

A M Y O L I V E I R A



DATING
blind

A VALENTINE'S NOVELLA

She's ready for love
Reality TV kind of love

EPILOGUE

I add an acceptable amount of white wine into the pan with the risotto rice. This should be enough, I tell myself. But no one is watching, so I add just a splash more. Let's be honest, it feels like a celebration kind of day. Even though we had so many of them through the years, I still make a big deal each time.

I look up to the scene in front of me and I can't stop myself biting my lip and stifling a laugh. It's an everyday occurrence in our household, *but still super cute*.

Milana is finishing few bits of a project she has to finish by tomorrow. Her books scattered on the dining table, her little back curved and glasses almost an inch from the ecosystem diorama she's building. I told her already to keep proper posture, but Nadia teases me, saying it's just a reflex thought because I'm a McKenna. Which is ridiculous, we have to keep a proper posture. Of course I've learnt how to hold mine on etiquette classes, but our daughter doesn't need to know that.

In front of the TV in our big fluffy white couch that I said wasn't a good idea to buy - when you have kids destroying the house- is Nadia, her nose stuck on a medical paper. Different from Milana, she knows how to hold herself up. Nose upright, black-rimmed glasses on the top of her cute little nose. To her side is our little toddler Dev watching the most obnoxious cartoon playing a song about recycling. He's dancing a little while Nadia holds his bottle up as Dev drinks from it. His eyes are glued to the TV and hers to the paper. That happens every night. Nadia refuses

to watch the cartoon with him, but also refuses not giving him his goodnight bottle.

They are cute. All of them. Milana with the bad posture and the insane diorama, Dev with his annoying cartoon and my wife who's frowning to the paper like it did her wrong.

"Lana," I call adding mushrooms to our risotto, "you need to get ready to bed, honey."

She doesn't reply. She doesn't even acknowledge me.

"Laaanaaa" I sing to her, mixing my pan happier than I'm usually am on a Sunday night.

"Milana, mam is calling." Nadia says without taking her eyes off the paper.

This awakes our daughter, of course. She straightens up her spine, shoves her glasses on top of her nose and smiles to me like the cute ten-year-old she is. I love her to bits but she can't be disorganized and a perfectionist at the same time. Something's got to give.

"Bed, baby."

She frowns and looks over at the couch. "Dev still up. He goes before me."

That's true, she's right. Milana is ten and Dev has only turned two recently, so by the laws of this family he goes first and she usually has extra time on the TV. I wave the rule off today though, "Dev messed with my schedule with a nap at five this afternoon. But he's having his bottle now. He's going down, son!" And I add a little awkward hand down sign. Being a mother made me so lame, but I can't stop it.

"Don't you think it's wrong I go at the same time as the toddler?" Her majesty Milana, The Smart Ass asks me.

I shrug, grabbing more wine from the fridge and serving myself, "Not my problem." But it has no bite to it. Frankly, she's right. It's her right as the older sister to go to sleep after the toddler, and usually I would abide by that rule. But we had a busy weekend, and she got fast food today. Actually, we were happy out and about hours before she cared to drop the bomb that she had not just a project due tomorrow, but it was a diorama. So let's just say the rules are suspended for today.

"Bring a book and you can read up in your bedroom for half an hour." My unhelpful wife weighs in.

I look up to catch Lana twisting her nose, considering it. In the meantime, Dev is done with his bottle and with no shame he slaps the bottle off of Nadia's hand, making her look from the paper for the first time. She checks if he had enough. Nodding puts the bottle on the coffee table.

Milana still thinking but we all know her time is up. Nadia is already up. Taking Dev in her arms, she nods towards the door.

"Let's go, say goodnight to mam"

Nadia's tone isn't harsh, she just has a way with the children to say what is supposed to be done and let them know there's no negotiation. Me? Sometimes I badly rap to take my point across. I like to think we are a great parenting team.

I see in Milana's expression, she's deflated for missing her chance to say something. I don't think it would work, anyway. Usually I'm the pushover, but I'm set on making them go to bed and have a little time with my wife tonight. Milana marches over and hugs my mid-section as I step away from the cooker. I kiss her beautiful mane of hair and inhale her delicious flowery scent.

"Do you even know how much I love you?" I ask her the same thing I ask every night.

