

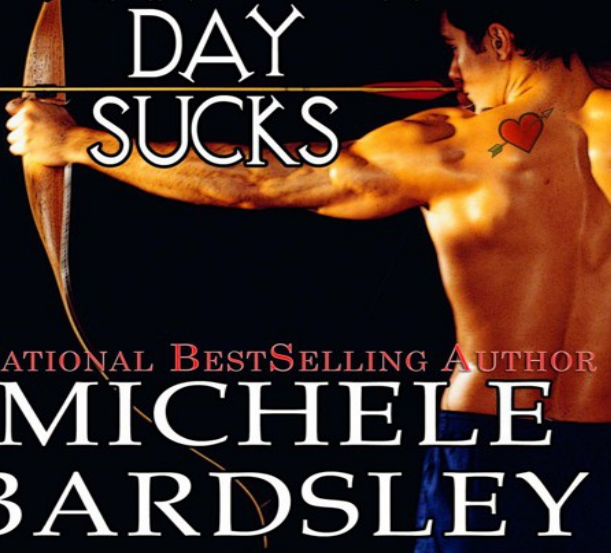
A FREEMAN PUBLICATION

WHEN IT COMES
TO LOVE, SOME-
TIMES YOU HAVE
TO TAKE A SHOT.



VALENTINE'S DAY SUCKS

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
**MICHELE
BARDSLEY**



Valentine's Day Sucks

Broken Heart 9.5 / Broken Arrow
0.5

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By Michele Bardsley

“I SHOT CUPID.”

“Mom?” I croaked into the cell phone. I cracked open an eye and rolled it toward the digital clock on my nightstand. “It’s barely 7 p.m.”

“I’m sorry to wake you early from your undead sleep, Jessica, but I didn’t

know who else to call.”

“The police?” I suggested. What? I don’t like being jolted out of my vampiric sleep by crazy Mom phone calls.

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

Ugh. Grugh. Blurgh. “I’m not the one shooting love gods.”

“Jessica!”

“Sorry, Mom. Just gimme a sec to process.”

“Jess? Everything okay, love?” My husband’s voice wound through the dark room like awesome music. You know, like Wham’s “Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go.”

I reached out across the bed and stroked his shoulder. I had excellent

night vision, so I saw the glint of his sex-me-up grin. My hunny bunny was 4,000 years old and counting, and he still looked as yummy as he did when he got vampified at the ripe ol' age of twenty-five. He stretched so that covers slid down to his waist. My gaze followed the blanket's progress, hoping for a big reveal. Patrick's grin widened. My insides turned gooey, and my girl parts shouted, "Woo-hoo!"

"Everything's great, honey," I said cheerfully. "By the way, my mother killed Cupid."

His expression turned to "let's have evening sex, babe" to "what the bloody hell?" He sat up. Sadly, the covers bunched at his waist preventing me from

ogling his package. “She killed who?”

I punched the “speaker” button on my phone just in time for Patrick to hear my mother screech, “That bow-wielding bastard tried to kill me first!”

Wait. What? I swallowed the laugh that caught in my throat. She really did mean Cupid. Tomorrow was Valentine’s Day, but it wasn’t exactly known as a prankster or party holiday. Besides, my mother wasn’t that kind of jokester. “Cupid? The flying angel boy with the bow and arrow and chubby thighs ... that Cupid?”

“He’s not a cherub,” my Mom said through gritted teeth (I know this because that’s her primary mode of communicating with me). “He’s a grown

man dressed in pink Armani. And he kept aiming gold arrows at me.”

“That sounds like him,” mused my husband.

“Seriously? You know Cupid?” I asked.

Patrick gave me a look. Okay, so vampires and fairies and werewolves were real ... but c’mon ... Cupid? I was vampire for Pete’s sake, but even I had a hard time believing the mythological arrow-through-the-heart guy existed.

“His name is Eros,” said Patrick. “And yes, I know him. I haven’t seen him a hundred years or so.” He paused. “And he can’t be killed, o’ course.”

“I know! I shot him twice and he kept getting up,” said Mom. Panic edged her

voice. “I put another five bullets into his chest, and he finally stayed down. And then I ... well, I rolled him up in garden netting and staked him to the ground with yard ornaments.”

