

Antoinette De Poi, is pleased to present the following short Romance as an example of her writing style for your reading enjoyment.

Ms. De Pio's first book in her **APPEAL to HEAVEN** trilogy, entitled "*Loves Release*", as well as her volume of selected poems

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Love in Bloom

By Antoinette De Poi

Becky cut the ribbon on the long white box, lifting the slim lid and gazing down at the dozen long stem red roses nestled in tissue paper. She gently ran her fingers over the delicate petals before reading the enclosed card.

"It's happening again!" she sighed, feeling both pleased and perplexed.

Suddenly the front bell chimed insistently for the second time that morning, and she rushed to open the door. A well dressed middle aged woman waited impatiently on the porch, along with a handsome smiling young man holding two stuffed grocery bags.

"Mom? Josh? What're you doing here?"

"Let us in and I'll tell you," answered Judy Warren, as she brushed past her startled daughter and headed down the hall.

"Wait!" called Becky, catching up with the pair and deftly moving between her mother and the kitchen doorway. "Josh, let me take those so you can both get your coats off and hang them over there in the entrance."

"That's OK," assured her long time friend. "I can put them in there first."

"No. You'll get overheated. Just give me the bags!" insisted Becky, her voice rising with each word.

"Let her have them, Joshua," instructed Mrs. Warren, with a skeptical glance in her daughter's direction as the young man obediently handed off the groceries.

Then, as her mom and Josh headed toward the vestibule, Becky deposited the grocery bags on the kitchen table, plunked the lid back on the box of roses, tossed it unceremoniously into the broom closet, and made it back to the table seconds before her unexpected guests entered the room.

"What's this for anyway?" asked Becky, trying not to sound out of breath as she greeted each of them with a hug and brief kiss on the cheek.

"I'm giving a surprise engagement party for your brother and can't keep this food at home. Your father and Mike would eat everything," replied Judy, as she opened Becky's refrigerator and began to sort through things.

"Mike's engaged? When did that happen?" asked his surprised sister.

"It hasn't happened yet, but it will soon," came her mom's muffled answer, as she continued to move items. "Here, I don't know what this is but you'll have to eat it," she announced, as she withdrew a package and set it on the counter. "I need to make room for my perishables."

"Thanks for the meal planning assistance, Mom, but that's salmon I'm defrosting for dinner. Let me do the rearranging while you explain what you're talking about."

"Gladly," agreed the woman, as she stepped back and faced her daughter. "St. Valentine's Day is coming and it would be romantic if Mike finally popped the question to Amy. They've been dating for a year. It's about time."

"Has he talked about getting married?" asked Becky,

"No. But he should be thinking about it and, with just the right prodding, I'm sure I can make it happen."

"You're in on this scheme, Josh?" Becky questioned the sandy haired young man, casually leaning against a counter. "I thought you were Mike's best friend?"

"Your mom's a force to be reckoned with," he stated, with a boyish grin and a shrug of his broad shoulders.

Becky eyed the pair for a moment before giving a shrug of her own. "Who am I to stand in the way of true love," she declared sarcastically, surveying the cluttered refrigerator shelves before taking her mom's place. "But did you need to buy so much?"

"I wanted to be prepared to be spontaneous," replied her mother. Then, after a short pause, "What's this?"

"What's what?" asked, Becky, her head deep inside the refrigerator.

"These flowers. Who're they from? Do you have a boyfriend you haven't told me about?"

"Mom, stop snooping!" protested Becky, quickly extracting herself from the chilly depths and glaring at her mother, who was standing next to the broom closet with the open box of roses in her hands. "It's not like that."

"Really? The card says 'Your Valentine'," corrected the older woman.

With a huff, Becky snatched the small piece of paper from her mother's fingers.

"No need to get testy," protested Mrs. Warren, feigning insult.

"I'm sorry, Mom. Technically, I guess I have a secret admirer," admitted Becky. "But it's not what you think."

"Then what is it?" asked her mother.

"I don't want to go into that now, Mom," whispered Becky with clenched teeth, and a nod toward the very interested Joshua.

"Honey, you know I'll find out about it eventually," stated Judy. "Just tell me and save yourself some stress."

