

A person wearing a dark suit and a white shirt is holding a large, glossy red heart with both hands. The heart is the central focus of the image.

Charmed

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One

Valentine's Day had to be the worst holiday ever. It was the one day of the year when Nora Smith's one failing glared like a thousand watt spotlight. Yes, she was successful, healthy and basically happy. But, she was also very much alone.

Nora stared at the red foil hearts hanging from the ceiling. She hated all the cutesy, gilded trappings that went with this time of year. But, the customers of *Simple Charms* expected her to celebrate love. After all, she was the proprietor of a store that sold love potions and charmed amulets.

She read Tarot and tealeaves in the back room—promising her customers good fortune and romance. In rare moments, she used her empathic gift to get to the root of problems. Most of the time, those problems centered around love or the lack of it. By all appearances, she should be the most romantic woman in Savannah.

Appearances could be very deceiving.

With a sigh, she shuffled her deck of cards one more time. It was often pointless to try and read one's own future, but Nora was so tired of making bad choices. She was tired of being alone year in and year out.

"Will I find love?" she whispered to the cards.

Some more shuffling and she carefully set them down on the counter before her.

"Well, here goes nothing."

With a flick of the wrist, she overturned the top card and set it to the right. *The Lovers* gleamed in all their naked glory beneath the fluorescent lights. Nora raised a brow. *No way*. She hadn't been out on a date in over six months, a roll in the hay was far out of line. Her shoulders drooped.

Damn. Maybe she needed to find herself another psychic—someone who could give her some helpful guidance. Or maybe she just needed to sign up at some dating service.

"Where have you been?"

Nora spun around, cards forgotten as she put her fists up, ready to do battle.

"Damn, Tom," she said as her body relaxed. "Where the hell do you get off sneaking up on me like that?"

His green eyes narrowed and she watched his jaw clench and relax. The lights reflected off the strands of gray in his short dark hair. It looked soft and inviting—perfect for roaming fingers. Damn, the man got sexier every year.

"I wasn't sneaking," he growled, the timbre of his voice sending little quakes of awareness down her spine. "The bell rang when I opened the door, didn't you hear it?"

Her face warmed. "No, I didn't."

"You were supposed to close at five and go to Clancy's for a drink. Like always. It's almost six-thirty, Nora. You didn't answer your cell. I thought something happened."

She opened her mouth to tell him she wasn't that predictable...only he had a point. An irritating one, at that.

"I decided to do something different tonight," she lied. In reality, she'd spent the last hour staring at her decorations and feeling sorry for herself. Valentine's Day really sucked when you were over forty, widowed and alone.

"Really?" he prodded. "What? Are you holding a séance in the backroom?"

Crap. She was a truly terrible liar. *Think...think fast...*

"No, I'm going to take a nice hot shower, make some kettle corn, and watch a schmaltzy chick-flick. Alone."

He raised a brow. Nora couldn't help but notice the way his full mouth curved up at one corner. It was a wonderful, capable mouth.

"Schmaltzy?" Tom repeated.

"Yes...romantic, funny, predictable and with lots of unrealistic dialogue. You know—schmaltzy."

"Uh-huh." He glanced around at the sparkling hearts twirling on their transparent threads. "Now why don't I believe you're really that cynical?"

"This is for the customers," she insisted with a wave at the décor mocking her overhead.

She really hated defending herself to Tom. He was her lawyer and her old high school flame. He was the only man she'd ever opened up to both heart and soul. The only one she still associated with who had once seen her partially naked. Lying to him felt like lying to a priest.

A very tall, dark and sexy priest who roused less than saintly thoughts...
Nora shook her head and swallowed.

"I like chick-flicks," she admitted. "But they are very unrealistic."

"True..." His gaze moved around the room as he jangled a set of keys in the pocket of his wool coat. Nora frowned. She could feel the unease pouring off of him like heat from a stove. What on earth was going on with him tonight?

"Were you waiting for me?" she asked.

"Yes, I was."

"Oh." Her stomach did a little flip.

Interesting.

