

LondonFalling.NOOK

T.A. Foster



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Time Spell

Cover Spell

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To all the bloggers and readers out there,

thank you for reading!

For all of my Carolina Girls

Heads Carolina

I needed this. It was one grade. It was my graduation, my future, and my life—what choice did I have? He would forget this ever happened. We both would.

I tapped out the last sentence and pushed the enter button with limited certainty.

It was done. Now I just had to wait.

CHAPTER ONE

Three Months Earlier

I brushed my flyaway bangs from my eyes and settled into a seat in the middle of the lecture hall. The oversized room was drafty, but I shirked the heavy coat from my shoulders and rubbed my arms a few times. At least the layered scarf wrapped around my neck gave the illusion of warmth.

How was it possible that four years of my life came down to this last semester? If the class had been offered in the fall I would have already taken it, aced

the class, and graduated in December. However, the-powers-that-be who create the labyrinth of class schedules only offer Communication 224 in the spring. And without the class, I couldn't apply for graduation.

I guess the advantage of having such a light schedule this semester was the extra time I would have for theater group. Nina and Derek needed help. They always needed help when it came to the Encore Theater ensemble we joined as freshmen. The plays didn't produce themselves.

Students filtered in a few at a time, filling in the gaps in the stadium-like

seating. Backpacks littered the little space left in the aisles. In unison, we pulled out our laptops and began the pre-class ritual of checking in with our friends.

I logged on to Facebook, just to make sure Nina posted the announcement about open auditions for *Spoiled Hearts*. Maybe it was the cold weather or the spring semester blues, but we hadn't received much interest in the play. This was Derek's debut as a playwright, and Nina and I were doing our damndest to make it a success. That boy could write—the rest of campus would know it soon. Other than paying people for tryouts, we were running out of ideas to fill up the cast. Before I could add my comments to

the catchy post, the lights started flickering. *Wait, was this curtain call?*

“Welcome, everyone.” The woman at the front of the room cleared her throat and smiled at the students scattered in front of her. “I’m Professor Garcia and this is Communication 224: Current Issues in TV and Social Media.”

I closed out my screen and typed a new heading on a blank document.

“Before I move forward with my expectations for the semester, I want you to put those things away.” She shooed her hand in the direction of a line of computers dotting the front row. “Yes, I

know what you're thinking." She rolled her eyes. "This might be a class on social media, but I don't actually want you *on* social media while we're *in* class. Understood?"

I didn't see any heads nod, but Professor Garcia continued as if the entire class was on board with her rules.

"Most of you have heard that this class is a little unusual." As she pulled the mic clipped to her lapel close to her lips, she smiled.

The class nervously chuckled in agreement. Communication 224 had a reputation for being the most unexpected

class in the Communication Department. The waitlist to get in was always long and it didn't help that it was only offered once a year. Maybe now that I was enrolled in the class I would actually find out what the buzz was about.

“I’ve posted your syllabus along with the reading assignments online on the class website. But I know what you’re really interested in is the project.” She raised her eyebrows and zeroed in on the students exchanging intense whispers.

A girl in yoga pants and a neon sweatshirt raised her hand. “Is it true we only have one grade all semester?”

Professor Garcia smiled. I observed the events unfolding like a stage production. It seemed this professor had rehearsed her lines.

“Your classmate in the front row asked if there is only one grade all semester.” She twirled on the heels of her leather boots and walked over to the smart board screen. She tapped a button and the screen flashed a Y, then an E, and finally an S appeared on the screen.

I couldn't think of a time in class when I heard so many audible gasps. I kept my objections tightly locked away.

“Before I hear the outcry and

protests on how this is unfair and I'm ruining your grade point averages, blah, blah, blah, let me explain how this class works. Yes, there is only one grade, but you're not in this alone. Everyone has a partner, and together you work on a final project. Each week in class we discuss the readings and how they pertain to the project you've been assigned. I don't give you random pop quizzes or ask that you post weekly on the discussion board. You are all either juniors or seniors. At this point, you know how to participate in your classes—it's up to you what you do with the information I present in here."

She paused and surveyed what I imagined was an entire auditorium of

wide-eyed upperclassmen.

“Go home, do the reading, and at your next class, on Thursday, you get your assignment. For those of you who are required to take this class, you have a few weeks to decide if you want to drop it from your schedule. It’s not for everyone. See you in a few days.” Professor Garcia waved a hand in front of the class and walked to the smart board, cutting its power.

It was only for a moment, but I sat in my folding chair while the other students dispersed around me like ants. Class hadn’t even lasted ten minutes, and I couldn’t wrap my head around what had

just happened. Maybe I was going to have more time on my hands than I realized.

“London! You’re here! I didn’t expect you for at least another hour. You can help me figure out this costume nightmare.”

My best friend, theater partner, and roommate looked ecstatic to see me. “Nina, you won’t believe this class.” I wasn’t sure where to start.

I dropped my bag on the floor and joined my bestie on the stained and spotted couch in the basement of the Encore Theater. Nina had scattered pages

of a script and was flipping through magazine pages. We had been a part of the eclectic and fiercely independent theater group that wrote, directed, performed, and produced all of its plays since we first arrived at Carolina. My days and nights were devoted to every word uttered on this stage.

“Tell me. What is Garcia’s big project this semester? I can’t wait to hear what she’s come up with for you.” She grumbled as she folded the corners of her magazine.

“I don’t know. She’s keeping it a big mystery until next class. I’m surprised she’s not teaching in the Drama

Department instead of Communication. She had this whole production lined up to deliver the big cliff-hanger just so she can shock us next class. Don't know if I'm buying it."

Nina laughed. "Yep, that sounds like her. I heard one year she had her class go all semester without using their Facebook or Twitter accounts, and one year they had to create their own website as a class and keep a twenty-four-hour chat going for the whole semester about stuff happening on campus. I never read it, but I heard it was intense."

"Are you serious? Those both sound a little extreme." I started tagging

pictures as I read through scenes in the play. I didn't like the idea of either of those projects, but this class was just a means to an end. "It doesn't really matter to me. I have one semester left then I'm done. I'm so ready to pack my bags and head to L.A. Have you been outside today? It's snowing again. Next year at this time, I'll be in shorts, looking up at palm trees and sunny, warm skies. Good-bye, North Carolina. Good-bye, snow and ice. Hello, Hollywood."

"Not everyone loves summer weather all year, you know. I like the snow—sometimes. Plus, it only snows a few times a year. You're always talking about leaving, London. But I'm not

giving up. I still have one semester to get you to change your mind.”

I laughed at my roommate. “No way. That’s not going to happen. I’ve been dreaming about living in California and acting since I was a little girl. Why would I stay in North Carolina?”

“Maybe because your friends and family are here and you lo-ove it.” Nina giggled as she wiggled back and forth on the couch.

“That’s not fair. I do love it. You think I should give up everything and join the family business?”

Nina shrugged her shoulders.

“Well, that’s not what I want to do. I can’t be an actress here. Even the great plays that are on campus travel around the country. They don’t stay here. I’ll never make it as an actress in a small town like this.”

“London, they’ll eat you alive in L.A. You’re too sweet for Hollywood life. You’re the nicest person I know and nice people don’t finish first in that business.”

“Aww...you didn’t say that last week when I wore your white sweater without asking.”

“Well, you should have asked me.

Are you going to at least do a college bucket list?”

“Um...aren’t those for old people?”

“No, look.” Nina pulled out her phone and opened a new screen. “There’s this guy on campus, Beau Anderson, who has this super funny blog and he just posted the Carolina Bucket List for this year’s seniors.”

“Let me see that list.” I grabbed the phone and scrolled through the blog while reading aloud a sampling of the tasks each senior should complete before graduation. “Nina, there are a hundred

things on this list. Take an exam drunk. Go to a paint party. Take a spur of the moment trip. Get tickets to the Duke game. Climb the Bell Tower on Senior Day. Dance in a library flash mob. Have a picnic in the arboretum. Go stargazing in Kenan Stadium. Steal a kiss in Davis Library. This list is silly. No one actually does all of these things.”

“Yes, they do. I’m going to do as many things on there as I can before we graduate.” She said it with such undisputed assertiveness that I knew she was serious.

“Well, let me know when you get to number fifty-five, ‘feed a squirrel in the

quad.' I want to be there for that one."

Nina punched me in the arm. "I have lab in a few minutes. Speaking of which, would you want to pick out a few of these costumes for me while I'm in class? I would really appreciate it. I can't take trying to match another skirt and sweater set for this play." I watched as she gathered her backpack and marched toward the stairs.

"Isn't Candace supposed to be working on this? She's the designer for *Spoiled Hearts*."

"Ugh. I know, but she hasn't been around and I don't want to let Derek

down.”

“Oh, so this if for Derek?” It was my turn to give her a hard time.

“Just do it, London. You’re so good at set and costume design. Please?”

Knowing Nina needed to get to class, I gave in like I always did to her last minute pleas for help. “Sure. What else do I have to do?” I sighed, realizing for the first time that having all of this free time on my hands might be more of a challenge than I anticipated.

“Awesome! You’re the best. See you tonight at the house?”

“Ok. We can rent that new zombie tonight. Is Candace going to be there?”

“Oh yeah, the one where they try to find a way to survive without eating brains. Sounds gross, but good. Not sure about Candace. She hasn’t returned my texts all day. Why don’t you try to call her? Bye, roomie.” Hugging her coat tightly to her chest, Nina darted up the staircase.

Candace could wait. Ever since we returned to Chapel Hill after Christmas break, she had been so wrapped up in Pearce it was as if she didn’t even live in the house anymore. I didn’t really understand why dating a football player

was such a demanding job, but according to Candace, it wasn't like everyone else's boring relationships. Pearce needed her. *Yeah, he needed her for his personal entertainment.* Nina and I had probably been too vocal about the guy, and things with our third amigo were at best awkward when we did see her at the house on the rare occasion she resurfaced to repack and grab a change of clothes.

I repressed an inner sigh. Guys were always the root of drama. If it wasn't a wide receiver breaking up our trio, it was Nina pining after Derek and his brilliant playwright mind. How many nights had we stayed up until two coming up with ways for Nina to tell Derek how

she really felt? If he couldn't see how she gushed over his every brilliant idea and volunteered for all of his projects, then he didn't deserve my best friend. She had too much to offer to waste her time on a guy clearly more interested in what was happening downstage than right in front of his face.

Although, deep down I understood Derek's passion for the theater, I wasn't about to tell Nina. I loved being on stage more than anything. It was where I felt completely alive and calm all at the same time. Something happened every time I walked in front of an audience—I didn't care if I was only part of the ensemble, or if I was the lead. Being on stage felt as

natural to me as breathing.

Alone in the basement, I turned off thoughts of my friends and their distorted love lives and focused on the pictures in my lap. It looked like Nina was going scene by scene, pulling out potential costume options for each act in the script. It was time to divide the costume assignment among the characters to round out each one's style in the play, rather than the scene itself.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. *Awesome*. I had at least two hours before the next group invaded the Encore Theater in the basement of Graham Memorial Hall. I tucked earbuds in each ear, hit play on my phone, and started

styling for the production.

The blanket of snow cast a soft white glow throughout campus. It was after five, and except for the illumination from the street lamps, the quad was dark. I watched as my breath turned to a frosty cloud. Tugging on the edges of my collar, I pulled the coat closer to my neck. It was freakin' cold.

Something about the way the fluffy snowflakes drifted through the sky reminded me of magic. When I was twelve, I played Clara in the *Nutcracker* and the snow on stage looked just like

this. With one palm turned toward the clouds, I couldn't help but reach forward to catch one of the heavy flakes. My eyes followed the quiet dissent as the cluster of flakes made their way to rest in the bowl of my hand. I was glad Nina wasn't here to witness the smile and giddiness forming. This place was beautiful—freezing snowy wonderland and all.

“Watch out!” A voice cut through the serene stillness.

Before I could shake my momentary snow trance and sidestep the oncoming biker, I hit the cold pavement under my feet.

“Ouch.” I rubbed just below my right hip, which had taken the brunt of the fall.

“Oh, man, I’m so sorry.” The frantic biker dismounted, propped his two-wheeled ride against a lamppost, and crouched next to me. “Did you break anything?” He eyed my heavy coat and scarf.

“No. I’m fine. Just a little banged up.” Startled and embarrassed, I looked at the assailant. Was I really that absorbed in a snowflake that I walked into an oncoming bike? Maybe the handlebars clipped the side of my backpack just enough to send me spiraling to the

sidewalk.

His hand was outstretched and his face worried.

“My fault. Let me help you up.”

No arguments here. He clasped my hand in a firm grip and I pushed off the ground. The biker pulled me straight up before I was ready to be vertical. I caught myself before I slipped again.

“You sure you’re ok?” He tilted his head. I noticed earbuds dangling from around his neck. He was wearing a long-sleeve T-shirt. Not exactly cold weather gear.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. Thanks.” I dodged his concerned look and retreated in the direction of the bus stop.

“Uh. Ok. Bye.”

As I scrambled from the scene of the accident, I thought I felt him watching me. Not wanting to get caught with a sneak peek, I waited until I crossed the street before turning around. I watched as he grabbed his handlebars, slung one leg over the side of the bike, and pushed down on the pedals.

Through a confetti parade of snowflakes, he wheeled off and disappeared behind Graham Memorial. I

hadn't even bothered to berate him for his crazy steering or thank him for taking the time to help me up. After four years of dodging maniac bikers, one had finally hit me. It was bound to happen.

A deep sigh produced another hovering crystal cloud of breath, I thought I could reach out and grab. Bike Guy had been kind of cute with his deep-set eyes and sandy brown hair. It was hard to miss his arms with that T-shirt. I shook my head. No, he was just a random guy that plowed me down on the sidewalk and saw me act like a complete idiot.

The unmistakable sound of the air brakes for my bus squeaked to an ear-

piercing stop. I dashed off before I was stranded on campus for another hour. Nina was probably already waiting with pizza and zombies.

CHAPTER TWO

Professor Garcia swished a red pashmina over her left shoulder and strolled to the front of the lecture hall, letting the impact of her heels on the floor command attention.

The sudden sounds jerked me out of my dreary thoughts. The left side of the auditorium was flanked with floor-to-ceiling windows, and the only thing I could see from my seat was a gloomy gray sky and naked oak trees glistening with melting icicles. The January temperatures hovered around forty degrees, making it a miserable existence on campus for my cold-natured body.

“Welcome back, everyone! Let’s get started.” Jumping into the presentation, she pointed her remote at the smart board. “This is the day you’ve been waiting for. It’s finally here. It was a long few days, wasn’t it?” A Cheshire-like smile spread across her face. “I’m going to reveal your final project.”

Ok, this was starting to feel like student hazing in some twisted kind of academically acceptable way. The three-day buildup for the mystery assignment had manifested itself in unrecognizable nervousness in the pit of my stomach. I didn’t even get this worked up before walking on stage. Why was Professor

Garcia being overly dramatic about this?

“Ok, gang. Here it is. I had a little help from last year’s class with the video.” The outlandish professor lowered the room’s lights and pressed play on the screen with the quick click of the remote.

The growing mumbles and whispers circulating in the seats around me halted once the video began to roll.

The young announcer’s voice boomed over the footage. “In today’s world, television is dominated by reality shows. But is it real? Can people really survive on a deserted island? Would you fall in love going on perfect dates? Do the

wives of athletes lead the most glamorous lives? Could you convince your friends to eat roaches for money?”

I winced at the image of a scrawny, sunburned woman cramming a handful of the creepy pests into her mouth. Pictures of other popular shows flashed across the screen. I recognized scenes from *The Islanders*, *World Race*, *Matched*, and *Roommates*—all shows I didn’t have time to watch since I was always in rehearsals.

The music carried to a frenetic pitch. “Now it’s your turn to prove whether there is any reality in reality TV. Is this all just a network scheme to get viewers and money, or is it real? This

semester *you* are one of these reality stars.”

The students gulped and the whispers were almost deafening.

Professor Garcia smiled and raised the lights in the lecture hall. “All right. All right. Keep the comments to yourselves. This is how it works. Using a handy little computer program, I have paired each of you with another classmate. Each pair has been assigned one of these reality shows. You will incorporate the theories from your weekly reading assignments into your final assessment of the show. At the end of the semester, you will present your findings

to the class.”

She followed the steps to the top of the hall and surveyed the highest row of students, apparently still trying to absorb the assignment being thrown at them. She slammed the remote on the podium.

“I do *not* want a paper. You can write a paper in your other classes. I want you to live this. Discover it. *Be* it. Understand?”

I was certain I wasn’t the only one who had no understanding of what was going on. How could this be happening? My final grade, the one I needed to graduate, was hinging upon some

outrageous project that I had to work on with some random student and was being hijacked by Professor Crazy. I didn't even watch reality TV.

“You are probably anxious to see who your semester partners are. The pairings are listed in alphabetical order. Raise your hand when you see your name and find each other. Once everyone is paired up, I will give you your reality show. I'll let you take the rest of the class to meet and come up with a game plan. Ready?” She paused with precision timing. “Oh, this is so exciting.”

The students stared at the white screen, waiting for their names to appear.

The presentation music started again. The first name on the screen flashed once and crawled into the left-hand column. Chuck Adams timidly raised his hand and waited for the name of his partner. The entire class turned and watched as Meredith Cruise smiled brightly, gathered her belongings, and relocated in the seat next to Chuck.

I got the sinking feeling this was like something out of *The Hunger Games*. Come to think of it, Professor Garcia would fit in nicely in the Capitol. There was nothing I could do but sit and await my reaping results. Whom was I going to end up with for an entire semester?

The roaring music drew my focus back to the screen. The next name to appear was Beau Anderson. That name sounded vaguely familiar. Before I could place where I had heard it before, the next name to flash on the screen was London James. Doing my best to catch my breath and look like this was the most natural selection process in the world, I cautiously searched the seats for Beau, whoever he was.

Scanning the rows behind my seat, I hoped this guy was just as serious about getting an A as I was. No luck. I kept my hand high above my head, feeling more and more like an idiot on display in a bad

game of middle school dodgeball. Where was this guy? I seriously considered giving up and asking Professor Crazy for a redo in her computer's matching game.

In the top seat, closest to the door, I spotted a raised hand. I peered at the male figure half cloaked in the shadows cast by Professor Garcia's classroom theatrics. The mystery partner threw me a smile and a wave. Slightly relieved, I returned the seemingly recognizable gesture. However, as I collected my notebook and shoved it in my backpack, prepared to climb to the top of the classroom, I stopped. I remembered where I had seen that smile before. It was Bike Guy. As in, saw me land on my ass

in the quad, Bike Guy.

Not wanting to seem thrown by the partnership, I jogged up the stairs and slid into the open seat next to Beau Anderson, my partner for an entire semester.

“Can you believe this? Crazy, huh?” He moved his book bag over to make room for my feet.

Maybe he couldn't tell I was eyeing him suspiciously, or maybe my happy partner act was working. Didn't he recognize me as the girl he had plowed down by the quad only two days ago? I wasn't going to mention it.

“I’m London.” I smiled.

“Yeah. I saw that on the screen.”

Beau leaned back in his seat and chewed on the end of his pen. “I’m Beau.”

“I saw that on the screen.”

I jerked as the sarcastic snip fell from my mouth. That was not what I meant to say. Something about this whole scenario was completely unnerving. I wasn’t sure if it was the project, the crappy introduction with Beau, or his apparent amnesia that was bringing out my bitchy side.

My sarcasm didn’t seem to rattle

him.

“So, what show do you think we’ll get?” Beau reached for the bill of his hat and spun it so that it was it was facing backward.

“Uh. I have no idea. I hope it’s something halfway interesting. Did you finish the reading over the weekend? The article on how reality shows are contributing to a culture of bullying was really cool.”

“You actually read that?” Beau scoffed. He reached for a Styrofoam cup on the floor and took a sip of something that looked like orange juice.

I tried to keep my heart from sinking. “You didn’t do the reading?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get to it. I had something I was working on for my blog.”

“Wait a minute. That’s how I know you’re name. You’re that blogger guy my roommate told me about. You wrote the senior year bucket list blog.”

“Yeah, that’s me. You read my list?” His voice cracked and I stifled a small giggle.

“I read it. But you can’t possibly expect people to do all of the ideas on

your list. Some of the stuff is out there.”

“Honestly, I don’t care if other people do it or not. I’m going to check off every single thing on the list. I made it for myself.”

“Impressive.” Ok, that was intentional sarcasm. Where was all this negativity coming from?

It looked like everyone was paired off and nervously exchanging small talk. I saw Blair and Maggie from one of my other Communication classes in deep discussion. Those two were always together. Professor Garcia and her heavy boots began their ascent to the top of the

classroom.

“Here we go. I have your reality shows in my hand.” The colorfully clad woman shook a stack of note cards in her hand. “I’ll walk around and pass them out. It will give us an opportunity to chat a bit.”

Taking two long strides, Professor Garcia landed behind us. “You two get first pick.”

She presented the note cards fanned in a semi-circle, and before I could blink, Beau drew one from the center. He flipped it over in his palm and laughed.

“What is it? Which show?” I took

the card from Beau. It felt like my heart was going to beat out of my chest.

Over Beau's sneering laughter, I read the card: *Love Match*.

“Do you two have any questions?” Professor Garcia chimed in over the shock and awe plaguing us in that moment.

Somehow, I managed to stammer out one. “Is this the dating show where people are supposed to propose at the end of the season?”

“Fascinating, isn't it? It's one of my all-time favorites.” A wide-eyed Professor

Garcia descended on the next unprepared pair of students.

So much for chatting with her and discussing the topic. I turned to Beau, desperately seeking a solution. “Do you think we can trade out or something? I’ve never even seen the show.” I tried to keep my voice low.

“And you think I’ve seen it? I don’t watch shit like that. It’s a chick show.”

“How do I know what you watch? We have to fix this.” I raised my hand, waiting for Professor Garcia to turn and catch my frenzied hand waving.

“Yes? Do you need something,

London?” Both hands were on her hips.

“Thanks for coming back over.” I swallowed hard, thinking my voice sounded small and quiet. “My partner and I were wondering if we could maybe trade in our show. Neither one of us has ever seen it.” I smiled sweetly and kept my eyes wide, pleading with the professor to dole out some sympathy on our situation.

“That’s perfect! You have the best scenario in the class. You can start fresh and unbiased. Open your minds to the possibilities ahead of you.”

Beau handed the card back to the instructor. “What I think London is

trying to say is that we want another show.”

I shrank back in my seat when I saw her eyebrows repositioned to the top of her forehead. “Is it Beau?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“This isn’t kindergarten where you get to swap out things because you don’t like them. You drew the card. You take it or you fail the class.”

The card hung between them. Neither was backing down. I snatched it from Beau’s hand and tucked it in my notebook.

“Thank you, Professor Garcia. We can handle it.”

Her gaze softened. “Good. I look forward to your presentation at the end of the semester. And, London, I’ve heard such rave reviews about you from my colleagues, so I’m expecting something extraordinary from you.” Grinding her heels into the floor, she walked toward a gawking pair of our classmates.

“Are you trying to get on her bad side or something?” I hissed at Beau.

“I don’t really care what side I’m on with her. This show is stupid. We should be able to trade out for another

one. And what are you? Some kind of college teacher's pet?"

"Well, we can't trade. So stop making it worse." I took a deep breath. "This is the last class I need to graduate; it means something to me. I can't fail. And, no, I'm not a teacher's pet—just a really good student."

I shoved my notebook in the zipper pocket, heaved my backpack on my shoulder, and bolted through the swinging door at the top of the auditorium. I didn't know how much more of Beau Anderson's nonchalant attitude I could take. It was obvious he didn't care about the class or our

partnership. He probably didn't even need the course for his major. I would just have to ace this one on my own.

“London. Hey, wait up. Where are you going?” Beau half-jogged toward me through the empty hallway. The classroom doors were closed on either side of us, and I could see furious note taking through the glass windows.

My thumbs were tucked through my shoulder straps. *Quick, think of something cool to say.* I probably looked like I just freaked out in class in a less than rational freak-out kind of way. “I thought I would get a head start on watching some of the *Love Match* episodes.”

“Uh. Ok. That’s cool, but don’t you think we should watch some together? You seem kind of pissed at me.” He was fidgeting with the bill of his hat.

I started feeling guilty. “Sorry. It’s just that I need this class. And if you hate the show, I figure I’m going to have to do it on my own. I’m going to get an A on this project.” *Jeez, I sound like a super nerd.*

Beau retrieved his phone from his back pocket. “Ok, what’s your number?”

