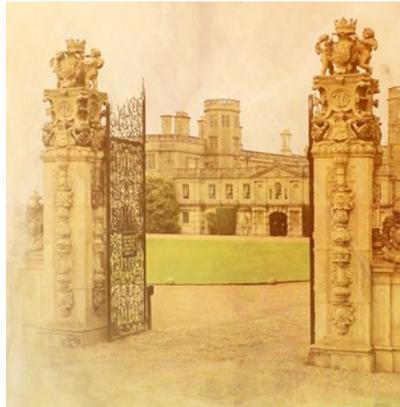


Charlie Cochet presents...



Love in Bloom

A Chance & Jacky Valentine's Day Special

“Absolutely not. I’m sorry, Henry, but that’s a terrible idea.”

Damn it all. Why the hell was I having so much trouble with this blasted tie? It wasn’t as though I hadn’t managed the thing every other bloody day. My shaking hands weren’t helping matters either.

“Here, let me.” Henry took hold of my shoulders, and turned me none too gently. The doc was getting antsy with me. Well, as antsy as Henry could get. He was so astoundingly polite, even for a Brit. And here I thought the only fella who could make the doc lose his rag was Johnnie. Of course with Johnnie, Henry didn’t stay in a lather for long, as his infuriating beau was a crafty mug, and knew just how to distract the doc to get his way. With me, the doc was out of luck. Johnnie might be pigheaded, but the kid had nothing on me.

“Shouldn’t you and Johnnie be getting on to your evening of debauchery?”

Henry's cheeks went pink as he huffed, and sorted out my tie. I was grateful he didn't attempt to strangle me with it, though the look in his eyes told me he was tempted. "Yes, well, we have a lovely evening planned. Johnnie's taking me to see *The Count of Monte Cristo*."

Not that I wanted to burst Henry's bubble, but I was pretty sure that picture had come and gone quite some time ago. "I didn't know that was still playing."

"It's not. He's managed a private screening at some swanky estate. I don't know how he bloody did it, but he did. He knows it's my favorite." Despite his words, Henry's flush deepened, and he smiled bashfully. "He's rather something, isn't he?"

"Not much we wouldn't do for the right fella, Henry." I thanked him for his help, and stood before the long mirror in my dressing room. "Which is why I appreciate the offer, but I haven't changed my mind, and doubt I will be any time soon."

"Chance, it's nothing to feel prideful of, especially if Jacky agrees. His condition will require far more physical effort on your part, and if, heaven forbids, the time comes, he will rely solely on you."

"And I have no intention of letting him down."

Every couple of months we had this conversation, the three of us. Jacky's physical condition was deteriorating. We'd been preparing ourselves for years, watching as the love of my life struggled more and more to remain on his feet. The injuries he'd suffered during an ambush while serving in the French Foreign Legion were taking its toll. At six and half feet tall, and well over two hundred pounds, it wasn't easy for a man of Jacky's size and strength to deal with the crippling pain. It was just as difficult for him—a former commandant, to find himself confined to a wheelchair more often than not, but my Jacky was a strong, willful, stubborn, confident man, and he would fight until his very last breath. I knew him better than I knew myself. "Jacky won't want a nurse while he has me."

"You can't do everything, Chance. What about the boys? What of everything you do around the manor, the lessons, the town theater? You already do so much. Think of your own health, not merely Jacky's."

I neatly arranged my matching handkerchief in my front breast pocket, and attempted not to put too much thought in my evening plans. “Henry, you know I respect you. You’re a topnotch doc, and a great fella. What’s more, you’re family. But until I’m too old to do it myself, I’ll take care of Jacky. Now, could we talk about this some other time? I’m kinda in the middle of a life altering moment.”

“Oh! Goodness, yes. Of course. Though you really have no need to be so anxious.” Henry smiled at me. The same kind of dopey, dizzy in love grin he usually sported when Johnnie was around. “You’re really quite the romantic at heart, aren’t you?”

