

# **Candy for Valentine**

## **Michele Bardsley**

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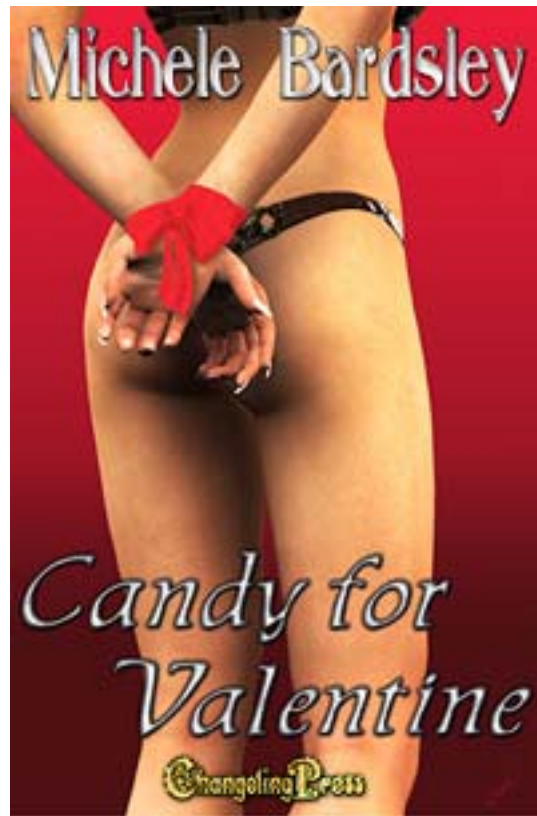
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## Chapter 1

Valentine Carter sat down at a corner table and watched the merriment around her. Every year, the Heart of Romance Readers' convention was held the second weekend of February. The party started on Friday evening and continued through Sunday afternoon. Tonight was Friday, and the Rock n' Roll Rave kicked off all the fun.

She sighed. Since she'd checked into the hotel at 4 p.m., she'd been snubbed by authors *and* readers, approximately 142 times. Her "posse," the loyal women who posted comments on her review site, The Blog Bitch, and who emailed her daily, were not here.

She was alone.

Just like always.

Valentine surveyed the dancers bopping around at the front of the ballroom. A DJ was set-up in the far left corner, spinning songs such as "Rock Around the Clock," "Tutti Frutti," and "Peggy Sue." Sitting by herself at the large table with its shiny white plates, folded napkins, and sweating water glasses, she drank a glass of Chablis and moped.

A flash of red caught her attention and she looked up. Madra Milton. The author's novel, *Take Me Away*, was up for a Reader Heart award. In December, Val had reviewed the book, recommending that readers use it for kindling. Now, she felt a sliver of shame. Not for the first time she wondered if her friend Eve was right about the reviews on The Blog Bitch. *Do I really get more pleasure out of trashing the books than I do reading them?*

Madra, wearing a red-and-white cheerleader's outfit, sauntered toward a table filled with people. She posed then shook her single pom-pom in a pseudo cheer. Her audience clapped and laughed.

Val looked away. She couldn't recall ever having a moment like that -- where a bounty of friends and fans welcomed her. She *felt* that way online, when others gave her cyber high-fives and added their own cutting opinions to hers. She'd been disappointed when none of her Internet pals could come to the conference. She had envisioned snark sessions at parties like this one, laughter and joke-telling, and doing in-person what they did on the blog.

Once again, doubt fluttered in her mind. She had always thought of herself as a romance reader. And so, she believed her blog had attracted other romance readers. Like her, these readers were tired of the same old plot devices, cheesy dialogue, skinny, simpering heroines, and heroes who were either Navy SEALs or ancient vampires.

But maybe she'd merely attracted other cynical women who didn't believe in love anymore. Her negativity had gathered more negativity. Was The Blog Bitch a service to readers who wanted the real scoop on romance novels? Or merely a place where she could use romance novels as scapegoats for her bitterness about love?

"Hi there! Looks like you need a friend."

The southern drawl belonged to a pretty woman with platinum locks pulled into a ponytail; she was dressed in a white sweater and blue poodle skirt. As Elvis crooned "Don't Be Cruel," she plopped into a chair. Her affable smile jolted Val out of her morose thoughts.

"Isn't this the greatest? I mean, it's only day one and all... but wow oh wow. First reader's conference for me. What about you?"

"Yes," said Val. "First one." *And last one.* No way would she suffer through another event where people saw her nametag and bolted mid-conversation. She had finally taken it off, but most people knew her face now. If she wasn't scheduled to participate on two panels -- Bloggin' The Review and Honesty in Review Writing -- not to mention presenting a category award at the awards banquet, she would've booked a flight out of here tonight.

"Are you a reader or writer?" asked the bubbly blonde.

"Reader."

"That's terrific! I'm an author." Out came a business card, which she presented to Val. "My first novel came out last summer, *Kiss Me Once*. The next in the series, *Kiss Me Twice*, hits shelves in June. I'm so excited!"

Val tried not to flinch. She had blogged about *Kiss Me Once* and like most of her reviews, it hadn't been favorable. She looked at the pink rectangle: Lanie Haart was scrolled across the top with a big red "kiss" in the center. Lanie's website address and email were at the bottom.

"Thanks," said Val. She was reluctant to reveal her own identity. After all, Lanie was the first person to speak to Val since she'd arrived at the party. "Do you have fun writing?"

"My most favorite thing in the world. Of course, I just got published, so I don't make enough to quit the ol' day job." She laughed.

"What's the ol' day job?"

"Rocket scientist."

"Really?"

Lanie grinned. "Nah. I just like to say that to see how folks react. I'm a waitress. Just me and my little girl, making do in our little corner of Savannah. Been that way ever since my husband ran off with a movie star and moved to the Bahamas."

"You're kidding!"

"Yeah," admitted Lanie. "It sounds more glamorous than saying he got tired of being a husband and a daddy and left. Five years ago, he took a twelve-pack of Budweiser, our dog Jester, and the truck. Haven't seen him since."

Val waited for the punch-line.

"Oh, no, that part's true," she confirmed, waving a hand as if being abandoned by her own husband wasn't a big deal.

"I got divorced more than a year ago," Val said. "I was a paralegal and he was a lawyer. Frank and I had been married for about three months when I found out he was sleeping with my boss."

"What a rat!"

Val nodded. She couldn't quite believe she was confiding such painful memories to a stranger. Maybe she was so damned desperate to connect to someone at this conference she would say anything to keep 'em around longer than five minutes. "Turns out they'd been sleeping together before the wedding, too. I don't know why he walked down the aisle with me. It took longer to get divorced than we were actually married. God, I was so in love with him." She gulped the rest of her Chablis then shrugged. "But that's why we read romance novels, right?"