“My number?”

“Yeah, so we can talk about the show?” His right eyebrow was arched

higher than the other.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s 967-1101.” I watched as he tapped the digits into his contact list.

Two seconds later, my phone buzzed in my bag. “That’s me. Just save my number.”

Standing in the cold hallway of Manning, I felt my resistance to my unwanted partner warm a few degrees. Maybe he was genuinely interested in trying to share the responsibility for this God-awful project.

“After you watch a few episodes, let me know what it’s about.”

Ok, maybe not.

“Are you serious? If you think I’m going to do this project for you, you’re wrong, Beau Anderson.”

“Whoa. I was kidding.” He backed up and threw his hands in the air. “You’re not much for jokes are you?”

Embarrassed, I tried to keep my cheeks from turning a bright rosy pink—the color my mom always said was the telltale sign I was wrong about something. “Right. Yeah, I knew that. Ok. Let’s just text or something after we’ve watched some episodes.”

I headed for the door. I had to get away from Beau. At least he didn't remember me from last week; I realized that was actually a blessing. I was completely off today and everything coming out of my mouth was either bitchy or entirely dumb—neither one a part of my personality. I had even stumbled through the cold reading I did for Derek's new play this morning.

I pushed on the door's handle bar and shoved forward, taking in a deep breath of cold air. I jogged down the Manning Hall stairs.

“London, hold up.”

I swiveled toward him, catching a patch of ice with my heel. There was nowhere to go but down. My arms flew out, trying to grab the railing, but I landed on my bottom.

Beau raced down the stairs and knelt next to me on the brick sidewalk. “Hey, you ok?”

This time my right hip was definitely going to bruise. How many beatings could one petite body take? I was barely over five feet tall. There wasn’t that far to fall, but man, it hurt when I did.

His hand was under my elbow, encouraging me to sit up. “Wait a minute.

I know how I recognize you.” A smile spread across his face. “You’re the girl who walked into my bike the other night in the quad.”

Oh no. He did remember.

CHAPTER THREE

“London, you’re the most graceful person I know. You took professional ballet lessons. I’ve never seen you fall. Like, ever.” Nina was busy preparing a homemade icepack for me with a plastic bag and some ice tray cubes.

I managed to hobble into our one-story brick house and plant myself on the couch. I needed more than ice after the performance I gave today.

“I *used* to be the most graceful person you knew. I can’t remember the last time I fell. Probably when I learned to ride my bike.” I winced as she held the

icepack on my leg.

“At least it’s not bikini season. That’s going to look terrible.”

“Thanks.” She was right. I could already feel a goose-egg size knot forming under my jeans.

“Tell me. What’s the project? I’ve got some time before I have to catch the bus for lab.” She had collected a few throw pillows from around the living room and handed them to me on the couch.

Just the mention of Communication 224 sent a wave of nausea through my system.

“It’s terrible. I don’t know what I’m going to do. The nutty professor used an experimental computer program to pair us off in class. Then each group was assigned a reality show for the semester. We have to prove whether the show is real or just part of Hollywood commercialism by living out the show. She told us to *be* it. Whatever that means.”

“Really? That’s it? What show did you get?” Nina’s eyes lit up. She would have been perfect for the assignment. She was America’s resident reality TV fan. The only reason I had even heard of half of the shows was because of her.

“Love Match.”

I should have covered my ears. The squeal from my roommate was the high pitch equivalent of a howling banshee.

“Love Match?” I love that show! The dates are so romantic and the guys are so cute. Everyone falls in love and they travel all over the world. There are private jets and champagne. Oh, you’re so lucky you got that one.” Nina was getting more excited with each detail she shared.

“Calm down. It’s not that great. I didn’t tell you about my partner.”

“Oh, who did you get? Tell me he

is super hot.”

“Beau Anderson.” I moved the pack of ice farther down my thigh.

“Wait. You mean the guy who wrote the bucket list blog?”

“Yeah, but that’s not all. He’s not only Bucket List Guy, he’s also Bike Guy.”

“What? The guy from last week who plowed you down is Beau Anderson and he’s your Communication 224 partner?” Nina was laughing.

“What’s so funny? Are you laughing at me? I’m in pain over here and

panicking about this class.”

“Stop worrying, London. But really, what are the chances you would get paired up with him?”

“It’s not going to be that bad, right? I really need this grade.” And I needed a dousing of Nina’s reassurance.

“You’re going to be fine. *Love Match* is my favorite. I’ll walk you through it, one candlelit step at a time. No worries.” Everyone loved this show.

I was relieved. At least I could count on Nina’s love for bad TV to pull me through.

“Tell me. What’s Beau like? I’ve never seen him.”

I thought about my new partner. With all of the confusion and theatrics in class, I hadn’t really noticed much about him. Well, not much other than he must be a human heater. T-shirts in icy January kind of stood out. Then there were those perfectly sculpted arms. I could feel my cheeks warming again.

“He’s a guy.”

“That’s it?” Nina carried her backpack to the front door. She sounded disappointed.

“Yeah, I mean he looks like any guy on campus. Brown hair, brown eyes. Not that interested in class—you know—a guy.”

“Huh. That’s too bad. I thought that maybe someone who came up with all of that cool stuff on the list would be hot. You know, for your sake.” She giggled and clutched her bus pass.

I wasn’t sure why I held back on the arm details or the dark eyes—they were definitely worth mentioning, but Beau Anderson was just like every other guy I had met in my other classes. They were in school for things unrelated to expanding their academic horizons. I

couldn't see how he was any different.

“No, not hot. Sorry to ruin your little blogger crush. You better go. You'll miss the bus.”

“You sure you're ok by yourself? I can skip lab if I need to stay and help you.”

“I'm good. I think a nap is in order.” I shimmied into the assortment of pillows on the couch. The sun still wasn't shining and it was freezing outside. With both roommates out of the house, a nap was a perfect end to this Bronte-esque afternoon.

“I'm jealous. Ok, I'll see you after

class.” Nina closed the door behind her.

I nestled into the couch and pulled the quilt nicknamed, “ugly quilt,” around my shoulders. Candace’s grandmother had given it to her when we moved into the house last year. The three of us spent the entire summer before our junior year planning our house décor. We wanted it to look retro chic, which is challenging on a college student budget. Candace did her best to fake a smile when she opened the package from her grandmother that arrived during the first week of classes. We laughed so hard that the three of us were in tears making fun of the orange and brown patches sewn together with pink thread. It was never supposed to be

visible in the living room, but after a late night movie fest, I discovered it was comfy and warm. I became the champion defender of Ugly Quilt, and it had a spot on the back of the couch ever since.

My eyes closed, and somewhere in my mind's replay of the awkward meeting with Beau, I fell asleep.

Through the fog of my afternoon nap, I thought I heard the distant sound of my phone ringing. I shoved Ugly Quilt away and fished for my cell on the floor next to the couch.

I swiped at the screen. “Hello?”

“London? Did I wake you up or something?” I didn’t recognize the male voice on the other end of the call.

“Um. Who is this?”

“Beau. Your Comm partner.”

I blinked hard. It was dark outside and I had no idea how long I had been sleeping. My leg was aching, and the icepack Nina had made was a bag of room temperature water.

“Oh yeah. Hey, Beau. What’s up?”
I realized that I didn’t add his number to my contacts after he called me in Manning.

“I was just talking to my roommate, and his girlfriend is over here. Anyway, I told them about *Love Match* and she’s a huge fan.” I was starting to feel like maybe I was the only girl on campus who didn’t watch the dating show. “She said there’s a marathon on tonight on the Timeless Channel. Maybe I could come over and we could watch it. Get caught up before the new season starts.”

I shook the sleepy fog from my head. “Ok. Sounds good. When does it start?”

“In an hour, I think. Where do you

live?”

“I’m off campus, just a few blocks back from Franklin Street off Mallette.”

“Cool. Just text me the address and I’ll see you soon.” He hung up before I could respond.

I saved his number in my contacts, then opened the screen to text him our address. I noticed there were three missed texts from Nina.

Derek needs help with the read throughs. I’ll be at the theater late if you want to meet us.

An hour later, there was another one.

*No one else is here, so don't meet us.
This might be my chance. Hope your leg is
better.*

I tried to picture Nina tearing
Derek away from his playwriting
obsession to focus on her in the Graham
basement. She was probably going to be
there for hours just working up the
courage to make a move on him.

I typed a quick response.

Good luck. I want the deets.

I thought about letting her know
about the impromptu TV date with Beau.
It wasn't a date, it was homework, but I

hesitated. Nina would make something out of it.

I folded Ugly Quilt and placed it back on the couch. I surveyed the room. It was fairly neat. We spent most of our time in our bedrooms and only used the living room to watch TV or movies. Candace was the messiest, so with her out of the house it was easier to keep it presentable. I wondered what Pearce thought of her housekeeping skills.

I boiled a pot of water and tossed in some spaghetti noodles. Within fifteen minutes, I had a gourmet Italian meal ready to eat. I sat at the kitchen table, spinning my pasta on my fork while I

pulled up the bucket list Beau wrote a few weeks ago on my laptop.

Some of the things seemed tame: “Take your picture with Rameses.” Ok, that was one I had always wanted to do. He was the school’s cuddly mascot.

I read one of the items buried in the list: “Hook up in Davis Library.” What? Who was this guy? He actually made a list that encouraged students to shack up on campus at the library—that was ridiculous and gross. I was right when I told Nina he was just like every other guy I met at school.

I continued reading through the

list: “Have a picnic in the arboretum at night.” Ok, that one sounded slightly romantic.

I cleared the table and rinsed my bowl before placing it in the dishwasher. The doorbell rang.

I pulled back the heavy wooden door. Beau stood on the porch under our single lightbulb.

“Hey. Can I come in?”

“Oh yes. Sure. Come on in.”

He breezed past me, tucking his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. He was wearing a T-shirt in our school

colors, light blue.

“Nice place. Do you have roommates?”

“Thanks. Yes. I have two. But they are out right now. Want something to drink?”

Beau took a spot in the middle of the couch and leaned into Ugly Quilt. I fought the urge to reach behind him and grab my cuddle blanket.

“Sure. You have a beer?”

I had no idea if we had any beer. My grocery shopping usually consisted of juice, pasta, and cereal. I thought I

remembered Candace buying some for Pearce just in case he was ever at our house. I shuffled through Chinese food containers and a bag of browning lettuce. There it was. A six pack of tall brown bottles. I grabbed one for my guest, but before I closed the fridge, I picked up a second.

I handed him the cold bottle and watched as he placed the edge of the cap on the coffee table and slapped the lid with his left hand. He tossed the cap in the center of the table and took a swig.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

I followed the same steps as I had seen Beau just perform. Placing the lip of the beer cap on the edge of the table, I whacked the lid with my left hand. Instead of freeing my lid from the bottle, I sent the entire bottle to the floor and with it a bubbly puddle. Well, now he probably knew I had never opened a beer before.

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath while I darted to the kitchen to grab some paper towels. I started mopping up the sticky liquid.

“Here. Let me help you. Looks like you’re having a rough day.” Beau pulled a handful of the towels from my hand.

“First beer?”

“How could you tell?”

“It might have been how you placed the bottle on the table like you were getting ready to perform surgery.” He laughed. “That was serious concentration.”

I took the dripping mess from his hands. “Thanks. I’ll be right back.”

My refillable water bottle was in the drying rack next to the sink. I placed it under the faucet and waited for the water to reach the top. Beer was off the list for tonight. Plus, it was better for my vocal chords to stay hydrated.

When I returned to the living room, Beau had already cued the TV to the Timeless Channel. I took a sip of water and sat opposite of him in the recliner. I eyed Ugly Quilt.

“It’s getting ready to start.”

I watched floating rose petals and candlelight fill the screen. Before the show even began, I had made up my mind—this was not reality.

A handsome blue-eyed man in a tailored silver suit began speaking. “Welcome. I’m your host, Mitch Henderson. On tonight’s episode of *Love*

Match, our bachelor, Toby, is down to three bachelorettes: Roxanne, Julie, and Victoria. But who will he choose? Is Julie's past too much for him to handle? Is Roxanne here for the right reasons? Find out on tonight's dramatic episode of *Love Match*." The montage of date clips flashed across the screen.

I saw Beau take another sip of beer and roll his eyes.

Once the introductory segment was over, the show launched into a date with the bachelor and one of the girls. He walked along the shoreline of a tropical island and stared into the waves while the girl rushed ashore on a jet ski, squealing

and laughing. The two devoured each other in the surf and I thought Toby might dismantle the girl's bikini right there. I grimaced as the petting got heavier. After a few more seconds, they finally jumped on the jet ski and raced out to a yacht, where they spent the day feeding each other grapes, swimming with dolphins, and inhaling champagne.

Beau placed his empty bottle on the table. "Mind if I get another?" It was a commercial break, but I needed a break from the mushy gushy content too.

"Sure. Back of the fridge."

He turned the corner for the

kitchen. My mind paced through options for our project. I had only seen fifteen minutes of the show, but it couldn't possibly be real. I had never seen anyone in real life act like those two.

Beau knocked the top off the beer just as date number two commenced. This time Toby was harnessed to the edge of a cliff overlooking waterfalls, when one of the girls rode up on a horse. She dismounted and jumped into his arms, repelling gear and all. *Wait, did he just shove his tongue down her throat?* He was doing that yesterday with Victoria. Horrified, I watched as he strapped his date into a harness so they could repel down the cliff tandem-style. The poor girl was in tears,

but the hunky bachelor assured her if they could get through this, their relationship could handle anything. I wanted to ask him if it could handle Victoria and Roxanne.

With only twenty minutes left in the show, Toby met his third date of the episode in a classic convertible. Roxanne jumped and clapped when he revved the engine and slid across the hood to spin her around in his arms. The short sundress she had on flared up and I was sure his hand was under that skirt. I kept my eyes straight ahead and didn't look at Beau. Toby and Roxanne spent the day in a field of wild flowers, sorting through the most perfectly packed picnic basket I

had ever seen. Roxanne even made matching bracelets out of flowers. I choked on my water when Toby promised to keep it forever. He tucked it in the pocket over his heart.

In the final segment of the show, the three girls stood side by side, holding each other's hand. Toby strolled into the candlelit room with a furrowed brow. He exchanged a handshake with blue-eyed Mitch and presented his beloved trio with a choked up speech. He preceded to hand out roses to two of the girls—the ones that made the cut after the last round of dates. Julie was out and Roxanne and Victoria hugged, knowing they were the final two in the race to win Toby's heart.

“Ok. I don’t think I can watch another episode of this tonight. How many are there?” I looked at Beau.

“I think two more. But I know he’s going to pick Roxanne.”

“Roxanne? But they had the worst date in the wildflower field. I didn’t see any connection there at all.”

Beau laughed. “For someone who’s never watched this, you’re kinda into it.”

“No. Not into it. It’s just we watched the whole episode and I didn’t see anything between them. Besides, how do you know he chooses Roxanne in the

end?”

“My roommate’s girlfriend told me. Victoria is the new bachelorette. She’s the one we’ll be watching all season when the episodes start next week.”

“Oh.” I had no idea how this show worked and I was probably more confused now that I had seen an episode. Nina needed to help me with this.

“Do you have any ideas for the project? We have to prove if this is real or not—and include class theory,” he added.

This couldn’t be real. How could Toby have been with all three of those girls and then propose to just one at the

end? The show had to be a concocted phony. People don't fall in love like that.

"It's fake. It has to be." I was certain. "I know acting when I see it. I've been on stage long enough to know those people aren't having real feelings."

"I agree. But how do we prove it?"

"Hear me out. This might sound crazy." I couldn't believe what I was getting ready to say. "You know how Professor Garcia wants us to *be* the show? What if we date?"

"What?" Beau sat up.

"Not really date, but date like they

do on the show. We'll try to go on the same kind of dates they do and we'll prove that you can't force people to have feelings just by putting them in romantic situations. Since neither of us believes it's real, we're going into this on the same page."

"Yeah. Yeah, it could work. We copy their dates each week."

"We'll work in some theory from class. And we can even blog about it. That can be our social media component. I'll write about the date from a girl's perspective and you give the guy's take. It's perfect."

“I’m in.”

“Good. We have a deal.”

“Yep.” Beau raised his beer to my water bottle until they tapped.

I smiled. I could see the A for Communication 224 on my transcript now.

CHAPTER FOUR

Beau and I had watched the first two episodes of the new season of *Love Match* and tonight was our first fake date. We had settled on going to the West End Wine Bar and then a pottery-painting place.

Victoria, the newest bachelorette on *Love Match*, had already been on countless dates with her collection of suitors. Most of the dates were completely out of the question for us, like singing on stage with Bon Jovi or acting as stunt doubles in a movie. We suffered through the episodes, waiting for a date that had some kind of plausibility for our college

budget.

There were still twenty minutes before I had to meet Beau. I stood in front of the mirror debating my outfit. I opted for skinny jeans, leather boots, and a fitted sweater. It only took me a few extra minutes to curl my hair so that it cascaded down my shoulders in long layers.

“Wow-za. Look at you.” Nina whistled as she walked up behind me.

“It’s just a fake date. Don’t get excited.”

“You look pretty hot for a fake date. Where are you two going?”

“Wine bar and then the pottery place. Do I look too dressed up? I don’t want to look like I’m dressed up.” I started pulling on my sweater, thinking maybe it clung to my curves more than I had intended.

“You look amazing. He’ll like it.”
Nina winked at me.

“I don’t care if he likes it. We’re group partners. This isn’t a real date. You know that, right?”

My roommate stuck out her bottom lip. “I can dream, can’t I? You haven’t been on a date since last semester,

London. Why not try him out?”

I didn't need Nina to remind me how things ended with my ex. I chose plays and rehearsals over movie nights and parties. It made sense that dating someone else involved in drama would be a great fit, but even he didn't get me. Acting was only a college hobby for him.

“I am perfectly ok with my love life. I'm leaving for California in a few months. There's no point in even trying to date someone right now. And Beau Anderson is not that person.”

“What's wrong with him?”

I ran my hands through my hair to

give it an extra shake of volume before spraying it with a light mist of hairspray. “I didn’t say there is anything wrong with him. There just isn’t anything about him. He’s just a normal, regular guy.”

“Um. Ok, whatever you say. Not everyone is an artist or an actor. There are guys in the world who are interesting even if they aren’t involved in theater. Why don’t you just date him?”

I shot Nina a don’t-mess-with-me stare.

“I get it. You don’t want to date right now. Not a nobody. Not a theater guy. But, speaking of theater guys, I’m

going to call Derek and see if he needs any help with the play.”

I thought about telling my friend to give it up. Derek hadn't returned a single advance and all he did was take advantage of her willingness to help his artistic crises. I liked him but enough was enough.

“London, did you hear something?” Nina scrambled off my bed in the direction of the muffled sound.

I followed her to the living room. Candace stood in the middle of the room with her hands covering her face.

“Candace, what's wrong? Are you

ok?” I questioned my distraught roommate. We huddled around her.

Sobbing into her hands, I thought I heard her say something about a breakup.

“Sweetie, we can’t understand you. Here, sit down.” I led her over to the couch. “What happened?”

“He said it’s over, that he just can’t see where this is going.” She wiped her nose on her sleeve. “How can he not see a future for us? What is he even saying?”

I pulled her against my shoulder, grateful my sweater was black. “Pearce doesn’t know what he’s saying. You’re

going to be fine. You'll be over him in no time."

Candace wailed into my shoulder. "But I don't want to be over him."

"Shhh. Shhh. You're going to be ok. We'll get some ice cream and make it a girls' night. Right, Nina?"

"You've got your date. You're going to be late meeting Beau. I'll stay with Candace. You go."

Candace perked up. "Date? London, how did I not know you have a date? Oh yeah, I guess because I haven't been here. I've spent the past few weeks with Pearce. A good friend would know

you have a date.” She started crying again.

“It’s not a date. It’s a project for my Comm class. I can cancel it. This is more important.”

“I’ve been the worst roommate and the worst friend. I don’t know what’s going on with either of you. I haven’t done any of my work for the play.” She sniffed. “How can you even stand me? Pearce can’t. Do you believe he said that to me? He can’t stand me.”

Nina handed her a tissue and stroked her blond hair. “Candace, we don’t think that at all. We love you and we know you’re here for us if we need

you.”

I walked to my room to search for my phone. If I texted Beau now, I could still catch him before he made it to the bar.

It had been well before Christmas since the three of us had a night together at the house alone. Candace might be feeling like crap now, but Nina and I could get her through this. She and Pearce hadn't been together long enough for her to be so wrapped up in him. A girls' night would put everything back in perspective.

I walked to the living room. “Why

don't we make sundaes or brownies?" I stopped. Standing in our living room was a towering muscled athlete with his arms around my tear-stained roommate. Nina was planted on the couch, looking as dumbfounded as I felt.

"Hi, Pearce."

"Sup, London?" He didn't make eye contact with me. He was focused on Candace. He brushed her tears away with his thumb.

Before I could ask what in the hell was going on, she took him by the hand and lead him down the hall to the bedroom that hadn't been slept in, in

several weeks.

I shrugged my shoulders in defeat at Nina. Candace had been sucked back into the portal that was Pearce Hudson. We probably wouldn't see her again for another month or until the next time Pearce broke up with her.

“Can you believe that shit?” Nina fumed.

“There's nothing we can do about it. She's crazy about him.”

“Yeah, psycho crazy. Does he have some kind of mind control over her? I'm going to go down there and tell him what I think.”

“Hold on, Nina. You don’t want to go in there. Just think what they’re doing.” I blushed a little knowing Pearce and Candace were in makeup sex heaven.

“You’re right, but I’m done with this. Next time he breaks up with her, I’m not fetching tissues or chocolate.” She crossed her eyes and cast an evil eye down the hall toward Candace’s door. “You better go. You’re late to meet Beau.”

“Shit. I am. Ok. I’ll be home later. Not too late.”

“You should stay out all night. See what happens on one of those *Love Match*

dates.” My persistent roommate giggled.

“You’re not going to give this up, are you?” I hugged her and left for my first fake date.

Date One: Paint the Town Blue

Beau was already at the bar, where they kept wine on tap. I showed my ID at the door to the bouncer, and walked up to my non-date for the evening. Tapping him on the shoulder, I waited for him to turn around.

He had forgone his usual T-shirt attire for a light blue, long-sleeve, button-

up shirt. The sleeves were a little tight on his arms. It even looked like he had run some kind of gel through his hair. It was styled and I smelled a hint of aftershave.

“London. You made it. I was getting ready to text you. Thought you stood me up on our first date.” He smiled.

“It’s not a real date.” I didn’t mean to say it like that. I kicked myself and checked my inner bitchy meter.

Unfazed, he continued. “I know. It’s a fake date. Here. I got a glass of wine for you.” He reached across the bar and handed me a glass of something red.

“Thanks.”

“Let’s go up on the roof.” He started walking toward the iron staircase.

“But, it’s January. It’s freezing.”

“You’ll be fine. There are heaters up there. Plus, when do they ever have a date on *Love Match* when they aren’t on a rooftop?”

“Good point.” I grudgingly followed my partner up the spiral stairs.

Beau opened the door for me to walk out into the cold Chapel Hill night. I caught my breath. The rooftop was empty. Sparkly lights draped the

perimeter and a few scattered heat lamps dotted the patio.

“How about over here?” Beau pointed to a table.

I gently placed my wine glass down and sat directly under the heat lamp. The warmth from the glowing tower was enough to keep me from shivering.

“I’ve never been up here.” I looked up. The sky was crystal clear and the stars glimmered overhead. I glanced over the edge of the brick wall to see the street sprawl out in front of us. A couple walked just below us holding hands.

“It’s pretty cool.” Beau shifted in

his seat and took a sip of the wine.

“Did you do the reading yet for this week? I couldn’t believe it was on how reality TV romances gear subject matter to appeal to the female demographic. It’s the perfect article to use for the project.”

“Do you always talk about class?”

“What do you mean?”

“London, look around. We’re the only people on top of the wine bar. That down there is Franklin Street—one of the most famous college streets in the country. We’re seniors. Just take it in.”

He swirled the wine around in the bowl-like glass.

Beau caught me off guard. I wasn't expecting a lecture on seizing the moment. "Wait. Is this one of the things on your list?"

He leaned into the table and smiled. "No. But what does it matter?"

"It doesn't. You're right. It's a beautiful night." I took another sip of my wine and felt it warm me down to my toes.