“Oh,” I said, not sure when my mother turned into Rambo. She lived in a secluded cabin at Lake Tenkiller. When I was kid, we spent every summer there. After my father died, Mom divested herself of nearly everything they’d built together and moved into the family cabin. I worried about Mom living in such an isolated location—especially after she refused my suggestion she get a Life Alert button. “I’m not old,” she’d responded.

Except, hello, she was.

And she wasn't immortal. She didn't want to be a vampire, either. Or live in Broken Heart where she'd be safe. Ugh. Mothers, you know?

"When do you think you can get here?" asked Mom. Her voice was still a little shaky, but she seemed back in control.

"On our way." I hit the "end" button on my cell. I looked at my nearly naked husband, and sighed. "We have to go be responsible adults now."

"Ah. Okay."

We were used to all kinds of weirdness because we were vampires and most of our friends were paranormal creatures and we lived in a place filled with zombies and ghosts and shape-

shifters. Still, “attack of the Cupid” was a new one.

Patrick took my hand and looked at me, and in that silvery gaze, I saw love for the all ages. When I met him, Patrick believed we were soulmates. The concept had scared me, especially since I’d been sunk into the mire of divorce when my husband was killed in a car accident. Suddenly, I was no longer a soon-to-be divorcée, but rather a widow with two young children to raise alone in the small town of Broken Heart, Oklahoma. After the arrival of Patrick and his paranormal pals, several of us single parents had been turned into vampires. Being undead had its perks, but it sure as hell didn’t make parenting

any easier.

As we quickly dressed, I told Patrick everything I knew about Mom-aggedon. We didn't have time for a car ride, or even for the faster travel mode of flying by vampire (which is cool and fun). No. We were gonna have to sparkle our way over there in a burst of ancient vampire and fae magic. (Did I mention Patrick's lineage was fae before the whole undead thing?)

Anyhoo.

“Why do you suppose Eros ended up at your mother's cabin?”

I never tired of hearing my husband's Irish brogue. It was like he was singing me a love song every time he opened his

mouth. And that made me want to do things to him. Naughty things. I guess I was doing that opened-mouth drooling thing again because he quirked an eyebrow at me, his lips lifting into a wicked, wicked grin. I can hear your thoughts, love. There'll be time enough later for being naughty.

That whole soulmate thing? Well, for vampires, it meant we could get inside each other's thoughts. You know, undead couple telepathy.

"Yeah, yeah," I said, waving my hand. "We have other priorities because Cupid's stalking my mother." I tapped my chin, and thought about the problem. "Well, I would've said he was some drunk who wandered into in the wrong

yard, and passed out. But he's ignoring bullets like I ignore calories, so he's probably not human." I glanced at my husband. "Cupid wears pink?"

"Occasionally," said Patrick. He wrapped his arms around me, and we began the magical transference of our atoms from Broken Heart to Lake Tenkiller. "I wonder who we might be rescuin', love. Your mother ... or Eros."

"HE LOOKS DEAD," I said, leaning over the unconscious god. The guy was good-looking. He had blond wavy hair, chiseled features, and a body that belonged on the cover of GQ. Even if it was clasped in pink-striped Armani.

"What do you think, Mom? Is he a

boxers or briefs kind of guy?”

My mother stared hard at me. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” I deadpanned. “I’m always serious about a dude’s underwear.”

“Briefs,” she said. “Can we get back to the dead guy on my lawn?”

“Technically not dead. I can’t believe you shot him,” I said. “He’s not bleeding, but those bullet holes sure ripped the hell out of his jacket.”

“Because the important thing,” said my mother in a crisp tone, “is whether or not his clothing can be saved.”

“I’m looking for clues,” I countered. “And hey, I am not the one who put seven bullets into the god of love.”

“Shut. Up.”

I knew that tone. As a mother, I had used that tone.

I shut up.

While Patrick investigated the inside of the cabin for any Cupid-esque clues, I returned to studying the hero of Valentine's Day. Eros was bound up in several yards of green garden netting. On the edges of the netting were pinned six iron stakes that used to be in my mother's garden. Between those were multi-colored pinwheels. And sitting precariously on his legs was a large ceramic gnome.