"Happy endings are the best," agreed Lanie. She pointed at Val's empty wine glass. "Hey! Let's get us another drink and make a toast to bad husbands."

"That sounds wonderful."

Lanie rose from the table and plumped her skirt. "Where are my manners? I didn't even ask your name!"

Val's grip on her purse tightened. She got up from the table, her heart in her throat as she extended her hand. *She probably won't know who I am. Or if she does recognize me, maybe she'll thank me for all the publicity.* "I'm Valentine Carter."

Lanie's hand slipped away from Val's. She was still smiling, but the friendly light went out of her eyes. "Oh. The... uh... Bitchy Blog or Bitch Who Blogs... right?"

"The Blog Bitch."

"Well, bless your heart. Brave of you to come to a conference with so many authors attending."

"I was invited."

"How nice for you." Lanie bit her lip, obviously engaging in an internal debate. Valentine waited. Either Lanie would suck up to her, hoping to get a better review for *Kiss Me Twice* or she would lambaste Val for every mean word in the review for *Kiss Me Once*. No matter which choice Lanie made -- Val had lost a potential friend.

"I feel sorry for you, Mrs. Carter," Lanie finally said. "You're a decent writer, y'know. You shouldn't waste your time tearing apart other people's hard work. You should stop blogging about books and try writing one."

"I don't discount the time and effort an author puts into her novel," defended Val. She'd heard this old saw before. Authors often claimed that reviewers should consider how they'd sweated and bled and wept for their art. Hah. If the end product sucked, it hardly mattered how many hours it took to create it.

"You don't listen worth a hoot," said Lanie, rolling her eyes. "Quit wasting your time and your talent on that blog and use it to write a book. Why do you think I wrote *Kiss Me Once*? Got me right over that rough patch when Benny left me. I didn't have a job or a car or a cent to my name. All I had was an apartment with overdue rent and a toddler who kept crying for her daddy. Some women drink or eat or *blog*... I wrote a novel. I went to work and I took care of Katie Lyn and I wrote."

"That's great," said Val, holding on to the vague hope that she and Lanie might yet be friends. "You're realizing your dream."

"You can only realize a dream if you have one," said Lanie. "And that's the difference between you and me, isn't it?" She picked up her glittery blue purse and tucked it under her arm. "I'll bid you good night, Mrs. Carter. I'm sure you understand why I can't have that drink with you."

"Yeah," said Val. "Sure."

Lanie Haart zipped away as fast as her bobby-socked feet could carry her. Val watched her walk toward the dance floor. As she passed the table where Madra held court, the author waved her over. Lanie squeezed into a chair between Madra and a good-looking man with the bluest eyes Val had ever seen. For a split second, the man's gaze snared hers. Val felt a lust attack of epic proportions before the man looked away. The amorous fires died instantly.

Feeling monumentally depressed, Val left the Rock n' Roll Rave and headed to the one place that always offered solace to the unwanted: the hotel bar.

## Chapter 2

Val ordered a Jack and Coke from the cocktail waitress and settled into the corner booth. The space was dark and cozy and well away from the rowdy women who'd claimed the bar. Envious, she watched the tight-knit group, all wearing red shirts sporting "Madra's Minions," drink margaritas and laugh at their own goofy antics.

Sighing deeply, she decided she couldn't spend another second watching other people enjoy life. She would go upstairs, order room service, and stay in bed until the first panel session, which began at 10 a.m. tomorrow.

"Hello," said a sexy male voice. "Mind if I join you?"

Val looked up and met the gaze of Blue Eyes. Did Pierce Brosnan have a twin? Because this guy was hot. Oh, yeah. He was Remington Steele-James Bond-Thomas Crown HOT. Still, she shook her head. "You should probably know that I'm Valentine Carter, owner and publisher of The Blog Bitch. If you are an author, the relative of an author, the friend of an author, or the true-blue fan of an author, chances are good you hate my guts."

He chuckled, scooting into the booth and sliding over two drinks. "I snagged one from the waitress and got you a second one."

"Thanks." Val pushed over a twenty-dollar bill, but he refused the money.

"It's my pleasure to buy drinks for such a pretty lady." He smiled, his teeth flashing white. "I'm Dominic."

A sexy name to go with a sexy man. Her gaze flicked to red shirts at the bar. Several others had joined the minions, Madra and Lanie among them. Was it weird to want to be over there, one of the many basking in the glow of friends than here, with the gorgeous guy?



"I saw you with Madra earlier," she said, wrapping her palms around the chubby glass. "You a friend of hers?"

"I'm a cover model," he said. "Don't worry, I'm not gay."

"Perish the thought."

"I spend time with everyone. I'm up for the Best Cover Model award, which requires votes to win." He looked at Val. "I hope I can count on your vote."

Val nodded, though she was disappointed that he was only schmoozing her for a dumb contest. *Valentine, if you were a flower, you couldn't attract a bee.* She sucked down half the drink. It was cold and crisp and tasted more of Jack Daniels than of Coca-Cola. All the same, she finished it off.

"How long have you been a reviewer?" he asked. Hmm. Had he inched closer?

"I've reviewed books here and there for websites and stuff for a long time, but I started The Blog Bitch a little over a year ago."

He nodded, looking as though he were interested in her every word. Wow. She actually felt like he gave a shit. She started on the second drink, which tasted better than the first.

"So, how many books of Madra's have you reviewed?"

"Her last five. I'm afraid I've been rather mean to her."

"Really? Did she deserve it?" He leaned forward. "Some of these romance authors think they are God's gift to writing."

"Yeah," agreed Val. "Damn right. I think Madra's stories are kinda pompous. Every time I read her work, I feel like she's talking down to the reader. Like we can't get what she's saying. I mean if she wants to be all hoity-toity she should write a literary novel and get it over with. Why write romance novels if she doesn't like them?"

"That's an interesting viewpoint."

Val blinked. Somehow a third Jack and Coke had arrived and she was damned near close to finishing it. Counting the Chablis, she was two drinks past what she usually imbibed. "Whew. I'm kinda buzzed. I... uh... y'know, better get back to the room."

"Of course," said Dominic.

Val managed to free herself from the booth, but the second she got to her feet, the world tilted.

"Whoa." Dominic clutched her arms and righted her. "Maybe I should walk you to the elevators."

"Okay dokay." Val saluted him with her purse and made him laugh. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and guided her out of the bar. As they crossed the lobby to the bank of elevators, Dominic's woodsy cologne wafted over her. God, he looked yummy, he smelled yummy... he probably tasted yummy, too. She wanted to lick him.

"What floor?" he asked.

"Fourth."

He pushed the button and the doors dinged open. Val wobbled into the car and fell against its side. Dominic stepped through and once again, righted her. "How about I walk you to your room?"

"Okay dokay," she said again.