"Something bothering you? You've seemed a little off since you got here."

Being a little off was becoming a trend whenever I was around Beau. I wasn't sure if the wine had already gone to my head, but I told him why I was late arriving to our non-date.

“It's one of my roommates. She's dating a football player and they broke up for about five minutes. I thought she would figure out he's just using her, but she took him back. It's depressing seeing someone you care about be treated that way.”

“That sucks. Who is she dating?”

“Pearce Hudson.”

“Whoa. You know Pearce Hudson?”

“Try not to sound so excited. He’s really a dick and I hate how he treats my friend.” My mood was souring the rooftop atmosphere.

“He’s only the best wide receiver to ever play at Carolina.” I shot him a be-careful stare. “But sorry to hear he’s such an asshole to your roommate.”

I laughed. “Thanks. That actually makes me feel better. Now, if only we could get Candace to see it.”

“Well, do you want some

unsolicited advice?”

I looked at him cautiously, although I was dying to know his male perspective on this problem. “Sure. What should I do?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? That’s your helpful advice?”

“If he really is a jerk, she will eventually figure it out and then she’s going to need you to help her do whatever girls do to get over asshole boyfriends. Drink wine. Eat chocolate or something. The point is, if you interfere now, you won’t get to be that person for

her when she really needs you.”

I was surprised. It was exactly the advice Nina and I needed but couldn't hear through all of the Pearce drama. “That's really—sweet, I guess.”

“I have my moments.” He winked. “What about you? Are you dating the quarterback?”

I almost spit my wine out. “No, I'm not dating a football player.” I wished I had said I wasn't dating anyone. Suddenly, I wanted Beau to know I was single. Although, it shouldn't matter. It didn't matter. He didn't need to know my personal love life status. I abandoned

clarifying my relationship situation and focused on my wine drinking. He had chosen an excellent merlot.

He raised his glass. “Since we’re supposed to be mimicking *Love Match*. Let’s make a toast.”

Every date on that show had no less than three toasts. They were always toasting to true love, finding forever, or dreaming big.

“Do you have something in mind?”

“How about to making it count?”

“Isn’t that a quote from *Titanic*?” I would be surprised if he had seen the

epically tragic movie.

“I don’t know. It sounds like something they would say on the show.”

I inhaled the icy January air and raised my glass until it tapped Beau’s.

“To making it count.” I smiled at him over the rim of my glass. His eyes were locked on mine. A little chill rippled through my chest and it wasn’t from the air. I was completely caught off guard.

“You sure you’re ok, London?”

I nodded vigorously, trying to convince myself more than Beau.

“All right. We’ve got two parts to this not-date. Ready to go paint some pottery?”

“Um. Yes. Let’s do that.”

Beau was standing next to the table with a hand extended. I hesitated, for a second, but placed my hand in his.

“Ok. Pottery Paints. Here we come.”

During last week’s episode, Victoria took five of her suitors to a pottery shop where the men painted various figures in an effort to capture the eye of the bachelorette. By the end of the

date, the guy with the best piece of art received a rose and some special one-on-one time. Beau and I laughed at the guys' attempts to make a bisque model car or frog look like anything other than an elementary school project.

Pottery Paints, the studio on Franklin Street, was brightly lit. Across one wall was an assortment of plain, untouched clay molds. On the opposite wall were the finished products of the customers who had spent time in Pottery Paints.

I selected a canister with a lid that had a small bird perched on top. I watched Beau as he scanned the choices.

He reached for a plate.

“What are you going to paint on there?” I asked.

“I thought I’d go ahead and make the commemorative championship plate.” He started sorting through the various shades of blue on display.

“What kind of championship?”

For a second, I thought there was something on my face. His shocked expression had me brushing my cheeks.

“What kind of championship? Girl, you’re at the mecca for college basketball. I’m talking about our championship.”

“Oh. Ok. Cool.” I sat on the bench next to him.

“Well, I learned something about you tonight.” His voice was playful.

“What’s that?”

“You are definitely not a sports fan.”

“I guess it’s that obvious.” Part of me wished I had been more observant growing up around so many sports fans, but I was always more interested in reading or watching a Lauren Bacall movie.

“Uh-huh.” He was penciling in a victory slogan on the plate. “Should I quiz you on the difference between off sides versus a false start?”

“No, no, no. I admit, I know nothing. I kind of burned out on all the sports frenzy as a kid.”

“So what do you do for fun?”

I thought that maybe he already knew. “I’m an actress. Maybe you’ve seen some of my shows on campus.”

“Doubt it.”

I laughed. “You haven’t been to any plays on campus? None?”

“I had to go to a few my freshman year as a lab requirement for Drama 15, but since then I haven’t been to any. Are you any good?”

I noticed the bird on top of my canister was the same blue he was using for the lettering on his plate. I wasn’t sure how to answer that question. “Why don’t you come to one of the shows and see for yourself?”

“Really?” He stopped painting and looked up.

“Yes. We can do something after. Maybe one of the *Love Match* dates. We’ll

blog about it.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t tell if he was disappointed. Did I say the wrong thing?

“Our new play, *Spoiled Hearts*, opens in two weeks. I’ll email you the showtimes.”

“Wait. Isn’t that Valentine’s Day weekend?”

Shit. I hadn’t thought about that. “I guess so. Do you have other plans? We can do it another time.”

“No. Between marking things off my list, going to class, writing my blog, and fake dating you, I don’t have

Valentine's plans.”

His answer made me unexpectedly giddy. I had never bothered to ask him if he had a girlfriend—it shouldn't matter in a pretend relationship. However, all of a sudden, I was satisfied knowing he had an open calendar.

“Do you think they'll want to sell this awesome plate?” He held up his masterpiece, littered with number ones and Carolina blue paint.

I cringed. “I think they'll probably let you keep that one.”

We dropped off our painted pieces with the girl at the counter. She told us it

would be a week before they would be glazed and fired. We could pick them up then.

Beau opened the door for me as we exited the pottery studio. I pulled my coat around me tightly and rubbed my arms.

“Do you need a ride or something?” Of course, he wasn’t wearing a coat, but I thought I saw him shiver.

“I walked. I’m only a few blocks away.”

“What kind of bachelor would I be if I let you walk home? It’s late. I’ll take you.”

“Ok. Where are you parked?”

“Right here.”

He pointed to a black and chrome motorcycle wedged between two giant SUVs. He handed me a helmet as he climbed on the bike. With a flick of the wrist, the bike roared to life.

“Coming?” He patted the seat behind his back.

I had never been on a motorcycle before. They were noisy and scary. I was sure my mom would have a heart attack if she saw me climbing on the bike right now. I slid one leg over the side until my

body aligned with Beau's. I tried to sit up straight, so I wasn't pressed so close to him.

“Hold on tight.”

He grabbed my hands and locked them around his chest. The muscles under his shirt felt as hard as I imagined. Wait, I hadn't imagined what they would feel like, had I?

He walked us backward and then revved the bike forward, leaving the wine bar and Pottery Paints behind us. Funny, I was freezing, but I loved the bike. I felt free, even wrapped around Beau.

Within minutes, he pulled into my

gravel driveway. Not sure how long I should keep my hands on his chest, I dropped the embrace as soon as he took off his helmet.

“Thanks, Beau. I had fun tonight.” I hesitated before handing him the helmet. I didn’t know how fake dates were supposed to end. Nina’s nagging voice echoed in the back of my head. She would want me to invite him in. Instead, I spun on my heels and walked toward the front door. “See you in class.”

“Night, London.” He revved the engine a few times and spun out of the driveway.

What was it I called Beau only a few hours ago? Regular? After our fake date tonight, I wasn't sure that was entirely true. I watched his taillights round the corner. I needed to get inside, start working on the blog, and stop thinking about Beau Anderson.

CHAPTER FIVE

Beau didn't strike me as the type of overachieving student that I had always been. He seemed too cool and calm, as if nothing ever worked him up. When he texted me the morning after our wine and pottery date, I did a double take.

Finished my blog. Check it out.

His work was finished before mine. Nervously, I logged into the site he had created for us on Blog Hits and read his rendition of our fake date.

First Date: Re-creation of Victoria and Bachelors painting pottery and private wine bar

party

Show Myth to Debunk: Mandatory fun and alcohol consumption create bonding moments, bringing couples closer together

This is my first blog chronicling the Love Match dates I'm going on each week with my Comm 224 partner, London James. For those of you who have read my other blogs, you know I don't hold back—I'm honest and to the point. Expect nothing less from my accounts during this project.

London and I met at the wine bar. My date was late. I guess it wasn't too far off from a real date. When is a girl ever ready on time? After we ordered a glass of wine, we sat on the

upper terrace. We had the entire rooftop to ourselves. This is the part of the show when the bachelors usually reveal something private and revealing about themselves. And this sudden revelation of true deep dark secrets is supposed to bring the couple closer together. That didn't happen with us.

Hmm. I nervously read the last line. I didn't share much with Beau on the rooftop, but talking to him about Candace and Pearce did make me feel a little closer to him. Maybe I was only divulging the troubles in my roommates' lives, but it felt like opening the door to something. Like I could tell him more—tell him about my parents or about the problems with the play, or just talk about

anything and he would listen. I reread the words and wondered if he was trying to protect Candace's privacy or if the exchange just didn't have the same effect on him.

Next up, we walked over to Pottery Paints. To do what? You guessed it: paint some pottery. I made an awesome championship plate. Pics to be posted soon. I discovered my date isn't a sports fan. I know there are a lot of girls out there who don't like sports, so guys, this can happen to anyone. Once I knew that, it was hard to come up with other things to talk about. Little bonding commenced over painting.

After the first date re-creation, I can say with confidence that after date one, we are

sticking to our hypothesis: the show is a complete fake. Until next week's dating report—B.A.

What? I didn't know what I expected him to write, but reading those words made the whole date seem like a terrible evening. It wasn't terrible. I liked the rooftop, and his funny plate drawing, and he left out the part where I rode behind him on the motorcycle with my hands planted on his firm chest. Ok, maybe he didn't need to add that part.

My phone buzzed.

Have you read it yet?

I wanted to be cool and casual like Beau. Technically, there wasn't anything

wrong with what he had written. It was all true. Why was I even debating the merits of his blog? I should be relieved I had found a partner who was as committed to the project as I was. We would certainly win over Professor Garcia with our dating accounts. That was all I needed—an A for graduation.

He eagerly texted me again.

I nailed the theory for this week. What do you think? Should I change it?

He did make sure to bring in the theory we were focused on debunking. It didn't make sense to argue with him or make a big deal out of nothing.

It's great. Loading my post now.

This whole dating scenario was fake, but the feelings bouncing around in my chest felt real. The opposite of what I wanted.

Date Two: Muscles and Margaritas

Dressing for this non-date was more complicated than last time. We were trying to combine two dates since I had to take some time for extra rehearsals for *Spoiled Hearts*. Beau seemed easygoing about the schedule and had come up with an athletic, night out mix-up. I was

already doubting my physical abilities. It was hard to deny that the nearness of Beau seemed to throw off all of my training and innate talents.

I waited for him outside of Fetzer Gym. In a matter of seconds, I heard the roar of his bike. He pulled up to the front and threw down the kickstand.

“Ready to climb a wall?” He looked eager and energized.

“I guess so. I’ve never climbed before.”

“Piece of cake. You’ll do great.” He locked his helmet to the side of the bike.

I followed him into the gym, scanning my student ID as we passed by the counter. The gym's policy required all students to pass a Belay Test before climbing the wall. I had never taken a single Belay prep session, but Beau had a way around the obstacle. One of his friends worked at the gym and said I could climb.

Last week, Victoria had taken Chris and Ed on a two-on-one repelling date. Each one of the bachelors, in his own way, had helped her face her darkest fears of heights, unidentified spiders, and helmet hair. During the entire episode, I couldn't help but think Victoria was exaggerating the terror of the mountain

wall. It looked like it was all just an act to get the men to wrap their arms around her. How scary could it be to climb down something that you were belted and strapped in to? That show was so fake.

“Ready to do this?” I looked over and Beau was already halfway in his gear.

“Sure.” I stepped over so that the gym assistant could start wrapping my legs, arms, and waist in harness straps. The tighter the straps became, the more I started to worry.

I watched as Beau jumped and reached for the highest bolt and began scrambling up the wall. It looked

effortless as his arms and legs moved from peg to peg. He was almost at the top of the wall before I took hold of my first anchor. I pulled up, trying to find the next ledge to support my foot. This was harder than it looked. Beau waited for my painstakingly slow ascent.

“Glad you could make it, movie star. Ready to head back down?” He looked over his shoulder and flashed me a smile.

My eyes followed his target and I realized how far from the ground we really were. The people at the bottom of the wall looked like there were toddlers. *Holy shit.* My palms started sweating and

my mouth went dry.

“London? You ok? You look like you just saw a ghost.”

“We’re high, Beau. Up here. We’re really high.” I closed my eyes tightly and tried to breathe through my nose, but couldn’t tell if I was getting any air, my head was fuzzy.

“Whoa. Hold on. You’re fine. Don’t worry. We’re going to get down from here together.”

I’m not sure how he moved behind me since my eyes were closed, but I felt his arms slip under mine and his chest was resting tightly against my back.

“Just take a deep breath, and we’ll walk down the wall together.” His voice was reassuring.

I felt my body lean into his as I exhaled a pent-up breath.

“Good. You’re doing great. Keep breathing just like that. Here we go. You can hold on to me if you need to. We’re headed down now.”

I grabbed his arm. It was taut and strong.

What seemed like at least thirty minutes passed before both my feet were firmly planted on the Fetzner Gym floor. I

unwrapped myself from Beau's protective cage before unclipping the harness. I grabbed my bag and headed straight for the locker room.

The few handfuls of water I splashed on my face steadied my nerves. I looked at my reflection. I was pale. I pinched my cheeks and used a few scratchy paper towels to dry my face. Luckily, I had brought a change of clothes. These were sticky from my sudden panic attack. I changed as quickly as I could and ran back out to Beau, hoping I didn't look as horror-stricken as I felt.

"You ok?" His dark eyes looked

pitiful. Had he been out here the whole time worrying about me?

I smiled. “Yes. I feel like an idiot, or should I say exactly like Victoria? Isn’t this what happened to her in the last episode? It took two bachelors to coax her down the cliff. I’m starting to think I shouldn’t have been so hard on her. I’m sorry I freaked out up there.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. No big deal. Happens to everyone. You were great. You made it down in one piece.” He smiled. “I don’t know if you’re still up for it, but since we’ve got another doubleheader planned, what do you say to Margarita Madness at La Playa?”

“Si, señor. I could use one of those.”

La Playa was one of the lesser-known Mexican restaurants in town. Actually, I had never heard of it. But Beau said they had ninety-nine-cent margarita specials and karaoke tonight, so it seemed like the perfect addition to our fake dating escapades.

I waited in the booth while Beau ordered two fish bowl-sized margaritas on the rocks. He laughed with the bartender, and they both glanced at the

pretty blonde singing *Total Eclipse of the Heart*. She was belting out the notes, managing to stay on pitch despite the guys at the table in front of her catcalling her every move.

Beau placed a frosty margarita in front of me then slid into the opposite side of the booth.

“What do you think of La Playa?”

I looked around at the red pepper lights hanging from the ceiling and our entertainment. “It’s good. I like it. Anything that’s about the beach and the sun sounds good to me.” I took a gulp of the lime drink. I still felt a little on edge

after the rock wall fiasco.

“I feel bad about the wall. I shouldn’t have pushed you to climb. I guess there is a reason they want people to pass the test before climbing.”

“Beau, it’s not your fault. I didn’t know until I got to the top that I was afraid to climb back down. Don’t worry about it. I hope your friend isn’t going to get in any kind of trouble for breaking the rules for me.”

“He will be fine. I don’t think anyone knew what was going on at the top of the wall. Still, I feel bad—it wasn’t cool. What’s something you like to do?”

He made a bitter face as he sipped the salty rim of the drink.

I looked over at the perky blonde wrapping up her song. A wicked idea entered my mind.

“You would make it up to me?” I asked sweetly.

“Sure. Yeah. I feel terrible. Do you have something in mind?”

“Come with me.” I grabbed his arm and yanked on him as I headed for the makeshift platform that represented the La Playa karaoke stage.

“Uh-oh. No way. I’m not singing.”

His feet were planted firmly in front of the step.

The blonde handed me the mic and I walked over to the DJ to request our song.

“Beau Anderson, you scared me half to death at the top of that rock climbing wall, this is the least you could do.”

In defeat, he hung his head and joined me on the stage. “If I’m getting ready to humiliate myself, did you at least pick a cool song?”

I didn’t have time to answer. The intro started and I saw sheer panic rise in

his eyes.

“The *Dirty Dancing* song? Are you trying to kill me?”

I didn't answer and launched into the words to *Time of My Life*. I pointed at the screen so Beau could follow along. He stumbled through the lyrics, but after the chorus, I could tell he was getting into it. When we were finished, we had a standing ovation. La Playa liked our Johnny and Baby version of the song.

“See? That wasn't so bad.” I laughed as we returned to our booth and the drinks.

“London, you are crazy.” He chugged the giant drink. “I have never been on a karaoke stage and I don’t plan on getting on one again.”

“Aw, that’s too bad. You were pretty good up there.” I giggled. Where were my friends with their constant video recording when I needed them?

“You, on the other hand, can sing. Why didn’t you tell me you could sing like that?”

“I told you I’m an actress. What, you thought that was specific only to speaking parts? I can sing, dance, act—you name it—I can do it on stage.”

“Really?”

The margarita was delicious. For ninety-nine cents, I wanted another. I waved down the bartender and circled my hand over my head so he knew to bring us another round.

“Yep. There’s nothing else I want to do. It’s in my being. As soon as graduation is over, I’m packing and moving to L.A.”

“Wow. That’s commitment. You even sound like an actress. Don’t you think that’s a little dramatic? You sure you want to go all in? Sounds pretty risky

to me.”

I finished off my drink. “You sound like my roommate, Nina. But I don’t have any doubts. Especially because I know this is what I’m meant to do. I can’t be a teacher or doctor or accountant. This is it. You may have seen me wipe out in the quad, fall in front of Manning, fail at beer opening, and have a panic attack in Fetzer Gym, but when I’m on stage I’m unstoppable. I was born to be an actress.”

The waiter dropped off our second round. I downed a few sips.

“What about you, Beau? Are you

going to be a professional bucket list blogger?”

“Ha. Ha. Funny. For such a sweet girl, you’re a smartass sometimes.”

I smiled at him and felt the corners of my mind feeling warm and fuzzy from the drink.

“Actually, I’m pre-law.”

“Really? You don’t seem like the lawyer type.”

He leaned back in his seat. “I don’t know what you think that type is, but I’ve already been accepted to law school for the fall semester. I’m going straight

through. It must make me the lawyer type.”

“Let me guess. Your dad is a legacy. He has a big law firm in Raleigh and he’s already offered you a position as soon as you graduate. You’ll make partner in less than five years and he’ll hand over the keys to the firm by the time you’re thirty so he can start an early retirement.” I licked the salt from the rim of my glass.

“Someone thinks they have me all figured out.”

“Don’t I?” I had courage flowing through my veins. It was fun flirting and sparring with him.

“Pretty close. But it’s my mom, not my dad who is the attorney. The family business is in Wilmington, and if the past four years are any indication of me getting a job there, I’m going to have to do more than just show up with a law degree.”

“What does that mean?”

“Let’s just say I haven’t been the perfect A student, like some of us.” He eyed me over his glass. “It’s one of the reasons I’m in Comm 224. I heard it was an easy A.”

“Where did you hear that? All I’ve heard about are the crazy projects.”

“Yeah. But I don’t have to study. There aren’t any tests. I just go to class and the project is coming together. My last semester here is all about living it up. We’re seniors—we never get this time back. Don’t you just want to do something big?”

“Are you talking about your bucket list again?”

“No, not necessarily. I mean leave your own legacy. Surprise people.”

That was the only cue I needed. Laughing, I slid out of the booth.

“London, I’m not going up there

with you again,” Beau called out to me as I hopped on the stage. I rescued the crowd from a trio trying to sing a bad Village People song.

A light round of applause sounded as I grabbed the mic. I covered it and whispered to the DJ.

“Ok, La Playa, this is a very special song, for a very special friend of mine. Someone who told me I should seize the moment and surprise people. Mr. Beau Anderson. Right over there. Yep, there he is. This one’s for you, Beau.”

He ducked down and slid lower in the booth.

I lowered my head as the sounds of piano notes filled the cantina. The music pushed the lyrics forward and I started singing *Stay*. This was by far my favorite Rihanna song and I had sung it a hundred times in the shower. Tonight, I was going to share it with the world—the world according to La Playa.

The song ended and I curtsied, handed the mic back to the DJ, and rejoined Beau.

“London James, ladies and gentlemen. Full of surprises.” He raised his glass to me.

I laughed and finished off my

margarita. “Another round?”

“Oh no. I think it’s time we call it a night.”

Disappointed, I picked up my bag. I couldn’t keep the words bottled up. Tequila was an unwelcome filter eraser. “Why? You have a hot date or something?”

Beau’s eyebrow raised higher than the other one. “No. I have an intramural game tomorrow and I can’t stay out all night drinking with my Comm partner.”

“Oh.” I felt silly. “What sport?”

“It’s basketball. The championship

game is tomorrow and I want to get that T-shirt.”

“T-shirt?”

Beau sighed. “I keep forgetting. You don’t know about sports. There’s a championship for all the intramural teams. The winners get an intramural T-shirt. It *is* one of the things on my bucket list. I’ve played sports four years here and never won the grande prix of shirts. Tomorrow’s the day.”

He maneuvered me toward the exit of La Playa. This was only my third motorcycle ride, but I already felt like an expert. I swung my leg over the side and

clipped my helmet on, pulling snugly on the chin strap.

The bike roared into the gravel drive. Nina had left the porch light on for me. It was unlikely Candace was home.

“Thanks for the rock climbing and the margaritas, Comm partner.” I tried to attach the helmet to the seat, but I kept missing.

“Um. London, are you drunk?”

“Drunk? Me?” Why couldn’t I put the helmet on the seat? I missed the hook again.

Beau cut the engine on the bike and

dismounted, taking the helmet from my hand and magically hooking it to the backseat.

“Wait, how did you do that?” I was sure the bottom of the helmet was solid and could no longer attach to the seat.

“Let’s get you inside, lightweight.”

Ha. Ha. He called me a lightweight. I’d like to see him try to bench press me. Wait, do I want him to bench press me?

While I was visualizing Beau in the gym on a flat bench with me twisted around a weight bar, he reached for me and scooped me into those ridiculously sculpted arms. This was the second time

tonight he had wrapped me in those limbs of steel.

I was sure the *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack was playing when he nudged open the front door and carried me into the house. He surveyed the room before settling on the couch. He situated me on the cushions and tugged on the heels of my boots. Displaced from my feet, he set them on the floor.

“You still singing?”

Ok, maybe it wasn’t a soundtrack. It was me.

“Oh, Ugly Quilt.” I reached out for

the comfy blanket.

He chuckled. “Ugly Quilt, huh?”
He pulled it from the couch and tucked it around my body.

I pulled the blanket up to my chin and turned toward the wall. The room seemed to spin a little less if I stayed cocooned on my side.

“Good night, movie star.”

I couldn't tell in my tequila haze what happened next, but it felt like he kissed the top of my head before closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER SIX

Theater groups were anything but quiet, and with my pounding hangover headache from last night's margarita mishap, it wasn't the kind of loud I wanted. I sipped on some water, hoping the ibuprofen I had taken would kick in soon.

Derek walked over to where I was sitting on the couch and shoved a few pages in my hand.

“What's this?”

“I rewrote the third act last night. You have new lines. I thought we could

work through some of it today.”

“Derek, we open next Saturday. That’s only one week from today. You think we can do this?”

“There isn’t anyone I trust more to get it done. I wrote it just for you.” The scruffy playwright reached down and tried to hug me from the side.

Nina appeared in the doorway. I pushed out of Derek’s half-hug.

“Hi. Wanna help me with some new lines?” I held up the fresh pages of the script.

Nina plopped down next to me.

“Sure. There are new lines?” She had an accusatory stare pointed at Derek.

I was going to coral him into the conversation, but he retreated to the opposite side of the basement where Doug started asking him lighting questions. I flinched and gripped my head as the lights started flickering all around us. I made a mental note to consume much less tequila.