"Not as much as I love you." Her answer is automatic. We do it every day, but when she looks up to me with a little smile, I know she loves this little ritual as well. As lame as her mammy makes it.

After her, Nadia comes over with Dev in her arms. I kiss his temple; he sucks on his pacifier, head resting on Nadia's shoulder. "Goodnight, gorgeous."

Nadia moves upstairs. "I will be back in a second..."

I nod and keep cooking, adding broth and gently stirring. I'm excited for today, even though I know Nadia doesn't care anymore. It's the premier of another season of *Dating Blind* and it's tradition to watch together, at least it is to me.

It has been many and many seasons since we starred on it; I know Nadia is over it, but I can't help myself. Each year when the theme song starts and they present the new competitors, I get a little flutter on my belly. Fifteen years ago I was one of them. I was scared little Gianna and even though life was terrifying to me, I still came on TV to look for love.

I went on TV and fell in love with my boss.

It was the coolest thing I've ever done - beautiful children excluded.

I see Nadia's point. The show changed, the people we knew backstage don't work for it anymore, the set is different and even the structure doesn't resemble the one of fifteen years ago. But still ours. The first time I saw those little red words on the screen not knowing who that person was but the fact whoever they were, made my heart feel whole again.

Nadia became my everything after *Dating Blind*.

She's my rock, my courage. She made me fearless, and every leap I took since it's because of her. I know she would say I've done everything on my own, but the thing is; When you fall in love with your boss on TV, there's very little else that would scare you.

After filming *Dating Blind*, we both came back to work. I slept over Nadia's and she drove us to the hospital, looking over to me thirty thousand times to check if I was still breathing. We never entertained not telling people, but I was still nervous. At the time I was still a volunteer, I could simply choose a different place to be, but I was always so attached to Oldmill Memorial I couldn't entertain the thought.

"Breathe, Gigi." She whispered in my ear while holding my hand to her chest as we crossed the parking lot.

Goosebumps all over my skin when I felt her warm breath on me, and I shook myself, "If you want me to be calm you can't whisper like that."

Nadia laughed. Tugging my hand to her, I stepped closer as she took me in her arms. Our bodies flushed together, Nadia touched her nose to the sensitive skin behind my ear and I shrived.

"It will be ok. Why are you so nervous?"

I melted in her arms. "I don't know. I'm silly like that."

"Well, stop it now." She let me go, my legs like noodles and I wasn't sure anymore if it was the nerves or her touch.

Unsurprisingly, no one said anything. Nadia and I worked completely a part and I would not touch her while we were at work, and imagine that, after a few weeks off, no one asked me directly, "So, are you in love with our boss or what?"

At the end of a great first day back, I was chatting with the nurses on our way to the front door, stopped for a second so we could chat without being out in the cold. I heard the click-clack of the heels coming towards us, and I felt that prickly awareness over my body. We all looked in the noise's direction, as Nadia crossed the front desk with few patient charts on hands and her white coat still on. God, she was beautiful. Pencil skirt, blouse, the white coat with Dr Singh embroidered just by her chest. Silk strands of her hair coming down to her neck in a loose bun. The air literally got caught in my lungs as I watched her.

“Good evening, Dr Singh.” Xavier called, making our presence known.

She looked up from the charts, seeing our little chatting circle, and opened a smile. “Hi everyone, heading home?”

We all nodded, me weirdly knowing I had to wait for her.

“Great. Thank you for the excellent work today.”

Everyone beamed. She thanked them every single day. One more think to the list why I was so in love with Nadia Singh. Coming towards me, with a little smile on her lips I gasped, knowing well the devil of a woman she was. I felt her hand touch my lower back as she turned my chin towards her and gave me a kiss on the lips. Nothing scandalous, but enough to make me trip on my own feet.

“I have just one patient to see and be back in five minutes, ok?” she told me. “Can you order Chinese for us? We can collect on our way home. I’m starving.”

I nodded dumbly, afraid to move. Nadia smiled down at me, nodding too she stepped away, “Thanks, Gigi.”

Her heels announced her departing as I turned to all my friends and their expression which ranged from shocked to knowing smiles.

I cleared my throat. “So I have something to tell you.”