"Was the gnome necessary?" I asked.

"I didn't know where else to put it," said Mom. "I'd ripped up half the garden already and the little guy looked out of

place.”

I resisted the urge to point out that a ceramic garden gnome placed on an unconscious man's legs wasn't exactly in place. She stared bemusedly off into the distance, and I thought I'd give her some time to gather her thoughts. I had a feeling Mom was close to her breaking point. Honestly, I didn't want to be the one who broke her. I figured my kids would eventually do that, anyway.

I looked around. I hadn't been here in a while. The cabin sat on two acres of wooded land. It was a short walk to the lake shore, and in the summer time, the area was crawling with families, senior citizens, and partying teenagers. In February, however, the place was dead.

(Ha, ha.)

“Pardon me, ladies, but I appear to be in need of assistance.”

My mother and I screamed, clutching at each other.

“What the fuck!” I yelled.

“Jessica!” admonished Mom. “Watch your language.”

I was a grown woman. A vampire. A freaking immortal. And my mother still berated me when I cussed.

Sheesh.

We stepped away from each other, and we looked down at Eros. He was trying to free himself, but not really getting anywhere. He stopped struggling when he realized a cheerily painted ceramic gnome squatted on his legs. He

stared at it for a long moment. His blue gaze flicked up at us. I'd say his expression was confused, but since I couldn't see most of his face ... well, I wouldn't.

"Have I been drinking?" Eros inquired. "Because even for me, this is pretty far gone."

"You were trying to shoot my mother with your arrows," I said. "I already told her she wasn't getting chocolate tomorrow because she tried to kill you."

Mom whacked me on the arm.

"Ow," I said, even though it didn't hurt.

"I don't leave chocolate," said Eros, sounding a little offended. "I'm not the Easter bunny."

I imagined a Hulk-sized rainbow-colored bunny hopping around town delivering baskets filled with chocolate. Damn. That would be awesome. “Is he real?” I asked hopefully.

Eros shook his head. Well, he tried to. Mom had wrapped him tighter than a Pharaoh’s mummy. “No,” he said. “There’s no such thing as the Easter bunny.”

“Bummer. What about the tooth fairy?”

“She’s real, but she stopped the whole money-for-teeth exchange centuries ago.”

“Hmm. What about Lucky the Leprechaun?”

“Who?”

“She’s talking about that little animated character from the Lucky Charms commercials,” said my mother impatiently. “Why did you try to kill me?”

“Kill you?” He blinked. “My arrows don’t kill. Speaking of which ... where is my bow?”

“I threw it in the lake,” said Mom.

“You what? That was a present from my mother,” said Eros. “She’ll kill me if I lose it.”

“Oh! What about Paul Bunyan and his Big Blue Ox?” I asked. “Are they real?”

“I ... uh, well, I don’t know.” Eros wiggled. “Will you untangle me, please?”

“Hey, what about—“

“Jessica Anne,” interrupted my mother in a scarily calm voice, “if you ask that man another question about a mythological creature, I will reload my gun and shoot you.”

I closed my mouth. I wasn't sure if she was serious, particularly since she knew that bullets wouldn't kill me, but they really, really hurt.

“Jessica. Colleen.”

We turned as my husband crossed the small concrete porch and joined us. He held up a little vial that looked as though it was filled with black glitter.

“That's strange,” said Mom. “I thought the fairy dust was gold when I bought it.”

“You bought fairy dust? What did you

buy it with? Childhood memories? Years off your life? Your soul?" I screeched. Panic consumed me. Fairy dust was rare, and it was certainly never given away (especially not to humans). Fairy dust, since it granted a single wish, was often traded by fairies for things they coveted. Many of them, however, were kinda jerks and they would steal what they could from humans in exchange for a wish. A wish, BTW, wasn't without strings. Trust me—it was better not to make one at all.

My mother frowned. "Would you calm down? It's not real, for heaven's sake."

I slapped a hand against my chest where my heart wasn't beating. "Holy

crap. Don't scare me like that."