"Don't mind me," advised Josh. "Pretend I'm not here."

"Right, that'll work," replied Becky, tongue-in-cheek. "And, anyway, there's nothing much to tell. I've been getting flowers for a while, that's all."

"How long is a while?" asked her mother.

"I don't know," answered Becky, evasively. "A few months I guess. It's complicated."

"He's been sending roses for months?" exclaimed Judy. "How complicated can it be? Is he married?"

"No, Mom! You know me better than that."

"Then what's the problem? Don't you like him?" asked her mother.

"That's not it!" protested Becky. "And they're not always roses."

"Stop trying to change the subject," ordered Judy, with a raised brow.

Becky's shoulders slumped. "The problem is I'm not sure who's been sending them."

"Well, that's ridiculous!" declared Judy. "Every girl knows which of her male acquaintances might be romantically interested in her. How can you not be sure?"

"Yeah, how?" asked Joshua, earning Becky's reproachful stare.

"It's not that I don't have any idea at all," the frustrated girl explained. "I'm just not certain. I've narrowed it down to two different guys. But how can I find out? I can't just ask."

"Why not? I would. How do you think you're father and I got married?"

"I'm not you, Mom. I'm not going to ask a man if he sent me flowers."

"Why don't we let Becky explain what's going on?" ventured the obviously amused Josh.

"Great idea," affirmed Judy.

"Noooo," lamented Becky. "Let's just get back to putting the food away."

"Nonsense, Becky. As your mother I'm obligated to assist you in solving this mystery. Tell us who you think has been sending the flowers and how you came to that conclusion. Maybe we can come up with some suggestions on how you can find out which fellow it really is."

"Mom, please ----."

“Come on, Bec,” prompted Josh, with a mischievous laugh. “Inquiring minds want to know.”

“ALRIGHT!” conceded a defeated Becky, more harshly than she had intended. “If you must know, I’ve been sort of flirting a little with this one guy at work and ---.”

“You hussy!” declared Josh, pretending to be shocked.

“Joshua,” scolded Mrs. Warren. “You’re not helping.” Then turning to her daughter once more, “Don’t pay any attention to him. Tell us about this person at work.”

“Look, this is a bad idea ----,” said Becky.

“I’m sorry, Bec. I’ll behave,” promised her friend. “I want to help.”

“OK, but any more interruptions and we’re done. Agreed?”

“We’ll listen quietly, dear,” Judy assured her, giving Josh a meaningful nudge.

“OK. Well, after I got the first bouquet I tried to figure out who could’ve sent them. There only seemed to be two possibilities. A co-worker named Glen Hudson and my neighbor Jimmy Russo.”

“Why those two?” asked her mom.

“Yeah, why?” questioned Josh.

“As I said,” explained Becky, with an exasperated look in Josh’s direction, “Glen and I’ve been kind of flirting back and forth at the office for a while ---.”

“What exactly have you said?” interrupted Josh. “I need details.”

“No, you don’t,” said Becky. “You know perfectly well what I mean. It was just playful teasing, nothing serious. At least I didn’t think so, even though he’s single and very handsome. But he flirts with all the girls. He’s even dated a few.”

“So, he’s a player,” concluded Josh, dryly.

“No he isn’t! He’s always been a gentleman,” Becky hotly asserted.

“Sure, a real upstanding guy,” commented Josh, sounding less than sincere. “Have you gone out with this ‘very handsome’ co-worker?”

“No, he hasn’t asked,” admitted Becky. “But it doesn’t bother me. We’re just friends.”

“Well, if he’s dated other girls in the office and not you, I think that eliminates him,” concluded her mother. “But you certainly came to his defense fast enough. Do you have feelings for him?”

Before Becky could answer, Josh interrupted, “Let’s move on. What about the neighbor?”

“Yes. When did you meet?” asked her mom.

“Last summer, when he moved into the rental next door. I introduced myself and ended up helping him and his friends carry in boxes. Then I stayed for pizza and we’ve been friendly ever since.”

“Exactly how friendly?” asked Josh.

“JOSHUA!” both women said at once.

“Sorry. What I meant was --- what makes you think he could be sending you flowers?”

