

A is for Average

My mother always assured me of two things; I'd grow into **my** nose and **her** bra size. As it turned out, neither ever happened. My name is Rita A. Marano, I'm almost thirty years old, and I know who I am. My eyes aren't pretty, my hair is basic brown and, simply put, I'm ordinary. I've always thought the "A" in my name was for "Average" instead of Antonia.

There is one thing special about me though; it's my voice. I've been told it's very soothing. And since I make my living talking on the phone, that's a good thing.

As a telephone advice nurse, I recently got involved with a stroke victim and his family. I answered their questions and helped with hospital discharge problems. One of the sons, Eric, seemed to be taking on the brunt of his father's home care. Through numerous phone conversations, Eric and I sort of hit it off. He'd call for moral support, to ask more questions, or sometimes, just to check in and say hello. Eric told me my voice was comforting and my confidence in him helped him realize he could manage all the changes going on in his father's life. He was so grateful for my expert help that he invited me to come to the restaurant where he worked. Eric promised that everything would be on the house.

Well, I knew how expensive the place was, I'd never been there because I couldn't afford it, and I was hesitant about a blind meet. I figured he'd probably react

to me like everyone else – ho hum – but I wanted a sneak peek of him, too. So I made up an excuse about why I couldn't go, and secretly devised a plan.

My best friend Michelle agreed to spend half a day's salary and go with me to Chez Charles. We dressed up. I wore a smart black skirt and strappy sandals, even had a pedicure. I've been told bright blue is a good color for me, so my top matched the ocean on a sunny day. It even made my eyes stand out a little. What mattered was, I felt special.

We strolled into the grand European tiled entrance dotted with potted palms, heard a pianist playing Brahms, and walked toward the *matre'd*. Michelle asked the stuffy gentleman in a white waistcoat if we could sit in Eric's section. I nodded in approval. *Good thinking!*

The crowded and noisy room smelled of fresh baked bread and crushed garlic, but I was anxious, not hungry. We were seated in a small booth with a white tablecloth. With palm tingling anticipation, I watched a regular looking thirty-something guy come our way. He had collar-length brown hair and, up close, deep set green eyes. He filled his white waiter shirt out with broad shoulders and strong looking arms, and his smile was adorable in a one-dimple sort of way. His badge read: Eric.

Michelle and I glanced at each other and tried not to giggle, just like a couple of teenagers. She bumped my knee under the table when he asked what we'd like to order, so I went first.

By this time, he'd made me so nervous my mouth had gone dry. I tried to sound natural and laid the menu on the table to hide my shaking hands.

“I was thinking about the chicken,” I said. *It was the cheapest thing on the menu!* I followed up with a pithy, “Can I substitute the potato with rice?”

He looked thoughtfully earnest, and said, “May I make a recommendation?”

I saw the slightest sparkle in his eyes when he recited the entire list of specials from memory. I noticed sturdy hands that obviously knew about hard work--beyond waiting tables. I thought about the heavy responsibility he'd taken on with his father since the stroke. My heart broke a little for him, but first it beat really fast when his finger accidentally touched mine while pointing to an item on the menu. Before I knew it, I'd changed my mind and went for the almond crusted salmon with mango chutney.

We smiled at each other and--I'd swear on a stack of anything you'd want me to--something jumped between us. I got tingly all over, and felt a tickle all the way down my spine.

After he took Michelle's order, he grinned at me again. Okay, I realize male waiters flirt with lady guests to get bigger tips, but this felt different. Maybe I was more sheltered than I'd imagined, but dang, he seemed absorbed with me, and it felt great.

Along with the basket of baguettes came a bottle of Chardonnay. We mentioned that we hadn't ordered any wine and he said it was part of the daily special. Next came crab stuffed mushrooms. Raising our eyebrows, Michelle and I looked at each other. *Some special.*

Eric kept making extra visits, smiling each time, asking if we needed anything else. *Yeah, I'd like a plate of you!* That's when I'd noticed the wine had gone to my head,

and cut back a bit.

After our meal, Eric insisted that dessert was part of the special too, and brought us both coffee. I was stuffed, but Michelle and I looked at each other and said in unison, "We'll share."

Normally, I would have thought I'd died and gone to heaven with the chocolate eight ways sampler, but the real treat was Eric. A perfect gentleman, he charmed the slinky sandals right off my feet. And I'm quite sure he knew it, too, because he kept making eye contact with me, and my face felt hot, like I'd been sunbathing. Michelle slipped off to the restroom and all of a sudden it was just Eric and I.

"Was everything to your liking?" he asked.

At that moment, I realized if he'd suggested that I drop everything and run away with him, I would have. But then I wouldn't have gotten very far before I probably would have hurled, too, because of all the eating I'd done, so it was a good thing he didn't ask.

"Oh, yes. I've never had a finer meal." I tried to sound sophisticated, but it came out regular old Average Rita.

"I hope you'll come back...often," he said with a subtle smile as he handed me the black leather check holder. And with a playful glance, he said, "But I guess all good things must come to an end."

I nodded in wistful agreement as he walked off, and I took a cheap glance at his cute and tight rear end.

My eyes practically popped out of my head when I read the bill!

It said: *Dear Rita, Dinner is on me. Thanks for everything, Eric.*

I caught up with him at the kitchen doors and said, "How'd you know it was me?"

A gentle, endearing look crossed his face. "I'd know your voice anywhere."

If there weren't three other employees standing around, I'd have grabbed his broad shoulders and kissed him right there in the restaurant. Not! Sometimes I get my fantasy life mixed up with reality. Instead, in true Rita fashion, I shook my head, and grinned until I thought my lips might get stuck on my teeth.

"May I call you sometime?" he asked. "I mean, not at the Advice line, but at your house?"

At that most-perfect moment, right in front of the bustling Chez Charles restaurant kitchen, I felt spectacular! Gorgeous! Ecstatic!

Anything...but average old Rita. "Of course! You had me at 'May I take your order'." I grinned again, this time until my cheeks hurt.

With that, he leaned forward and gave me a kiss so soft yet knee-buckling sweet, that up until that moment in my life I'd only dreamed about happening to me.

Smack in the middle of our special kiss, I decided to drop the A. from my name. Forever.