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Michael Rich

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Ex's and Oh No's

by Michael Rich

"I think I may be interested in Rachel."

Scarlet nearly chokes on the chicken in her salad. She quickly reaches for her water, drinks some, takes a few deep breaths and says, "Why... just... no. You have to know that it will never work out."

"Thank you, Sherlock. Any more brilliant insights that I never would have guessed?"

"No. But I have a few questions."

"I figured you would," I reply.

"In order: 1. How did you figure this out? 2. How long ago did you figure this out? And 3. Why?"

"Uh, so I can answer two of those. So, the first one, I realized I was contemplating what would happen if we started dating more often than usual. Two, umm... I think about two weeks ago. As for the third question, I have no answer. I really don't know why."

Scarlet doesn't say anything for a few seconds, stunned by this turn of events. When she does though all she can say is, "You can't be serious."

"I told you I am. And if you are just going to laugh at me, we can switch topics right now."

"No. No. I'm sorry for being amused, but you have to admit this is pretty funny. I mean, honestly, you and Rachel? You know wild cats make a better couple. Besides, Zach, are you sure this is because you like her? You might just feel like you need to be in a relationship and thus allowing yourself to think about one that will never happen. At least, that's what I do."

I go to lecture Scarlet but I stop. I hadn't actually considered that possibility. "How is it that you manage to think of these things while I don't?"

"Because I dated you and I understand how you think."

"That's a scary concept. Somebody understands how I think."

Scarlet chuckles. I can remember why I started dating her. Her smile would put any A-list celebrity's smile to shame. And her personality: words cannot describe the beauty that is her personality. But alas, our relationship was not meant to be.

"So how was your trip to Europe?" I ask as I prepare to take a bite of my burger.

"Honestly? Sort of mismatched. I loved seeing all the old towns, but it's hard to be in the most romantic cities in the world on your own."

Time slows to a crawl. I didn't think hearing her say particular words would sting but life is full of surprises. I breath in, trying not to break under pressure. I have to approach this delicately. I can see she is gauging my reactions. I continue chewing on my burger and then swallow.

Before I can think of anything to say she interjects. "Something you want to say?"

"No, nothing. I was just thinking..." I stumble over my words.

"Let me stop you there. We both know that's a dangerous activity for you. So, how's that paper coming?"

I notice the change in topic but am thankful for it. "Which one is that? The fun one or the actual essay?"

"The essay. I know you'll write the fun one in the blink of an eye. And I know you'll put the essay off until that's all the time you have left."

"Well, you know what my secret is, right?"

"And what would that be?"

"Energy drinks," I exclaim, holding up the Monster I have been drinking. "The elixir of life." I pause, debating whether or not I want to ask about something that I'm not sure I want the answer to. "So, have to ask, why are you constantly checking your phone and blushing." *Looks like we are getting an answer regardless now.*

"I am doing no such thing."

I take a sip of my monster, “Uh-huh. Sure, you aren’t. Just like I’m not addicted to energy drinks and terrible decisions.”

“I am not blushing,” she says steadfastly.

“Scarlet, if you get any redder Rudolph will lose his job.”

She chuckles at this.

“I am simply waiting for someone to text me back.”

I see her slip the phone into her backpack trying to hide something. I don’t know why, but I have the sudden need to know what she is hiding. Why should you care? You aren’t dating her anymore.

“You’re not gonna get away from the question that easily. Now, who?” I insistently ask.

“Who what?”

“You know what I meant. Whose message are you expecting?” This little cat and mouse game is starting to annoy me. I put my burger down on my plate and look at her.

“It’s just a guy. Honestly that’s all.”

“Liar, that’s never all. What’s his name?”

“Well, if you must know, his name is David. And I’m sure he’s texted by now.”

She reaches back into her backpack and pulls out her phone, turns it on, and stares at it, her face going from excited to mildly disappointed.

“He hasn’t texted, huh,” I comment snidely.

“How can you tell?”

“You wouldn’t just put down your phone if he had texted you. Now, I would love to learn more,” suddenly her phone buzzes and I pause. Not only because her phone buzzed, but also because I’m trying to figure out why I give a damn, especially considering the fact that Scarlet is my ex. A small voice in my head tells me: *You still have feelings for her.* “About David.” *For fucks sake, can my life not be a goddamn rom-com?*

“Why do you care so much about my personal life?” She asks after she is done with her text.