When they reached the fourth floor, Dominic held onto Val until they reached Room 432. She couldn't find the card key so she handed Dominic her purse. He plucked it from a zippered pocket, opened the door, and helped Val to the bed. The floor lamp in the corner offered the only light in the room.

"Thanks," she said. God, she felt damned strange. She'd been drunk before, but this feeling was different. Dominic knelt down and took off her high heels.

"There," he said, looking up at her. "That should do it."

A lust bomb exploded inside her. Dominic was gorgeous, he was in her room, and she hadn't had sex with a man since her dumb-ass husband. Suddenly, she wanted to have sex more than she wanted anything *ever*. "I need help with my clothes," she said coyly.

He obliged, removing her dress, half-slip, and pantyhose. He looked at her black lace bra and matching panties. "Those are very pretty, Valentine. You look spectacular in them."

"Thanks." Her thumbs hooked into her underwear, but Dominic stilled her hands.

"Wait. I like to look, y'know? Especially when a woman is as beautiful as you are." He caressed her cheek and she sighed with delight at the tender gesture. "Y'know what else I like?" His hand dipped into his jacket pocket and pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

"Never done anything like that before." She giggled and put out her arms. "Cuff me, officer."

"I'll be the bad cop." He grinned. "Put your hands behind your back."

She did as he asked and he snapped the cuffs around her wrists. Then he helped her scoot onto the bed. She was feeling dizzy. Was it the alcohol or the horniness?

"One more thing, Valentine."

"Hmm?"

Out of his other jacket pocket, he produced a red ball that had two black straps hanging from it. "It's a ball gag. You'll be my little slave, won't you?"

"Sure." Vaguely, she felt as though what was unfolding between her and Dominic wasn't quite right. He hadn't harmed her, but he hadn't touched her like a lover, either. Something about the scenario was weird.

He placed the ball gag in her mouth and connected it behind her head. She didn't particularly like the way the sphere felt, but if it meant Dominic would fuck her, she'd do anything he asked. Her body was revved and they hadn't even done minimum foreplay.

"Now, sit up and lean to the right. Look at me, darling."

Unable to resist his sultry instructions, she did as he asked. Light flashed numerous times, blinding her. She blinked away the dancing dots in front of her eyes.

Dominic sat on the bed and patted her thigh. "You're just perfect, Valentine Carter, as you are now. Know why?"

She shook her head.

"Because you can't talk and you can't type." He leaned forward, his gaze as hard as sapphires. "You're petty and cruel and you don't care who you hurt. When you wake up, you'll be bound and gagged. Right now, you're squirming because the same drug that will wipe your memory makes you horny as hell."

Val heard the words, but couldn't quite comprehend them. What was with all the talk, anyway? She wanted to have hot sex with Remington Steele.

"I'm glad we had this little chat," said Dominic as he stood up. "Have a good night."

Stunned, Val watched her would-be lover walk away. She yelled, but the ball gag trapped the sounds. Dizzy, horny, and really confused, she scooted off the bed. Her legs caught in the covers and she fell.

Momentarily stunned, Val laid on the floor.

What the hell had just happened?

On shaky legs, she got up and sat down on the bed. Dominic was teasing her. Yeah. He'd be back soon.

And she'd be waiting.

## Chapter 3

Michael Sanderson almost clipped the man sauntering down the hallway. He looked up from the paper he was reading. His single suitcase dangled from the other hand. "Hey, man. Sorry."

"No problem." The blue-eyed dude gave Michael the hubba-hubba once-over. Oh, please. This player wasn't even his type. First, he was male and second, he was human. "You here for the Romance at Heart conference?"

Michael didn't feel like telling the flirt that he was a publicist scheduled to take a few evening appointments. "I have a friend who's up for an award."

"Friend?" The guy actually pouted. Michael controlled the urge to roll his eyes. What was it about him that always attracted gay men?

"Yeah, he and his wife have the room next to mine."

This news brought the sparkle back to the blue eyes. "My name's Dominic." He handed Michael a white business card. "I'll be here all weekend."

"Good to know." Michael tucked the card into his jeans pocket. "See you later."

"I hope so." Dominic winked.

Michael smiled then resumed walking down the hall. He knew Dominic was probably checking out his ass. He resisted the urge to wiggle it; the guy might think it was an invitation. With his vampire ears, he heard the man's footfalls on the carpet. The elevators dinged open almost immediately. Thank goodness. He was feeling tired and on edge. Dominic was lucky -- he could've easily been dinner.

According to the paper in his hand, Michael had been booked into Room 432. Steven and Eve had made all the arrangements and Eve had promised him an "awesome surprise."

The stupid key card didn't work. Wasn't that typical? He used some vamp mojo on the door and it clicked open. As he entered the room, he immediately smelled a human female. Her sexual scent was strong and invoked an immediate reaction. Dropping everything, he hurried into the main part of the room.

The gorgeous brunette sat on the bed, dressed in nothing but bra, panties, cuffs, and gag. Woo-hoo! He was mightily impressed by this *surprise*.

"You are way more than awesome," he said.

Her brown eyes looked glazed and wild. Oh, baby. She was different from his usual donors. Maybe Steven and Eve had realized he needed to change it up. He was a rarity in a world filled with rarities -- a vampire who could only feed when engaged in a sexual act. The act of fucking and feeding bolstered his powers. As young as he was in the vampire world (only forty years undead), he had more power than vampires who'd been around for a thousand years. He'd stopped having relationships more than twenty years ago; no woman he'd met had been able to keep up with his need for blood and for sex. These days, he hired call girls who could give him what he needed. He never used the same woman twice, he paid her well, and he wiped her memory.

"God, you're beautiful," he said as he kicked off his Vans and shucked his jeans and boxers. He took off his T-shirt and stood before her naked, his cock already primed. "Let's make the first time last a little while."

She shook her head. She looked desperate. Frowning, he leaned forward to cup her mound and found her panties soaked. "Playing ahead of time?" His frown flipped to a smile. "Okay." He could hold off on feeding for now. "If you want me to fuck you, lay face down on the bed, and show me your ass."

The woman laid face-down on the bed. Her handcuffed hands pressed against her back. Her luscious ass, barely covered by the black lace panties, wiggled at him.

He gripped her hips and pulled her backwards until she was on the edge of the bed and her feet were braced on the floor. He pushed aside the panties and slid his cock into the slick, tight heat. Condoms were unnecessary. He could neither give nor get STDs and he was incapable of getting a female pregnant.

She clenched his cock with her pussy as if to say, "C'mon, already!"

He thrust deeply, increasing his strokes to meet the frenzied reception of his new lover. She came hard, her cunt sucking at his cock; his orgasm burst instantly. Whoa. *This is definitely different.*

The woman flipped to her back. Her body was flushed and pearly with sweat; her brunette locks were a sexy mess. The color of her eyes reminded him of a good cognac. Helping her sit up, he reached around and released the ball gag from her mouth.