Mom opened her mouth—and by her expression, I knew a lecture was getting ready to spew forth. I set my internal phaser on "cringe." (Star Trek joke! You're welcome!) However, our prisoner's voice stalled her words.

"Hello, Patrick," he said.

"Eros," acknowledged my husband. "Seems you're feeling rather homicidal these days."

"I don't kill people!"

"You were shooting arrows at me," said Mom. "That counts as attempted murder."

"They're not those kinds of arrows. They're magic. They open the stubborn human heart to love." He frowned. "I

haven't used the bow in millennia. Today, I had this sudden, irresistible urge to take it and come here." He attempted to look around. "Wherever here is."

"Oklahoma," I said helpfully. "Our motto is 'Oklahoma is OK.'"

"Fascinating," said Eros. "Now, about this netting—"

"Why can't you get out of it?" I asked. "You're a god, right?"

Eros sighed. "Gods can't abide iron. It weakens us."

"Oh."

Patrick lifted the tiny glass vial. "The fairy dust, Colleen. Where'n did you purchase it?"

My mother apparently didn't

appreciate his tone because she crossed her arms and tapped her foot when she responded. “After I visited you last night, I was driving through downtown, and my car went broke down in front of Simone and Brady’s garage. They offered to check it out, but said it would take a while. I wandered around downtown and came across this quaint little gift shop. The fairy dust was on a display stand near the register and I thought it was adorable.”

“An’ you say it was gold when you bought it?”

“Yes. I’m quite sure.”

Patrick nodded. “I’ll call Simone.”

“Good idea,” I said.

“Hey,” said Eros. “What about me?”

“You still feel like shooting me mother-in-law with your bow?” asked Patrick.

“Not really.”

My hot vampire hubby reached down and grabbed the netting. It split in half. Iron stakes and yard ornaments went flying. The gnome arced about three feet and shattered on the porch.

Even though her son-in-law had caused the damage, Mom glared at me. “We’ll replace everything,” I promised.

Eros extracted himself from the debris and stood up. He brushed off the dirt from his jacket and pants, and then offered a sheepish grin. “I’d appreciate it if we could keep this whole incident quiet.”

Patrick nodded and slapped his ancient pal on the back. “O’ course, Eros. We won’t tell anyone that a 63-year-old human female bested you and tossed your magical bow into the lake.”

“Shit,” said Eros. “You’re not keeping this a secret, are you?”

“Not in a million years,” said Patrick, smiling.

WHEN WE GOT inside, Eros asked to use the bathroom.

“Do gods pee?” I asked.

Eros blinked down at me. “Who are you?”

“This is my wife,” said Patrick. “Jessica.”

I swore Eros shot him a look of sympathy.

“It’s down the hall to the right,” said Mom. “Please excuse my daughter’s manners. She was dropped on her head as a baby. Several times.”

Eros nodded, and went off to do his potties. Or not. Because he didn’t answer the pee question, I would never know.

“I bet there are lots of people who wonder if gods pee. Or if they poop,” I said.

My mother paled. “Oh, dear God.”

Patrick laughed, then leaned down to kiss my forehead. “Ask him again, love. See what he says.”

“Don’t encourage her.” Mom

narrowed her gaze at Patrick. “Why are you calling Simone?”

“Because the fairy wish probably has something to with Flet,” he offered. He took out his cell phone. “I’ll be right back.” He went outside to the porch, either for privacy or more likely to get away from my mother’s bone-melting glares.

She turned to me. “What is a Flet?”

“A pain-in-the-ass pixie who likes to cause trouble,” I said.

“I’m getting a cup of coffee,” said Mom. “I’m sorry I can’t offer you anything. I keep forgetting to pick up a pint of blood.”

Mom thought it was the height of rudeness not to offer guests something to

drink, even vampire guests. Vampires could only eat and drink inside the borders of Broken Heart, thanks to that ornery wish-granting Flet. On the upside, I got to eat chocolate again. Nothing tastes better than a Godiva truffle. Except Patrick. And blood. (Sorry, but ... hey, vampire here.)

Despite the fact I had been a vampire for quite a while now, and Mom visited Broken Heart regularly, she wasn't much for wanting to know exactly what went on in our strange little town. Plus, there was no way in hell she'd keep a pint of blood in her refrigerator. Not that we'd want to drink it ... bagged blood tasted awful.