They worked on the same block and normally quit at the same time every evening. It wasn't big deal when they ran into each other at the local bar. It had actually become a part of her routine—close up shop, walk to Clancy's, meet Tom and have a beer.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've been a little pre-occupied. I guess I lost track of time."

"I waited because I need some advice."

"Advice?"

"Yes...about a woman."

Her stomach clenched. "Oh."

Double damn. That was the last thing she expected. True, he wasn't gay—far from it if memory served her right—but thinking of him with another woman? For some reason the entire notion left her feeling downright ill. Yes, he had been married. Yes, since his divorce he dated from time to time. But tonight, the love life of Thomas Kincaid, hot attorney at law, was the last thing she wanted to ponder.

"Well, I doubt I'd be much help." She turned away and walked around the counter to begin rearranging a small box of worry stones she kept by the register.

"Why not?"

"I'm not exactly a normal female," she said, inexplicable irritation growing hotter with every second. "Besides I'm a bit out of touch with the twenty-something crowd."

She heard the rustle of cloth and a light footstep as he moved closer. "What makes you think I want a younger woman?"

It took every ounce of control she possessed not to jump at the sound of his voice so near her back. Nora swallowed and tried to ignore the heat emanating from his body.

"Don't all men?" she brazened.

He laid a hand on her shoulder and she turned. His green eyes seemed to sear her to the very core. What were they talking about?

"I'm not all men."

Nora struggled to breathe normally. This was crazy. Thomas didn't make her feel this way—all hot and shaky inside. She'd known him for over twenty years. He was a friend, a confidante.

A lover...

Her gaze slipped to his firm mouth and she felt her skin heat. He was a very sexy friend. Why hadn't she noticed that before? Correction, she had noticed at sixteen...a lifetime ago.

"Will you help me?"

She blinked. "Huh?"

"Advice...remember?"

It was as if he'd dashed her with ice water. He wanted help with another woman? Her pride took a direct hit. But what the hell? At least she wouldn't have to be alone on another Valentine's Day.

"Yeah, sure. Why not? I've got nothing else to do." She took a step back. "Just let me lock up and I'm all yours."

"I certainly hope so," he murmured.

Nora glanced back over her shoulder. Tom, head bent over a glass display case, intently studied a row of Egyptian amulets. She frowned. Great, now she was hearing things. Weren't her inconsistent premonitions and empathic emotion-fests bad enough? Add hallucinations to the mix, and she'd be just about set for the funny farm.

"Do you mind if we talk upstairs?" she asked, suddenly in desperate need to be rid of the circling hearts and cloying scent of lavender and sandalwood. "I'm not really in the mood for Clancy's tonight."

She thought she heard him swallow. Her gaze narrowed. What the hell was wrong with him? She could feel the tension pouring off of him in waves. If anyone should be uncomfortable, it was her.

"Lead the way," he said with an easy smile.

Two

"Okay, have a seat," she said, motioning towards the sofa. She might sound casual, but on the inside, it felt like two cats fighting in her stomach.

Tom shrugged off his coat and laid it across the back of the recliner. A familiar gesture, but for some reason she couldn't take her eyes off of him. How had he gotten so fit and muscular? In high school, he had been on the wrestling team with the long, lean muscles to prove it. He had bulked up since then...in all the right places.

Smart, gorgeous and aged to perfection...why the hell did I ever break up with him? She turned and fled to the kitchen, putting as much distance between them as possible.

"Is beer okay?" she called.

"Sounds good."

A minute later, she sat on the other end of the wide blue sofa, beer in hand.

"So, tell me about your lady friend," she encouraged, all the while her traitorous heart aching as if it had a knife in it. "It's Valentine's Day. Why aren't you with her instead of here?"

"Didn't have the nerve to ask her out," he admitted. He stared at the drink in his hands for a moment and smiled. "She's beautiful, successful, bossy, and a real pain in the ass."

Nora laughed. "Okay, she sounds perfect for you. What's the problem?"

His lips thinned as he frowned. "She doesn't seem to realize I'm a man."

"Is she blind?"

He looked up, brows raised. She felt her cheeks warm. *Damn*. She could not give herself away—not now. Not when the man was interested in someone else. She wasn't even sure what she felt for him.

