

## **Debbie Gets A Boyfriend (and other accomplishments)**

By Sarah O'Connor

Debbie didn't expect to see John at her desk that afternoon, but she supposed this was how relationships worked, partners showing up and celebrating the other's successes. Just the day before she had eagerly accepted a supervisor position at her company and had actually called John on the phone to tell him like couples did in those old movies (he'd come over and helped her celebrate in his own wonderful way). And that morning Debbie had been surprised to find a gift from John on her desk, a dozen red roses littered with baby's breath which (while cliché) made Debbie feel woozy in the best of ways from her stomach right to the tips of her toes. And now here was John at her desk holding two coffees. He handed her one that literally had her name (misspelled) on the side.

"What are you doing here?" Debbie left her desk and gave him a quick hug; she wasn't used to public displays of affection yet. But John was. He held onto her tightly and grasped her chin. When their faces were close he kissed her, right on the lips in front of her co-workers. It turned Debbie's face red.

"I wanted to make sure you got your surprise," he eyed the roses which poured over Debbie's cubicle. They were the talk (and envy) of her co-workers that morning.

"They made it here very safely," Debbie said, swaying a bit in his arms feeling old-timey and deeply in love. She'd been hard at work all morning, trying to find a time when she could sign and scan the documents needed to confirm her new role in the company, but that hadn't stopped her from trying to take the perfect picture of the roses to post on Instagram (she hadn't yet).

"What a man of romance! I thought those kinds only existed in movies," her co-worker Sloane said as she removed herself from the cubicle beside Debbie's. Her shoulder touched the roses so that they shivered as she brushed by them.

"Who says men of romance are fictional?" John took Sloane's hand and Debbie couldn't help but notice how it lingered.

"You got yourself a real Romeo." Sloane twisted a curl of hair around her index finger. Debbie took a sip of coffee. It was bitter, black, the way John liked it. He didn't know her coffee order yet.

"Deb-o-rah who's this handsome man?" Everleigh asked, knocking one of the roses out of place as she joined their small circle (Debbie had to fight the urge to stick it back in its proper place).

"This is my boyfriend, John." Everleigh shook his hand; her eyes didn't leave John's the whole while.

"I didn't know Little Debbie had a boyfriend," Everleigh teased, resting her hip against Debbie's cubicle wall.

Sloane smiled, "You're Debbie's little secret."

Debbie hated most of her co-workers, but Sloane and Everleigh were easily at the top of her list. She liked to think that the hatred hadn't begun as petty jealousy over their looks and inheritances that they wore as gold chains around their necks. She knew it was childish, she was self-aware enough to know she was projecting her insecurities onto her colleagues (Debbie had gone to therapy) but it was easier to blame her hatred of them superficially than acknowledging that she was to blame. That's why Debbie was so happy for the promotion (she could go back to therapy), Sloane and Everleigh would have to answer her damn emails now that she was their

supervisor. She had no doubt they would still talk about her behind her back, but at least she could fire them (within reason, of course).

Debbie tried to answer, her words stumbling when John pulled her in close and winked, "Who wants to give up a secret?"

John was her first in what had previously been a nonexistent love life for Debbie. A late bloomer, her mother scolded, when she forced herself into a videochat. But now that Debbie had John things had improved between the two of them. Her mother complimented her more now. Debbie had called her mother to tell her about the promotion but she had gotten upset, certain that Debbie was calling because she had done something to make John break-up with her.

But now Debbie was blooming, as radiant as the roses crowding her desk. As such, she was constantly trying to figure out if she was doing things right, acting like a girl, a woman should in a relationship. At thirty-two most people called her ma'am over miss, but girl sounded nicer, younger. Prettier. She worried John would think she was a freak for her lack of experience, but he was patient and seemed to notice when she had to pause and think of what to do next. He always placed the next stepping stone out, and he was so good at talking, so open. God, he made her happy!

"So do you just give her roses every day or is this a special occasion?" Everleigh fingered one of the flowers, balancing it on one of her perfect French tips before letting the head drop (the simple action made Debbie want to grab her finger and pull it back until Everleigh screamed).

"I would, but today was a particularly special day with the promotion and all," John laughed, a throaty sound that was more of a cough than anything. Debbie told herself it was a charming sound, something she could easily identify in a crowd. He pulled Debbie in close again, his grip tight (she wished he would loosen up a bit, she didn't want anyone from HR to

see her participating in inappropriate workplace behaviour). She knew she could leave if she wanted to but that might come off as rude, so she stayed pressed tight against John's side, accepting that this was just how he showed affection.

She wondered if he meant it about the flowers every day. Debbie had always been uncomfortable with being given gifts, but she hadn't told John about that. They hadn't dug deep into the trenches of their childhood traumas yet. She figured she'd have to give John something now, but what? Debbie didn't know where she fell on the love languages spectrum, hadn't even thought to try and place John. It wasn't like she could ask him what he would want from her in return, he'd probably say nothing, an answer that was always a lie (a statement that killed relationships). They'd only been dating for three months, had talked a month prior online. She could blow him. That seemed the easiest way to show she was grateful for the flowers.

"It's going to be so weird not having Little Debbie as my neighbour." Debbie had overheard that Sloane had also applied for the supervisor position. Knowing that she had beaten her out was its own kind of high, one roses, coffee, and a visit from John couldn't compete with (though they were appreciated).

Debbie opened her mouth to talk about her new role when Marion and Janet waddled over, "Debbie is this the flower boy?"

"The one and only," John said with a smile. He introduced himself again as more and more of her colleagues emerged from their cubicles, the same pattern of conversation continued.

Everyone was interested in what John had to say:

"We talked for months online and she wouldn't bite—"

"I met her outside the restaurant; it seemed safer that way—"

"I paid of course; I'd pay for more if she let me—"

No one wanted to listen to Debbie. She was going to be their damn boss, and no one cared about when she was starting or if she was going to be competent (she would be). The only thing that mattered was that she had John, and John seemed to love the attention. He kept telling the story of them, loud and exaggerated to sound more entertaining than it actually was (in the beginning they were nothing but a white screen and some black text, stationary profile pictures with awkward and stilted conversations and Debbie had considered more than once about ghosting him). But maybe that's just what men did; maybe that's just what relationships were, every couple pretending their story was special and unique but was really just a mediocre, faded copy of the same interactions in different settings (maybe that's what being a good girlfriend meant, being an expert at pretending.)

John looked at his watch, "Well that's lunch."

Before he left, Debbie and John kissed full on the lips. It was longer and more intimate than how he had kissed her when he first came into the office, more than she was used to in public (or at all if she was being honest). But maybe that was just because her co-workers were staring at them. When John released her from the kiss he waved goodbye to her and all the rest of her co-workers. Her future subordinates went back to their desks whispering so low to one another that it sounded like any other normal office murmur (so low that Debbie could pretend they weren't talking about her and John).

Debbie sat down at her desk and straightened the roses that had gone askew from their vase (she preferred dahlias, but what woman would complain about being given roses?), swept the fallen petals into her hands, and stuffed them into her pocket for her scrapbook. She took a sip of the coffee John had gotten her and then threw it away.

(It had gone cold.)