Mom offered me a tired smile, and

then went to the kitchen. The cabin was basically a huge open space—living room, dining room, and kitchen. There were two bedrooms, and the bathroom. It wasn't a big place, but it still felt lonely. I wished Mom would move into town. It probably wasn't good for her to spend nearly all her time alone in this place—especially with its memories of the best of our family times.

Patrick finished his phone call and returned to me. “Simone an’ Brady are on the way. And they’re bringin’ Flet.”

I wrapped my arms around Patrick and laid my head on his shoulder. “You know, I’d say tonight was really strange...”

“But it’s really not,” finished Patrick.

He stroked my hair. “At least, not for us.”

Truer words were never spoken.

BRADY AND SIMONE arrived with a jar full of pissed-off pixie. We gathered in the living room, and Eros appeared—literally. He wore a white T-shirt, faded jeans, and Converse sneakers.

“What happened to the suit?” I asked.

“I burned it.”

I gave him a thumbs-up. “Good call.”

Flet floated in his glass prison, all sparkling fury. His gold light, however, dimmed considerably when Brady showed him the vial of black glitter. Flet took one look at the evidence, and

crossed his tiny arms. "I didn't do it."

"Flet," said Simone, her voice full of warning. "We know what a fairy wish looks like when it's been used. We also know you're the only around here who can grant wishes."

I looked at my mother, wondering why she was staying so quiet. She sipped from her coffee mug, eyeing Flet like a bug she wanted to squash. Well, we'd all had that feeling a time or two. Flet could be impetuous, especially when he got bored.

"What did you do, little guy?" asked Brady.

Flet remained mutinously quiet.

"Confess," demanded Simone. "Or you will be in charge of Glory's slumber

party and entertaining eight pre-teen girls.”

Flet flinched.

“That means talking about boys, having pillow fights, watching chick flicks, and comparing boobs,” added Simone. “Are you prepared to show off your boobs, Flet?”

“Sweet mercy! All right, all right,” said Flet, raising his itty bitty hands in a gesture of giving up. “I thought Colleen ... er, needed a wish for Valentine’s Day. Yes.” He nodded eagerly. “So ... I, um, put one in the gift store, and gave her a wee bit of encouragement to buy it.”

That meant the little bugger used some of his pixie influence on Mom. I took the jar from Simone, and brought it to my

eye level. “Are you saying my mother wished for a psychopathic Cupid?” I asked.

“Hey,” protested Eros. “I’m the god of love. Talk to Hades if you want death wishes.”

Flet looked genuinely horrified. “I granted no such thing.” His expression went sullen, and then he sent a wounded glance at Mom. “Why don’t you ask her?”

We all turned toward my mother. She took a long sip of coffee, but the mug was too small to hide her obvious discomfort. She glanced around at our faces—and finished off her drink.

I sniffed at the foreign smell that wafted from the empty mug. “What kind

of coffee is that?" I asked.

"Bourbon," she said.

Holy crap. Was my mother losing it, or what? Booze. Guns. What was next? Chippendales in a hot tub? I glanced at Eros. She'd come pretty close to that one, especially if she had figured out a way to haul him to lake along with his bow.

"All right, Mom. You said the glitter was gold. Now it's black. The wish was used." I pointed at Brady, and he held up the vial as though he were a prosecutor showing the jury incontrovertible evidence. I arched an eyebrow. "'Fess up, woman."

Mom did something I'd never seen her do before.

She blushed.

I was dumbfounded into silence. I felt Patrick's arm slid around my shoulder and he tucked me in close. He always knew when to comfort me—though I suspected he was really trying to keep me from strangling people.

We should work our mind mojo on her, I sent to him. She's keeping secrets.

She's allowed to have secrets. Love, I know you've been worried about her, but she's always under our protection. She'll be fine.

Gah. I hate it when you're reasonable.

Well, then. I promise t' be unreasonable later ... in our bed.

Sweeeeet.

"I've been visiting someone," said

Mom.

“Who?” I asked. “Where? When?”