"I mean, seriously, Tom. You are very obviously a man..." her gaze moved over him and she swallowed, "All man...Maybe she bats for the home team?"

He shook his head. "No, definitely not."

Nora shrugged. Her head began to throb from all the turmoil—his emotions, her emotions, everything combined and swirled around her until she thought her brain might explode. She pressed a finger to her temple and grimaced.

"Have you told her how you feel?"

"No, not in so many words."

She sighed. "Oh, for pity's sake—tell the girl!"

"Tell her? Just like that?"

"Um, yeah."

"What if she doesn't feel the same?"

"Then you hurt like hell for a while and move on."

"I don't want to lose her friendship."

The pain in his eyes made her chest tighten. Wow. He was really serious about this woman. Why had he never said anything before? How could she have missed the signs? Did she know her?

"How long have you been in love with this mystery woman?"

"A long, long time."

The tears sprang back, and she looked down at the amber bottle clutched in one hand. No way could she let him see her cry. Especially not when it didn't make any sense. She didn't care about Tom that way, and even if she did it was too little too late. She was the one who broke off their romance. They were friends now, nothing more. It must be a hormonal imbalance turning her into a teary, sentimental slob. That and a stupid holiday invented by chocolatiers and greeting card companies.

"Well, you'll never find out if you don't tell her," she encouraged. If only one of them could be happy, it might as well be Tom. He deserved it. "Women don't read minds."

He nodded, chugged down the last of his beer and set the bottle on the coffee table.

"You're right, Nora," he said with a determined gleam in his eyes. "I've waited too long. I've wasted too much time as it is. I'm going to tell her how I feel and damn the consequences. I'm sick of being so close and not being able to touch the woman I love."

Her chest tightened, part of her crying out to stop him...to tell him how *she* felt. "Good," she muttered. "That's great. I'm sure everything will work out fine."

She stood, hoping beyond hope that he would get up and leave so she could have a good long cry in private. Tom rose and looked down into her eyes. The world seemed to fade around them as something in his gaze set the butterflies dancing in her belly.

"Before I do, I just have one question," he said softly. "Why did you stop speaking to me after your seventeenth birthday?"

"Wh-what?"

He stepped closer. Her skin tingled. "Do you remember our date that night?"

She nodded silently. How on earth could she forget? It had been magical...and scary as hell.

"I thought..." he looked away for a moment, "I thought everything was good between us. Then you wouldn't talk to me, wouldn't see me. The next thing I knew, you said it was over."

"Tom—"

"I just want to know why?"

Her eyes filled with shameful tears. "I was scared."

"I know—but why, honey?" He took her hands in his. "What were you afraid of?"

"I let you touch me in ways no one ever had. I wasn't ready for sex, but I knew it was the next step...it had to be. You wouldn't have been happy with anything else after that."

"You should have told me," he reprimanded. "You should have talked to me instead of cutting me off without a word. I was blindsided, Nora. You may as well have kicked me in the teeth. But every time I tried to talk about it you just shut me out. I finally stopped trying."

Her vision blurred. "I'm so sorry. I really screwed up, Tom. I just felt so much..." she shook her head, "I didn't know how to handle it."

"Well, I think you know how to handle it now."

Then he pulled her in his arms and claimed her mouth with an unexpected kiss. Nora's confusion instantly melted at the touch of his large warm hands on her skin. His lips were soft then urgent, demanding as he ran

his tongue over her lips. She opened to him, the world fading as she sank into the carnal pleasures he offered. His hands were firm and gentle as they moved over her back, pulling her closer until their bodies melded into one from chest to hip. Fire leaped through her veins, burning every ounce of self-control to ash.

She pulled away from the kiss and gasped for breath. Tom stared at her across the small space, his chest rising and falling as if he'd just run a mile. At least she wasn't the only one carried away by it all. She'd felt his desire when he pulled her close—felt it all too easily.

"What are you doing?" she blurted in confusion. "I thought you were in love with someone."

"I am, Nora..." he closed the distance between them. "I was talking about you."

"You...? I don't understand."