“Just a hunch,” Becky confessed, trying to sound nonchalant about it. “We’ve been indulging in a little lighthearted banter ---“

“Gee, Bec, how many men are you leading on?” questioned Josh, incredulous. “You sure there isn’t someone else you may have forgotten? The mail carrier, or the news stand guy?”

“I’m not leading anyone on! I’m just engaging in innocent innuendo with friends. What’s your problem?” asked Becky, her anger mounting.

“Really, Joshua!” scolded Mrs. Warren. “I think two different men are more than enough. And it would be helpful if the two of you wouldn’t fight like children.”

“Sorry, Bec,” apologized Josh, still sounding disgruntled.

“Me too,” answered Becky, sullenly. “And now that I’ve confessed my wicked ways, how do you suggest I proceed?”

“Just ask them each out on a date and see who accepts,” offered Judy. “That will prove who it is.”

“No, that’ll never work.” objected Josh, before Becky could respond to her mother’s idea. “The right person has to stop skulking around in the shadows and ask her for a date.”

“Skulking in the shadows?” questioned Becky. “It’s not like I’m being stalked!”

“You think Becky’s being stalked?” asked Judy, sounding alarmed.

“No, no!” protested Josh. “Everybody, calm down! Maybe I should have said that he’s got to stop hanging around floral shops and sending stuff anonymously because Becky has so many suitors that she can’t figure out who they’re from,” he finished, with a pointed look in the girl’s direction.

“Josh, if you don’t cut it out ---,” warned Becky.

“What about the florist?” suggested Judy, “Have you checked with them?”

“First thing, Mom. They wouldn’t tell me anything.”

“Well, what did you expect?” exclaimed Josh. And then, when he saw the ladies scowling, he added, “You know, because they have to maintain the confidences of their clientele.”

“When did you join the privacy police?” asked Becky.

Judy shook her head. “Please try and stay on track. How do we make this secret Valentine ask Becky out? Wait! I’ve got it!” she exclaimed. “He needs to think he has some competition. Make him jealous!”

“That’s not a very good idea,” protested Josh.

“I disagree,” countered Becky. “I like it. It just might work.”

* * * * *

“Hey, good-lookin’,” called Jimmy, coming out his front door with some trash for the street-side bin. “What’s up?”

“Hi back at ya, stud-muffin,” Becky answered, with a come-hither smile.

Becky had been sitting on her front stoop practicing what she intended to say. It made perfect sense. If the two men in question wouldn’t ask her out, then she would give them a little incentive. Before she could lose her nerve she blurted out, “I met this really nice guy and we’re going to the movies tonight.”

Jimmy seemed startled for a second, but then smiled as he answered, “That sounds nice.”

“Yes,” agreed Becky. “He’s very nice, and very handsome, too.”

“OK,” said Jimmy, “Well, have a good time.”

“Yes, we will, we’ll have a very good time, thanks,” she called after him as he went back up the steps to his house.

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“You’re looking especially cute today, little girl,” commented Glen, with a wink, later that day. “Got a meeting scheduled?”

“No, big guy,” answered Becky, with a coy smile in return. “Can’t a girl dress up once in awhile?”

“Sure thing,” replied Glen, with a wolfish leer as he began to turn away.

“If you must know,” said Becky, stepping into his path, “I have a lunch date with this guy I just met.”

“Oh? That sounds nice.”

“Yes, he’s very nice, and very handsome, too.”

“OK,” said Glen. “Well, have a good time.”

“Yes, we will, we’ll have a very good time, thanks,” she called after him as he entered his office.

Funny, she thought as she watched him disappear through the doorway, I have this strange feeling of *de’ja vu*.

* * * * *

Becky answered her front door before the bell had even finished chiming.

“We got here as fast as we could,” said her mom, as she and Josh entered, “What’s wrong? Tell mommy all about it.”

“It’s not working,” sobbed Becky, as the three of them walked to the kitchen.

“What’s not working?” asked her confused mother.

“This whole ‘jealousy’ thing!” Becky wailed, slumping into a chair at the table.

“Did you tell both young men that you were dating someone?” asked Judy.

“Yes, but that was last week and Glen hasn’t said anything about it,” responded Becky. “And I haven’t even seen Jimmy,” she ended, with another gulping sob.