"I'm Michael."

"I'm..." She paused, concentrating. "Valentine."

"As in my valentine? It's a little early, but I appreciate the gift all the same."

Her lips curled into a half-smile. Then she grimaced. "My arms hurt."

"Where's the key?"

She looked at him blankly. Unease skittered through him, but he chased it away. Apparently, she'd lost the key to the cuffs. How had she managed to get them on? Hmm. Maybe someone had helped her get ready and Valentine had misplaced the key. Comforted by that thought, he bent around her and pinched each cuff. The metal snapped easily and the handcuffs fell off.

"Neat trick," she said. Then she leaned forward and sucked his cock.

The suddenness of her sexual act had his groin tightening in instant pleasure. He spread his legs to offer better access; she released his cock, bent lower and kissed his balls. She pulled each one into the warm cave of her mouth, flicking and sucking lightly.

His fingers wound into her hair, tugging as she flattened her tongue against his hard length and sought his crown. Her moan vibrated all the way to his balls. Oh, God. He pulled her hair again; another moan ricocheted down his cock. Then she went down on him again and again, until he was thrusting and moaning.

The orgasm rushed through him, hot and relentless.

She wrapped her hand around his cock and squeezed. His cock spasmed as hot come flooded her mouth. She drank him dry, licking him clean.

Even as she licked the last of his semen from her lips, his cock was readying for round three. He had a strong libido, part curse, part blessing, but his reaction to this woman bordered on ridiculous. He could fuck her all night. Could she handle it?

"That was fantastic," he murmured. He knelt on the floor and cradled her face.

She smiled. "You taste good."

"I bet you do, too." Scooting backward, she wiggled off her panties and gave him the first view of her glistening pink pussy. Her sweet cunt was devoid of hair, looking smooth and luscious.

He watched as she spread apart her juicy lips. Oh, yeah. His valentine was very luscious.

Michael scooted against the bed, pulling her forward until her legs draped his shoulders. He leaned in and kissed the outer lips of her pussy. She shuddered at the slight touches, and he felt a thrill of satisfaction. He knew the value of seeing to his partner's pleasure, but he wanted more than to just give her an orgasm.

He wanted to worship her.

He slid his tongue over her clit, flicking it until she moaned. Then he licked her sweet flesh until his tongue dipped into her wet heat. He drove it into her cunt, fucking her relentlessly. Her hands dove into his hair and she bucked, her pussy sucking at his tongue.

Michael withdrew from her and she cried out in protest. Smiling, he placed tiny kisses all around her clit, until, finally his lips closed around the tender nub and sucked hard.

Her scent was so strong he couldn't stop his fangs from descending. He pierced her labia and blood flowed into his mouth.

*Oh, God.*

Pleasure intensified. He flicked and sucked on her clit, no longer coaxing her bliss, but demanding it.



His aching cock begged for attention. He wrapped his hand around it and stroked off.

As her cunt pulsed with pre-orgasmic quivers, he freed his fangs from her soft flesh. Her blood trickled down her pussy to blend with her juices. He licked it all, in a frenzy now. The lovely taste of her blood mixed with her pure feminine taste.

He bit her again and she shattered, her hips lifting as she screamed. Her come rushed into his mouth along with the tang of her blood.

Hot pleasure exploded. His semen splashed against the bedding as he finished himself off.

Long moments passed before he could once again free himself from the delectable woman.

She lay on the bed, looking sated, but not, thank God, exhausted. Grabbing the end of the bedding, he wiped off his cock then crawled next to the woman. She rolled toward him, her hands dancing along his pectorals.

He nuzzled her neck, sampling her flesh with soft lips and warm tongue. His hands cupped her breasts, fingers teasing the nipples into taut peaks. She squirmed against him, her hands busy with his cock.

His mouth closed over one nipple. She moaned and gripped his penis, stroking it. One of his hands coasted down her thighs and parted her pussy. His finger rubbed the slippery folds, teasing her clit before dipping inside.

His mouth once again descended on her nipples, licking and sucking one and then the other, while his finger slid in and out of her pussy.

He rolled her over with him so that he was splayed on his back and she sat on his stomach. As she slid onto his hard, hot cock, she planted her hands on his chest and rode him hard. *This feels incredible.* He loved the feel of his cock plunging into her cunt, over and over. The coil of bliss tightened within him.

He played with her breasts, his fingers twisting her nipples.

Once again, his sweet lover tipped over the edge. Her vaginal convulsions caused his cock to slip out, but he rolled over and covered her. Sliding inside her slick pussy once more, he fucked her until another orgasm claimed him.

He groaned as he ejaculated, pleasure a bright burst of heat.

Thoroughly sated, he collapsed onto his beautiful valentine. She licked his collarbone. Laughing, he slid onto his side and cuddled with her. She looked at him dreamily.

“That was amazing,” she purred. “You’re a wonderful lover, Dominic.”

## Chapter 4

"What the hell is the emergency?" asked Eve crossly. "You didn't make any sense on the phone. We haven't even checked into our room yet." She gestured at the suitcases near their table.

After offering a mental suggestion that his mystery woman sleep, Michael had called Steven's cell phone. His friends had just walked into the hotel, so he asked to meet them in the back booth of the hotel bar.

"I went into my room and there she was, my surprise. Only she keeps calling me Dominic."

Eve frowned. "Your surprise? I gave you a box of blood truffles. Oh my God. You did your... uh, thing with some random chick?"

"She was in my room wearing a ball gag, cuffs, and really sexy underwear. What was I supposed to think?"

"Fresh off the preeeessses," trilled an unfamiliar voice. Michael took the flyer from the very drunk blonde. Her red T-shirt said "Madra's Minions." "And don't forget to vote for Dominic as Best Romance Cover Model." She placed a pink ballot in front of Eve. Michael used his hypnotic voice to suggest she go away and forget the three people at the table.

"We did not choose a lover for you," said Steven, as patient as ever. "You say she was in your room?"

"Yes." Michael frowned. "The key didn't work. So I used the ol' mojo to unlock the door. It never occurred to me it was the wrong room." His stomach clenched. "She was willing -- more than willing. Damn it! I'll just do a memory wipe and find some way to compensate her for..." *For the best sex I've had in forever.* He didn't want to wipe her memory. He wanted to get to know her. He wanted to... oh, man. He wanted to

date her. What the hell was wrong with him? No human woman could keep up with his appetites.

None but her.

Vaguely aware of Eve's continued sputtering and gesturing, he looked at the flyer given to him by the blonde.

## THE BLOG BITCH

*I'll do anything for publicity.*

Below the glaring title was a picture of his mystery woman. She was sitting on the bed in her black-lace bra and panties, the ball gag and cuffs making her look victimized instead of sexy.

"Who the fuck did this?" he demanded. He shoved the flyer toward Steven and Eve. "That's her. That's my valentine."