“Easy there, Henry. I’ve plugged mugs for calling me far more flattering names.” I arched an eyebrow at him, but couldn’t help my smile. Romantic. There’s a word I never thought anyone would ever associate with me. Still... I took a deep breath, and turned to my friend, my anxieties fighting to get the better of me. “What if he thinks it’s a stupid idea?”

“Courage, dear fellow. Besides, this is Jacky we’re talking about. He adores you.”

I nodded, giving him a tremulous smile. It was true. I didn’t know how I managed to win the love of a right guy like Jacky Valentine, considering the whole of my life, what I’d done, and where I ended up, but I was thankful each and every day.

Henry followed me out of the dressing room into the bedroom I shared with Jacky, and out in the expansive ante room. My stomach was full of butterflies, as if tonight were our first night together. “Thank you. Enjoy your evening, and try not to let that beau of yours get you thrown in the hoosegow.”

“I’ll give Johnnie your love,” Henry said with a knowing grin.

“A kick in the backside is more like it,” I grumbled as Henry walked off chuckling to himself. Geez Louise, I was on my own, with my own thoughts. Dangerous territory.

The idea had come to me, admittedly, quite a while back when an acquaintance from London had shared an article from a tabloid newspaper published in Australia. Where he’d gotten it was beyond me, all I knew was that I was immediately fascinated by the headline. The article itself was complete trash,

and nothing I hadn't heard before. It yammered on about perversion, queers, indecency, and read like the author had all but ruptured a spleen getting his disgust out onto the page. None of that mattered. What mattered was what had gotten my attention; the heart of the article.

It was something unattainable for me, and those like me. Something beautiful, and wonderful, often abused, taken for granted, or discarded. I knew fellas like me who went about as if they already possessed this gift, and although in the eyes of king and country, it would never be—less we wanted to end up in a workhouse, in the eyes of our family, and our hearts, it would be so. What better day than today for such a gesture? Especially since I had a habit of teasing Jacky, telling him I had no intention of getting him a gift for this absurd lovers' holiday. After all, around here, every day was Valentine's day. The quip resulted in the same unamused expression it did whenever anyone teased him about his surname. Of course, unlike everyone else who teased him, I was the only who received a nice hand to the backside for my efforts.

A knock on the door captured my attention, and I continued to wander aimlessly around the room as I told them to come in. A gray-eyed imp appeared before me. He gave me the up and down before grinning widely.

"What do you think?" I asked, watching as Aubrey made himself comfortable on one of the armchairs. Almost nineteen already. Where did the time go? Listen to me. No wonder Johnnie was always blabbering on about me behaving like some mother hen. Though it was difficult not to where Aubrey was concerned. With a broad grin, he nodded his approval.

I'd worn the deep blue, three-piece suit with cerulean tie because it was Jacky's favorite. He'd told me on several occasions of how it brought out my eyes. It scared me how much I loved him. Before Jacky, I didn't even know it was possible to love someone that much. Opening my eyes every morning, and seeing him there beside me was the greatest gift I could ever hope for. I needed him more than anyone could possibly understand, and I hoped tonight would once again show him what he meant to me. Good God, when had I turned into such a sap?

"Do you think he'd care? I mean, I know he'd care, but do you think it would mean all that much to him, considering our relationship?"

Aubrey knew exactly what I was yammering on about. He was one of the few who were privy to my Valentine's Day plans. I glanced at him, smiling when Aubrey tapped the fleur de lis pin I'd given him to help him when his anxieties got the better of him. Bless his sweet little face.

"You're right. I need to stop being such a pill."

Aubrey jumped up from his armchair, and came to stand before me. He threw his arms around me, and squeezed me tight. I was no match for him, and that boyish grin. He patted my chest over my heart, and I felt a lump forming in my throat. He was small for his age, but had a heart as big as a fellow twice his size. If someone as brave and wonderful as Aubrey believed in me, I had to be doing something right. It was time.

"I better go before Jacky sends a search party after me. Probably thinks I'm off getting shot by poachers again." With a wink at Aubrey, and a failed attempt at sternness when instructing him to behave himself along with the other Brats during their evening of boyish mayhem, I left the room, and as I neared the front doors of the manor, heard the horn of my Austen blaring. Someone was eager to get moving. With a smile that could barely be contained, I descended the manor steps. Jacky was sitting in the passenger seat waiting for me, engine running.