I have two choices in front of me: tell the truth or lie. I quickly decide to lie. “Well, because I am a nosy little shit and…” I trail off. I hate lying to Scarlet but for the sake of my sanity and our friendship, it needs to be done.

“And what?”

“And I want to make sure you don’t just like him simply because you want to be in a relationship.” I relish in the ability to twist her own words back at her- attempting to make her feel some modicum of pain after she caused me so much during our break up. I can see from the way Scarlet’s eyes are darting around the room and how she has taken on an unusually erect posture that somebody has called general quarters inside her head.

“Honestly? I’m not really sure. I live my life like a romantic novel looking for a lead love-interest. I just never seem to know why or how much I like someone until I start dating them.”

She stops and I’m not sure why. She probably can’t think of a better lie. I have no response so I simply pick my burger back up, take a bite and start chewing, extending the silence for just a little bit longer.

“And besides, I’ve decided I’m not going to start anything from now on. Maybe I’ve watched *He’s Just Not That Into You* too many times, but if the guy I like likes me, then he’ll make it happen,” she continues.

“That doesn’t have to be the case. A guy shouldn’t be the one who has to make the first move. Honestly, that’s a silly way to think.” I am about to begin saying something else when I see that her posture has gone back to normal and that she has her not listening face on, so I stop talking and finish my burger.

3 days later

I put down the PS4 controller and check my phone. The brightness blinds me momentarily. Checking the time, I see it is 1:33 A.M. “Oh fuck, I didn’t think it was that late… maybe I should get ready for bed,” I say rubbing my eyes. “Wait a second…” picking my phone back up I see that it is now technically Saturday. “Should I continue playing *Fallout 4*, play a new game, or watch Netflix?” I ask out loud. After contemplating my options for a moment, I decide to watch Netflix.

“What to watch? What to watch?” I mutter as I go through my Netflix queue. “Ah yes, mind numbingly stupid humor sounds wonderful,” I say as I come across *Blue Mountain State*. Before I get the chance to start watching BMS my phone starts buzzing. “What the fuck. Just what the fuck. Why the fuck are you buzzing?” Going over to

my phone I see that someone is calling me. *Who the fuck is calling me?* Picking it up I see that it's Scarlet. *Why is she calling me?*

"What's up?"

"Nothing really. I just couldn't sleep and I knew you would be awake."

Why is she lying. It's too early in the morning to be doing this shit to me. "Liar. You're never up this late. What's going on? Are you drunk? Do you need someone to take you home? Are you alright? Tell me you weren't driving."

"No, I'm not drunk. I'm not in trouble. I haven't been driving. I honestly don't know what's keeping me up," she says.

"Again, I'm calling liar, but are you sure you're ok?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. I'll see you this evening at the group dinner, right?"

"Of course, but seriously, I need you to tell me what's going on. Something has to be keeping you up. What is it?" I plead with her. She is never up this late.

"Cool. I'll see you then. Bye!"

"What in God's name was that?" I say as I look at my phone. I hadn't talked to Scarlet since we had lunch three days ago. Chills go down my spine as I think about that lunch, "Dodged a bullet there," I mutter. After a minute, I start pacing my room, phone in hand, muttering to myself, "Why the hell did she call me?" *Because something is wrong.* "No shit. But what could that thing be?" *She could still have feelings for you and wanted to talk.* "Don't be daft you stupid brain. She is the one that broke up with me, so why in the name of God would she still have feelings for me?" *Fine, then why do you think she called you?* "Fuck if I know. Probably had something to do with David. Heard he's interested in Megan Radnor though." *You should tell Scarlet.* "That is definitely not going to happen." *Why?* "Why should I tell the girl that broke up with me that the guy she likes actually likes somebody else?" *Because you are a good person.* Laughing I say, "Who the hell told you that lie brain?" After a moment I continue, "Besides, I am seeing her later tonight and can ask her what the call was about then. But right now I am going to sleep, so I'm going need you to shut up sometime in the next ten minutes." *And if I don't.* "Dear lord, it's like the Terminator except its rise of the organs," looking down I say, "don't you dare think about joining him Appendix because I can take you out at any time. And Liver, if you join I will destroy you with alcohol, which will also destroy you, Brain. So, I am going to bed right now and you are going to shut up." *Fine.*

Later that day

"Hey Scarlet, why don't we take a walk?" Dinner had just ended and everybody was going their separate ways, but I needed to talk to her.