“That was awkward. What’s going on with you two?” I didn’t know how much Nina would tell me with so many actor ears in the vicinity. Plus, I didn’t want to press her, considering all of the boy drama we were handling with

Candace. I wanted to be her supportive friend, not the pushy one.

“Nothing. Not a thing. That’s the problem.” She sighed as she watched Derek discussing houselights. “But, I heard a certain motorcycle in our driveway last night. How was the date?”

“Ugh. Once again, I made a complete idiot of myself. I mean, I did, and then I didn’t because I was on stage, but then I did again because I got drunk. I’m a disaster when that guy is around.”

Nina giggled. “I think someone has a crush.”

I swatted at her with the newly

written act three. “Do not. That’s the exact opposite point of the project. We are dating to explain that the show doesn’t work. You can’t force two people to like each other on these dates.”

“I’m the *Love Match* expert, and I’m telling you it’s real. Toby and Roxanne were soul mates and so were Dave and Maddie. That show makes happy couples—it’s the real deal.”

“You can go on thinking that, but for this project, I need to disprove it.”

“So are you saying you would date him if you could?”

I paused. The question had been ricocheting in my mind since my first motorcycle ride with Beau. I didn't want Nina to make me think about this anymore.

“No. Stop twisting my words, matchmaker. Besides, Beau is too busy checking things off his bucket list to date anyone.”

“What's he working on now?”

“Well, today he's playing in an intramural tournament to win a T-shirt. Dumb, right?”

“He's in a championship?” Nina

looked shocked.

“Yeah, so?”

“London, that’s a big deal. Why aren’t you going?”

“Wait, you understand that we are fake dating, right? I’m not actually his girlfriend. The blog, the dates, it’s all for the project.”

“Whatever. You need to get your fake girlfriend ass over to that tournament and cheer for him. It’s a big deal to get one of those shirts.”

I held up the script. “I have work to do here. I’m the only one who can

learn my new lines for act three. I have responsibilities.”

“I’ll take care of the tyrant.” Nina motioned to Derek, who was flailing his arms in the air. “You go have fun. Cheer for your fake boyfriend.”

Maybe her suggestion wasn’t so absurd. I could go to the game for a few minutes. Just for moral group partner support. I jumped off the couch, forgetting for a second the headache that had plagued me all morning.

“Thanks, girl.”

“London, wait. Where are you going?” I heard Derek call for me.

I turned toward him as he ran across the basement. “Talk to Nina. Seriously, Derek. Go talk to her.”

“But I thought we were going to work on the material I wrote for you.”

“I’ll be back later. I have somewhere I have to go. Don’t worry. I’m coming back.”

I raced up the stairs and straight to Woolen Gym before he could guilt me into changing my mind.

“Hey. What are you doing here?” A glistening Beau smiled at me. This was

the first time I noticed that a hot and sweaty guy wasn't completely gross. Especially one who smiled like that.

“Is that one of those famous T-shirts? Can I see it?”

Beau tossed the shirt at me and I held it up to admire. “Wow. Pretty awesome. Congratulations. You checked another thing off your list.” I was used to praising my costars, but I wasn't sure what to say to an intramural athlete.

“Thanks. This one means a lot. Let me see that.” He jerked the victory shirt out of my hands.

In slow motion, Beau peeled his

sticky, gray T-shirt from his torso, pulling it over his head while giving me a full visual of all the muscles I thought might exist under there. He fidgeted with the zipper on his gym bag before stashing the wet shirt in a side pocket. He didn't seem to mind standing on the drafty basketball court half naked. I did my best to keep my jaw from dropping.

“Dude. We finally got one.” One of the other players walked up and slapped Beau on the back.

“Yeah, man. It was a longtime coming.” Beau slipped the dry shirt on over his head.

Another sweaty teammate joined the excitement. “That game was tight.”

I stood, watching the guys congratulate each other on their victory. A few other teammates walked up to join the discussion.

Hesitant to interrupt their celebration, I waved over their heads. “I just wanted to see the big game. I’m going to head back to the theater. Rehearsals are intense right now.” I walked backward a few steps before hitting the corner of the bleachers with the back of my knees. *Ouch.*

“London, thanks for coming to the

game.” He waved and huddled back with the other guys.

“Uh. Yeah. Sure thing. See you in class.”

Hoping his teammates didn’t see me stumble into the seats, I turned and headed back to Graham Memorial and my cast mates.

“So, how did it go? Did the fake boyfriend win?” Nina greeted me as soon as I entered the basement.

I sighed. I had been in a funk the entire walk across campus. “Yes. He won.

T-shirt and all.”

“Why are you back here so soon? I thought you’d go out for a victory drink or something on his bike.” She winked.

“No. I showed my support. I didn’t want to let everyone here down. I’ve got lines to work on.”

I noticed the script pages I had dumped on the couch were still lying where I placed them. I snatched them up and started reading the new words Derek created.

“Wait, wait, wait. You’re not getting out of this that easily. What happened? You seem upset—all moody

and gloomy.”

I brushed my bangs to the side and let my shoulders slide. “He was busy. All the guys were excited about the game—I left so they could hang out and celebrate. Isn’t that what good fake girlfriends do?” I tried to smile.

I shouldn’t feel disappointed. Beau and I didn’t have plans. We were free to do whatever we wanted to do on the weekends, and I needed to focus on the play. He had even agreed to put our next date on hold so I could devote more time to rehearsals. I guess part of me thought he might ask me to work on the project, but that was silly. We have other things in

our lives other than Comm 224 and *Love Match*.

“No, that’s perfect. Play hard to get. Give him time with the boys. They love that.” Nina’s smile reached from ear to ear.

“Nina! I’m not after him. There is absolutely no plotting going on here.” I was starting to think she could hear my thoughts. “Now, can you just read through these lines with me?” I sat on the couch, inhaled a deep breath, and practiced my new monologue.

It was almost ten at night by the

time we wrapped rehearsals for the day. It was grueling going through so many runs, but I felt good about what we had accomplished. Derek, as usual, had delivered some amazing dialogue additions. Too bad he couldn't share his creative triumphs with Nina. She was ready to pour on the celebratory lovin'.

My phone vibrated in the back of my bag just as Nina and I were walking out of the basement.

Want to go to the game with me on Thursday?

It was a text from Beau. A swirl of attach butterflies hit my stomach all at

once.

I typed.

What game?

He responded.

Funny

Really, what game?

Maybe I should have asked Nina before I sent that text, but I wasn't sure what he was talking about.

You go to Carolina. It's a basketball game. Date 3.

I had rehearsals Thursday night,

but this project was important. They could handle it if I missed one night.

Ok. I'm in.

*Thanks for coming to my game today.
See you in class.*

I thought before I texted again. What would Victoria text to one of the bachelors? She kept all of those guys hanging on her every word.

See ya

Ok, it wasn't my best text, but it was casual, short, and sweet. My brain was fried after today. An old movie and Ugly Quilt were calling my name.

Date Three: Hoops and Hearts

Sure, I went to a school that was predominantly known for its basketball status in the world of college athletics. It wasn't lost on me that it was a part of the highest echelon and had created arguably one of the most elite programs in the country. However, I just wasn't into sports.

I had turned down tickets to Carolina basketball games for four years. I never participated in the lottery drawings, or camped out for hours before

a game just to sit behind the basket. So why didn't I hesitate for even a second when Beau asked me to go with him?

Fans donned from head to toe in light blue filtered past me. I sidestepped a dad who had his little girl perched on his shoulder. Why did they make cheerleading outfits for people who weren't two feet tall yet? Ok, she was cute with the matching pom-poms. I wasn't even sure I was in the right place at the Dean Dome. He had told me to meet him outside the basketball museum.

This date was going to tie in perfectly with the last episode of *Love Match*. Victoria and the bachelors went to

a San Antonio Spurs practice and failed miserably at team drills. The guy who scored the most points in the game of three-on-three won a ticket with Victoria to go to that night's game. I wasn't sure why the producers thought a sporting event would be romantic. After the buzzer sounded, the bachelorette and her date wandered the borders of the San Antonio Riverwalk and tasted every type of tequila they could sample. I was glad Beau and I already had our margarita night—tequila sounded terrible right now.

“London. Hey!” Beau walked up in a short-sleeve T-shirt and jeans. “Ready? We’ve got to get in if we’re going to get

halfway decent seats.” He handed me a ticket.

“What do you mean? Don’t we have seats?” He was already jogging ahead of me, slipping past the older fans taking their time with the steps.

He stopped in his tracks to look at me. “Haven’t you been to a game before?”

I thought about lying, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to pull off that act tonight. “No. First one.” I smiled brightly.

“Good God, girl. Ok, come on.” He pulled on my elbow and guided me up

the staircase. He launched into a quick rundown of the student seating system. “We have tickets, but they aren’t assigned. The student sections are first come, first serve. If we get here too late, we’ll end up in the rafters. Now that I know this is your first game, we are not sitting in the nosebleed section.”

I was nervous. Sitting in the rafters sounded terrible. I had a quick flash of the rock climbing wall.

After the event staff at the front door scanned our tickets, Beau took off running, pulling me with him. It seemed completely natural that my hand was locked in his. I could hear the horn

section of the band and we funneled down the stairs taking us to the lowest level of the dome.

A man in a yellow T-shirt with an overbearing mustache held up his hand. “Sorry, folks. This section is full. You need to go up there.” He pointed toward the upper level.

I bit my lower lip—I wasn’t sure how high the seats were that he wanted us to sit in, but I didn’t think my stomach or my sweaty palms could handle it.

Beau turned to me. “Give me a sec.”

He slung his arm around the

staffer's shoulder and cupped his hand over his mouth while he talked into the man's ear. The guy looked at me and then smiled. He nodded at Beau.

“I think I miscounted down here. Yep. Two more spots on the other end. Walk around. Enjoy the game.” He patted Beau on the back and climbed a few more rows behind us to help an alumna with her armrest.

Beau took my hand in his warm palm, a gesture that I was starting to like, and lead me to the other side of the student section. We squeezed next to a student whose chest was covered by a painted U. I noticed the boys next to him

had painted torsos as well. A big N and C had been drawn on their chests.

“What did you say to Mustache Man to get him to let us sit here?” I leaned toward Beau’s ear so, hopefully, the lettered fans next to me wouldn’t hear.

“Secret. I can’t you tell you that.” He flashed a smile. “Like the seats?”

I wasn’t going to prod him anymore. I looked around. We were in the heart of the Dean Dome. From my seat, I could see every muscle flinching on the players as they warmed up on the court, the coaches’ scribbling on their

clipboards, and the comic movements of Rameses—who was headed our way.

I pulled out my phone. “Would you take my picture? It’s on the list.”

Beau tilted his head sideways. “You’re marking things off my list for your list?”

“Yes. Quick, take it before I don’t have another chance.” I tugged on the snuggly ram’s arm as he approached my seat. He wrapped his big matted hoof around my shoulder and shot Beau a number one.

“Hold on, Rameses.” Beau tapped the screen on my phone and jumped on

the other side of the mascot. He extended his long arm and clicked a picture of all three of us. “This will look great on the blog.”

“Thanks, Rameses.” I hugged the big mascot before he was tugged in a different direction by another fan. I looked at the picture on my phone. It was the first picture I had of Beau, and I had to keep myself from blushing. He looked cute. We looked cute together, even if there was a big stuffed ram between us.

The buzzer rang out through the building. It was game time. Beau started jumping up and down next to me, and I noticed all of the students looked like

bouncing popcorn.

“Come on, jump, London. Jump around.” He laughed and started bouncing out of control.

It was contagious. I became a jumping bean, mimicking the frenetic energy of the students in our section. I smiled at Beau. This was fun.

“What did you think of your first Carolina basketball game?” Beau and I walked into the crisp February night. I was actually hot after all the jumping and dancing. The air felt good.

“We won. It was awesome.”

“And why was that your first game?”

“I was asking myself the same thing. I feel like I probably missed out on something for four years. That was so much fun. Thanks for taking me.”

“At least you’re not a basketball virgin anymore.”

Good thing my cheeks were already flushed from the cheering frenzy, or hearing Beau mention virginity, even in a sports context, would certainly make me blush. Why was my mind even going

there?

“What do you want to do now?” he asked over the roaring hum of the buses parked in front of the sidewalk. We had made our way to the bottom of the stairs and there was a long line of fans waiting to board the buses.

“Oh, I didn’t know you wanted to do anything else.” He caught me off guard. Was this a continuation of the fake date? I was having a hard time distinguishing between the project and us just being ourselves.

“Right. No. Never mind. You probably have plans. I’ll catch you in class

next week.” He was backpedaling in front of my eyes.

“Wait. I don’t have plans. Let’s do something.”

“Yeah?” He was smiling.

“Yes. But can we go somewhere a little warmer? I’m starting to freeze again.”

He laughed. “All right, movie star. Let’s get you warmed up.”

I liked how he said that. I felt warmer already.

I stood behind Beau at the Caffè Driade counter. I insisted on buying my tea. These were supposed to be fake dates, but so far Beau had bought wine, margaritas, and snagged an extra game ticket for me. I had to pull my weight in this nonexistent relationship.

“I’ll grab us a table.” He was holding an oversized mug. I giggled when I saw the heart-shaped foam swirled on top of his coffee. The redhead behind the counter watched him walk away.

I ordered my decaf triple berry tea, paid, and slid into the seat across from Beau.

“Don’t you drink coffee?” Beau’s upper lip was coated with part of the foam heart.

“Hold on. You have a little something.” I reached over and let the top of my thumb graze his full lips. Under my touch they felt firm and suddenly, very kissable. I realized my cheeks were burning. No doubt, the barista was taking this all in. She hadn’t stopped staring at Beau.

“Thanks.” He reached for a napkin. “How’s your tea?”

Embarrassed I had moved into his

personal space, I tried to talk my way into distraction. “Good. I love berry tea.” *Ugh. Not the most riveting comments.* I took a cautious sip.

“Tell me something about London James, actress and basketball novice.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Where are you from? Do you have parents?”

I laughed. Beau was good at breaking the ice. “Yes, I have parents. They live in Asheville, in the same house I grew up in.”

“That’s a cool place to grow up.”

“I guess so. I hadn’t really thought about it like that. I’m not a fan of the snow or winter in general, so I’ve made plans for as long as I can remember to head somewhere warmer.”

“Is that why you are so determined to move to L.A.? You are running from snowflakes?”

“I’m not running *from* anything. I told you I want to be an actress. I am an actress.”

Beau raised his hands in defense. “I’m just teasing you, London. I know L.A. is important to you.” He sipped his

coffee, careful to avoid the foam mustache this time. “What do your parents say about all of it? Are they ok with you moving across the country?”

I sighed. “No. They are definitely not ok with it, but we have an agreement. As long as I graduate with As, I can go and do anything I want. They said they’ll support me for the first six months, and then I’m on my own. I either come back home to Asheville or I pay my way in California.”

“Hmm.” Beau looked like he was working through a calculus problem.

“What? You don’t approve?”

“No. That’s not it. I think it’s awesome you’re going to do what you want. But now, I get your need to have all As all the time. It makes more sense. You make a lot more sense.”

“Thanks. I think.” I wasn’t sure what ideas Beau was forming about me.

“It’s good. Too many people have to give up their dreams.”

I couldn’t blame alcohol since all I had at the game was a Coke and now I was sipping on a berry tea, but the question popped out of my mouth. “Like you?”

He looked puzzled. “What does that mean?”

“Do you really want to go to law school and follow in your mother’s footsteps?”

“Sure. Why not?”

I was crossing a line, but I didn’t want to retreat. “You aren’t the lawyer type.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re too adventurous, Beau, to be stuck behind a desk or in meetings all day. You would die from boredom taking depositions and arguing in a courtroom.

Ok, you are good at arguing, but you would get tired of it.”

His laugh resonated around the coffeehouse. I didn't like the attention we were getting from the other coffee drinkers and that darn barista.

“For someone I'm fake dating, you sure seem to think you know a lot about who I am and what I need or want.”

I contained an impulse to gulp. *Want?* Could he see that all I wanted right now was to taste those lips? He leaned toward me and his eyes blazed right through me, making my knees go weak. He was right. I did think I knew

him, and everything about his plan after graduation didn't feel right. He was right about something else too—I wasn't his girlfriend. Hearing him say it made me want part of it to be different.

“Just call me your observant fake girlfriend.”

Beau shuffled in his seat and cleared his throat. Ok. I took it too far.

“You ready?” Beau stood next to the table. I guess that was the cue the date was over.

“Sure.”

I followed him out of the

coffeehouse and hesitated in front of his motorcycle. I felt like I had turned the date upside down. I should have opened up more and told him I knew what it was like to be expected to live a certain life. That I knew how hard it is to break free from the guilt of disappointing people you care about because you never want them to think you're anything but a success. However, I didn't tell him any of that. As easy as it was for me to pour my heart out on stage and eke out every human emotion for the world to see, sharing all of that with Beau would make me more vulnerable than I wanted to be.

“Can I get a ride?”

Beau didn't answer. He handed me the passenger helmet and waited while I mounted the back of the bike. Before I could decide where to put my hands, he reached behind his waist, grabbed both of my arms, and wrapped them securely around his chest.

I pressed my body against his back and let my cheek rest against his shirt. He squeezed my hand before revving the bike and whipping us out of the parking lot. We had stopped talking, but not communicating.

When we pulled into my driveway, the lights were out at the house. Nina was probably asleep and Candace was still at

Pearce's place.

I swung my leg off the bike and looked at Beau. Standing next to him felt different. I wasn't ready for our fake date to be done. There was something stirring in me that had been swirling for weeks. I ran through a quick list of ways to stall, but all I could focus on were those lips and dark eyes. My mind was a total blank.

“Good night, London.” Beau fit his helmet over his head and closed the sun visor.

Just as I was taking a step to the side to let him roll the bike backward, he reached up and traced the side of my face.

I hesitated, unsure how to stop him from leaving, but just as quickly as he made the gesture, he rolled out of the driveway and down Mallette Street.

I felt the stirring sensation as he drove away. Shit! No. No. No. Nina was right. I had a crush on Beau Anderson.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Derek first pitched the idea of *Spoiled Hearts* and opening it Valentine's night, I thought it was smart. Standing behind the curtain with a packed house crammed into our experimental basement theater, I knew he wasn't just smart, he was brilliant.

"London, I really want to talk to you after the show," Derek whispered in my ear just as I took my mark on stage. Something about the way his lips almost grazed my earlobe gave me chills.

"Ok, but I have plans. It will have to be quick." I smiled at him and inched

to the side, careful not to leave the general area of my mark.

I shook my hands next to my side and inhaled deeply. It was my last second ritual before the show began. Madame Marguerite, my classical ballet instructor, had taught me the technique the night of my first recital and the tradition was born.

“Break a leg.” He swatted me on the ass, letting his fingers trail across my butt as he walked away. What in the hell was that?

I focused on my breathing and tried to shake the aggravated feeling.

Derek had never touched me, much less on a place on my body he had no right to feel. I could hear the music rising, the lights were on, and it was showtime—my favorite time. I shook my palms once more, and then closed my eyes just as the curtain rose from the floor.

For the third time, I trotted to the front of the stage and took a deep bow. The audience hadn't stopped clapping and the whistling was outrageous. This was by far the best reception our troupe had ever received on opening night. I was giddy and ecstatic. I couldn't see past the blaring spotlights, but I knew somewhere

in the audience my Comm 224 partner was applauding and waiting for our date to begin.

Finally, the lights dimmed and I hustled backstage, eager to change out of my costume and makeup.

“London, you were amazing.”

“Great role for you, girl.”

“You killed it out there tonight.”

I smiled and thanked everyone as I rushed past the crew and my costars. The company was gathering on stage to celebrate, so I had a few minutes alone in the shared girls’ dressing room.

I smiled at my reflection in the Hollywood-style mirror and immediately began the process of dismantling the heavy eye makeup caked on my face. Beau was waiting for me somewhere in the crowd outside the door.

Ever since our basketball date, it had been harder to stop thinking about him. We definitely had a moment in the driveway. The problem was that I couldn't talk to anyone about it. I was not supposed to be having any kind of moments with him. I don't know how everything in me was all of a sudden so thrown by Beau Anderson.

When I saw him in class on Tuesday, I couldn't even make eye contact without my cheeks turning a shade of bright pink. The kind of pink that shouted, I have a huge crush on you. He didn't seem to notice and that seemed to make it worse.

Tonight, I had resolved to have fun and try to focus on the project. This date was for a grade. I had to keep reminding myself of that. It just didn't help that it was Valentine's night, and my partner was all of a sudden the hottest guy I had wrapped my arms around.

There was a light knock on the door, shaking me out of my Beau

thoughts. “Come in.”

Derek pushed the door open and closed it behind him. “Hey.”

“Oh. Hi, Derek.”

I pulled out a cotton ball and started dabbing at my cheeks. Seeing him reminded me of the weird ass pat he gave me on stage. Maybe I had misinterpreted the gesture. We were all a little punchy on opening night. He was the writer, director, and producer. If anyone had a right to have preshow jitters tonight, it was Derek.

“You were more than I could have dreamed of tonight, London. You were

relentless. What you did out there was—”

Derek’s compliments were interrupted. There was another knock on the door, this time more assertive.

“Come in.” Sharing a dressing room with six girls was nothing if not a test of modesty and privacy. Girls were usually floating in and out like a revolving door.

Instead of a person, a bouquet of red roses worked their way through the crack in the door. I spun around in my chair as Beau followed.

He laughed as he crossed the room

and handed them to me. “I know they are kinda cliché on Valentine’s Day, but they are the perfect symbol of *Love Match*. My choices were kind of limited today. Plus, every pretty girl deserves flowers on Valentine’s Day.”

I managed to keep myself from squealing as I accepted the dozen roses in my arms.

“Yeah, man, those are cliché. Who are you anyway? Who let you back here?” Derek muttered.

“Derek! This is Beau, my Comm 224 partner.” I smiled reassuringly at Beau, noticing he was dressed in dark

pants and a button-up shirt.

“Oh, right, the guy you’re fake dating for class. I heard about that. Can’t find anyone who will date you, man?”

“Derek! Seriously. What is wrong with you?” I withheld a slap that was ready to fly from my palm.

The irritated playwright rubbed the scruff along his jawline. “Nothing. Nothing. I’ll catch you later, London.”

He knocked into Beau’s shoulder as he exited the dressing room. I watched in total bewilderment as the other girls in the cast started filtering in.

“Beau, give me five minutes. I’m almost ready.” I smiled and shooed him out the door before the girls started disrobing in front of him. Nudity in this troupe was all part of the family environment.

The little pit that started to form when Derek was in the room eased with the chatter of the other girls. I didn’t think anyone else saw or heard what had happened.

Candace ran up and threw her arms around my neck. “Babe, you were unforgettable tonight. It was our best show yet. The best.”

I was glad Candace had decided to stick with the performance. Although I was sure this was going to be her last show, it was nice to share the stage with her.

“Is Pearce here? Was he in the audience?” I hoped, for her sake, the man in her life had bothered to attend her opening night performance.

“He made it at intermission. He’s outside now. We’re going back to his place for a special romantic Valentine’s dinner. He said he’s going to cook. Isn’t he the sweetest?”

While the rest of us were taking off

our makeup, Candace was adding to hers. There was a certain image associated with the role of football girlfriend, and Candace made sure she fulfilled Pearce's expectations in every way possible. At least he was here on opening night—that should count for something.

“I'm happy for you, Candace. Sounds like you and Pearce are going to have a great time. I didn't know he could cook.” We laughed together. The image of Pearce stirring boiling water while wearing his shoulder pads popped in my head.

“London, the guy outside the dressing room, is he who you're blogging

about for class?” Penelope, one of the costars, asked.

“Yes. That’s Beau Anderson. We’re Comm 224 partners.”

“He’s cute.”

Candace winked at me with a knowing look.

Nina skipped into the room and slammed the door behind her. “Holy shit. Who is the hot guy outside our dressing room?”

All eyes turned to me. Did other people immediately see what it had taken me a month to realize?

“Uh, that’s Beau.”

“Are you kidding me? What in the hell is wrong with you, London? That’s the rock-climbing, motorcycle-riding, basketball champion Beau?”

“Uh. Yeah.” I cowered in front of the lights. Nina was going to let me have it.

“I’m letting you off the hook this time because I know you have plans and because I have plans too.” She had the cat that ate the canary look on her face.

“You do?”

Candace chimed in. “Love is in the air. Of course she has plans.”