I didn’t believe it was possible, but my mother’s cheeks reddened even more.

“For the last six months, I’ve been seeing a very nice gentleman.” She cleared her throat. “His name is Arthur.”

Mom had never dated. Not ever. I mean, maybe before my dad died, but after he passed away, she claimed he was her great love—and she never blinked an eye at another man. For twenty-freaking-years.

“Where on earth did you meet him, Mom? You don’t own a computer. You only go into town for groceries. And the only people you see are—” I gasped.

“You met Arthur in Broken Heart?” Patrick’s arm tightened around me, as if he were afraid I was going to tackle my mother and pinch her until she told me everything.

Which wasn’t a bad idea.

“Yes,” she said. “I met Arthur in Broken Heart. He lives in the Golden Oaks Retirement Community.”

“The senior citizen nudist colony!?” My mouth dropped open. Patrick gently used his free hand to close it, and then he laid his fingers across my lips.

“It’s clothing-optional, dear,” she corrected. “You’ve been persistent about having me move into town, so I decided to check it out.” She raised her hand to forestall my protests, even

though Patrick had already ensured I wouldn't speak. Or yell. Or lose my shit completely. "I know you've said you have plenty of room at your house, but my independence is important to me. I need my own space, Jessica. And God forgive me, but you would drive me so crazy, I would end up staking you."

Eros laughed, and his guffaw was followed by those of my supposed friends, Brady and Simone. And even my own husband wanted to laugh—which was why his stomach muscles were tensed and his hand trembled as he fought for control.

I batted his hand away from my mouth. "If you're dating someone, then why in the hell do you need a lonely heart's

wish?" I spun and glared at Flet. "You wanna add something to your story, frog bait?"

Flet immediately looked guilty. He shuffled his tiny feet, and then he sighed. He placed both hands upon his heart. "Maybe I interfered a little," he admitted. "But only t' help. I swear upon the soul of Saint Valentine."

"Which one?" asked Eros. He leaned down and studied Flet through the glass. "You're not just any pixie, are you? You're the little bastard who enchanted Geoffrey Chaucer." Eros chuckled as he straightened. "Chaucer was the one who associated romantic love with Saint Valentine's Day. The story was called Parlement of Foules."

“I did not enchant him,” said Flet. “He was my friend. He made a deathbed wish, okay?”

Uh, I was drawing a blank. I didn’t have enough room in my head for all the vampire shit I needed to remember, much less anything to do with pixies.

“A deathbed wish is far more powerful than a regular wish. Geoffrey asked nothing from me, even though I offered time and again. Except on the day he died. He asked me to grant love to a deserving couple each Valentine’s Day in remembrance of him.” He turned to my mother. “So, I gave it to you and Arthur.”

“You need another shot of bourbon, Mom?” I asked.

“Maybe several,” she said, looked dazed. “Oh, dear.”

“Why am I here?” asked Eros. “I’ve never fulfilled a Valentine’s Day wish while under pixie enchantment.”

“That’s not my fault,” said Flet. “Your appearance clearly had something t’ do with the words of the wish.”

“You gave them a lover’s wish without telling them?” I asked.

Flet looked at his feet. “Sorta.”

“Wait a minute,” said Simone. “You said and ... Colleen and Arthur.”

“Is that bad?” I asked. I looked at Simone’s alarmed expression, and gulped. “It is bad. Crap.”

Music burst into the room. Huh. It sounded like a Bon Jovi song. I listened

harder. Oh, yeah. That song from the '80s ... waaaay back when music still made sense to me. Golden light shimmered in front of Eros, and then it consumed him completely. After a few seconds, the light and music faded, and Eros stood there once again dressed in pink-stripped Armani. At least his shoes were—oh. Never mind. They were pink, too.

In his hands, he held the golden bow.

“Fuck,” said Eros.

Then he disappeared.

SINCE NEITHER BRADY nor Simone had the ability to travel by beam-me-up-vampire-Scottie, we decided that Flet

would take Simone, I would take Brady, and Patrick would take Mom.

Once we got that all figured out, we got with the undead atom implosions, and landed inside the Golden Oak Retirement Community.

Poolside.

During a party.

A naked old people party.