"Uh, sure."

"Awesome. So-,"

Scarlet interrupts me and asks, "So where are we going?"

"To where it all began," I say with a sly smile.

"Why?" Scarlet suddenly stops moving and I can see panic start to take hold in her eyes.

Why is she panicking? "Because I haven't been there in forever and because I want to swing on the swing set again," I chuckle as I say the last reason, hoping it will at least take some of the panic out of her eyes.

She starts walking again, "Fine, but I-"

"Before you start, I have several questions. Uh, to start off with what the hell was last night about?"

She paused for a moment before answering, "I was simply calling to see whether or not you were going to be at dinner tonight."

"Uh-huh. Sure, you were. Tell you what, I'm gonna give you another attempt so you can come up with a better story, because that was pitiful. And don't try to say you weren't lying. I know you well enough to know when you're hiding something."

We walk in silence until we are almost at the park when she finally says, "I called you because I wanted to talk to you. I'm not sure about what, but I know I wanted to talk to you."

I look at Scarlet, looking for her tells that she has when she lies: the slight twitch of the upper lip, the darting of the eyes to the left, and the braiding of her hair. *None of those are happening. Is she telling the truth?*

"I see." We reached the park and I immediately head over to the swing set and sit down in one of the swings

and she sits down in the one next to me. “I’m a little surprised you didn’t take the attempt I gave you and instead just told the truth. Honestly, I’m really happy you did that. Makes my life a lot easier.”

“Yeah. Well, you know I get pretty unpredictable when I’m tired. And since I was up at 2 A.M., you also know that I didn’t sleep much last night,” she says.

There it is. She’s playing with her hair. *Is she lying? Why would she lie about not sleeping much?* I know I’m being paranoid. Yet, her face has something in it that I don’t recognize.

“Ok, but seriously, what’s going on with you?”

She stiffens upon hearing my question. Like she desperately wants to say something, but can’t without the whole world changing in an instant. I keep looking at her, waiting for a response, but receive nothing aside from her awkward silence.

“Why do relationships have to be so difficult?” she finally lets out.

Well, there is your earth shattering kaboom. “Who are you talking about specifically?”

“Just me in general. You know, my track record. It’s terrible. I mean, I meet these great guys and either I pine away for them or I date them and realize ...”

“Realize what?”

“Well, I guess, that it won’t work for some random reason. Sometimes it’s my heart telling me so, sometimes my head. Heck, maybe the rest of me joins in and each limb has an opinion on my personal life. I don’t know. I just always end up alone, thinking about what I could have done better,” she ends.

I let out a big sigh. *I can name a couple of things off the top of my head that you could have done better.* “Well, it may be because you haven’t met the right guy.” *Or because you pushed away the perfect one.*

“Do you really believe that?”

I sigh. “Do you want the real answer or a lie that I’ve been working on for a couple of hours?” *Did I really just say that?*

I can see the fear in Scarlet’s face, but her eyes... her eyes seem to show relief. *Oh no, oh no, oh... please tell me this isn’t happening.* She opens her mouth and begins to say something, but she quickly closes it. After a moment she says, “The truth. I would like to hear the truth.”

“The truth is...” I pause, trying to collect my thoughts and form a coherent sentence, “that I think you found the right guy, but pushed him away because you couldn’t bear to let yourself feel what it was like to be... to be loved.” And it is happening. I can see the sirens going off in Scarlet’s head, yet I do nothing but wait for her response.

“Wait, are you saying you loved me?”

I’m taken aback by the way she asks, hopeful. “Well, love may be a bit too strong, but like was far too weak. And there are no words between them so I went with the one that most closely resembled what I felt,” I say, hoping I haven’t just heralded the end of my world.

“I see. Well, what if I told you that I may or may not still have feelings for you.”