Nina’s cheeks were flushed. “I ran into Derek backstage and he asked me to get a drink with him. I think this is it. He has finally come to his senses.” I watched as she lowered her shirt to expose a little more cleavage.

“Um, Nina?”

“What?” She turned toward me, dabbing extra coats of mascara on her lashes.

I chickened out. She looked so excited and it was Valentine’s night. I

couldn't crumble the fantasy she had since our freshman year. "Nothing. Have fun." I leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Be careful."

"Don't worry about me. Candace is right. Love is in the air."

"Bye, Candace. Tell Pearce hi." I wanted both of my roommates to have a special night with their Valentines.

I grabbed my coat and my roses and walked out to meet Beau.

"Ready?" Beau eyed me as I covered up my deep green dress with a knee-length vintage coat I had found in a thrift store.

I looped my arm through the crook of his arm. “Yes. I want to know what the mysterious surprise is.”

“Right this way.” He led me through the remaining audience members and the cast.

Date Four: The Stars Are On Fire

We emerged onto the parking lot of Graham Memorial. I noticed the barren rose garden encircling one of campus’s famous landmarks, the sundial. I clutched my roses a little closer to my chest. It was sweet that Beau got roses for

me on opening night, and even sweeter he called me pretty.

I followed him as he led me across the parking lot, past the dormant rose bushes, and toward the massive building adjacent to the theater.

“Where are we going?” I was just as nervous as I was excited.

Beau and I had to watch last week’s *Love Match* episode separately because of my rehearsal schedule. Nina had no problem turning it into our girls’ night. She finally had someone to watch the show with her, even if I was watching it out of graduation necessity.

Victoria and the bachelors were in Barcelona, where it was warm and sunny. The dating coordinators for the show had taken the intensity up a few notches since the first few episodes. I couldn't imagine we were going to go on a helicopter ride tonight, or ride wild ponies on the beach. I had wondered all week what date Beau was going to try to pull off from the show. I had a feeling as the season progressed it was going to be harder and harder for us to simulate the dates.

“Ever been in the planetarium when it was closed?” Beau had a mischievous look in his eye.

“Are you serious?” I had never

been in any building after hours except the theater, but technically, I was allowed to be there. It didn't count as renegade activity.

He laughed. "Come on."

We walked around to the farthest point of the dominant building, bordered by trees. I waited at the bottom of the stone staircase, while Beau jogged to the top and knocked on the glass. I felt like we were a part of the secret speakeasy society from the Roaring Twenties. The door cracked open and Beau motioned me to follow him inside.

"Hey, man, thanks for doing this,"

Beau whispered to his unnamed partner in crime.

“No problem. Everything is all set. Have a good time.” He punched Beau in the arm and slipped out the side door.

“Who was that?”

“One of my roommates. He works here. Good to have connections, you know?” He smiled and pulled me down the dark hall.

I was quickly learning Beau had connections all over campus.

My heels clicked on the marble floors, reminding me of Professor

Garcia's boots in class. I giggled silently, thinking about her wild theatrics. If she wanted her students to live her class, she had two who were doing that and more.

“Beau, where are we going?” We were climbing a winding staircase. I worried he thought we could try repelling again. Along with flying and horseback riding, Victoria had gone skydiving this week and I was not interested.

“Stop being so nervous. You're going to love it.”

We walked down another hallway and up a second staircase before he pushed open a door that led to the roof.

I caught my breath. The rooftop was glowing. Candle-filled glass jars created a walkway that led to the center of the roof and a pile of pillows and blankets. There was a picnic basket, a bottle of champagne, and roses—red roses everywhere.

“Oh, Beau. I—”

The roof of the planetarium looked like a professional set crew had decorated it for a romantic night under the stars. It was incredible.

“Wait. I have something else.” He held his phone toward the basket and tapped the screen. I smiled. My Rihanna

song played.

I followed the path of deep crimson rose petals toward the pile of blankets. They were multicolored and mismatched with the pillows. I noticed one had a cord. I looked at him quizzically.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I know you are always cold. I couldn’t expect you to have a stargazing rooftop picnic without an electric blanket.”

An electric blanket? He was melting my heart—that was sweeter than the roses. I flipped open the picnic basket. It was stocked with grapes, cheese,

crackers, and brownies. I reached for the chocolate first.

He knelt to grab the champagne and loosened it from the icy bucket. “I haven’t said anything yet, but I really liked the play. It was good.”

“Good?”

“Yeah. It was good. You, however, were the super star. You weren’t kidding about being on stage. It was like you were a different person out there.” He smiled as the champagne cork popped across the roof. “One day I’ll be able to say I knew that movie star when she was in college. Maybe I’ll even give one of those tabloid

TV interviews and tell all your secrets.” He handed me a chilled glass. “You know I’m kidding by now, right? Seriously, though, you were really fantastic tonight.”

I liked how Beau looked right into my eyes when he talked to me. “Thanks. I think for an opening night it went really well.”

“I bet you’ll be glad when the week is over and you can take a break.”

“Break? What do you mean?”

“You’ve been in rehearsals nonstop. Once the play is done, you can just coast until graduation. You only have this project.”

“I’ve got another production going right after this one. I’m not taking a break.”

“Really? Don’t you want to stop and experience college life before it’s gone? Isn’t there anything you wish you had more time to do? You spend a lot of time in that basement.”

I couldn’t tell if he was testing me or just teasing. “The theater is my life. I’ve been a part of Encore since I was a freshman. I have one show left and I’m not going to take off and hang out.”

His idea seemed absurd, but amid

the candlelight and the champagne, a part of me regretted I didn't have nights like this in my Carolina memories. I had spent them in the basement rehearsing or in the library studying. Beau's questions might have struck a nerve.

“Ok. Ok. I get it. You are an actress.” He knocked back the rest of his champagne. “It seems we both think we know what's best for the other.”

I felt slightly less irritated remembering how I grilled Beau about becoming a lawyer. I probably deserved that.

“Be honest. What do you think?”

He gestured to the rooftop.

Beau looked undeniably hot on the roof. It didn't occur to me only because all the girls backstage were undressing him with their eyes. My resistance to him was quickly coming undone every time his arm brushed against mine or he smiled at me as if he knew who I really was. The way he worried every time I made a fool of myself was sexier to me than I ever could have imagined. Beau was daring and adventurous; maybe it was time I tried to be too. I was holding so much back. Maybe I should try Beau's open approach to life.

I nestled into the pillows, hoping

he would sit next to me. “It’s the most unreal thing I’ve ever seen. I can’t believe you did all of this. You really know your *Love Match*.” It truly looked like something out of a movie or, in our case, a cheesy reality show about finding true love.

“I figured we needed something over-the-top to write about on the blog this week since it is Valentine’s Day and all.” I watched as he snapped a few pictures of the setting with his phone. “I can post a few pics and talk about how this looks just like one of Victoria’s dates. We haven’t had one of the crazy roses-and-candles dates they have on the show. This should definitely help disprove the

love theory.” He refilled my glass of champagne.

I bit down hard on my lip. I chugged the cold champagne, feeling the smoothness of the bubbles slide down my throat.

“Hey, London. You ok? You’re awfully quiet.” He finally sat next to me on the cushions and laid the electric blanket over my lap. It was already warm.

I couldn’t talk. If I said anything, my voice was going to crack and tears were going to run down my cheeks. This was the most beautiful date I had ever had and it was all fake. This was for a

class project and it didn't mean anything more to him than that. I wasn't much different from Nina and her useless crush on Derek.

“Wait. Did you think I was setting this up for real?”

Now he was just rubbing it in. I was the one who had given in to the romantic aura surrounding Valentine's Day. Talking was still out of the question; my voice would betray me. I felt the tear sliding down my face and I couldn't stop it.

“Oh shit. London, don't cry. Why are you crying? I'm not good with crying

girls. I have no idea what to do.” Beau nervously shifted positions so he was sitting almost in front of me, leaning on one arm. He edged closer so that I could smell the faintest hint of his cologne.

Sheer panic spread across his face. He looked so worried with his forehead crinkled, that a tiny giggle escaped my mouth.

“That’s better. I like it when you’re laughing.” He reached toward my face and traced the tear off my cheek.

The gesture was pure and intimate. I stared into his eyes. The depths of brown layers were dancing with the

flickering candlelight. I held my breath as his hand moved to cup the side of my face and I let my eyes close, feeling the roughness of his palm against my cheek. The longer we sat not moving, the more I felt the want for him building in my chest. I wasn't sure how to draw him closer to me—I already felt so off balance. But I knew I didn't want him to feel sorry for me.

“London, do you want it to be real?”

He wasn't supposed to ask me that. None of this should be happening. Resolved to extricate gracefully from my position, I opened my eyes. Before I

could regain control of the situation, Beau's lips brushed across mine. They were warm and tender, and he tasted better than anyone I had ever kissed. This must be what the show meant by champagne kisses. I shed the warmth of the blanket and any rational thinking. My arms wrapped around his neck as he groaned quietly, deepening the kiss.

My body trembled when his arm enfolded me and eased me onto the cushions his friend had arranged for our planetarium rendezvous. I ran my fingers along his neck and through his hair, urging his mouth onto mine harder. His hand slid down my thigh and tugged under my knee so that my leg coiled

around his waist.

I twisted my head to the side, allowing his hot mouth to kiss my neck. His tongue played with my ear. For the first time, I slowly opened my eyes, unsure if I was ready for the reality of what Beau and I were doing.

The flames flickered a bright orange. “Beau, fire!”

“Um...hmm...I feel it too.”

I pushed him forward, knocking him back. “No, it’s on fire. Our picnic basket. Look.”

“Shit.” He jumped up, pulled the

champagne bottle from the bucket and turned the ice and water onto the smoldering fire that had begun roasting our grapes and cheese.

“Are the brownies ruined?” I asked as Beau inspected the remnants of our late night snack.

He exhaled. “Yes. But at least nothing else caught on fire.” He tossed the basket and sat next to me. “That was intense.”

“Yeah, I—” I started smoothing my hair and taking light breaths. Did we actual do that?

“Maybe we should call it a night.”

He surveyed the charred basket. “This wasn’t how the date was planned. We weren’t supposed to—you know—cross the line.”

He ran his fingers through his hair, and I could tell that my usually cool and casual partner was completely out of his element.

Here it goes. The champagne bubbles were swirling in my head and I had to ask. “What did you think would happen when you bring a girl up to a rooftop on Valentine’s night, give her roses, light everything with candles, and on top of that, give her champagne when you know she can’t drink much? What exactly was

the plan, Beau? Sit up here and talk about class theory? You don't even do the readings."

I had more bottled up, just ready to spew, but his lips claimed my mouth and the only sensation I felt was the deep burning I had for this boy and his many mixed up signals.

"There. That's what I had planned, but never in a million years did I think you would let me kiss you."

Confused, but slightly satisfied he had kissed me again, I sat forward. "You wanted to kiss me?"

"Yeah. Why is that so hard to

believe?” He was playing with my hair and I wasn’t sure I could complete my thoughts.

“Because you have been anything but interested since the first day of class. You take every chance you get to remind me we are group partners.”

“And we are. You are my Comm 224 partner. But I’m not the one who came up with the idea to disprove the show. We can’t very well disprove it, if we are proving it, can we?”

The giddiness I had earlier in the night bubbled through my heart like the champagne. “Are we?” I was nervous to

ask. This question had been plaguing me since he rolled out of my driveway the other night and every time he looked at me. “Are we proving it?”

“You tell me.” He leaned toward me again, this time pulling me on top of him so that my legs straddled his waist.

I wanted to give in to the impulses raging through my body. “Ok. Stop. Stop.” I inhaled. “This will ruin the entire project. The whole month of blogging we’ve done is a waste. We’ve messed up everything. Oh my God. Oh my God.” I dismounted Beau and paced through the maze of candles. “I’m not going to graduate. I’m going to fail

Communication 224. My parents won't let me move to L.A. and I'm going to end up in the family business after all."

"Whoa. No one is failing anything." He stood to face me and grabbed both my shoulders. "Who says we have to tell anyone?"

"What? You think we should act like this didn't happen?"

I was crushed again. He wanted to pretend as if we never kissed or that his hands weren't all over me on a blanket surrounded by rose petals. I wasn't sure I was going to be able to forget this night, but maybe he was right. We should

reestablish our partnership.

“No. What I’m saying is we keep blogging as if we were. We tell everyone that the show is still a phony and the dates are *not* bringing us closer together. We go on the fake dates, but they don’t have to be so fake anymore. It stays between us.” I was beginning to like the devilish expression in Beau’s eyes.

“But isn’t that lying? The entire experiment is rigged if we do that.” I couldn’t deny I liked the prospect of going on a real date with Beau, but I wasn’t totally comfortable with lying to the whole school or to Professor Garcia.

“You said it yourself. If we come clean now, the whole month’s worth of work we’ve done was for nothing. If we admit that our hypothesis was wrong, what kind of project do we have to present? It doesn’t test or challenge anything about the show. Why can’t we keep this between us? Unless you want to go back to being just partners—nothing more. We can do that too. It’s your decision, London. I’m not going to force you to do something you don’t want to do.”

Something in the way he handed me the power to decide made it easy to choose. I walked over to him and let my hands explore the hardness of his chest

before wrapping them around his neck.

“You mean, we don’t tell anyone I just did that?”

He nodded while leaning down to nibble on my ear. “And definitely don’t tell them I did that.”

I laughed. “Ok. Deal. We keep the fake dating going.”

“Awesome. This project just got a whole lot better.” Beau growled into my neck. “Now, let’s get out of here before my friend finds out we almost burned down the planetarium.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Tell me what you think about this.” Beau cleared his throat and read from the screen on his open laptop.

“Valentine’s Night: Re-creation of Victoria and Seth’s candlelit barn date in Barcelona

Show Myth to debunk: Lavish romantic settings will forge romantic feelings

Love Match wants you to believe that by giving girls roses, filling them with champagne, and lighting everything within two feet with a candle, she’s going to fall for you. Guys, it’s just not true. Take Saturday night. There were more

roses than I could count, a starry sky, a little bubbly, and no sparks—nothing. Sure, it was a nice night to spend with a friend from class, but probably not how I would normally choose to spend my Saturday night. Don't let reality shows fool you. You can't make feelings out of candlelight. I posted pictures so everyone can see just how closely the setting looked like one of the Love Match dates. Until next week's dating report.—B.A.”

“Ouch. No sparks?” I wrinkled my nose. “It’s great. Can’t wait to read the comments you’ll receive.”

“Your turn. What are you going to post?”

“Are you sure you’re ready to read it? Can you handle it?” I taunted him.

“Hit me. I can take it.”

“Every time I watch Love Match, I become more and more disillusioned with love. The show exhibits no limits in perpetuating the stereotype that all a guy needs to do to win a girl’s heart is buy into the commercialism that is copycat romance. Saturday night, my Comm partner followed the show’s lead to a T, sparing no detail. Girls, you should have seen it. There were candles everywhere, champagne, and even rose petals. Most of you reading this blog probably think that we had the perfect date. Champagne and roses don’t create love. Real human connections and understanding do. As

much as Love Match wants you to believe that people can be forced into falling in love, I want you to know it isn't reality.—L.J.”

“No one can accuse you of holding back, movie star.”

“Is it too harsh? Do you think people will read right through it?” I worried every girl on campus was going to scan it and know deep down all I wanted was a million nights with Beau, champagne, and a bed of rose petals.

“No. I think it's fine. We need to get this posted. The next episode comes on in fifteen minutes.” He looked around my room. “Too bad you don't have a TV

in here.”

“The three of us share the one in the living room. It’s called roughing it. But we should be alone. Candace is over at Pearce’s tonight and I’m pretty sure Nina is somewhere with Derek.”

Beau stopped typing. “You know, that Derek guy is a jerk.”

It had only been two days since the opening of *Spoiled Hearts*. Other than seeing him on the side of the stage yesterday during our two shows, I hadn’t had any contact with the moody director. The incident with my ass and his strange behavior in the dressing room had to be

from preshow stress.

“He’s really not that bad. I think you met him at a high stress time. He’s a great writer and director.”

“I don’t know about that side of him, but you should be careful around him.”

“Careful? Nina has totally been crushing on him for years. He is harmless.” A nagging thought in the back of my head suggested otherwise.

“I don’t know why a fun girl like Nina would be after him.”

“Because she’s a hopeless romantic.

She can't help herself. Come on; get that thing posted so we can watch *Love Match*."

This was the first time Beau and I had seen each other since our Saturday night pact, which we sealed with a kiss. The theater was closed Monday nights, so I had the night off. It was perfect timing for us to watch *Love Match* together. When we texted back and forth about getting together, everything seemed the same—as if the kissing never happened. But when I heard the roar of his motorcycle rumble in the driveway, I realized seeing him again was going to be anything but normal.

"Posted." He smiled.

“Ok, I’ll start the popcorn; you start the show. Want a beer?”

“Yeah, I’ll take one.”

Not wanting to deplete Candace’s beer supply for Pearce, I had made a run to the grocery store earlier in the day. I met Beau in the living room, with a hot bowl of popcorn and two cold beers. I handed one to him.

He laughed. “I see you got screw tops. Nice.”

I twisted the lid and tossed it on the coffee table. I wasn’t going to spend one second of this night looking like an

idiot—twist cap lids were my first smooth move.

“Cheers.” I held up the beer and we clinked the bottles.

The realization hit me that I wasn’t sure what to do next. Nestle into the crook of his shoulder? Wait and let him make the first move? Sit close, but not too close? My mind raced with possible places to sit that would let him know I wanted to be near him, but only if he felt the same way. His leg was thrown up so that his ankle rested across his knee. There was a perfect spot for me to maneuver so that I was under his arm, but I couldn’t decide if it was too

suggestive to slide against his body like that.

He turned the volume louder with the remote. “Hi, I’m your host, Mitch Henderson. On tonight’s episode of *Love Match*, Victoria has a heartbreaking decision to make.”

“Are you watching this with me?” Beau reached out with his left arm, hooked it around my waist, and pulled me so that I was pressed into his side. *Crook of the shoulder it is.*

Mitch Henderson continued, not knowing I had just cleared my first obstacle of the night. “One of the

bachelors has been keeping a secret. It's a shocking revelation that will bring our bachelorette to tears."

"I don't care what we decided to do with the project; I still think this show is ridiculous." I looked at Beau as he drank his beer.

He laughed. "I won't argue."

I tried to relax into his arm as the episode began. It had never been this hard to concentrate on *Love Match* before. Victoria and her date were dressed in medieval costumes and were climbing the stairs of a castle in Scotland. The guy looked absurd in a velvet floppy hat. I

wasn't paying enough attention to know why they had on costumes. Beau had moved his hand to my leg and every few seconds his palm pressed into my thigh and ran smoothly toward my knee.

“Good. It’s a commercial.” He shifted my hair from the side of my neck and his lips began roaming the space closest to my shoulder.

I closed my eyes and leaned into his chest. My hands had exploring of their own to do. I grabbed the inside of his leg and worked my hand up until I elicited a full groan from his lips. Beau wasn't a bad boy, but sneaking around like this felt a little dangerous and naughty—it was

definitely a turn on. My mind heard the keys rattling in the door, but my body was elevated by the kisses Beau was firing down my neck.

“Dammit,” Nina muttered on the other side of the door. It sounded like her keys hit the porch.

Climbing out of the heat, I pushed against Beau, kicking one of the beers over in my panic. “Nina’s home. Shit.”

Nina opened the door with a surprised smile on her face. I was on the floor, scrambling for the beer bottle before more ended up under the couch.

“Hey, y’all. What’s up?”

“Uh. I’m such a klutz. Spilled my beer.” I smothered a giggle as I saw Beau reach for Ugly Quilt and throw it over his waist. I ran to the kitchen to grab a few paper towels.

I called back to Nina, “I thought you were out with Derek.”

“Ugh.” She sank into the recliner. “No. He said he wanted to write tonight. Alone. Can you believe that? We have one night off from the play and he wants to write. What are doing?”

Beau watched me as I sopped the sticky mess. “*Love Match*. Class project.”

He pointed to the TV.

“Oh. Good. I hope I didn’t miss much. I totally forgot to record it tonight. What’s the big secret?” Nina eyed me.

I froze. *Oh, God.* She already knew. I was stupid to think I would be able to keep this from my best friend. She had probably seen something through the window.

Beau answered before I could form a clear sentence. “Don’t know yet. Victoria and one of the bachelors went to a castle to reenact one of the medieval love stories from the town. She hasn’t gone on the second date yet.”

That must be why they had on the costumes. How could he pay attention to the show while he was sending me over the edge?

“Cool. Can I have some popcorn?” Nina reached into the bowl that was resting, untouched on the table. “I’m Nina, by the way. We haven’t officially met.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Beau.”

Beau smiled at me. Hiding this relationship was going to be a lot harder than I thought and it was going to take a lot more than Ugly Quilt to do it.

Date Five: Hunted Love

Beau had planned our first four dates. It was only fair that I start contributing to the execution of this project. *Spoiled Hearts* ended its one-week run last night, and other than sitting next to him in class, I hadn't spent any time with Beau since we watched *Love Match* together on Monday. My entire Saturday was devoted to preparing for the date. It was time I tried to surprise the campus expert on all things Carolina with something I knew he hadn't done yet.

“No peeking.” I had wrapped the

blindfold around his eyes as tightly as I could without hurting him.

“You’re not going to give me some kind of clue?” Beau was outwardly amused by the date I created.

“No way. I’m in charge today. You just have to trust me.”

“Does it involve body paint, bagpipes, or a floating hot tub?”

I laughed. The floating hot tub would have been fun, but I couldn’t find one of those in Chapel Hill on such short notice. “None of the above. You’ll see.”

I pulled the car onto the gravel

path and turned into a dirt parking lot. It was almost sunset. We would have to hurry if I was going to pull this off. I threw my car in park and ran over to the passenger side to help Beau.

“I’m kind of at a disadvantage here with the blindfold.” I steered him toward the opening in the brush and led him down the path twenty yards before I stopped him.

I placed his hand on the trunk of the tree next to us so he could steady himself.

“Ready?” I couldn’t wait for him to get started.

“Yes, please take this off.”

I walked behind him to untie the knot, but as my hands traced over his neck, I changed my mind.

“There’s one thing you have to do first.”

I could see his eyebrow arch under the silk scarf and a smile crept across his face. I took a step back and my body met the bark of the tree. Beau turned in my direction, anchoring his hands on either side of me. I wasn’t entirely sure he couldn’t see right through the blindfold.

I reached forward, taking his face in

my palms, and brought his lips crushing down onto mine. With the force of his body, he pinned me harder against the tree and hitched both my legs around his waist. We were completely derailing from the plan. I fisted my hands in his hair until I had loosened the knot on the scarf and freed his eyes from the cover. I watched as he took in our surroundings.

“Where are we?” It was getting darker. We were deep in the middle of the woods and I didn’t account for the light changing so quickly with the towering trees. Maybe we didn’t have time for a woodsy make out.

“You are on a *Love Match* scavenger

hunt.” I smiled.

“Sweet. What am I hunting?” He pressed himself harder against me.

“Me.”

His right eyebrow shifted high.

“What?”

“You better get going if you’re going to get your prize.” I wiggled out of his tight hold and landed next to him.

“Here’s your first clue.” I handed him a folded piece of paper and tried to refrain from laughing. Mr. Adventurous looked worried all of a sudden.

“You’re not going to tell me

anything else? I don't even know where we are, London."

"You have your phone so you won't get lost, lost. You just might not find me. Good luck." I winked at him. "Go that way." I pointed ahead on the path where the light was dimming and watched until he was out of sight.

I had walked the route of my scavenger hunt three times, and it took me an average of twenty minutes to complete the course I had created. Beau could probably beat my time, so I estimated I had about fifteen minutes before he found me.

I ran back to the car and grabbed my bag. Everything I needed was packed inside. I had sent Beau on a loop so I could safely walk in the other direction without running into him. We would eventually meet in the middle.

There was an open patch of ground near the stone wall overlooking the grounds. I pulled out a thin tarp before spreading a blanket over top. I had two camping lanterns, which I anchored just off the corner of the blanket.

I pulled out my phone to check the time. He should be here any second. I looked down the path. It was empty. I had hiked past this place twenty times

since I was a freshman, but I had never really stopped to look at the building that made the area such a famous landmark.

The round turret and the climbing ivy gave it a gothic feel that was starting to creep me out. Maybe I hadn't concocted the best date. Beau was missing, the sun was almost down, and the legends about ghost stories in these woods all of a sudden haunted me.