I slipped into the driver's side, and turned, my breath stolen at his beautiful smile, and sparkling green eyes. He was fetchingly dressed in a rich brown, three-piece suit, and red tie, looking larger than life as always. His honey-colored hair had gained a few additional strands of silver over the last year, but that only made him more refined in my eyes. It was slightly tousled, and I couldn't help but brush it away from his brow before my hand stroked his face on its way down his chiseled jaw.

"Miss me already?" I leaned into him, and stole a quick kiss.

"A minute away is a minute too long," he replied, that mischievous gleam in his eyes.

"Trying to skip the main course, and start with dessert are you?"

His hand came to rest on my leg as I drove away from the manor, and the butterflies in my stomach started to flutter their wings in earnest.

"Can you blame me? You look stunning, as always, kitten."

I spared him a quick glance at the pet name. No one in the whole of my life had ever dared call me by a pet name; much less the whoppers Jacky had come up with since we met. Thinking back, my heart must have known I was dizzy over the fella before my head did. Why else would I let some mug call me snuggle-pup, and not get a knuckle sandwich for it?

We weren't going far, only a ten minute drive down the dirt road behind the manor. Jacky had purchased a small cottage from a neighbor a few months ago. The owners were moving to London, and we agreed the place would make a great little getaway for the two of us when we needed time to ourselves.

Hawthorne Manor and everyone in it was our home, our family. We loved those Brats like nothing else, and we lived each day to help those boys. Sometimes, I fella just needed to whisk his sweetheart away for a night of getting cozy. We also enjoyed the occasional... racy evening, which usually started with me in some indecent attire, and far too much scandalous behavior to be considered appropriate for Hawthorne Manor, even in the privacy of our expansive quarters. Such evenings had been restricted to the King's Head Inn, but it was getting too difficult for Jacky to travel such a long way, so the cottage was a perfect solution.

The cottage was surrounded by greenery, with an abundance of trees, bushes, and flowers. It was tucked far enough away from the road to ensure privacy, and offered large windows, oak beams, antique dressers, and dark furniture. It was peaceful and secluded, but had a telephone in case of emergency, as well as modern fittings such a plumbing, and electricity.

I drove the car off the main dirt road onto the gravel path leading up to the front door, and after turning off the engine, I delivered a quick kiss to Jacky's lips. I bound out of the car, the excitement coupled with my nerves threatening to turn me into a sweaty mess. I scolded myself. Turning into a sweaty mess was supposed to come after my romantic surprise.

Popping inside the cottage, I pushed Jacky's spare wheelchair out to the car, and opened the passenger side door with a gallant bow. He took hold of my chin to kiss me before carefully turning in his seat to place his long legs outside the car, and with his arms shifted forward so he was closer to the seat's edge. I repositioned the chair, and returned to his side, planting a kiss to the tip of his nose as he slipped his arms around me.

“Ready?” He asked me.

“I was born ready, sweetheart.”

He chuckled, a wonderful deep rumble that rose from his broad chest. I helped him slip onto his wheelchair with minimal jarring. When I pulled back, he was studying me. “What’s with the face?”

“You put on weight.”

Hands on my hips, I arched an eyebrow at him. “Is this your way of talking me out of second desserts?” Wasn’t that why some English folk called it ‘afters’, because after you had dessert, you got to have some more? That was my interpretation, and I was sticking to it.

He shook his head, concern worrying his handsome face. “I’m sorry, that sounded awful. Not that it would matter to me if you did put on weight. I meant bulk. You’ve gotten bigger.”

“Have I?” I looked down at myself. Well, I had been spending a good deal of time looking after my physical health lately, doing quite a lot of boxing in particular. It took me a moment before it dawned on me. Jacky was too clever for his own good. He was concerned I was doing it in order to take the brunt of his weight when I helped him in and out of his wheelchair, and while it was true that I was keeping myself in pique condition to better serve him, I was hardly about to tell him so, as it would only dishearten him. “You got me,” I said, moving him away from the car, and closing the door. “I have been looking to increase my strength, but can you blame me? Have you seen how big Gideon is?”

