel her hands start to shake, but she just couldn't let this opportunity pass her by. "Maybe this one turned out to be the best one of all."

Claudia looked at her in confusion until it dawned on her what Leo meant. "You mean because now..."

"Because now, you can be my date...if you want to, that is."

"Your date?"

Leo nodded anxiously, wishing she could crawl into a hole and disappear.

"What a fabulous idea!" Claudia broke into a huge grin and took Leo's hand. "I see a couple of bar stools over in the corner. Think we should grab them?"

The small group of conspirators huddled in the kitchen, taking turns peeking out at Leo and Claudia, who hadn't moved since taking up their position in the corner of the room over three hours ago.

"That was brilliant, Denise," Nora said. "I knew Leo would never get up the nerve to ask her out."

"It was too easy," Denise agreed. "And I knew it was a slam-dunk when Caroline said Claudia had called her asking all about Leo."

"I was worried Leo wasn't going to go for it...the date thing. I had to promise never to set her up with anyone again."

"Caroline said the same thing about Claudia."

"And neither one of them got nervous about expectations and what could go wrong." Nora turned to the lovey-dovey couple. "And you two deserve Academy Awards."

"Glad we could help." Silvia planted a kiss behind her partner's ear. "Holly and I would never have gotten together if our friends hadn't been pushy, so I really hope this works out for those two."

"If the way they're smiling at each other right now is any indication, I think it will."

Happy Valentine's Day, and thanks for reading. Drop me a line if you want at kgmacgregor@yahoo.com.

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