One of the stories from the 1830s was about a student who had died on this land in a duel. Legend had it that in a panic to cover up his death, the students at the duel buried his body under a rock. When the girl he had been courting

found out her beloved had died, she supposedly waited at the rock for him to return. The eerie part of the story was that the rock also happened to be the rendezvous point where the couple used to meet secretly for dates. There were legendary stories that circulated about people who had seen the ghosts of the torn apart couple walking the woods together.

After I watched last week's *Love Match* episode, I thought this was the closest thing we had to medieval tales and a castle. I nervously scanned the woods again. Finally, I swiped the screen on my phone to call Beau. I couldn't stand it anymore.

“London. Found you. Man, this is awesome!” Beau was smiling as he jogged through the trail.

I hid my phone in the bag.

“Gimghoul Castle at sunset? Great idea. Did you know this was on my bucket list?” He seemed ecstatic.

“Maybe.” Of course, I had started studying the list more intently. “I’m glad you like it.” Now that Beau was here, I wasn’t as nervous about the ghost stories. The castle did look like it was glowing from the dropping golden rays of the sun. It was beautiful.

He knelt at the edge of the blanket. “Now do I get my prize?” He started crawling toward me like a tiger on the hunt. It gave me chills thinking what he would do when he caught me. Although, that was the whole point: kiss at Gimghoul Castle at sunset.

I sat up on my knees, anxious for him to make his way to the edge of the blanket. His body collided with mine, and in one swift motion, he pulled me directly under him.

“Gotcha.”

My giggles quickly turned to something else. Beau was staring directly

in my eyes, and it was impossible to hide how much I wanted him. My mouth parted as his lips descended on mine. I tried to steady my breathing, but the way he touched me only made me want more. I already loved kissing him. It felt hot, sexy, and just a little dangerous every time he made me moan. And he could make me moan.

“Hey! Hey!” I heard someone yelling at us. This was not happening.

“You kids shouldn’t be out here. Go on!” A guard from the castle walked on the other side of the wall and motioned to us to leave, throwing his hands in the air.

Mortified, I scrambled out from under my frustrated partner. My romantic gothic date was a complete catastrophe.

Beau reached for my hand and pulled me up. He shrugged his shoulders. We started stuffing my scavenger hunt items back into my bag. Back to the drawing board.

CHAPTER NINE

It didn't seem to matter what date Beau and I devised. We could never find a way to be truly alone. His roommates were never gone. Those boys played video games like it was oxygen straight to their lungs. Nina and Candace were more unpredictable every day with their habits. I couldn't count on them to stay out of the house. Beau knew so many people on campus, and with my small stage fame, it meant that in public we had to act as if we were strictly group partners on an experimental date. Our blog had also collected quite the following. Each week we had more and more comments from students sounding off on our *Love Match*

theories. People were watching and waiting for our weekly updates, including Professor Garcia.

The colorfully clad professor began our class lecture. “All right. I know you are just itching to get your spring break started, just don’t forget that while you are in Panama City or Myrtle Beach that your reality shows are still on air.” The girl in the row below us groaned at the reminder. “I would like to point out a few of the projects I’ve noticed that are coming along nicely.”

I held my breath and avoided Beau’s face. I couldn’t look at him. It made me feel too guilty. Although, what

had we really done since the Valentine's pact? He had other classes he studied for, I was back in rehearsals, and we could never find a way to be together alone. That was until tonight. Spring break was the start of a full week of alone time. Beau. Me. An empty beach house.

“Maggie and Blair have just done an exceptional job so far this semester with their *Lion's Den* project. Ladies, I wanted to let you know at the halfway point, your grasp of the class concept is phenomenal. Helping launch a new business in town is so original.” Professor Garcia clapped her hands in the air, just a few rows in front of the pair. “The other group I think everyone has noticed this

semester is the dynamic duo of Beau and London. You two have really examined the theories of reality production and have challenged the notion of relationship theory—truly good work, you two.”

I didn't mean to slide lower in my seat, but the praise from our professor brought sudden awareness to my partner and me. Beau seemed to take it in stride. His hat was on backward and he was cool as usual.

“Ok. That's it for today and for the week. Be careful out there on the beaches. Sunscreen people! Don't come back looking like tomatoes.” Professor Garcia laughed at her joke.

I looped my arms through my backpack straps, being careful not to stand too close to Beau as the class filtered out of the swinging doors. I caught a wink from him before I turned the corner to leave Manning Hall. In an hour's time, I would be on the road, headed to Beau's family beach house.

North Carolina beaches weren't particularly warm in mid-March, but Beau told me the house had a hot tub on the deck so it was a good idea to pack a bathing suit. I had been giddy for two weeks over the invitation to go with him

to Holden Beach. I assumed since it was our senior year that he probably had some crazy Cancun adventure planned with his roommates. It seemed that would make the top of his bucket list. He never told me what was on his calendar originally. I accepted the invitation with limited questions. He assured me his family would not be at the house. His mom was too busy working on a big insurance case and his father taught at the local high school. His spring break wouldn't be until April. We had the whole house to ourselves.

Storm clouds hovered on the horizon. I saw a flash of lightning when I hit the peak of the bridge that careened

onto the island named Holden Beach.

I pulled into the driveway, admiring the breathtaking house sprawling in front of me. Beau mentioned his mother was an attorney, but he never said anything about his family's financial status. The house was unreal. His motorcycle was parked in the garage. I stepped out of the car and looked up at the towering three stories rising above me. The wind had picked up and my hair whipped in the breeze.

“Hey! You made it. Let me help you. I’ll be right down.” Beau leaned over the lowest balcony railing before jogging down the stairs.

I moved to the trunk and pulled out my backpack. My laptop was snugly crammed inside. With an entire week at the beach, I'm sure there was going to be plenty of time to work on the project. I thought I heard thunder cracking overhead.

Beau met me at the bottom of the stairs. I wasn't sure if we should hug or kiss. Seeing him away from school was surreal. It was as if we were untethered from the world that had brought us together.

"I'll take that." He slipped the bag off my shoulder and reached for the

suitcase in my hand. “Come on. I want to show you the house. Good thing you got here before the rain.” He surveyed the storm clouds on the horizon.

Eagerly, I followed him up the stairs, taking note of the cute ass leading me upward, one step at a time. He ushered me past a row of rocking chairs and into the house through a sliding glass door.

“This is the kitchen. Snacks in here. Drinks in the fridge. Help yourself to anything.” He breezed past a stainless steel refrigerator and the double doors that opened to the walk-in pantry. “TV over there.” He pointed to the couch and

a sleek flat panel splayed across the longer wall in the open room.

This was evidently the NASCAR version of the house tour. I scarcely had time to get my bearings before he raced toward the hallway.

“Down here are all the bedrooms.” He wheeled my suitcase along the shiny pine floors. “I thought you might like this room.” He stepped aside to give me a clear view of the ocean.

The room was decorated completely in white. There was a set of French doors that opened to the ocean side of the deck. Beyond the breakers, I

saw another streak of lightning. Thank goodness I had made the four-hour drive before the clouds unleashed the rain. I glanced around at the rest of my accommodations.

It was unavoidable. In the center of the room was a king size bed. An enormous bed. A bed that was screaming: *I'm a bed.*

My knees were like Jell-O and my stomach twisted in knots. But the good kind of knots—the ones that had me jumping out of my skin waiting for Beau to make the first move. Although, why was I waiting on him? I knew exactly what I wanted.

It was silly to think it was ingrained in my head that it would be too forward or would come across as too slutty to tell a guy what I wanted—that I wanted him. However, in all my other relationships, I never made the first move, especially not in bed. Something about Beau aroused a primal instinct I kept buried with my last boyfriend. Beau challenged me on so many levels, or maybe I was just that turned on by the thought of having nothing between us.

He turned and pointed to a closed door. “There’s a private bathroom right here. Towels are on the shelf. My mom stocks the guest cabinet with extra

toothbrushes and stuff.” He hurried past the end of the bed and was moving toward the hallway. “Everything good?”

This was my chance. For the first time in a month, we were finally alone together. And not just any kind of alone—utterly alone in a beautiful house, secluded on a quiet beach. No Nina or Candace or Xbox-playing roommates. No gawking blog followers. No one.

“Beau?” One of his hands was on the door and he was headed in the direction of the kitchen. I couldn’t tell if he was excited to show me the house or nervous that I was there. It was kind of cute to see him shed some of his ultra-

cool exterior.

“Hmm? What’s up?” He had both feet back in the bedroom.

I sat on the edge of the bed, taking my time to unzip each of my knee-high leather boots before setting them on the floor. I peeled the cardigan sweater I was wearing off one arm and then the other. I tossed it on the chair. This was the best come-hither look I had. I leaned back on the bed. Self-admittedly, I had perfected this pose as Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

“Kiss me.”

I pushed myself to a place I had

never gone, but I wanted him to stay. The fire burning under my skin wasn't going to let this moment pass by without Beau knowing how I felt. I was willing to sacrifice any pride I had left to show him. It didn't make any sense to let him walk out the door. I smiled as he crossed the room, closing in on me a step at a time. *Mission accomplished.*

He eased his athletic frame onto the bed. "Like this?"

Beau's gaze was focused on my mouth. He studied the curves of my lips with his thumb, sending ripples through my body that surged in other places I wanted him to touch. I waited for him as

the space between us became the boundary for our breath. He kissed the side of my cheek while his hand gripped the back of my neck, sending a moan from my throat.

“Yes,” was all I could manage to sound out as he pressed his lips into mine. I drank in his kiss, while the outside world and its stormy skies faded away. This was better than what I could have asked for. I loved how he tasted. I was sure more perfect lips did not exist. I reclined back, pulling Beau with me on the summer white quilt.

The house shook with a loud clap of thunder, and the lights flickered several

times before the room was thrust into sudden darkness.

Beau shot up on both arms, hovering over me with his broad shoulders. “Shit. We just lost power.” I could tell he was contemplating leaving our compromising position for the more responsible house-sitting duties that had to be plaguing him.

The rain pelted the wooden deck outside the window, and I could hear the howling of the wind as it ripped around the corners of the house.

I had waited over a month for this moment and I wasn’t about to let him off

the bed or out of my arms. I was finally right where I wanted to be. After the cat and mouse game we had been playing, a little power outage wasn't going to stop the heat that was building between us. Lightning flashed through the glass door. A few kisses weren't enough. I wanted so much more.

I snaked my arms around his waist and gripped the small of his back. I might be tiny, but I didn't want him to have any doubts about what I was willing to do to keep him entangled in this position.

“Stay,” I whispered. “Stay with me.”

His mouth found mine in the darkness and I raveled my legs around him. I caught my breath as he worked the buttons open on my shirt. His hands explored every inch of my exposed skin, and I couldn't keep from moving under his touch, inching his fingers farther below my hips. I tugged the T-shirt over his head and let the backs of my nails trickle down his chest. His skin was hot and smooth under my fingertips. Even after my eyes adjusted to the lack of light, I closed them, trying to savor every touch and kiss. Each sensation Beau created with his fingers shot through me until I felt like a prisoner in my own skin. I wanted him to release me from the

pressure building deep within.

He seemed to be enjoying making me squirm with want. A devilish look flashed across his eyes before his lips began dropping kisses across my stomach like falling raindrops. Starting at my navel, I felt the intense sensation of his mouth while he drew a heated line to the buttons on my jeans.

“London, are you ok?” he whispered to me so softly over the thunder.

I couldn't think. I could only feel what he was doing to me, and it was amazing. We had never talked about

having sex. I knew it was inevitable after the night we decided to make our fake relationship real. Every time he touched me, it felt like my body was drawn to him. This night was meant to happen. I had never wanted anyone or anything so much. Seriously, he couldn't be trying to talk to me right now. I thought my body was saying it all without me having to utter a single word.

Then it hit me. I froze. What if I wasn't doing enough?

Beau steadied himself on his arms. "London?" I saw the smoldering look in his eyes. *Oh my God, he was hot.*

“Yes?” I didn’t want him to stop. I reached for the zipper on his jeans and tugged it until it reached the base of the seam. This was no time for conversation.

He exhaled deeply as I slid my hand between the denim and his skin. “I want you. Don’t get me wrong, this is all I can think about, but I need to know you’re ok with us—with doing this.”

I shimmied out of my jeans, tossing them on the floor. “Does that answer your question? Beau, I want this too. I want to be close to you, like this.” That was kind of an understatement, but I didn’t think I could tell him all of my feelings, especially right now.

He smiled before kissing me so deeply I couldn't remember ever being kissed before.

Taking my lead, Beau unbuckled his jeans, shoved them off his legs, and laughed when we heard them land somewhere in the dark.

Growling in my ear, he pushed my shirt farther down my arms. "Too. Many. Clothes."

"Mmm...hmm." I couldn't agree with him more, reveling in how my skin felt pressed against his. He was so warm.

Nimbly, his fingers released the

clasp on my bra, and he gradually tore the lacy lingerie from my breasts. As much as I wanted Beau, I loved that he wasn't rushing me or us. He took his time exploring, touching, and driving me crazy beyond my limits.

His mischievous eyes softened as his hand slid down my hip and began peeling the lacy fabric down my legs. I bit my lower lip and nodded to him. "Yes." I didn't want anything else between us.

Breathless for him, I arched my back, surrendering the core of my body to the fullness of him I needed so desperately. His palms pressed into mine, taking my hands over my head. I clasped

my fingers tightly around his grip. I didn't know sex could be so sweet and hot all at the same time. I had never felt so connected to anyone in my life. Every move he made sent rushes of heat spiraling through my body. I held on tightly, aching with unyielding pleasure at each controlled rock of his hips. This was all I wanted—to be so close to him that I couldn't feel anything but his heart beating, his breathing, and how much he wanted me.

“I guess you're going to tell me I can't put that on the blog this week.” Beau laughed with the sheet draped over

his leg.

“Hey! Not funny.” I punched him in the side, and then launched into a full attack, nipping on his neck with my teeth until he begged me to stop. It hadn’t taken me long to find the spot that would send him over the edge.

“Ok. Ok. Unless you want me to keep you in this room all night and deprive you of all food and drink, you better stop.”

I collapsed next to him. “Now that you mention it, I am hungry.” I had no idea what time it was. The power still hadn’t returned, and neither one of us

had managed to muster enough willpower to leave the bed. How many hours had we been lost in each other?

“Ok. Dinner’s coming right up. I can’t starve you on your first night of spring break.” I watched as a shadowy-figured Beau hopped off the side of the bed and searched for his haphazardly thrown pants. It was a shame he had to put those back on.

I sat up in the massive bed, feeling chilled without Beau next to me. He was a natural heater. “Do you have any flashlights or candles? I can help you with dinner.”

“Wait right here. I know where my dad’s emergency supply drawer is.”

I searched the floor for the remnants of my clothes while Beau assessed the lighting situation. *How did my bra end up under the bed?* I had just had sex with Beau Anderson and it was pure and utter blissful, mind-blowing sex. I squealed as I jumped into my jeans. Everything felt so perfect and so right.

A few minutes later, Beau returned with a pair of flashlights. He handed one to me. “Right this way.”

I shuffled down the hall, my hand tightly tucked in the back pocket of his

jeans. The heat wasn't working with the power outage, but Beau was walking around the house shirtless, not that I was complaining.

We emerged into the great room. There was a fire crackling in the fireplace and candles flickered on the mantle and on the kitchen countertop.

“How did you do all this?” I walked over to the fire to warm up.

“Luckily, we have a gas stove and gas fireplace, so we can still cook and you won't freeze tonight.” He winked at me and I melted. “How does stir fry chicken sound?”

At this point, I would eat a cardboard sandwich, I was so hungry. “Perfect.” I pulled a few pillows off the couch and laid them close to the fire. “You need any help?”

Beau looked surprisingly comfortable in the kitchen. I had never asked him about his culinary skills, but most guys in college stuck to Ramon noodles, pizza, and takeout food. I smiled, liking that he kept surprising me tonight.

“No. I’ve got this under control, but you can get the drinks. There’s wine and beer in the fridge.”

I opened the door to discover five bottles of wine chilling on the shelf. I looked at him. “Expecting a real spring break party?”

His grin turned sheepish. “Wanted to make sure I had my bases covered.”

I laughed. I guess I didn’t give him much of a chance to seduce me with the usual wine and dine ritual. We had been in the house all of ten minutes before I was begging him to rip my clothes off. I poured a tall glass of wine and handed him a beer.

“Cheers.”

He took the bottle. “To spring break.”

I reached on the tips of my toes, leaning toward him. He planted a rough kiss on my lips. “To spring break.”

I awoke the next morning on the living room floor cushioned by a makeshift bed Beau had created. The fire was still dancing among the constructed logs. The space next to me was empty. Sunlight streamed through the cathedral ceiling windows. I pulled the quilt against my bare skin and hugged my knees. If anyone had told me two months ago I

would be spending my spring break in a secret location with Beau Anderson, I would have said he or she were insane.

We had managed to go from reluctant group partners to something I didn't even have words to describe. All doubts I had about him and the chance I was taking with this charade evaporated the minute he kissed me. Last night was the most amazing night of my life.

“Hey. You’re awake.” Beau walked in through the sliding door. His earbuds were dangling around his shoulders. His T-shirt was soaked, and he had on shorts and running shoes.

“Hey.” I smiled, realizing I was the only one in the room completely naked. I could see my shirt hanging on the edge of the couch. “You went for a run?”

“Yeah. I didn’t want to wake you up. I’m going to go jump in the shower.” He darted through the living room and disappeared into the hall.

“Ok.”

What in the hell just happened? I crept to the couch to retrieve my shirt. Was that the same guy I stayed up with until dawn? I walked to the room Beau had designated as mine. The house felt warm, so the power must have returned

sometime when we were sleeping. I turned the shower nozzle to hot and stood in front of the mirror while I waited for the water to warm up. Something didn't seem right. Did he actually walk past me and just say 'hey' as if nothing happened? I was pissed. Stepping one leg in and then the other, I showered and prepared a speech for Beau.

One of the disadvantages to having long hair is the amount of time it takes to dry. Beau's mom had a high-powered salon-style hairdryer stashed in the cabinet. But even with the professional settings, I still spent fifteen minutes drying my hair before I could resurface in the kitchen. It did give me ample time to

rehearse my speech. It was going to go something like this: “If you think I’m just one more thing to check off your bucket list, then you’re wrong, Beau. You mean something to me. Last night meant something to me.” It was direct and short. I was going to stand up for myself, but still let him know I meant every breath of last night.

I charged down the hall expecting to find him in the kitchen. Instead, the room was empty and his laptop was open on the kitchen bar.

“Beau?” I called down the hall. No answer.

Ok, I was seriously getting mad. He had ditched me with no explanation. Because of him, I had fabricated two spring break stories. I lied to my friends and told them I needed to visit my grandparents before my big California move. I also lied to my parents and told them I was going with Nina and Candace to Charleston. Lying to the important people in my life wasn't my first choice, but it seemed like the only way I could be with Beau. Now I wasn't so sure I had made the right decision.

Then I saw the open screen on his computer. I didn't mean to snoop, but it was staring right at me. I perched on the closest barstool. Beau's Facebook page

was open and nothing I read made any sense. *Unbelievable.*

“Hey.” Beau stepped through the sliding doors and raised a paper bag in his hand. “I got us some donuts.”

I turned toward him, not knowing what to say.

“You don’t like donuts?” he asked. I could tell he was confused.

I attempted a smile, but I was failing miserably. Donuts didn’t seem like the solution to the sour feeling I had.

“I promise I wasn’t trying to be nosey, but you left your Facebook page

open and I saw the posts.” I was embarrassed he had caught me with his laptop, but more upset about what I had read.

“I didn’t want you to see that.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He placed the donuts on the counter and sat next to me. “It’s not a big deal.”

“You were supposed to be in Belize this week, and you don’t think that isn’t a big deal?”

I could tell he was nervous, something I rarely saw in Beau. “Don’t

make a thing out of it, London.”

“It kind of is a thing already. You canceled your spring break trip with your roommates, and they are posting all kinds of pictures and tagging you in them just to get to you. You weren’t going to tell me about Belize?”

“No. I was kind of hoping to keep it to myself.” He looked worried.

“I don’t know what to say.” I wasn’t sure which kind of guilt was worse—the lying kind or this. It seemed to be pelting me from all angles.

“Can we not talk about it?” Beau hopped up and rummaged through the

donut bag, extricating a gooey pastry smothered in chocolate. He took a bite.

I didn't want to make things any worse. His mood this morning had shifted since last night and I understood why. His asshole friends were giving him a hard time about the trip. Right now, he had to regret not going. He could be snorkeling and partying with his best friends in a vacation paradise instead of cooped up with me while we hid out from the world's prying eyes.

“Can you still make it? Can you meet them down there?”

“What?”

“I didn’t mean for you to cancel your trip. You should go. It’s senior spring break. You still have the entire week. The guys aren’t going to let you forget it, if you don’t go.”

“Girl, you are crazy.” He slammed the screen on his laptop and pushed the computer away from us. “I guess I’ve been kind of a jerk this morning. Sorry. I shouldn’t have let them get to me like that, but it doesn’t mean I want to change my plans. This is definitely where I want to be.”

His lips tasted like chocolate. I felt my body give in to him as his arms

encircled my waist. This felt so much better.

I pushed away. I still needed convincing. “You sure? It’s ok with me; I totally understand.”

“London, shut up and kiss me.”

Beau tapped the button on the garage door opener, and the heavy door retracted, blinding me with sunlight.

“Pick one.” He pointed to the two four-wheelers parked in the five-car garage of the beach house.

“I’ve never ridden one of these before.” I was starting to wonder if Beau was familiar with vehicles that had doors. He had a bike, a motorcycle, and a pair of four-wheelers.

“Really?”

“Really. I’ll probably crash. Can I just ride with you?”

“How about a lesson? By the end of the week, you’ll be riding solo.” He handed a helmet to me.

I placed it over my head. *So much for twenty minutes of hair styling.* Beau mounted the ATV and I positioned myself behind

him. He revved the engine and we rolled out of the garage toward the beach path closest to the house. I noticed a sign posted between the dunes. I read the notice: *No vehicles on the beach. Emergency personnel only.* Beau clearly ignored the sign as we climbed over the wooden walkway and raced straight toward the ocean.

He made a sharp turn as we reached the shoreline and increased our speed. He maneuvered us along the sand, dodging the waves as they crept closer to the wheels. I clutched his chest with every quick jerk of the vehicle.

Beau wasn't kidding about how desolate the beach would be this week.

We didn't pass a single person on the beach, only hungry seagulls. Cautiously, I pulled my hands from his chest and raised my hands in the air. I didn't care if the gulls were laughing at me. The sun on my face, the wind racing past us, and Beau pressed against my chest was all I could feel, and it was amazing.

Besides chocolate, wine, and tickets to Broadway, I was learning the quickest way to my heart was anything Beau-related. That included fishing—something I had never done before spring break.

“So you think we can actually catch something?” I looked doubtingly at the pole Beau had buried in the sand between my feet.

He was busy setting up a line for his fishing pole. I admired how he knew exactly what type of lure to tie on the end of the line. I had no idea what any of those sticky fluorescent gadgets were that he retrieved from his tackle box.

“Movie star, movie star. Don’t you know by now that I’m only going to do something if it’s fun?” He was smiling brightly and I loved how it looked on him.

The waves pounded and the surf rolled to the legs of our chairs. I couldn't believe how sunny it was. My sunglasses were anchored atop my nose and I had to break out a bottle of sunscreen. Professor Garcia would have been proud of me. We might not be having a Belize-style spring break, but it was sunny, warm, and we were sitting on a deserted beach together.

“What am I supposed to do if I hook something?” I stretched my toes out into the sand and started making a tunnel for the tide to pass through.

“I'll help you. Don't worry.” Beau stripped his T-shirt off his toned arms and hung it on the back of his chair. I

watched as he reached into the cooler for a beer. “This is pretty awesome, you know that?”

I smiled as I took one of the icy Coronas from him. “Yep. It is.” I shoved a lime into the bottle and took a sip. “So, how long have you been coming to this beach?” I scanned the empty horizon and the rows of vacant houses.

“Not that long really. My mom bought the house when I was in high school. She thought it would help us do more family things.” Beau used air quotes and I heard a tint of sarcasm at the word *family*.

“So, I take it, it didn’t really work?”