Jacky looked up at me, puzzled. “Gideon?”

“Yeah.” I started wheeling Jacky toward the house. “That boy’s had one hell of a growth spurt over the last year, and Oliver’s growing out of that gangly phase. Edmund’s not far behind. You think I’m gonna be able to handle those boys, much less the rest of the Brats if I’m all soft in the belly? Even Johnnie’s considered joining me for some sparring. Last week Connor knocked the wind out of him during a rugby match, and Connor wasn’t even gunning for him like Gideon was. You know how the boys like to rough house, and they don’t bat an eye when it comes to me and Johnnie. And that’s when they’re getting along.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

I leaned in to murmur in his ear, “Besides, a little extra stamina in the bedroom can’t go amiss.”

His cheeks flushed that lovely pink I enjoyed seeing so much. I locked the door behind us, and maneuvered him to the dining room, helping him settle into one of the chairs. Mrs. Whitmore had prepared a wonderful dinner for us, which I had brought over earlier, and had started warming up before heading back to change. The dinner wasn’t as important as everything that came after. The dining table had been set up with the silver and champagne glasses, which I filled with cool bubbly liquid. Jacky sipped from his glass, watching me as I set dinner on the table. Domesticity had never appealed to me, and before Jacky, the thought of settling down would have had me making tracks, if I ever got passed the part where I believed someone might care for me enough to make a home with me.

Putting those thoughts aside, I lit the candles in the center of the oak table. The curtains were drawn, and from the Victrola in the corner, Irving Aaronson crooned on about love in bloom.

Once everything was heated, and I sat at an angle from Jacky, we touched our champagne glasses. As we ate, I felt wonderfully comfortable, but I couldn’t keep my heart from beating wildly in my chest. Soon. Bloody hell, could I go through with this?

“Are you all right?”

“Hm?” I looked up from my plate, realizing I’d allowed my mind to wander. “Oh, yeah. I’m fine. How’s your dinner?”

Jacky smiled, and reached out to squeeze my hand. “Wonderful. Not as good as the company of course.”

I chuckled, my eyes dropping to my half empty plate of suckling pig, potatoes, and French beans.

“You look nervous. Are you sure you’re okay? Is something wrong?”

Oh, boy. *This is it, Chance.* “No. Nothing.” *Coward.* “I mean, well, I need to talk to you about something, something important.” I forced myself to meet his curious gaze.

“About us?”

“Yeah, sort of.” My palms were starting to sweat, so I pulled my hand out of his to wipe it discreetly on my napkin. Jacky let out a heavy sigh, catching my attention.

“I know what this is about.”

“You do?” Damn it. Someone had spilled the beans. I bet it was that no good Johnnie. When I got my hands on his scrawny neck, I was going to—

“Yes, and it’s a ridiculous idea.”

My heart plummeted into my stomach. “Oh.”

“Don’t you think? I mean, we’re fine the way things are. I don’t see why we have to change anything.” He cocked his head to one side, looking so absolutely certain. Had he thought about it at all? I couldn’t help my disappointment. A part of me had truly believed he would have been game, maybe even pleased with the idea. Jacky was more of a sentimental sap than I was. Then again, maybe not.

“You’re right,” I replied, summoning a small smile. “They’ve been really swell.” And they had. Lord knows they couldn’t have been better.

“You don’t think so? Damn it, Chance, I’m sorry. I’m being selfish.”

That brought a frown to my face, and I didn’t like the idea of him thinking such nonsense. “Jacky, you’re the most unselfish person I’ve ever known. If you think it’s a bad idea then... that’s that.”

Jacky shook his head, his expression determined. “Clearly you don’t agree. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed you’d feel the same way.” He let out a soft sigh, and his smile broke my heart. “I’ll tell Henry we’re going through with it.”

“Jacky, I don’t want you to agree to something you’re not comfortable with for my sake. It should be something we both want, and sure as hell not something you think is ridiculous.”

“I’ve upset you. On Valentine’s Day.”