Sir-Mix-A-Lot loudly proclaimed his love of big butts, and several partygoers were shaking theirs with enthusiasm. And other body parts were swaying and wiggling and—I let go of Brady and pressed my hands against my face. “My eyes,” I cried. “My eeeeeeeeyyeeees.”

“It’s not bad,” muttered Brady.

“We have vampire vision. And

immortal memory. I need therapy, STAT.”

“Jessica, my love!” Oh, sweet baby Jesus. That impish Irish brogue belonged to Ruadan, the first vampire in the world, the biological father of Patrick, and my undead father-in-law.

I pressed my hands harder against my eyes. “He’s standing right in front of us, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” said Brady.

“He’s naked, isn’t he?”

“Oh, yes, love. I’m very naked. You should try it. You’re too tense.”

“You have to go away,” I said. “I cannot look at my nude father-in-law.”

“The human body is a beautiful thing, Jess.”

“Dad?”

Patrick’s voice was very near, on the right of me. I felt his arm go around my shoulders, I turned and pressed my face against his chest. I nearly wept with relief.

“Wow.” Simone’s voice filtered through Sir-Mix-A-Lot’s booming rap song. “Ruadan? Jeez, that’s a—oh, hey, honey. I didn’t see you there.”

“Simone!” cried Ruadan. “Good t’ see you!”

“If you hug my wife,” said Brady in the coldest voice I’d ever heard, “you will die.”

“Da, why are you naked?” asked Patrick.

“Everyone’s naked,” said Ruadan. “I

didn't want to be rude and show up with me clothes on."

"You certainly are fit, Ruadan." That voice belonged to my mother. I heard her gasp, and realized she'd glanced down at his package. "My goodness."

"Kill me," I whispered. "Please."

"Let's just find Eros," said Patrick. If I didn't know better, I would think panicked his tone. "Colleen? Shall we go to Arthur's apartment?"

"Yes. It's a short walk from here."

Because my husband loves me, and because he probably didn't want to pay for my very expensive therapy, he scooped me up and carried me through the crowd.

I refused to open my eyes until he

swore that we were standing in front of Arthur's apartment door and there were no naked people in sight.

Patrick gently put me on my feet, and I opened my eyes. Brady and Simone, now with a freed Flet hovering near her shoulder, were on our left.

Mom knocked on the door. "Arthur?" she called. "It's me, dear. It's Colleen."

"Aaaaaahhhh!" shouted a man.

"Oh, my God! Arthur!"

"Mom, move."

She stepped out of the way, and I gave the door a shove. It busted off the hinges and fell inward. We all marched inside.

Eros stood in the living room, his bow aimed at a man standing about three feet

away. A towel was wrapped around his waist, thank the saints. Arthur had a bit of belly, in cute way I guess, a rather lot of chest hair, a likeable—if not frightened—face, and thinning gray hair. We gathered around Eros, all except my mother, who went to comfort her boyfriend.

“Shot through the heart,” he cried. He pointed at Eros. “And you’re to blame!”

I bumped Eros with my shoulder. “Dude. You give love a bad name.”

Eros blinked, and looked down at me. “You again?” He swiveled around and took in his surroundings. “Shit. What did I do this time?”

“You shot Arthur with your magic love arrows.” I grinned. “That sounds

like a porno.”

“You are so odd.”

“Unique,” I said.

“Did he really shoot you, Arthur?”
asked Colleen.

“Yes. With a gold arrow that just sank into my chest. It tingled.”

Eros grimaced. “I’m sorry. Look, we can explain—”

Arthur backed up a step, dragging my mother with him, and held up both hands. His eyes went red and he flashed his fangs. “I don’t want any trouble!”

His towel dropped to the floor.

And I was suddenly staring at the penis of my potential step-father.

I studied his package ... well, because I couldn’t not look at it. Don’t

judge. You'd do the same thing.

“Hey, Artie,” I said. “Not bad. Not bad at all.”

“BUT WEREN'T WE already falling in love?” asked Arthur. He'd made a concession to us clothed folks by putting on a pair of shorts. We sat around his dining room table drinking bourbon as we filled him in Flet's disastrous attempt at fulfilling wishes and poor Eros' forced compliance in said wishes.

