When Is Ever After?

By Sasha Gabriel

The office Christmas party was a happy time for everyone except Mandy. Work was forgotten as everyone laughed, toasting each other… and themselves.

But no one ever toasted Mandy. She was used to it. She would put a brave face on for everyone's benefit - otherwise someone might be insulted - but she never felt worse than at this time of year.

Mandy wasn't pretty… but she wasn't un-pretty either. Her hair was brown and thinning. Her size 14 dresses strained at the seams. Her personality was good and she was quick-witted, but no one ever seemed interested enough to want to find out.

Mandy went to the office picnics, cooking her delicious chili and beans, but still sat alone. Even during fire drills when everyone had to leave the building, no one watched to see whether Mandy had left, as well.

It was always the same. She felt alone... left out. Never part of anything or anyone.

She would *Good Morning!* and *Hey!* to everyone every day. But they would give a half-hearted reply, as though it took too much energy to answer her.

After dinner alone with her cat, Sylvester, she would read a book and fantasize she was one of the girls in the story… a pretty girl that others noticed and wanted to be with.

But sometimes she had to stop reading when the words became fuzzy, until she'd wipe the tears away.

And at those times when she could not fathom why her life was the way it was, she would speak her mantra, "When is Ever After?" the only answer coming from Sylvester, as he snored on her lap.

When New Year approached, she brought her favorite cupcakes to the office party - devil's food cake with marshmallow icing.

Everyone took one but Mandy took two: one for Sylvester (it was the only time she gave him human food) and one for next year. She made a wish on that cupcake… that next year, someone would share a new year with her.

The partying started in the morning. As the office revelers reveled, Mandy got some punch and her cupcake, said her silent wish and took a bite.

A deep voice behind her said, "Looks good. By any chance is that devil's food cake with marshmallow icing?"

Mandy choked as she tried to swallow, surprised that someone spoke to her. She turned around, red-faced and nodded, trying to swallow the last of the cupcake, which had suddenly turned to glue.

She did not recognize him. He must be new…

"What's your name?"

She wanted to respond but instead smiled shyly, some chocolate cake still embedded between her teeth.

He didn't seem to mind and smiled back. "Sorry… I didn't introduce myself. My name is Glenn and I'm new here." (That she didn't need him to tell her).

"When Jim introduced me to everyone earlier, he missed you. But I noticed you and wanted to meet you."

Mandy was too stunned to answer. *Was this a joke?*

"Look… I don't want to seem presumptuous, but… they all want to take me out to a drinking lunch and I just can't stand those things. Any chance you'd like to have a sandwich with me in the coffee shop downstairs?"

Shocked, Mandy blurted out, "With me? Why with me?"

He shrugged and said, "I don't like crowds. I'm happiest when it's quiet and since they're all in the conference room and you're here… I was hoping you felt the same."

Mandy stood up, grabbed her purse and finally knew the answer to her mantra.

Now.

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