"Valentine Carter. She's one of my best friends. I booked all our rooms together." Eve's gaze widened. "How the hell did they get this photo? How did they make her dress like that?"

Michael's fury was tempered by Eve's confusion. "Her name really is Valentine? And you know her?"

His gaze fell on the ballot. *Dominic*. God, how could he have been so stupid? He pulled out the business card from his pants pocket and tossed it onto the table. "I met this asshole in the hallway. He must've just come from the room. He did that to her."

"Dominic is gay," said Steven as he picked up the card. "So, he didn't create the situation for a sexual thrill. And he is fast friends with Madra Milton."

Eve grimaced. "Val hasn't been kind to romance authors in general, but she was particularly vicious about Madra's work." Eve folded the flyer in half, though Michael suspected she wanted to tear it into pieces. So did he.

"We have the same publisher," mused Steven. "The industry rumor is that Madra's sales have gone south. Her last romance wasn't picked up, so she's shopping a mystery."

"Revenge?" asked Eve skeptically. "You can't tell me that Val's blog influenced thousands of readers."

"Probably not," agreed Steven. "But Val is a prime scapegoat for her rage. I suspect Dominic drugged her to get the results he wanted."

"That may explain her eagerness," said Michael, disappointed that Valentine hadn't been hot for *him*. She'd just been hot. But it wasn't her fault. It was Dominic's -- and Madra Milton's. "There's no way to get all the flyers or make a whole conference full of people forget that they've seen them."

Steven smiled. "Then we shall do something else."

\* \* \*

Michael insisted that he care for Valentine alone. Eve protested this idea vigorously until Steven shooed her into their room.

He awakened Valentine with the suggestion that she do as he said without question. He picked her up, carrying her to the bathroom and lowering her into a hot bath. He shampooed her hair then took a soaped washcloth and scrubbed her from head to toe. After her bath, he put her into a nightgown rummaged from her suitcase. Tucking her into bed, he cupped her face and stared deeply into her eyes.

He connected with her memories of the evening and erased every instant she'd spent with him. Though it killed him to do it, he left intact those moments spent with Dominic. The only thing he could do for her was give the suggestion that she would not feel humiliated, but instead would feel courageous. He also implanted the idea that she had gotten herself out of the cuffs and ball-gag and tucked herself in for the night.

"You will not remember me. You will sleep deeply and when you awake, you will feel well rested and alert," he said, kissing her gently. "Good night, Valentine."

As her eyes drifted shut, she whispered, "Good night, sweet prince."

\* \* \*

"Vampires are real," repeated Valentine. She rolled her eyes and speared another piece of scrambled egg. "You've read too many of Adora's books."

"Hey, you accused Steven of being a vampire yourself."

"I was joking."

Eve had invited Val for breakfast in the hotel restaurant. Val awoke feeling refreshed, but it took less than five seconds to remember how she'd fallen for the smarmy Dominic. As if getting dressed up like a whore for his sick photo op wasn't weird enough, her embarrassment had riled her to the point she thought everyone was staring and snickering at her.

"I'll prove it tonight," said Eve.

Yeah, sure, she would. "So Steven is asleep in his coffin?"

"He doesn't have a coffin, but we take extra precautions in hotel rooms. He'll sleep until dusk."

Valentine wasn't sure if Eve really believed she was engaged to a real vampire or if her friend was setting her up for a practical joke. Their friendship had been rocky, and Val could put the blame squarely on her own shoulders. She had been hurt by Eve's relationship with Steven, who was handsome, rich, and treated his fiancée like a queen. Val realized now that envy had driven her to say and do things that had hurt Eve. And yet her friend had stuck it out. "I'm sorry I've been such a bitch. I haven't treated you well, Eve. I'm grateful you're still my friend."

Eve smiled. "I'm here for you, babe. No matter how bitchy you get."

"Thanks," said Val, smiling. She attacked her toast. "I'm thinking about shutting down The Blog Bitch."

"Really? Why?"

"I might try to write a novel. I think it might be a better way to spend my time."

"Val, that's wonderful. You would be a terrific novelist."

She felt warmed by Eve's praise. It would be so nice to focus her energies on creating rather than destroying. Pushing away her breakfast plate, she snagged her

orange juice glass. "I'm still thinking about plots and characters. Do you think Steven would give me some advice, maybe share some insights about writing?"

"As long as you don't mind meeting him at night." Eve laughed. "I know you think I'm crazy, but he really is a vampire. And he's not the only one, either."

Valentine grinned. "I don't know what you're up to, woman, but I am not buying it."

"If I can prove that vampires exist, will you let me get you a date for Valentine's Day?"

"You know I don't celebrate V-Day." Val chugged her orange juice. "But what the hell. If you can prove vampires are as real as we are, I'll go out with your mystery man."

"Even if he's a vampire?"

Val waved away Eve's teasing. "Yeah, yeah."

"Great. His name is Michael Sanderson. He's really hot and he'll call you to make arrangements."

"Only if you can prove your fiancé is walking around without a pulse." Valentine hesitated. "Wait a minute. Michael Sanderson? That name sounds familiar."

"He's a publicist," said Eve. "You've probably heard his name around here or you've seen it online. He and Steven have been friends for a long time."

"A vampire publicist." She snickered. "Doesn't that make it difficult to work during the day? How the hell does he manage to schmooze?"

"He has minions."

They both cracked up at the joke.

"Ms. Carter?"

Val looked up to see a harried woman in a pink jogging suit. Her brown hair was pulled into a topknot a la *I Dream of Jeannie*. A Gucci purse dangled from one arm, which also held a clipboard. The nametag on her shirt declared her to be Tabitha Johnson, Conference Chair.

"Oh, hi." Val grabbed her book bag and tried to find the conference schedule. "Am I late for the first workshop?"

"No, no," Tabitha said. "We won't need you to participate in the panels. For that matter, we've replaced you as a presenter at tonight's award banquet."

Val was stunned. They were ousting her from the panels and the banquet activities *today*? She nearly choked on her outrage, but she managed to ask, "Why?"

Tabitha's eyes flashed with disgust. "We don't need you mucking up a respectable conference with your idea of a publicity stunt. Madra Milton complained to me *personally* along with at least a dozen others. We support the romance industry and its authors, even if you don't."

Vitriol edged every word the woman spoke. Floundering in shock, Val glanced at Eve. Her friend was staring daggers at the conference chair.

Tabitha returned the glare. "And *you* are?"

"Eve Moore," she responded. "I'm engaged to Steven Jones, who writes as Adora LaFortune."

Even as she tried to figure out what the problem was, Val enjoyed watching Tabitha blanch. Steven was no small potatoes in the romance world. His erotica novels were *New York Times* bestsellers.