“Yes, quite frankly.” I never was once to mince words. I needed for him to understand how important this was to me, how important it was for us to be in agreement. If he was happy as we were, so was I.

“I apologize. I thought we were doing fine.”

“We were. Of course we were. I...” What a disaster. What the hell had possessed me to think of such an inane suggestion? The last thing I wanted was to disappoint him. “Never mind.”

“No.” He leaned forward, his green eyes pleading. “Tell me.”

I nodded, watching him as he sipped his champagne. He was so handsome. I remembered Aubrey, and the fleur de lis pin. The hell with it. This was Jacky. I’d never kept anything from him. “All right. I thought it might be nice to make it official, unofficially. I don’t know when it happened, but I started seeing you as my husband, and—”

Jacky sputtered a mouthful of champagne before coughing. I jumped from my chair, and went to his side, patting his back. “For crying out loud, Jacky, be careful.”

“Husband?” Jacky wheezed, his eyes wide as saucers.

“Yeah, husband. I know it all sounds ridiculous, but I love you something fierce, Jacky, and if I see you as my husband, have for a long time, why shouldn’t we marry, even if it’s in our own way, even if—”

“M... Marry?”

“Are you all right?” I put my hand to his forehead. He wasn’t any warmer than usual. Then it dawned on me. “Applesauce. You were talking about something else weren’t you?”

Jacky nodded. “The nurse Henry suggested we hire to help.”

“Nurse?” I waved a hand in dismissal. “Don’t be ridiculous. I already told him we didn’t—Oh.”

“Oh,” Jack repeated, our eyes meeting.

I knelt down beside his chair, my head resting against his thigh. “Well, this has to be the worst proposal in the history of matrimony.”

“You were going to propose?” he asked quietly.

“Yes.” I wondered how many other fellas had botched things up as astoundingly as I had. Though I reckoned Jacky was taking it a lot better than some

probably would. At least I didn't have to worry about delicacy. Not that I had much to begin with.

"Marriage."

"That's generally how it works," I muttered, rubbing my cheek against his leg.

"Yes."

"That's what I said."

"No, I mean *yes*, I'll marry you."

I blinked, and looked up at him. For a moment my noodle stopped working, and I couldn't understand the tears in his eyes, or the beautiful smile that lit up his handsome face, and then it came crashing into me all at once. I pulled back, and turned his chair so we were facing each other before I took his hands in mine. My voice was having trouble keeping steady, and not sounding like something was crushing my family jewels.

"Jacky, I... I love you so much. No matter what life throws at us, as long as fate allows, I will be by your side, caring for you, loving you, and thanking you for all the happiness you bring me." A tear rolled down his cheek, and I brushed it away with my thumb.

"When did you get so sappy?"

I burst into laughter, tears pooling into my eyes, and escaping despite my attempt to hold them back. He pulled me onto his lap, and I slipped my arms around his neck. I felt my smile tremble as I looked into those beautiful green eyes. How on earth had a hardboiled mug like me ended up spouting words of love and marriage? Come to think of it, I didn't care. If it was good enough for the Australians, it was good enough for me.

"I thought we might have a small ceremony at the manor. I know a fella in the life who can marry us. I know it holds no bearing outside the manor, but..."

"The hell with that," Jacky said, cupping my face in his large hands. "It'll mean everything to me."

"I love you, Jacky. Happy Valentine's Day."

Jacky smiled, mischief and love in his eyes. “I love you, Chance. It’s certainly a happy Me day. You’ve outdone yourself this year, sweetheart. I can’t wait to see what you have in store for next year.”

I laughed, and kissed him, my heart ready to burst from happiness, and the wonderful man in my arms. From the corner of the room, a lovely melody enveloped us in warmth and wonder on this new adventure, because with Jacky, my life was always one glorious adventure after another. We kissed passionately, hands roaming, breaths mingled, and the taste of champagne on our lips as Mr. Aaronson sang me a story, one that sounded awfully familiar.

My heart was a desert

But you planted a seed

And this is the flower

This hour of sweet fulfillment

I couldn’t have said it better.

The End

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