Beau pulled on the rod, testing its place in the sand. His eyes followed the line until it disappeared past the breakers. “No. She has a lot of great ideas, but when all you do is work, you can’t really see the ideas through. She’s never here. It’s usually just my dad and me, or sometimes my friends. It’s a sweet house. I’ve had some cool parties here. I guess that’s the bonus of her never being here—just like this week.”

“I’m sorry, Beau. That’s too bad. I’m sure she doesn’t mean to work all the time.” I thought about my parents and how they were constantly working and

devoted to their business.

“It’s no big deal.” Beau quickly changed subjects. He didn’t seem comfortable talking about his mother anymore. “You never told me what your friends are doing over spring break.”

Not wanting to press the issue, I rattled off my roommates’ plans. “Candace and Pearce have some kind of trip planned, of course. Pearce surprised her with tickets to the Bahamas. Nina was going to visit her cousins in Miami and, as she put it, have an ‘epic shopping trip.’ She asked me to go with her, but I didn’t want to disappoint my grandparents.” I giggled.

I did feel bad about lying to my friends, but I loved every minute I had with Beau and it seemed worth a tiny white lie to find this kind of happiness.

“You don’t regret it? The grandparent story?” He lowered his sunglasses to look at me.

“Honestly? No. I have had the best week with you.” I smiled and took another sip of the beer. “And I’m fishing.” I laughed.

“Hey! You’ve got one.” Beau jumped from his seat.

“What?” I was starting to feel

relaxed from the sun and the beer.

He pointed to my rod, which was now bending with sudden force toward the ocean. “London, reel it in!” He was excited.

Shit. I didn’t think we’d actually catch anything. I grabbed the handle on the rod and began cranking the reel. The line was tight and I could feel whatever was on the other end fighting my every movement.

“You’ve got this.” Beau’s arms wrapped around mine, and his body formed a support so that I could lean into him and continue to reel in the fish.

I tugged, pulled, and cranked until finally I saw a sliver of something sparkling break over the waves.

“There it is! Beau, there really is a fish!” Hurriedly, I spun the handle, bringing the fish to the shore.

“Well, you are officially a fisherman.” He held up the fish for me to examine. It flopped wildly in midair.

“Don’t you mean fisherwoman?”

He laughed. “I guess so.” He unclipped the fish from the lure and carried it to our empty cooler. “Now, just catch a few more for us and we’ll have

dinner.”

“We’re going to eat them?” I may have signed up for fishing on the beach all day, but cooking our victims wasn’t on my agenda.

“Of course we’re going to eat them. They’re blue fish—best eaten the day they’re caught. Don’t worry. I’ll do all the work.” He began re-baiting my line and tossed it out to sea for another try.

I smiled as I watched his arms glistening in the sun. He stepped back from the poles. “You ok with that plan?” he asked.

I realized right then that if Beau

could turn slimy, stinky fishing into something fun, that I was in far deeper than I had ever planned.

“Yes.” I smiled. “I’ll do the catching and you do the cooking. And you do the unhooking and baiting part too.”

Playfully, he scooped me into his arms.

“Hey, I’m not a fish.” The skin on his chest felt warm from the sun and I tasted a hint of salt on his lips as he kissed me. He gripped my thighs, tugging me closer to him. I sighed. My heart was definitely falling for this boy—one spring

break kiss at a time.

I wasn't sure how ten days passed so quickly. Last Thursday night felt like a lifetime ago. During the course of the week, we had ordered take out from all the island restaurants that were open, combed the beach for every shell possible, watched an entire season of *The Walking Dead*, learned we were evenly matched at poker, soaked in the hot tub until we looked like raisins, tuned in for *Love Match*, watched the entire ACC basketball tournament, and my favorite, discovered shower sex was our best achievement of the week.

I closed the trunk after Beau lowered in my suitcase.

“You’re all set. I’m going to go run through the house one more time before I leave and make sure everything is turned off. I’ll probably pass you on the road.” He winked.

“Back to reality, huh?”

“Or is it?” He mocked and I could tell he was trying to make me laugh.

“Beau, how are we going to do this when we get back to Chapel Hill?” Just the thought of leaving the beach house and the week we had behind was creating

panic. My palms felt sweaty. Couldn't we lock ourselves inside? I was certain I could survive without any doses of the outside world. All I needed was Beau.

“We’re going to figure it out. We’ve got a date tomorrow night to watch *Love Match*, right?”

“I can’t tomorrow night. Rehearsals start up for the new play. See, this is already complicated?”

“Hold on. It’s *not* complicated. Change of plans, that’s all. We’ll figure it out. Be careful going home. I’ll call you later.” Before I could protest and trap him into a more detailed discussion, he

kissed me on the forehead and ushered me into my car.

I backed out of the driveway and watched Beau climbing the stairs two at a time. I exhaled. This was going to work. He said we'd figure it out. I blasted the radio and pointed my car toward Chapel Hill.

Twenty minutes into the drive, my phone buzzed. I pressed the button on my steering wheel. "Miss me?" I used my lowest, huskiest voice.

"Yeah, I do, but wow, not like that." Nina was giggling on the other end of the phone. "Is that how you talk to

your grandpa?” She was laughing hysterically.

Shit. “Oh, hey, Nina. I knew it was you—just messing with you.”

“Liar.”

Did she know where I had been shacking up for ten days?

“So, how are the grandparents? You had to have the most boring spring break in the history of spring breaks. I can’t wait to see you! When are you getting back?”

Relieved but also filled with regret, I spoke into the car’s mic. “Everyone’s

good. It wasn't that boring." An image of a shirtless and shower-soaked Beau flashed through my mind. "Um. I'm on the road now, so you'll see me soon."

"Good. I can't believe we didn't talk all week. It was as if we were in a time warp or something. Have you heard from Candace?"

I hadn't heard from anyone. "No. Didn't she say she and Pearce were flying back from the Bahamas tonight?"

"I can't keep track of their schedule anymore. Be careful. See you for dinner."

"Bye."

I disconnected the call and focused on the road ahead of me. All I wanted to do was to tell Nina about the incredible week I had spent with Beau, but we had pinned ourselves into a corner.

CHAPTER TEN

“Welcome back, everyone. It seems you managed to heed my sun care advice.” Professor Garcia scrutinized the first rows of students. “Spring break is over though. We only have another five weeks of classes before your projects are due and the semester is over. Time flies around here! So let’s get to it. Today we are going to talk about Cultivation Theory.” The professor waltzed over to her smart board and tapped out highlighted words on the screen.

I stared at the screen then at the blank page of my notebook. I should be taking notes and analyzing every part of

the discussion on the perceptions of social reality, but the empty seat next to me was more distracting. Why wasn't Beau in class?

“Yes! That is exactly it. Perception becomes reality.” Professor Garcia beamed at Chuck Adams. I had missed everything Chuck said.

I watched as his partner, Meredith, smiled during the outburst of praise from Garcia. It was almost as if she was proud of him. Like he was more than her Comm partner. I tried to remember what reality show they had drawn.

In the row just below me, June

leaned over and whispered in Ben's ear. He playfully squeezed her leg before returning to his negligent note taking. What in the hell was going on? Did everyone hook up over spring break?

A flash of Beau hovering over me with that killer smile shot through my mind. Had it been three days since he had me pinned under him at the beach house? That seemed like way too much time to endure without kissing him or feeling his hands roaming my skin. I blushed and buried my face behind my long hair. It was silly to think my classmates could read my thoughts, but my feelings for Beau were spiraling beyond my control. What happened between us during spring

break had made sure of that.

“See everyone on Thursday.”

Professor Garcia cut the power to the smart board. “London, would you mind giving me just a minute?” The rest of the class looked at me like a criminal in a lineup, but continued to file out of the room.

There was nowhere to hide. Not behind Beau’s arms, or behind the other students. I was in this alone. I collected my backpack and made my way to the bottom of the classroom.

I looked at her red cowboy boots. They matched her hoop earrings

perfectly. “You wanted to speak with me?”

“Yes. Yes. I was hoping I could speak with you and Beau together. This involves him too.” She coughed into her sleeve.

My stomach was heaving back and forth. She had to know. Someone had probably spotted Beau and me on spring break, although we spent most of our time inside. Professor Garcia knew our project was a complete phony.

“I’m sorry, professor. I don’t know where Beau is. We could wait and talk on Thursday?” Stalling didn’t make much

sense, but I didn't want to face the firing squad alone.

“Why don't we chat, and then you can talk to him?” She had me cornered.

I tried to smile and push down the sudden urge to throw up in the auditorium.

“Your blog has been the talk of campus. That's an understatement. It has been the talk of every online communication theory group I'm in.” I didn't want to interrupt her to ask what an online communication theory group was. “Anyway, London, you and Beau have come up with something that is so

unique you are getting national attention in the communication theory community.” Her voice sounded scratchy.

My eyebrows reached the top of my forehead. What was she saying?

“I can’t tell you how many other professors have emailed me about your project. Now, I know it isn’t finished, but I want to present it at the national higher education conference this summer in Orlando.” Her coughing fit escalated. “I’m sorry. I think I might be coming down with something. Not enough sleep over spring break.” She tried to laugh. “But back to you and the research—”

I was speechless.

“I know you and Beau are graduating and I’m not asking you to take on additional work. But, I wanted to ask you two if you would hand over your research at the end of the semester and let me publish your findings. I’ll list you both as contributors, of course.”

This was bad. Very bad. Shit. I needed Beau’s calm and casual attitude. He could handle any intense situation. “I-I don’t know what to say.”

“I know. It’s a huge honor for undergraduates. I’m sure you and Beau can appreciate how unusual it is to be a

part of a national-level publication.”

“Professor Garcia, I have to talk to Beau about this. I can’t answer for him.”

“Of course not.” She waved her hand in the air. “I would expect nothing less from you, London.”

I bit hard on my bottom lip. I couldn’t think of a way to squash her idea. Instead, I started walking toward the exit at the top of the stairs.

“Oh, and, London, between you and me, you’ve done an amazing job on the project considering who you are working with.”

I turned in her direction, trying to hide the sudden anger that had just surfaced in my eyes. “What do you mean, Professor?”

She laughed. “It can’t be easy going on dates with someone like him. You’re so artistic and gifted. I didn’t expect anything to develop with you two; he isn’t exactly unique. However, you’ve done the best with an unusual situation. I can’t wait for the final project.”

If I had a dagger in my backpack, I probably would have aimed it at her hideous boots. I smiled sweetly before leaving. “Thank you, Professor. We won’t disappoint you.”

She didn't know him the way I did.
No one did.

Finally, alone in the corridor of Manning Hall, I pulled out my phone to text my un-unique-fake-not-fake boyfriend.

I felt like a mall walker hurriedly racing past row after row of towering bookshelves. Davis Library was nothing if not a labyrinth. It had been months since I had navigated the floors of periodicals and stressed out studying students. But after several rounds of cryptic texts, Beau

had convinced me to meet him in one of the library's eighth floor study rooms.

There was a man sleeping on one of the couches, but I didn't see anyone else as I charged to room 8052, the study cube Beau had reserved. I tapped on the door then pushed it forward, walking into a dark cubicle.

"Beau?" I called into the tiny study space. The door slammed behind me. I felt strong and determined arms encircle my waist as he backed me against the door.

"I missed you." He growled into my ear before descending on my mouth.

He grabbed under my bottom and hitched my legs around his waist. This was unreal.

I tasted his lips. “Have you been drinking?” I tried to pull back, but he was working his way down my neck and I was melting in his hands.

Then, I remembered we were in the library. Mustering a little more strength, I unlocked myself from his grip.

“Beau? What’s going on? Are you drunk? Don’t you have an exam?”

I felt his breath on my neck as my eyes started to adjust to the darkness of the study room.

“Yeah. Bucket list.”

“What are you talking about?” I was trying to pace my breathing. Three days without kissing Beau was definitely too many.

“Take an exam drunk, which I’m getting ready to do, and kiss a girl in Davis Library, which I just did. Check and check.”

I slugged him in the arm. “You lured me up here to mark something off your list?”

“Ouch, London.” He grabbed his bicep. “You didn’t seem to mind a second

ago.” His lips nuzzled under my jaw, and his hand slipped between the space under the small of my back and my jeans.

“Wait a second. You’re going to take an exam drunk? Are you crazy?”

“Don’t worry. I studied while you were in Comm 224, *then* I started drinking.”

I couldn’t stop the small moan that surfaced, but I could stop him. “Beau. I need to get you coffee or something. You can’t go to class like this.”

“Stop, London. It’s on my list. I’m going to do fine.” No doubt he would ace an exam in seduction, but how could he

pass a history exam like this?

“Ok. But let me at least walk with you to class?” I clasped my hands around his waist and pulled him closer to me.

“Ok, movie star. You can walk with me, but that means we have to leave this dark room, and I don’t think I’m ready to do that.” I yielded to him as his lips crushed mine.

Ok, we could stay a few more minutes.

Walking with Beau across campus, I felt like everyone was watching us. It

was probably because his attempt to walk in a straight line was failing miserably. I had to keep from giggling, and from grabbing him in front of everyone.

“What did I miss with the nutty professor today?” Beau was focused on the brick pavement under his feet.

“A new theory. The usual.” I decided this was not the time to talk to him about Professor Garcia’s request. He needed every functioning brain cell to remember what happened during World War II. I wasn’t going to cloud his thoughts with this problem. I could do that later.

He stopped in front of Hamilton Hall. “Wish me luck.” He smiled and I recognized the heated look in his eyes. He leaned toward me.

“Beau.” I darted back, so his lips missed mine. I eyed the students walking past us.

“Oh yeah. The secret.” He held his finger to his lips. “It’s hard not to kiss you, you know?”

I smiled. I did know. His lips were all I could think about. “Good luck on your drunk exam.” I waved as he tried not to stumble up the stairs. “I’ll meet you here when you’re finished.”

I looked at my phone. I had plenty of time to stop by the theater before his exam was over. I was sure Nina would need my help with costumes. We hadn't had a chance to catch up since spring break. I would do my best to avoid made-up grandparent stories.

“London! You’re here.” Candace and Nina squealed in unison. I felt like I had missed out on an important roommate memo seeing the girls together in the basement. I walked over to join them on the couch.

“What are you working on?”

“Did Derek call you?” Nina looked concerned.

“No, why?”

My roommates exchanged nervous glances. “Well, he decided to cancel *Winged Angst*. He wrote something completely new over spring break.” Nina broke the news.

“Is he crazy?” This was unheard of. Derek might be a creative genius, but this was taking things too far.

Candace stood and handed me a copy of the play. I read the title out loud.

“*Betray Me.*” I looked at my friends. “Are you two ok with this?”

Before Nina answered, I knew exactly what her answer would be. She would throw her full support behind anything Derek suggested. “It’s really good, London. Just read it.”

“But we already started promoting *Winged Angst* and we rehearsed it. Shouldn’t we get to vote or something?” I thought about all of the hours I had wasted on a play that wouldn’t see the stage. Nights I had missed watching *Love Match* with Beau, dates I had to skip, hours I wasn’t making my final Carolina memories, moments I couldn’t get back.

“Derek was worried you might be upset, but he says this part is perfect for you. Better than *Winged Angst*.” Nina was still playing the role of Derek expert. “Really, he said he was going to call you.”

“I think I’ll pass.” I handed the script back to Candace, who took it reluctantly.

“What? You’re kidding, right?” Nina was visibly shocked.

It was a slow surge, but I felt the confidence in my decision spread through my body and root in my heart. “No. It’s not a joke. I’m going to focus on other

things for the rest of the semester. Things not related to Encore.”

“What other things? Beau and your fake dates?”

I had to tread lightly. I had promised Beau I wouldn't breathe a word to either of the girls. “I do have the project and the rehearsals interfere with the dates, but that's not all. I want to do something else before I graduate. I've been buried in this basement for four years. I only have five weeks until the end of the semester; I need more than this.”

I thought Candace might start crying. “London, but we need you. You're

the lead actress. This is what you do; we're counting on you."

"Maybe if Derek hadn't scrapped *Winged Angst*, but I can't imagine starting over right now." They were disappointed, but I knew I was freeing myself. I had to do it. "Candace, you have Pearce, and Nina you are all tied up with Derek and whatever play he is working on. Don't you think I deserve to have something else too?"

Nina was relentless. "Does that mean something is going on with you and Beau?"

"Nina, stop. I just don't want to do

this play. *Betray Me* is for some other worthy actress, not me.”

She looked defeated. “I can’t believe this. I never thought it would end like this.” She wiped back a sliver of a tear. “Ok. Ok. If you think this is what is best for you, then you know I’m behind you, London, a hundred and ten percent. But I think you should tell Derek yourself. I’m not breaking this news to him.”

I wrapped my friends in a big circle hug.

“Sure. Whatever you need me to do, but this girl is not going to be in

Betray Me.”

I walked out of the theater basement for possibly the last time as an actress. It felt good. I looked over at the planetarium building across the parking lot. I hid an inner giggle, thinking about the burning picnic basket on the roof. Since January, I had experienced more Carolina moments with Beau than I had in the previous three and a half years on my own. Sure, I had dated. I even had a few boyfriends over the semesters, but the artistic type are moody at times, and like me, they just wanted to go to the theater, film festivals, and rent classic movies. For

the first time, I was a stereotypical, normal, everyday Carolina student—and it was awesome.

I texted Beau on my way to Hamilton Hall. Surely, he was finished with his drunken exam. I couldn't wait to tell him about my decision.

Are you done?

Yep. Just waiting on a pretty girl.

He always had the best texts. I sighed.

He was leaning against the handrail when I walked into his view. My first instinct was to run and jump into his

muscular arms, but this damn charade we had created for class kept me from doing anything that looked like a girl in love. *In love?*

“How was the exam?” I stayed a few feet away.

“Nailed it.” He was oozing with confidence or maybe some leftover drunkenness.

“Really?” I didn’t believe him.

“Why not. I know all the details about Pearl Harbor. I even wrote an essay about Japanese concentration camps in the U.S. I think I filled the entire blue book.”

“I’m impressed, but let’s see what your grade is before you declare drunk exam taking as your next best idea.”

“You just wait, London. I got an A on that exam.”

“What do you want to do now?” It was getting dark and campus was quiet.

“I’m not about to lose this buzz. Let’s go to He’s Not and get a blue cup.” He started walking toward Franklin Street.

“Blue cup?”

Even slightly tipsy, Beau stopped in

his tracks and turned toward me in a perfect swivel. “Don’t tell me. You’ve never had a blue cup?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Nope.”

“All right, girl. You are lucky you met me. If you haven’t been indoctrinated into beer drinking at He’s Not Here, world famous Franklin Street bar, we have our work cut out for us tonight.” He grabbed my hand and dragged me down the brick sidewalk. I didn’t point out that we were in the middle of campus and shouldn’t be holding hands. His palm felt warm in my clasp. I let Beau lead me to one more experience I needed to check off my list. “He’s Not, here we come.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

My bed was littered with scraps of paper. I had easily written down twenty casting call opportunities in L.A. and then balled them up. Nothing felt right about any of the parts. I wasn't so naïve to believe I would land a break out role in my first acting gig, but I couldn't relate to any of the characters. It probably wasn't helping that all I could think about was Beau and what he was doing right now. He still had a full semester of classes, exams to study for, and papers to write.

Beau let me plan this Saturday's date. I felt so disconnected from *Love Match* and everything Victoria was going

through on the show since my week away at spring break. The reality was, in some weird way, she and I were going through the same thing. While she was dating seven guys at a time, I was doing my best to date one and pretend to the world that what I was feeling wasn't real. But everything about Beau and me was real.

When I saw her first date of the episode, I knew it would be perfect for us. Victoria and one of the unsuspecting bachelors were driven by limo to a recording studio, where they spent two hours receiving voice lessons with Victoria's favorite singer. Once the quickie rehearsal was over, the bachelor sang his heart out in an attempt to get a

rose at the end of the date. It was a date to the sudden death. If Victoria didn't like the recording, he was sent packing. If she did, she would give him a rose and they would head on to the second part of the date.

Nina started throwing things at the TV when the bachelor didn't make the cut. She might be a fan of the show, but she didn't like Victoria's decisions about doling out roses. "He could sing. That was totally unfair. I don't know why she didn't give him a rose. They had chemistry. Anyone could see it."

I watched as my roommate huffed at our mini flat panel. "Nina, if it's not

there, you can't force it. Victoria likes the other guys better. Don't you think it was nice of her to send him home before things got any more serious?"

"Better? He was the cutest one on the show. It wasn't nice at all." My roommate was still appalled.

Now that I had quit Encore, I would be able to watch the rest of the season with Beau. At least he didn't throw things at the TV, and I was sure he could care less who Victoria picked in the end.

I pulled my car in front of Beau's apartment building. His motorcycle was

parked in a tight corner spot. I had never seen where he lived. It was hard not to be completely curious.

I knocked on the door of apartment 202. Through the door, I heard a loud, “Yeah?” I listened for footsteps and knocked again. “Come in!” That definitely wasn’t Beau’s voice.

Timidly, I turned the handle and cracked the door enough to peek in. Sitting on the couch were two guys, intently glued to the TV. Each one had a controller in his hand.

“Dude, that was badass!”

“No shit.”

I cleared my throat, nervous I might be in the wrong apartment. They looked up from the game.

“Oh, are you Paris?” the one on the left asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Nah, man, that’s Sydney.” I recognized the second one from the night at the planetarium. He had let us in the side entrance.

Before I could come back with a witty retort, Beau walked down the hall and into view.

“Hey, I didn’t hear you come in.”

He smiled, and I reminded myself not to be anything but casual in front of his roommates.

“Yeah, I just got here. I was going to introduce myself to your roommates.”

The Xbox junkies barely glanced up when Beau entered the room. “We met Dakota already.”

“It’s London, you jackasses.” Beau stood in front of the TV, blocking their view.

“Man, get out of the way.” The one on the left looked angry. “We said hi to

her.” I recognized both of them from the Belize Facebook pictures. I wasn’t a fan.

“Beau, it’s no big deal. I get that all the time. The funny what-city-are-you-named-after joke. Hilarious.”

He gave me an apologetic shoulder shrug. “Ok, let’s go.”

Neither one of us even bothered to say good-bye.

“Sorry about them. Russ and Chip aren’t always dicks. They’re good guys.” Beau ushered me down the stairs and to my car.

“I’m sure they’re nice...

sometimes.” The roommates didn’t impress me. Didn’t one of them have a girlfriend who watched *Love Match*? I was having a hard time seeing either one of them in a relationship. It made me a little nervous about Beau. Why would he live with those guys?

I pulled the seat belt across my chest, but before I could fasten it, Beau’s hands were on my face and he was pulling me across the console.

“I hate not being able to kiss you,” he whispered as his mouth landed on mine.

I fisted my hands in his hair and

succeeded in uttering, “Me too.” Kissing him was like feeling breathless and whole at the same time.

“Ok.” He pulled back. I really didn’t want him to stop. “Now you can drive.” He had a wicked smile on his face. “Where are you taking me on this date?”

I put the car in reverse. “You’re going to hate it at first, but I promise it will be fun. You’ll see.”

He groaned. “Oh no. I think I know what it is.”

Date Six: Laying Down the Hits

The recording studio was surprisingly busy for a Saturday night. There was a birthday party for a ten-year-old girl ahead of us. The giggling girls reminded me of a party I went to at that age. They were covered in glitter and boas.

Beau slouched as far as he could in the seat while he flipped through the song list. Admittedly, being surrounded by a pack of squealing girls was not the plan I had for this part of the date, but this was for the blog. I had a surprise part two after we recorded our song.

The girls skipped into an open studio. I brushed off the seat and watched the glitter flutter in the air around me. “Did you pick a song yet?”

“I’m still looking through the options of self-humiliation. I can’t believe you are getting me to sing again. Can we skip this part? Why don’t you record something and I’ll listen on this side of the glass?”

“That’s no fun. Sing with me. It’s exactly like the *Love Match* date, only this is a sure thing. I promise to give you a rose if you sing.”

He placed the binder next to him

and leaned dangerously close to me. I felt my heart race when he stared at me with an intense, lustful gaze. “Sure thing?”

I bit down on my lip. Beau was making me come undone right here in the studio waiting room. “Yes. Sure thing.”

“Next! Your studio is waiting. Room B.” A large man appeared from the control room and pointed us in the direction of the padded room.

Beau casually strolled into the studio, leaving me to regain my composure. I wasn’t sure how I was going to pull off the second part of the date he really wanted, but I did know there was

no way I was going to let him down.

“London? You coming?” He stood in the doorway.

“Yep.” I hopped up from my seat and met him in the recording booth.