"We're looking forward to his presentation this evening. And we are thrilled he's accepted keynote speaker for next year's conference." Tabitha cleared her throat, obviously uncomfortable. "I hope that this unfortunate event with Ms. Carter will not affect his opinion of our organization."

"You'll have to ask him," said Eve.

"*What* is going on?" asked Val. "I don't understand."

"Oh, please," snapped Tabitha. A sheet of paper was ripped from the clipboard and tossed onto the table. "You are welcome to stay for the conference and of course, we will cover your expenses, but you will not be invited back. Ever."

Tabitha turned up her nose and marched away, leaving Val the evidence of her so-called crime.



"Oh my God," said Val as she picked up the flyer. She started at the color photo of herself bound and gagged. "Who did this? Why?"

But she knew why. She'd pissed off the wrong people and they'd gotten revenge. She tore up the paper and left the pieces on her half-finished breakfast. Her stomach felt sour as embarrassment heated her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," said Eve. "It was a terrible thing to do."

"Was it?" asked Valentine. She tossed a twenty onto the table and picked up her book bag.

"Forget this bullshit," said Eve as she put another twenty on the table. "We need mall therapy." She rounded the table and grasped Val's shoulder. "I have a credit card that seriously needs to be abused."

"Okay," said Valentine. She wasn't going to run away. She would regroup and return. She would stay for the rest of the conference with her head high and shoulders straight.

Damn them all.

## Chapter 5

"I'm only here because I won't let these bitches deprive me of food," said Valentine as she poked at the rubbery chicken. The over-steamed vegetables looked about as appetizing as a pile of dog crap. She hadn't eaten a bite, but she was hoping for a decent dessert.

She sat at a front table near the stage with Eve and Steven, who had yet to show his fangs or his bloodlust. However, he hadn't eaten or drunk anything, either. No one else had bothered to sit with them, not even those who'd had reserved seats at the table.

As promised, Eve had whisked Val away for a day of shopping, which included an emergency pedicure and a movie featuring Keanu Reeves. But not even mall therapy had cured Valentine's anger. She was hurt, yes, but more so, she was really fucking furious. It didn't take long to figure out who would create, print, and distribute the horrible flyers.

She supposed, on some level, she deserved the punishment. If she made authors feel that humiliated and that exposed, well... okay, she was sorry. She was already shutting down the blog. Now people would think it was because Madra Milton and her goon Dominic had shamed her into it.

"Hi," said a male voice. The voice had been issued by a tall, handsome, blue-eyed, sandy-haired man. Had Brad Pitt authorized clones? To her surprise, he pulled out the chair next to hers and sat in it.

"Are you a model?" she asked. "Because if you are --"

"This is my publicist," interrupted Steven. "Michael Sanderson. Mike, this is Valentine Carter."

He grasped her hand and shook it. Wow. He was really gorgeous.

"Hi, Valentine."

"Hey," she said weakly.

"Michael agreed to do a few evening appointments," said Eve. "How did it go?"

Michael's grin was a little too wicked. "Perfectly." He turned to Val. "I understand we have a date."

"Only if Eve wins her bet," she said, refusing to be wooed by another pretty face. His brows rose questioningly, but she didn't clarify her statement. Hoo-boy. Had it gotten hotter in here?

The lights dimmed and Tabitha Johnson, crammed into a glittery blue dress, swept onto the stage. "Before we begin the festivities, ladies and gentlemen, our favorite author Madra Milton and our two-time Best Cover Model champion Dominic, would like a moment of your time."

She stepped away from the podium. Madra and Dominic walked onto the stage and took Tabitha's place. "We are responsible for The Blog Bitch flyer circulating. I am bitter, you see, about my flagging career. Even though Ms. Carter's reviews are biting and sometimes crass, they offer kernels of truth. I wanted to make her pay for pointing out to everyone the flaws of my writing."

Dominic leaned forward and spoke. "Madra and I have been friends for years. I am so sick of these romance conferences and prancing around rabid housewives that it pleased me to do something so mean."

Together, they said, "We are sorry, Ms. Carter. We apologize to the conference organizers and all the attendees for our hurtful joke."

They turned and left the stage. Utter silence befell the entire ballroom. Not even the murmur of voices or clanging of silverware interrupted the sudden, thick quiet.

Tabitha stepped up to the microphone. "Well... I... my goodness." She took a deep breath. "The Heart of Romance Readers conference would also like to extend our apologies to Ms. Carter. We... we deeply regret any problems this may have caused to our attendees and presenters." She smiled too brightly as she said, "Please, let's continue with our program."

Stunned didn't begin to describe how Valentine felt. She looked at Steven and Eve, who wore twin smug smiles. "How the hell did you manage that?"

"I glamourised them," said Michael. She turned to look at him. He leaned close. "You see, I'm a vampire." He smiled and revealed very sharp, real-looking fangs.

Val's heart leapt to her throat. She looked at Steven, whose smile also revealed a set of shiny, white fangs. Then she looked at Eve. "I think... I think I believe you."

"Come to the dark side," said Eve, chuckling. "We have cookies."

"Are they chocolate?"

"Duh."

Cautious now, she turned to face Michael once more. "I should be totally freaked out. I should. I mean, you're a --"

He kissed her. Wham! Lust did a dance all the way to her pussy, where it stayed, mixed up a batch of drinks, and issued invitations. Michael's tongue dipped into hers and she heard a hallelujah chorus. Her body felt engulfed in fireworks.

He let go of her lips only to brush his hot mouth across her neck. She quivered under the tender assault. "This is crazy," she whispered.

"I don't want you to be scared of me," he said, drawing away. "I want to explore what's between us. Let me take you out for Valentine's Day."

"But we can't do dinner." Her gaze went to his mouth. The fangs had receded.

"I'll watch you eat." His eyes glittered with desire. "I'll buy you two desserts. I'll buy you champagne. Anything."

"Well," she said, grinning, "if you're throwing champagne into the deal... how can I say no?"

## Chapter 6

### Valentine's Day...

"I had a great time," said Val as she unlocked her apartment door. She turned to look at Michael. He'd been a perfect gentleman all evening. He brought her roses, took her to an excellent restaurant where he ordered a very good champagne, and held her hand during the movie.

It had been the best Valentine's Day ever.

Michael leaned forward and brushed his lips across hers. The electricity that arced between them nearly stole her breath. The roses quaked in her arms. But he stepped back, his gaze lingering on her neck.

"Would you like to come inside for a drink?" she asked. She wondered what it would be like to feel his fangs sink into her flesh. Excitement zipped into the pit of her stomach.

"Another time," he said. "We should take things slow, Val."

"Why?" Her body hummed with disappointment. She wanted him like she'd wanted no other man. Something about him magnetized her. She wanted to be closer to him, but didn't dare step into his embrace. It was obvious he didn't want to push her into anything she might regret. Or maybe he was the regretful one. What if he hadn't had a good time and was trying to get away from her?