“Of course they haven’t reacted to the ‘date’ scenario,” Josh casually stated as he took a seat.

“What do you mean by ‘of course’?” asked Becky, with her brow raised the same way her mother often did.

“Well, did either one actually see you with another man?” he asked rhetorically. “Of course not, because there is no other man, so why should they be jealous?”

“I see no reason why they would doubt Becky’s word. They don’t know that there really isn’t someone else,” reasoned Judy, making herself comfortable in the chair across from her daughter.

“One date does not a relationship make,” answered Josh, his expression smug. “Hence, they do not feel threatened.”

“Well, how do you propose we remedy that, Mr. Know-it-all?” asked, Becky.

“It’s obvious,” interjected Mrs. Warren, happily. “If Josh feels that they need to actually see you with

another man then he can pretend to be your new beau!”

“No way!” objected Josh.

“You have to,” agreed Becky, picking up on her mother’s idea. “The only other choice would be Mike, and I can’t ask my own brother to pretend to be a boyfriend.”

“You can’t ask me either,” he protested.

“Of course we can, dear,” said Judy, giving his hand a pat. “You’re the logical choice. So just give in and help us decide how to go about it.”

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“Thanks for stopping by to check that faucet for me, Jimmy. I can’t imagine what’s going on. It was dripping like crazy last night,” Becky apologized, as they walked back down the hall.

“No problem, sweet stuff,” said Jimmy. “Call me if it starts up again.”

They stood awkwardly for a moment, at the still closed front door. The silence lengthened as they just looked at each other until Jimmy meaningfully asked, “Anything else I can do for you?”

The bell suddenly rang, making them both jump.

“Oh dear, that must be my date!” exclaimed Becky, wondering why she felt relieved. “I seemed to have lost track of the time. Let me introduce you,” she offered, as she opened the door to reveal Josh inelegantly holding out a sad little bunch of pink carnations.

“Hi, Becky,” said the wooden statue that was Josh. “These flowers are for you. Are you ready for our date?”

“Yes, please come in,” answered Becky. “Allow me to introduce you. Josh, this is my friend Jimmy. Jimmy, this is my date Josh.”

“Hi, nice to meet you,” greeted Jimmy, as the men shook hands. “I’d better be getting home, Becky.”

And then he was out the door before anything more could be said, despite all the rehearsal that had gone into that little production.

“I swear, you couldn’t have been less convincing as an amorous suitor if you had tried,” Becky accused .

“What are you talking about? I did everything you wanted.”

“Not even close, buster. You better improve before tomorrow,” she warned.

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Just before noon, Becky maneuvered herself close to Glen’s office door. She barely got into position when she saw the nearby elevator open and Josh emerged, with a box of candy under his arm and heading straight for her. At the same moment, Glen came out of his office on the way to lunch. Becky was standing so close to the door that he nearly ran her over.

“Sorry, toots,” he apologized.

“Think nothing of it,” replied Becky, with a flutter of her eye lashes, as Josh joined the pair.

“Hi, I’m here to take you to lunch,” Josh stiffly recited. “This box of candy is for you, sweets for the sweet.”

“What a surprise,” Becky gushed. “Let me introduce you. Josh, this is my co-worker, Glen. Glen, this is Josh. We have a lunch date.”

“Hi, nice to meet you,” greeted Glen, as the men shook hands.”I’d better be getting along Becky.”

And then he was into the elevator before anything more could be said, in spite of all the additional rehearsal that had gone into this second routine.

“I swear, Josh,” fumed Becky, in a seething whisper. “You delivered that line with about as much sincerity as someone who was handing candy to a diabetic.”

“Hey, I never said I was good at this acting stuff. What more do you want?”

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“I don’t see any way around it, Mom,” concluded Becky. “I’ll just have to ask them out on a date. Separately, of course.”

“Of course,” agreed Mrs. Warren. “What do you think, Josh?”

“Don’t ask him what he thinks! He’s the reason nothing has worked out as planned.”

“Not true!” protested the young man. “I did everything I was supposed to do. It’s not my fault ---.”

“Children, please!” begged Judy. “We need to move forward.”