“Maybe you were,” slurred Flet. He sat on the edge of a shot glass, dipping his hand into the bourbon. “But she wasn't.”

Arthur frowned. He turned and took

Mom's hands in his. "You're not sure about us? Even after last night?"

"Last night?" I asked. "What happened last night?"

"None of your business, young lady," said Mom.

"I've already seen Artie's penis," I said. "So it's okay to admit you two had sex."

Mom's jaw went slack. "We didn't actually ... do it."

"We're not bound," said Arthur. "But still, Colleen, your daughter has a point."

And I really wanted to say, No, Artie, apparently you had the point, but Patrick put his hand on my leg and squeezed.

Keep it up, love, and your mother will

ground you.

You mean, stake me. Okay, okay. I'll be good.

You're a darlin' liar, you are.

I smiled.

"I have to admit, Arthur, that I starting thinking about our differences. I'm human, and you're a vampire. You'll stay sixty-six forever, and I will just keep getting older." She brought a hand to her face, a still beautiful face even with its laugh lines and wrinkles. "I know I could try to Turn ... but I just don't know. And how could you want me if we have so little time left together? And what if ... if I die ... and you're bound to me ... you know that's not going to be easy."

“I don’t care. I cherish every minute with you,” said Arthur. “I didn’t get a choice about Turning, but I understand your dilemma. Just be with me, Colleen. We’ll figure it out.”

Mom looked torn. I could tell she wanted to leap, to be in love, and to be with a partner. With Arthur, she wouldn’t be alone anymore, and she would have a partner. For however long that may be—whether it was another twenty years or it was forever.

“Choose love,” I told her. “You should always choose love.”

Mom smiled at me, her eyes bright with tears. Then she leaned over and gave Arthur a gentle kiss. “Okay,” she said. “I’m yours.”

“Wish granted!” said Flet, lifting both arms in a motion of triumph. “I rule!” He fell backward, off the shot glass, and splattered on the table. Gold glitter puffed out.

Then he was still.

A tiny snore emitted from his tiny nose.

“He’s passed out,” said Simone. “I think that’s our cue to go home.”

“Ours, too,” said Patrick.

We all stood up and said our good-byes. I was the last to hug my mother. She kissed my cheek, and said, “Thank you.”

“I love you,” I said.

“Love you, too.”

Eros was still in his pink suit, but his

bow had disappeared. He walked with us as far as the courtyard.

“It’s been an interesting experience,” he said. “I think I’ve been retired long enough. It’s time to come back to the world of humans, and help them find love.”

“Lots of people find love,” I said. “Why do you think they need your help?”

“Because they’re humans,” said Eros. “Stubborn, irrational creatures. Besides, mother’s been so bored lately she would probably leap at the chance to do some matchmaking.”

“Good luck to you then,” said Patrick, offering his hand. “Let us know if you need help.”

“And the same goes for you,” said

Eros, shaking my husband's hand.
“Jessica. It's been ... enlightening.”

“Thanks. Um, before you go, I just gotta know—do you pee?”

Eros laughed. “Oh, yes. Gods and goddesses pee—we pee champagne.” He put a finger to the dimple in his chin. “And we poop rainbows.” He winked at me—and disappeared.

I glanced at Patrick. “He's joking, right?”

Patrick shrugged.

“Oh, c'mon,” I said. “You cannot tell me that rainbows appear because gods are somewhere in the sky taking a shit.”

“Why not?” asked Patrick. “Now, do you want to continue this conversation or —” He held out his hands and a familiar

gold box appeared in them. Godiva. My favorite chocolates. Yay! “—do you want to go home and celebrate Valentine’s Day?”

“I want you,” I said, taking his offering and standing on my tippy toes to kiss him.

“Ta gra agam duit, céadsearc.”

I smiled against his lips. “Back at you, babe.”

The End

(Sorta. It’s never really the end with
Broken Heart.)

ABOUT MICHELE BARDSLEY

Michele Bardsley is a national bestselling author of paranormal, romance, and mystery fiction. She lives in Texas with her husband (The Viking), four dogs, two cats, and nine finches.

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