*Bullshit.* Val swung open the door. The interior was pitch-black. Biting her lip, she turned once again to her date. "Would you mind walking me inside?"

"Afraid of the dark?" he asked, clearly not believing she didn't have enough courage to enter her apartment.

"I'm not afraid of the dark," she said. "And I'm not afraid of you."

Lust leapt into his gaze and for a moment, she thought he might really kiss her. Instead, he walked past her into the apartment. She followed, shutting the door behind her.

The snick of a lamp switch echoed and a pool of light encroached on the darkness. Michael had chosen to turn on the small lamp she kept on a side table. Most nights, she sat on the couch and read a book underneath its soft illumination.

"I don't see any boogey men," said Michael.

"You haven't checked the bedroom."

"Val..."

"Are you afraid?" she asked, smiling. "You're a vampire. I'm a human. What could I possibly do to you?"

"More than you think," he responded. He headed into the hallway.

Val dumped the roses and her hastily removed coat onto the couch then hurried to follow him.

Michael had already entered her bedroom and flicked on the light.

"Looks like you'll be safe." He turned to face her. "Even from me."

She shut the door behind her. "How about a little bet?" she asked. "You watch me undress and if you don't want me by the time I'm done, I'll let you leave."

"I want you right now," he said. "But I'm trying to resist temptation."

"Why?"

He looked away. "I didn't want to tell you yet. I wanted you to get to know me." He put his hands out in a pleading gesture. "I would never take advantage of you, Valentine. I like you very much."

"I like you, too, Michael." She tried to decipher his expression. "Is there something you need to tell me?"

"There's something you need to remember." He looked stricken. "I'm a rarity in the vampire world. I've had to hire call girls to be my... er, meals because I cannot take blood without having sexual intercourse. I can't have relationships because my condition requires stamina most humans don't have."

She swallowed the knot clogging her throat as tears pricked her eyes. "You're saying we can't be together."

"Come here." He opened his arms and she hurried into his embrace. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. "I want you, Valentine, and I hope that after you know the truth, you'll want me, too."

She looked up at his tormented gaze. Suddenly mesmerized by the blue of his eyes, she felt herself tumbling backward in time. *The hotel room. Dominic humiliating her. Michael appearing and asking her to consent to sex. Their coupling flashed by like a movie fast-forwarded. Intense. Hot. Later, he bathed her, put her to bed... made her forget.*

"Why?" she asked as she stumbled out of his arms. She glared at him. "Why would you do that?"

He looked at her pleadingly. "I thought you were a present."

"You thought I was a prostitute," she corrected. "I'm not talking about the sex, you dolt! Why would you make me forget about what we shared?"

He stared at her, his expression one of surprise. "Dominic's drug made you willing. You were confused. I should've known that you were under duress, but I didn't. I took advantage of you."

"You took what I offered," she said simply. "Dominic is the one who really took advantage of me. And I let him. I was feeling down in the dumps about myself and that stupid conference."

Val wanted to kick her own ass. Dominic would've never gotten away with his shenanigans if she hadn't let low self-esteem and pretty-boy bedazzlement affect her judgment. Now that her memory was restored, she wanted Michael even more. If he had only wanted sex from her, he wouldn't have bothered dating her after getting it. He sure as hell wouldn't be so worried about her feelings or insisting on taking things slow. He cared about her. And he obviously wanted to be more to her than just a one-night stand.

"I don't regret what happened between us," she said. He looked boyish and uncertain, and her heart melted.

"I'm glad," said Michael. He reached out and grasped her hands. "I told you that I haven't had relationships because my needs are too strong for most human females."

"And vampire females?"

He grimaced. "There are no vampire women I wish to sleep with."

"If you have to have sex in order to feed," she said, "then have you been... *you know*, with call girls since we... *you know*?"

"No," he said. "One of the perks of my condition is that I can go longer than most vampires without feeding. Ever since I've had you, Valentine, I can't bear the thought of being with anyone else."

"Then be with me." She let go of his hands and backed away. Her little black dress had spaghetti straps; she pushed them off her shoulders and wiggled out of the dress.

Michael's gaze went molten. "You were wearing that under your dress all night?"

"You mean vampires don't have X-ray vision?" She laughed as she kicked away the dress.

The corset was black and fastened in the front with a row of eyelets and hooks. Two black straps connected it to her black fishnet stockings. To complete the ensemble, she wore a pair of black lace panties. She hadn't taken off her high heels, either.

"Interesting bows," said Michael, his voice hoarse.

Two incongruous pink ribbons laced through the top of her stockings, each puckered into bows. The color looked bold against the black of her lingerie -- a touch of whimsy among items meant to seduce.

Michael's gaze feasted on her and she knew he wanted to devour her. Literally. She wanted to feel the magic between them, just as she had that first night. But this time, they would both be clear-headed, willing, and completely able.

"Shall I undress for you?" Her hands hovered at the edge of her corset.



"No." Michael shed his coat and jacket, dropping them carelessly. He looked so handsome in the Armani suit with its crisp blue shirt. He hadn't bothered with a tie; instead he'd left the first two buttons open.

He walked to her and stopped. "Are you sure, Valentine? Because if I start, baby, I can't stop."

"Sounds like a promise."

Lust permeated her as his fingers trailed down the corset to slide along the connective ribbons. Then he traced the edge of her stockings to the backs of her thighs. His palms flattened against her skin and rose upward, cupping her buttocks.

Every touch made her skin tingle. She wanted to wrap herself around him and rip off his clothes, but she didn't. No, she would follow his lead. She would show him that she could take everything he could give -- and more.

He released her ass and knelt before her. He unsnapped her stockings from the corset. Then he untied each pink bow and pulled out the ribbons. He stood up and draped one ribbon around Val's neck. The other, he tucked into his pants pocket.

Starting from the bottom of the corset, he unhooked each eyelet. It was torture to wait for every snick of release. Val wanted to feel his hands on her badly, but it was as if he was keeping his fingers from her skin deliberately. By the time he'd worked his way to the last catch, she panted and moaned as her heart pounded fiercely.

He removed the corset, tossing it to the floor. Her breasts, freed from the constraint, ached to be caressed and kissed. Michael met those needs. Leaning down, he drew one nipple into his mouth and sucked it into hardness. Electric thrills raced to her cunt. Her panties were already soaked and she wanted to pull them off, but she remained stationary. Much of her pleasure was derived from doing only what Michael wanted her to do.

When her nipple was stiff and aching, Michael took one end of the long ribbon dangling from her neck and drew it around the taut peak. "Lift your breast," he said in a low voice.

She did as he asked.

He twisted the nipple hard and she sucked in a breath as pain shot through her. He looped the end around her nipple and tied it tightly. Her nipple pulsed and reddened, but the hurtful tingles offered her more pleasure than pain. She sucked in deep breaths, her body quivering with need.