"I never quite forgot you, honey. I've tried to be a good friend—to be the man I thought you needed in your life after your husband died. But I'm tired of being friends. I want more...I have for a very long time."

"And you couldn't just tell me that?" She spun and paced to the other side of the room, fighting for distance and sanity. "Y-you just grab me and kiss me like...I don't know what. This is crazy. You've never even hinted—"

"Oh, I've hinted," Tom interjected. "I've done everything I could think of to let you know how I feel. I've done everything humanly possible to get you interested in me again except haul you off to my bed like a caveman."

"Yeah, except you know, ask me out." She shook her head in disbelief. "What do you have against a little truth?"

"Like the truth you gave me twenty years ago?" He stormed across the room, the anger in his eyes making her flinch.

"I was a kid," she defended. "A stupid, frightened kid. I didn't know how to handle a relationship like ours."

"I know, but we're not kids anymore, Nora. We're both single and over forty...and I can't stop caring about you. I can't sit by and wait for you to notice me—time passes much too quickly."

"I know...I understand...but this is just too fast."

"Okay," he replied. "We can slow down..." He stepped closer. "A little."

Panic filled her and she stepped back out of reach. "I, uh, don't think this is a good idea."

"I think it's a great idea. I think it's well past time we take this step." He ran a finger along her jaw, his gaze filled with tenderness. "I love you, Nora Jean Smith. I have for a very long time and I don't plan to stop."

The determined look in his eyes made her throat tighten. She knew he wouldn't force himself on her, but did she have the strength to resist? With one look from him her body nearly went up in flames. She admitted it now—she had felt this way for days. Weeks. Maybe longer.

But the past and her guilt had always stood between them. Until now.

"I don't want to sleep alone tonight," he whispered.

Her heart leaped into her throat. "I haven't changed my sheets in days."

He smiled. "We'll just get them messy, anyhow."

Her eyes widened. "Tom!"

"It's the truth, honey. We're adults. We've both been married. We both know what sex is like."

She held up a hand to silence him. "You could at least pretend a little romance."

It was his turn to blush. "I'm sorry. But I've been waiting for this moment forever. I'm too hot and horny to let you use any lame excuse to turn me away."

"I haven't shaved my legs in almost a week."

That admission brought him up short and stopped his forward momentum. His brows raised and for a second she almost relaxed. Then he shrugged those broad, powerful shoulders and stepped forward again.

"It doesn't bother me. I like the European style."

I can't do this...it's been so long....

"Oh, it will bother you if we go through with this, believe me—"

Tom sighed heavily and lifted his arms out at his sides in supplication. "Nora, sweetheart, why don't you tell me what's really bothering you?" His mouth twisted. "Have I read this wrong? Maybe you don't want me? Maybe you want a younger man who can—"

"No!" she cried. She couldn't let him think her hesitation was because of him "I-I do...want you." She swallowed. "I just haven't..."

He tilted his head slightly and waited. The man had the patience of a saint. Maybe it was time she laid her cards on the table and let him make the final choice.

"I haven't been with a man in a very long time," she finally admitted. "You'll be disappointed, Tom. I...I was never very good in bed."

Shame made her skin burn and her heart ache. If she had learned anything from her brief marriage, it was that she didn't have what it took to please a man in bed. She was too inhibited, too insecure. Then she felt Tom's warm, strong hands on her shoulders as he pulled her toward him to gaze point-blank into her eyes.

"Honey, there's nothing wrong with you." He bent his head and placed a soft, gentle kiss on her lips.

Nora felt that touch to the very center of her being. And then the fire ignited, sucking every ounce of oxygen from her lungs. Her head spun with possibilities...with promise as she ran her hands up over his chest.

"Okay," she whispered. "If you really mean it...I think I'd like to take you up on that proposition."

He grinned and pressed his forehead to hers. "My charming psychic...does this mean you're my Valentine?"

"Absolutely," she said with a smile. "And I see a long, happy road ahead."

Bio and links:

Meg Allison is a wife, mother of five amazing children, and a writer of romantic fiction. Life is never dull and it's often noisy. Meg reads and writes to escape the real-life drama.

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