“We’re sorry, Mom. I know you already have your hands full with Mike and Amy. I appreciate the time you’ve taken to help me.”

“Don’t get me started on those two,” lamented Mrs. Warren. “That reminds me, while I’m here I might as well pack up most of that food and take it home. There won’t be any engagement party very soon. Could you assist ----?”

“Sure, Mom, no problem,” said Becky, as they started to gather up the food .

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A short time later, Becky and Josh sat at her kitchen table enjoying the snacks that her mom had left behind as a reward.

“Why so glum, chum?” Becky asked, popping a chip into her mouth.

Josh looked at her a moment before complaining, “You said you appreciated your mom , but what about me? I’ve taken time to help, too.”

“Aw, did baby get his feelings hurt?”

“Come on, Bec, I’m serious,” he said, as he took his dish to the sink.

“OK, I’m sorry,” apologized Becky, as she joined him. “Should we kiss and make up?” she joked.

“Sure thing,” he agreed, as he suddenly turned, enveloping her in his arms. He gently covered her lips with his in the first real kiss they had ever shared.

When he finally released her, Becky felt her face grow warm, her breath coming in little pants.

“Let’s see if either one of your chosen Bozo’s can hold a candle to that!” declared Josh. And before she could even think of an appropriate response, he had his coat on and was out the door.

* * * * *

Becky hadn’t heard from Josh in days and it was beginning to worry her. But life must go on, so tonight she was proceeding with her planned date with Jimmy. She had just come right out and asked him to go with her to a movie. If things didn’t go well she could always pretend that this was only a buddy outing. But if it looked promising she would invite him in for some coffee after the show. She had it all planned. What could go wrong?

The door bell rang as Becky was giving herself one last check in the hall mirror. The new dress fit perfectly, her hair lay in soft waves, and her make-up was done with a delicate touch. She answered the door with confidence. But it all drained away as soon as she saw who was standing there.

“Hi, kiddo, all ready to go?” asked Jimmy. “You remember Patty, right?” he asked, indicating the buxom blond hanging on his arm. “And Ted, Eric and Susan are waiting in the car. When I told them where we were headed they wanted to see the movie, too. Then, we can all go out for pizza afterwards.”

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“This is really great, babe. I was a little surprised when you suggested we take in this movie together,” commented Glen, as he made-the-move and rested his arm along the back of her theater seat.

“I thought it might be nice,” answered Becky, not understanding why she was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

“I didn’t realize you were so into me,” he continued. “Sure, we played our little verbal game but I didn’t really see you in that way. Until now,” he added, as his hand moved off the seat back and down to her shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

“See me in what way?” asked Becky.

“You know.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Come on, doll. You must know that I don’t waste my time and money for just a good night kiss?”

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The front door slamming behind her, Becky rushed to the kitchen with another white box. It seemed forever since the last time her ‘secret admirer’ had sent flowers. Now that she had dismissed the notion that

either Glen or Jimmy were involved, she was back to square one.

Her fingers seemed frozen as she fumbled with the ribbon. And when she finally lifted the lid her eyes widened in disbelief, for there lay the most exquisite orchid that she had ever seen.

Her hands trembled as she withdrew the card and slowly read the message inside.

“If you were paying attention, dearest one, you would have known that the yellow daffodils on your birthday celebrated my joy at our friendship; the orange marigolds in the fall let you know of my desire; the red roses, of course, declared my love for you; the pink petals told of my admiration; and now, this flawless white orchid speaks of your purity. So, my sweet, will you open the door to your heart and let me in?”

Oh, that was the most romantic thing she had ever read. Her mind whirled with the memory of all the blossoms she had received over the past months. The vision of each bloom swam through her brain. But what was pink ----?

Becky’s thoughts flew back to when she was next to Jimmy at her open front door (“*these flowers are for you*”). She remembered standing with Glen outside his office (“*sweets for the sweet*”).

Becky raced back to her door, opening it wide. Her mouth formed a perfect oval at the sight of the handsome man standing on her porch.

“May I come in?” asked Josh, with a meaningful smile.

Becky responded with a brilliant smile of her own as she stepped aside so he could enter, and then she closed the door slowly behind him.