Michael bent to her other breast and tormented her nipple with lips and tongue. With one breast caught in a sensual trap, she could barely tolerate the torment of the other one. She resisted the urge to wiggle off her undies. Damn, she wanted her panties off and his cock inside her. The very idea of getting horizontal with him made her even hotter.

With the ribbon still around her neck, Michael pulled the loose end of the ribbon toward her nipple. Without him asking, she lifted up her breast. Once again, he twisted the already stiff peak and pleasure-pain zipped straight to her weeping pussy.

When he finished tying the second nipple, both her breasts arched slightly upward, the nipples plump from the ties. The ribbon chafed her neck only a little; a small discomfort worth the bliss felt by her well-loved breasts.

Michael's finger dipped into her panties and stroked her very wet pussy. He looked at her, his eyes shining like sapphires. "Do you want me to fuck you?"

"Hell, yeah!"

He chuckled as he walked behind her. He took both of her hands, drawing them behind her back and crossing them at the wrists. Then Val felt the second ribbon winding over and through until her arms were bound. Michael lifted her hair and kissed the back of her neck, right below the ribbon that held her breasts hostage.

He continued downward; kisses dotted her spine as his fingers stroked her hips then hooked into her panties. She felt him kneel behind her as he drew down the underwear to her ankles. Lifting one foot, he tugged them off. Next, he rolled down her stockings and plucked off her heels.

Now, Val was naked, except for the pink ribbons adorning her nipples and wrists.

"Go to the bed and lay down face-first," he ordered in a soft voice. "Plant your feet on the floor and lift up that sweet ass."

Excited, Val did as he asked. Her pussy was so wet, her juices dripped down her thighs. She heard the whisper of his zipper then felt him get behind her.

Her bound hands tingled, but she didn't care. Her nipples received an extra dose of torture as they rubbed against her bedspread. Oh, God. She wanted to beg him to hurry, but she bit her lip to keep from doing so.

Finally, he fitted his cock against her entrance. Grasping her hips, he slid all the way into her cunt. She shuddered at the feel of his full penetration. But he didn't move.

Frustration roared through her. A girl could take only so much! Then his hand snaked to her pussy and rubbed her swollen clit. As he did so, he started pumping his cock hard and fast into her.

Michael fucked her over and over, his finger rubbing her clit, bringing her closer and closer to orgasm.

Then she felt a tug on the ribbon tied to her nipples. As it pulled taut, her nipples, which already felt on fire, went into sensation overload. Her orgasm exploded - - endless waves of heat and light and bliss.

"Valentine!" Michael drove deep and shuddered as his seed shot into her still pulsating cunt.

Before she could even take a breath, he pulled out. He untied the ribbon binding her wrists then rolled her onto her back.

He removed all his clothing in a blur. Then he covered her, his mouth taking hers in a desperate kiss. Her nipples rubbed on his lightly furred chest and she felt her body rev up for round two.

Moaning, she wound her legs around his waist as his hardening cock found her entrance again.

"I want you so much," he murmured. "I don't think I'll ever stop wanting you."

"Good," she managed as he plunged into her.

His mouth trailed her collarbone then his tongue flicked at the sweat beading her breasts. God, her nipples ached fiercely. As his lips clamped one straining peak, she cried out. *It feels so good.*

She held on for dear life as his cock thrust faster and harder. He suckled her tortured nipple and then she felt a double sting in the tender flesh of her breast.

Pleasure imploded. The orgasm rocked her to the core. As Michael sucked her nipple and drank her blood, she felt rapturous. Complete. *I belong to a vampire.* The very thought made her giddy.

Then he stilled, thrusting deeply. She squeezed his penis with her vaginal muscles as he came. He groaned against her flesh.

Spent, they lay against each other. She needed more breath, even if he didn't. Finally, he soothed her ravaged nipple with his tongue then released her breast. She watched his fangs recede and was surprised to feel a spurt of disappointment. To her surprise, she liked to be bitten.

Michael's gaze was filled with passion as he said, "Happy Valentine's Day."

"The best one *ever*," she said, grinning. She knew they were not done making love, not by a long shot. And that suited her just fine.

*I'm dating a vampire.* Hmm. That was a great first line to a novel...

## Epilogue

One year later...

"I finished it," said Val. She put the printed manuscript on the kitchen table and sighed happily.

Michael looked up from his laptop and grinned. "Congratulations!" He stood up and wrapped her into his embrace. "I knew you could do it."

"Steven said it's good. He got me an invite to his agent." Her heart thudded at the very idea of shipping off her baby.

"*My Date, The Vampire* will be a hit," he promised. "Do you know what today is?"

"Don't remind me," she grumped. But she couldn't pretend that V-day was heinous. Not anymore. "I have to zipper myself into that maid-of-honor dress in less than an hour."

"It's romantic," he said. "I'm glad Steven and Eve are getting married."

"Me, too." She looked at him, happier than she'd ever been. Michael was an insatiable lover and she met his every sensual demand. She wasn't hungry so much for the sex, even though it was beyond spectacular, but rather she was hungry for Michael. She loved him. He made her feel... complete. *Geez, that sounds so corny.* But it was true all the same.

"I have something for you," he said.

He reached into the pocket of the jacket hanging on the chair. Then, to her shock, he got onto one knee and offered up a black velvet box. When he popped it open, she saw a princess-cut diamond set on a platinum band. "Valentine, will you marry me?"

"Yes!"

Michael stood up and plucked the ring from the box, sliding it onto her left ring finger. "I love you, my darling."

"I love you, too."

*I'm marrying a vampire.* Hmm. That was a great first line for a sequel... *My Husband, The Vampire.*

## **Read Eve and Steven's story in *Christmas For Eve...***

Much to the envy of her friends, Eve Moore is dating erotica author Adora LaFortune -- who is really Steven Jones, horror novelist. Though she fell in love with the characters from *Swelter*, Adora's hottest paranormal historical, Eve's falling more in love with the author who created them.

Now it's Christmas Eve, and she's ready to give Steven her heart along with her presents. But then she finds out that *Swelter* isn't exactly fiction. And the author isn't exactly mortal.

## **Michele Bardsley**

Multi-published in several genres, Michele Bardsley is a bestselling author in electronic and print. Michele put pen to paper in junior high in the form of angst-filled poetry, angst-filled journals, and angst-filled short stories. She wanted to be a journalist, but after getting an associate degree in liberal arts -- otherwise known as the degree of the perpetual student -- she ended up majoring in marriage and motherhood whereupon she failed housework, plant care, and staying calm in the face of big owies.

Michele loves to hear from her fans! Visit her website at [MicheleBardsley.com](http://MicheleBardsley.com) or email her at [MicheleBardsley@yahoo.com](mailto:MicheleBardsley@yahoo.com)