The one scenario I didn’t plan for just happened. *Why didn’t I plan for this? Oh, right, because it was supposed to be impossible.* “I... give me a moment. I need to think.” After what seemed to be an eternity I had collected enough of my thoughts to form a coherent sentence. “To be completely honest I would ask you if you wanted to try again at the whole dating thing... or I would tell you go fuck yourself”

“Why would you tell me to go fuck myself?”

“Please don’t ask that...” I say. I really don’t want to go down that road. I take several deep breaths, bracing myself for the appearance of my own Mr. Hyde.

“I am going to ask that and you are going to give me an answer,” she says forcefully. “Now, why would you tell me to go fuck myself?”

I get out of the swing and begin pacing back and forth a couple of feet in front of Scarlet. “There are a lot of reasons. One is because I still want to get even. And sure, we may be friends, but guess what, being friends with you fucking kills my sanity. So far this month, I’ve had several mental breakdowns and I’ve started to go to counseling in an attempt to get through all this. And it was working for a bit, but then you fucking had to come back from your goddamn trip to Europe.” I pause for a moment, to allow Scarlet to digest this. She begins to open her mouth to say something but I quickly interrupt her and with a measure of evilness say, “Close that goddamn thing that you have

the audacity to call a mouth. You will listen to all of this and not say a single goddamn word.” I hear the rage and violence in my voice. *Good, because I want her to feel small and scared.* “And let’s not forget how you broke up with me: over text. You broke up with me over text in my **FIRST GODDAMN RELATIONSHIP**. You knew that it was the worst possible way to break up with me, yet you still did it. And it gets worse when you consider the fact that we had lunch together that day. And you want to know why I think you did it? Because you are often a cold, heartless bitch.” At this point I’m yelling. I stop pacing and look over at her and see she is terrified. *Excellent.* “Oh, and who could forget the fucking fact that you **hid the fact that you wanted to break up with me FOR TWO FUCKING WEEKS**. A relationship is a two-way street. There is supposed to be communication between the parties involved. Which brings me to my next point. You are horrible at communication. Like, a fucking rock communicates better than your ass.” I pause for a moment to relish in the rage and violence that I can hear in my voice. I look over at Scarlet and see that her face is a mixture of shock, anger, and a few other things. Momentarily I feel really bad. *Oh god, what have you done?* Immediately another voice chimes in, *you are too far into this to back out now, you have to finish.* I decide to go with voice two’s suggestion. “Then there is also the fact that I am not entirely sure why you broke up with me. I have had to gather information on why you broke up with me from everybody but you, because you refuse to think about why you broke up with me. Do you understand just how childish that is? Not thinking about the breakup because it will “hurt you.” News flash Scarlet, not knowing fucking hurts. A lot. And do you want to know how much not knowing with complete certainty why you broke up with me has destroyed me? Oh wait, no, of course you don’t, because you don’t give a damn about other people. To you people are just things to be used and once they have served their purpose, you toss them to the side.” I pause so I can collect my breath. Purging all rage and violence from my voice, I stop pacing, step in front of Scarlet’s swing and crouch down. I look into her eyes and calmly say, “There is something else. I will always have that in-between-love-and-like feeling for you. And I know you won’t. I will always just be a mistake that you made.” I stand up and look down at Scarlet. “I told you not to ask.” Voice two chimes in again, *I think that went quite well.*

I turn around and start walking away from Scarlet, heading towards my bed. I just want this night to be over. There is one more thing I have to tell her though. I stop, and looking over my shoulder, say, “You might like to know that David is interested in Megan Radnor, so you can give your hopes and dreams the kiss of death,” I pause for a moment to allow what I am going to say next have more impact. “Just like you gave my hopes and dreams,” I say with a sneer. Her face tells me that between my rant and the comment that her heart is shattered and in a billion different pieces. *Good. The bitch needed to be emotionally eviscerated.* I turn back around and head home.

Nearing my apartment, I slow down. The adrenaline from my rage is finally starting to wear off. I feel exhausted. I hadn’t realized how much energy I expended yelling at Scarlet. There is also a lightness in my chest that I hadn’t felt before and it feels how I assume ambrosia tastes. I look up at the stars and sigh, wishing that I hadn’t just yelled at Scarlet. “On the bright side, this shows that happy endings are complete and utter bullshit,” I mutter.