By the time *Dating Blind* aired, we were a well-known couple in the hospital. Everyone knew we met in a reality show and while the patients sometimes were surprised to meet us, the staff knew what was going on. Years ago Oldmill Memorial was a place of hate and intolerance. The head physician prior to Nadia was a horrible bigot of a man and for long he clouded our vision of what life really was. We lived in fear; I counted on my fingers the good people I knew. Nadia changed it everything. She brought light to the hospital, and proud herself in helping everyone that walked through that door. But I helped too, at least I like to think I did. After *Dating Blind*, things changed completely. Not that we didn't have the occasional patient who would say something to make us uncomfortable, but it was little in comparison with the overwhelming support we had. For someone who wasn't even out, being out to the entire country changed me, but for the best. I realized I needed to be more of myself; I needed to show people who I was and let them see me the same way Nadia saw me.

I left the volunteer position and took a job as a nurse. I talked to my parents with certainty that we had boundaries between us. I didn't want to cut our ties, but they had to learn that their opinions on my personal life weren't welcome.

I did everything a McKenna isn't supposed to do. I worked long shifts as a nurse in a hospital in our small town. All my friends had no money and no influence whatsoever. I fell in love in a reality show and not just I came out, but I

did it on TV. The thing was, that was me. That was who Gianna Miriam McKenna was, and maybe all the McKennas before me would frown upon what I was doing with my life, but I knew the McKennas after me would be proud. I would make sure of that, one Milana and Dev at the time.

Twenty minutes later, I hear Nadia coming down the stairs, her foot padding through the kitchen while I add the last of broth to the risotto.

“Did he go down ok?” I ask.

I feel her body covering mine, her chest to my back, her hands snaking through my stomach as she inhales my scent. “Yes...” it’s the only information she gives me.

I stir the rice, and she bites my earlobe. “What don’t we eat and go to bed too?” she asks me.

I chuckle, “Because it’s premier night.”

“I’m well aware.” She tells me, licking my neck. I feel the zing going through my spine as I hold the pan with one hand and the spoon with the other.

“Nadia, you can’t seduce me.” I bluff.

“I’m sure I can. I do it every night for fifteen years. It’s second nature, really.”

I shake my head, she’s right and I love when she gets all cocky about it. But I’m also adore our little traditions, and I’m quite attached to this one. I turn around in her arms, facing the wife of mine. Her beautiful deep brown eyes and that delicious mouth a little fuller on the bottom lip, her silky hair brushed from her face, the most amazing caramel skin.

“We can have a glass of wine,” I say, taking her waist and stepping even closer, “And watch the show and still have plenty of time for bed activities. We are allowed to sleep after twelve, you see.”

She smiles a little, her hands coming up and resting just on top of my ribcage, one breath away from my breasts.

“You know I do whatever you ask me to do.” She says, making me smile.

I come closer, kissing her just a little, a peck on the lips, but Nadia is looking for trouble. She lowers her hands from my ribs quickly, hooking her fingers on the waistband of my trousers, and brings me closer, deepening the kiss. The same kiss of the woman who stole my heart so many years ago. The gentle nibble on my bottom lip, the taste of her tongue that always gets a moan out of me. Her warm hands, her love, her patience, and the life we built together.

She lets me go after one last suck to my bottom lip and I feel lightheaded. I smile to her, completely in awe of how lucky I got. I grab her hands on mine, feeling the smooth feel of her palm.

The love she gave me, the memories, the hardships, the babies we made. Everything I love the most I owe to her.

And of course, to *WNB's Dating Blind*.



Contemporary Standalone Romances

Ellis Montgomery

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Unabashedly Yours

Sassy legal assistant Rina is only buying time until she can go back to the big city and forget all about the small town she came from. How hard it is to write a romance novel, save money and not fall in love with your boss?

Letters from Clara

Bette never wanted a huge manor in Ireland, but that's what she got. After losing her aunt, Bette goes to Ireland to claim what she thinks is hers. Darragh Quinn won't give up easily on his family's land. Fights, screams and steam are the result when Bette and Darragh meet.

Novellas

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Lou's Guide to Eternal Hate

Louisa is going on the perfect summer trip with her mother, until Carmen deters their plans by inviting her new boyfriend and his son. Little does everyone know the son and Louisa already met one another after a great night in the sheets. Lou now has a mission to break up her mother's relationship and avoid Remy Park like the plague.

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