“I have the perfect song for us.” He pointed to one of the titles in the binder.

The man on the other side of the glass flipped the microphone switch so he could talk to us. “Ok. I have your song cued. You can do two run throughs and then we record it. Any questions?”

I pulled the headphones on over my ears and gave the operator a thumbs

up. We were ready.

Beau adjusted his headset and winked at me. I was glad he was having fun with the date. We stumbled through the first take. I kept trying to match the pitch in his voice, and he was trying to keep up with the lyric placement. Singing without backup vocals is hard to do. By the third take, we nailed it.

“That’s a wrap. Wait in the lounge and I’ll have your CD ready in five minutes.” The voice boomed in the quiet studio.

Beau reached for my hand and led me to the waiting area. He took any

chance he had to touch me.

“I have an awesome idea for the track.” He looked excited.

“What do you mean?”

“I can put it on the blog with this week’s post. Before you know it, we’ll have ten thousand downloads.”

That damn blog. I didn’t really want to share the song with the whole campus or as Professor Garcia had mentioned, the country. I still hadn’t mentioned my conversation with our wacky professor to Beau. She canceled class Thursday, claiming she had the flu. It bought me another few days before I had to give her

an answer about publishing the research. I was going to have to approach the impossible situation with him later tonight, before he distracted me with all his seductive tactics.

“London? Hello? You look like you’re a million miles away.”

“Sorry. Thinking about the blog.”

“We don’t have to post the song if you don’t want to. I thought it added another element for us.”

“No. No, it’s a great idea, but I do need to talk to you about class.”

“Ok. What’s up? You look

serious.”

The door opened to the control room and the burly man shoved a CD in Beau’s hand. “Here you go. It’s a good song. You two aren’t bad together.” He patted Beau on the back before shuttling another group into Studio B.

“Can we get out of here? I want my rose now.” His hand found the curve above my hip and he planted his arm around my waist.

“Yes. I have more planned.” I smiled at him. “Let’s go.”

I couldn't believe how dark it was at Kenan Stadium. It was the beginning of spring, so the football stadium wasn't being used for anything, but still I thought there would be some kind of lighting.

We pushed on the chain-link gate and walked into the concrete corridor. It was eerie how quiet the complex was at night.

“What part of Victoria's date is this?” Beau asked over my shoulder.

I turned to face him. “This isn't a *Love Match* date. This is our date.” He grinned at me; he was catching on.

“Follow me.”

In less than two months, we would be walking these same stairs and taking our seats in the bleachers for graduation. Tonight, I didn't want to think about what was going to happen in May. I only wanted to be with Beau.

We took the steps down to the field level and passed through the manicured hedges that bordered the football field. I read the numbered lines running across the grass until we reached the center. Before I picked Beau up tonight, I had stashed a small blanket in my bag just for this moment. I retrieved the blanket and pressed the corners, flattening it into the

fifty-yard line.

“Last time I tried this, the guard at Gimghoul Castle ran us off. What do you think the chances are we can actually sit here on the fifty-yard line and do some stargazing?”

Beau laughed as he sat next to me. “You are better at checking things off my list than I am. Stargazing at Kenan?”

“That’s not all. I brought drinks.” I reached into my bag and pulled out two beers.

“Is that like a Mary Poppins bag or something? You can fit anything in there.” Beau lifted the corner and peered

into the side pocket.

“No. I just know how to pack.”

“We have to make a toast.” He raised the glass bottle in my direction. “To Carolina nights.”

I smiled and let my bottle tap his before taking a sip.

From where we sat, the sky looked like it was littered with diamonds. They stretched from one end zone to the other. It was a new moon, giving us the perfect night to find constellations.

“Now, about that rose.” His seductive eyes were watching me squirm.

Beau wedged his beer into a patch of grass. His eyes looked hungrily at my mouth. With an unexpected fierceness, he lunged at me, sending me back on the blanket. I threw my arms around his neck as his lips took mine. *So much for stargazing.*

He paused, letting his hands trace the edges of my face. “London, I can’t keep my hands off you. This project is going to kill me.” My body bowed toward him as he playfully nipped at my neck with his teeth. “I want it to be over so we can stop sneaking around. I want to touch you whenever I want.”

Project. Shit. I still hadn’t told him

what was going on. “Beau, we need to talk about the project.” It was barely a whisper.

His hand cupped my bottom and he squeezed until I was pressed against the center of his body. “Just kiss me, London. We can talk later.”

As he brushed his lips over mine until my mouth parted for him, he worked the zipper down on my jeans so his hand could slip between my legs. I groaned. We could definitely talk later.

It was after two before I pulled into the driveway. I ran my fingers through my

hair, pulling pieces of grass out of the long strands. I giggled. I closed the front door behind me. The lights in the house were off as usual, but the TV was on. I glanced around the room before I saw the huge moving mound on the couch. Oh no. Someone was under there.

I held my breath and tiptoed across the floor. Maybe if I were quiet enough, whoever was under the blanket pile wouldn't know I was home. No need to embarrass one of my roommates and her guest.

I had just made it to the kitchen when I heard, "Nina, someone's in here." I scuttled to the wall so that I could stay

out of view. My heart was racing.

“Derek, you’re crazy. Don’t stop.”
Nina’s voice was low and husky.

Quickly, I darted into my room before I heard another breathy movement. *Ick*. I muffled my laughter as I gently turned the handle on my bedroom door. Well, she had finally done it. Sunday breakfast was going to be interesting in our house.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The details were sketchy at best. Nina wasn't as excited as I thought she would be after her four-year conquest had been achieved. Getting Derek to sleep with her didn't produce the magic between them she thought would be there.

"It was good, but it wasn't all fireworks and hotness. You know?" Nina was still in her pajama pants and her hair was in a ponytail.

I eyed her over my mug of tea. Of course I knew. Everything with Beau was fireworks. I couldn't imagine anything

else. “I’m sorry it wasn’t what you wanted, Nina. But hey, now you know. You can move on.”

“Move on? I’m not giving up after one night. He just wasn’t focused.” She bit into a piece of toast. “I’ll give him another chance.”

We made breakfast at noon—normal breakfast time for us. I didn’t go to sleep until after three. Beau kept texting me until my eyelids wouldn’t stay open. There was no telling what time Derek finally left after a night of un-hot sex.

“Honey, I just don’t want you to

get your heart broken. Derek hasn't been the most receptive and willing participant in all of this. There are other guys out there. Guys who would love to date you *and* sleep with you."

She let out a long sigh. "Enough about Derek. How was the fake date last night?"

"Oh, nothing interesting."

"London, come on. Beau is super hot. How can there be nothing going on between you two?"

My cheeks had to be turning pink. I walked over to the sink to wash out my mug. "He's just my class partner. Ok?"

“Something is going on with you. Why won’t you talk about Beau?”

“Because there is nothing to talk about. I’m going to go work on my blog for last night’s date.”

Before my best friend and former confidant could pester me with more Beau questions, I rushed to my room. I took a deep breath. I had to find a way to erase all of the emotion I felt for Beau and our sixth date while I threw in bits of class theory into the post.

Date Six Re-creation: Victoria takes a bachelor to a recording studio

Show myth to debunk: Exposure to romantic television will incite romantic feelings

Based on the principles of Cultivation Theory, the longer an individual is exposed to certain behaviors on television, the likelihood increases that the person will start to believe the world around them is just like the TV behavior. In our case, watching multiple episodes of Love Match should spawn romantic notions that life is a romantic fairy tale. Ultimately, the more lavish dates and love proclamations we watch, the more we should start having some of those feelings. That is—if the show was real.

On our sixth date, Beau and I recorded a song together in a local studio. Minus the famous singing celebrity, we did exactly what Victoria

and her bachelor did. We laughed and goofed around over the lyrics, but in the end, the date concluded the same way it started.

My stomach was turning in knots. I couldn't finish the blog. I knew this is what I had agreed to do, but lying about the date wasn't the only thing bothering me. I didn't want people to read my words and think I wasn't completely falling head over heels for Beau.

I needed to talk to him. I looked down at my pjs. First, I had to change into clothes.

I banged on the apartment door

with more force than I knew was in my fist.

“What?” one of the gaming roommates called.

“It’s London. Can I come in?”

“Sure, Paris. Come on.” I think it was the one Beau had identified as Russ. I walked into the mess they called the living room. He had a remote in one hand and a piece of pizza in the other.

“You’re not giving up the name joke are you?” I asked, scanning the apartment for my fake boyfriend.

“Nope. Beau’s in his room. Last

door on the left.” He never took his eyes off the TV.

I sidestepped a pile of clothes that had been dumped in the middle of the room. I couldn’t tell if they were clean or dirty. Quietly, I walked down the hall, pausing in front of Beau’s room. The door was closed. Maybe I should have called him. I had never shown up like this before. Although, Russ didn’t seem like the most perceptive person. He wasn’t going to put two and two together.

I tapped lightly on the door before nudging it open.

Beau was sitting at his desk typing.

“What, Russ? Are you stuck on level three?”

I giggled. “Sorry, I don’t know anything about level three.” I closed the door behind me.

“London? What are you doing here?” He crossed the room and wrapped me in a big hug. My feet dangled from the floor.

“We need to talk.”

“Uh-oh. That’s never a good way to start a conversation.” He carried me over to his bed and lowered me on the unmade covers.

“Beau, this is what happened last night. I tried to talk to you and you kept distracting me.” I turned my head from side to side so he couldn’t access my lips.

“I distracted you? I was there to do some stargazing and you know, I can’t remember seeing a single constellation.”

He started tickling my sides until I was erupting with laughter. “Beau, stop! Russ is out there.”

“He’s a zombie if you haven’t noticed. He probably didn’t even see you walk in here. Chip’s the one I have to worry about it and he’s at his girlfriend’s house.” He assaulted my stomach with his

fingers. “I didn’t know you were so ticklish.”

I was almost in tears. “Ok. Stop. Stop.”

He sat up, straddling my hips. If he started undressing me with his eyes, I knew I would forget my whole mission in the surprise visit. I needed to stay on target. His eyes flared with mischief.

“All right, go ahead. What do we need to talk about?” He reached backward and caught my thigh with his hand.

“Uh-uh. I can’t talk to you like this. Go. Sit at the desk.” I tried to wiggle out

from under him.

“Seriously?”

“Yes, go.” I shooed him to the other side of the room so I could breathe again.

“I’m ready. Lay it on me.” He motioned toward his chest.

Being in the same room with him made my freak out seem silly. I wanted him closer, back on the bed, but Professor Garcia wasn’t going to forget about the research request. We needed to come up with a better plan.

“Ok, on Tuesday, the day you

drank your way out of coming to class, Professor Garcia pulled me aside after the lecture. She said that our project is getting lots of attention among her professional colleagues.”

“So?” Beau was wheeling his chair across the room, inching closer to the bed.

“So, she asked me if she could publish our research. She wants to present it at a conference in Orlando this summer.”

“Oh.” He was halfway across the room. “Not good.”

“Exactly. We can’t give her fake

research to present at a conference. This is turning into an ethical nightmare.”

“Then, let’s tell her the truth.” His wheels hit the corner of the bed. “We’ll tell her the hypothesis failed.”

“What? Are you crazy? We have lied all semester. We’ll get an honor code violation and we’ll fail. I can’t fail the class. I need this A.”

He had climbed on the bed next to me. “Would it be so bad if you didn’t get an A? Let’s just tell her and then I can do this anytime I want.” He reached for the side of my face, and I swerved to avoid his kiss. “I would risk standing in front of

the stupid honor court to be with you.”

“I don’t even know what you’re saying right now. Not get an A? I’m a straight A student. And go in front of the honor court? Oh my God, this is getting worse.” I wish I had paused long enough to listen to what he was saying to me, but the panic I felt was spiraling me into a tailspin.

Beau’s expression changed from playful come hither to cool and distant. “Right. You need the A so you can go to L.A. Movie star dreams.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I didn’t like what he was implying and I

regretted not letting him kiss me.

He exhaled. “London, you’re so focused on getting out of here. Why are we even doing this?”

My heart landed in my stomach. I scrambled for a way to turn the conversation in a different direction.

“I needed to ask you about the research. We have to give her an answer in two days.” I had no intention of going near his question. Maybe I could steer him back to the kissing or his feelings.

He had stopped inching toward me. “You’ve been running the show since the beginning. What do you want me to say?”

You can't have it both ways."

Why was he so annoyed all of a sudden? I wanted him to keep moving closer. The two feet between us felt as big as the football stadium.

"Beau, what is going on? You're making me nervous."

He sighed. "There is a way out of your moral dilemma."

My stomach flipped again. This couldn't be happening. "You're not serious." Tears were pushing their way to the corners of my eyes.

"Let's go back to being group

partners. It makes it simple. Take me out of the equation. You don't have to worry about lying anymore, we hand over real research, and then you get your damn A. Win-win."

It felt like he had punched me. *No. No. No.* "That's not win-win. How can you say that? That's not what you really want to do." The room was spinning. My eyes burned.

"What did you think was going to happen? We graduate in less than two months. You're going to California. I'll be in law school. Let's just get this over with now and you can finish out the semester taking the moral high road. Deal?" His

voice was cool.

I couldn't hear him talk anymore. Through a blurry haze, I ran out of his room and passed Russ. I didn't care if he saw my tears. I wasn't going to be back.

"London, slow down. I can't understand you. Here, blow your nose or something." Nina handed me a tissue as I buried my face in my pillow. "Do you want me to call your mom?"

"No!" I sniffed. "I'm fine. I just need a minute."

"You're not fine. Your face is all

puffy and red and you're crying—clear signs you're not fine. You've been in here for three days. What happened?"

It didn't make sense what had happened. I wanted a way to undo what Beau said on Sunday, and undo my stupid idea to show up at his apartment. Was he thinking about this all along? Was he thinking about this Saturday night on the football field or during spring break? Because I'm moving, he thinks we're destined to break up? The tears welled again and I sunk into the covers.

"Ok. If you don't tell me what happened, I'm calling your parents. You are really freaking me out. You missed

class yesterday; you never miss class.” Nina was sitting at the end of the bed with a concerned look, cell phone in hand. “Three days is long enough to scare me. You can’t exist on Saltine crackers and soda. You’re definitely missing some food groups. This—whatever it is—isn’t good for you.”

It didn’t matter anymore. The secret wasn’t even a secret. “Beau and I broke up.”

“What? You mean fake broke up? Is it some kind of twist in the project?” Nina was visibly confused.

I reached for another tissue. “No.

It was a real breakup. We've been together this whole time."

"What?" Nina screeched into my room.

"I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't because of the project and I agreed to keep it a secret. I don't know what I've done. What did I do?"

"Hold on. You have been secretly and publicly dating Beau Anderson all semester, and I'm just now finding out?" She looked hurt.

"I'm sorry, Nina. I didn't want to keep it from you, but I didn't want to include anyone else in the charade. It's

bad enough we lied to everyone—
Professor Garcia, the class, everybody.”

I watched as my friend scanned her memory bank. “You didn’t go see your grandparents during spring break, did you?”

“No. I have grandparent guilt too.”
I made a mental note to schedule a visit with them soon.

“Wow. You’re more adventurous than I thought.” Nina sounded impressed.

“You aren’t mad at me?”

“If I could date someone who

looked at me the way he looked at you, I would do it in a second. I'm not mad."

"What are you talking about?"

"I've known all along there was something going on between you two. It was sort of obvious that night I walked in on you when you were supposed to be watching *Love Match*. Beau looked at you like you were the only girl in the world. It was sweet. He was obviously crazy about you." She smiled.

I sighed, thinking about what he said to me in his room. "He's not crazy about me anymore." I hadn't heard from him since I left, running teary-eyed from

his apartment.

“What happened between you?”

“It’s such a mess. I screwed the whole thing up with my moral high road, as he called it. Professor Garcia wants our research to present at a conference. I told him I didn’t think we could give her research that was a lie. So, he said we should tell her the truth, but I totally freaked out. Then, he gave me the only other option that exists—give her real research and call off the relationship. We can just go back to being group partners.”

“What? He said that? Who does he think he is? That’s just stupid.” It made

me feel better seeing Nina get all worked up over Beau. “You’re in an impossible situation.”

“He’s not completely wrong. I am leaving in two months. This was bound to end at some point. He took care of it before I was ready to.”

“Are you hearing yourself? You’re actually defending him. Defending the guy who just broke your heart.”

“But, Nina, do you know what else he said? He told me it was worth risking everything to be with me. And what did I do? Ignored him—totally ignored those words, as if he didn’t tell me how he was

feeling. How could I do that to him? I would break up with me too.” I could feel the tears running down my face.

“Awww, he really is sweet. He said that?”

I nodded between puffs into the tissue.

“London, we need to turn this around.”

“What do you mean?”

“Wait, first do you care about him? I need to know what I’m dealing with here.”

I nodded in agreement. Care wasn't even close to the level of feelings I had for him.

“Then, we help him see what a colossal mistake he just made.” *Uh-oh*. If she was planning anything like her tactics to get closer to Derek, I was in for a disaster.

“Nina, I don't know about that. I think I'll try to call him later tonight and talk to him. He was probably spooked. That's what guys do when they start getting close, right? They freak out and come up with some lame breakup excuse.” It sounded reasonable, but I wasn't sure if that's what really happened

with Beau. “It’s been three days. He’s probably cooled down by now.”

“No, haven’t you read *Cosmo*? You can’t call him. You need to get him to come to you.”

I had a sinking feeling. “But I don’t want to play mind games with him. No games at all. That’s why this imploded. I tried to cheat. We lied about us from the beginning and now there isn’t even an us.”

“It’s not a game if you’re helping him realize his true feelings. It’s not a trick, London. He is crazy about you; he just needs to be reminded.”

She was starting to sound sane.

“Let’s say whatever little plan you have cooked up works, it still doesn’t solve the problem I have with the research. The project is rigged.”

“Hmmm...I keep forgetting about that shitty project.” I could see the wheels turning in Nina’s head. “Got it! I know what you can do, but you’re going to have to come clean with Professor Garcia.”

“But she’ll fail me.”

“No she won’t. She’s going to love this.”

For the first time in hours, my

heart felt a little less broken and slightly hopeful. I hugged Nina. “Thank you. I don’t know what crazy scheme is going through your head, but thank you.”

“It’s nothing. I want you to be happy. Now, go take a shower and change out of these three-day-old pjs. We’ve got a boy to rope in.”

I giggled. My love life was completely in her hands.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

All I had to do was keep my composure, steady my breathing, and limit the eye contact. I could do this. I had played Sandy in my high school's rendition of *Grease*. I could pull off badass Sandy in tight, lycra pants, strutting across a stage in five-inch heels with a packed house watching my every move. Today skinny jeans and a fitted cotton shirt would have to do, and there was only one person I needed to impress—Beau.

He was sitting in his regular spot. The top perch of the class. I entered the row from the opposite aisle and walked

toward him, careful not to look too excited to see him. Nina and I had only devised this plan yesterday, and it was all I had. Beau hadn't called, texted, or emailed since the Sunday breakup, and today was Thursday. It was embarrassing that I missed Tuesday's class, but my broken heart needed time and distance.

I'm not sure if he watched me walk toward him. I kept my eyes on my phone and the texts I was sending Nina. She was my lifeline to the outside world and the only thing keeping me on this plan.

He's here, I typed.

Good. You can do this. It will work.

Nina's words made me smile. *Call me after class.*

I slid into the seat next to Beau, dropped my backpack on the floor, and fished for my notebook. My pen stash was in the front pocket. I dug through the collection until I found my favorite blue writing pen.

“People. It’s time to get started. The weeks are rolling past us and we still have lots of theory to cover.” The classmates around us lowered their voices. Everyone had grown accustomed to Professor Garcia by now, and the protesting and grumbling days were long gone. “The projects are looking great.

This is one of the best semesters I remember. I'm going to have to recycle this assignment for another year." I looked up and noticed our instructor had traded her red boots for purple ones.

Before I could jot the date on the fresh notebook page, the pen slipped from my hand and landed between Beau's legs. *Are you kidding me?*

I tried to smile as he retrieved the pen from its precarious position and handed it to me across the armrest. My fingertips brushed against his knuckles as I took the pen in my hand. I didn't want it to affect me the way it did, but the nearness of him had a way of closing the

hole that had been burning in my chest since I saw him last. It was only a second, but for that moment, I didn't hurt.

“Everyone ready for Para Social Relationship Theory? It's fascinating! They are planting characters in reality TV shows left and right. Who isn't in a relationship with a TV character they love?” The nutty professor's laughter peeled through the auditorium. It was loud enough to snap me back to my current reality.

I brushed my bangs away and inked out the theory for today's lecture. I shifted so I was angled away from Beau. This was going to be the longest class of

my life.

I managed to take five pages of notes. Professor Garcia never lacked in examples or stories when it came to her presentation of a new theory. It also helped distract me from my group partner. I tucked my notebook in my backpack and was careful not to fumble the pen again. I didn't need another flailing incident today.

“Have you talked to Garcia yet?”
Beau was standing next to me. It was the first time I had heard his voice. He sounded impatient.

“No.”

“Are you going to tell her about the research or did you already tell her?” He had worked his arms through the straps on his backpack and he was edging toward the door. It was hard not to admire his chest as his T-shirt pulled against his torso.

“I wasn’t in class Tuesday.” This was harder than I thought it would be.

“So you’re telling her today that we’re handing over the research?”

“Yes. I’m going to talk to her once everyone clears out.” I glanced around at

the partners filing out of class. It was difficult to watch my classmates who had clearly become couples through the course of the semester. Why couldn't we have been assigned *Island Fever* or *The Lion's Den*?

“Ok. Cool. Thanks. I wasn't here Tuesday either. Didn't know if you talked to her yet.” He turned to leave.

Nina had told me no matter what he said or did I was not to ask him about the next *Love Match* date, but he was walking away. How did she think this was going to go? Did this mean he had given up on the entire project? My eyes were starting to sting, and the farther he got,

the more the hole in my chest burned. This was not working—at all.

“Oh yeah—we need to plan date seven for this weekend, don’t we?” he asked before reaching the swinging door.

“I guess so.” I stood, facing him and those smoldering eyes that almost made me forget what had happened.

“Did you watch the show Monday?” he asked.

My chest relaxed. He hadn’t given up on the project.

“I did. What about you?”

“Yeah. I saw it. What date do you want to try?” His voice sounded warmer. At least he was tuning in to the show.

“You choose. Whatever you want to do is fine with me. I’m going to talk to Professor Garcia now.” I pointed over my shoulder at the cowboy-boot-wearing academic.

“Right. Ok. I’ll just text you or something.” He pulled his earbuds out of his pocket.

“Sounds good. See you later.” I turned to catch Professor Garcia’s attention before he made it to the door. I didn’t want to watch him walk away.

Nina would be proud. That went exactly how she predicted. I was glad I didn't cave to the desperation I felt. If only my conversation with the professor would go the same way, I'd be on my way to making all of this right.

She was shuffling a stack of folders into her briefcase. "London! I've been meaning to email you, but I had this darn cold-flu and I was lucky to get my cats fed, if you know what I mean."

I smiled meekly. "Sorry you were so sick. That sounds awful."

"I might have caught it from Mr.

Tall Dark and Handsome, so it was worth it. You kids aren't the only ones who have your fun on spring break." She laughed as she pressed a tissue to her nose.

Did my professor just tell me she hooked up with someone and caught a cold? "Um, so I wanted to talk to you about the research. Can we maybe sit for a minute?"

Professor Garcia nodded toward the front row stadium seats. "You look a little worried. If it's about the conference, there is nothing I need for you or Beau to do. I'll handle everything."

My hands were starting to get hot. I

shook them next to my side and took a deep breath. “I’m not sure how to say this.” I closed my eyes and thought about what I almost had with Beau, what grade I almost had. This lie had cost me too much; it had to end. “Professor, Beau doesn’t know what I’m getting ready to tell you. He thinks I’m going to hand over our research.”

“And you’re not? I’m quite confused right now.” She was so still not a single bangle on her wrist moved.

If I didn’t spit it out, I would never have the strength to tell her. “We were together—Beau and me. We have been dating for the past few weeks. I was with

him all through spring break and I didn't tell my parents or my roommates. And when he wanted to tell you that we were together, I stopped him because I really need this grade. It's the only class left for me to graduate and my parents aren't going to let me move to L.A. if I don't have an A. But Beau broke up with me during our argument and so now we're not together."

Professor Garcia sat with a stunned look on her face. "Oh my. That's a lot to take in."

"I know and I'm so sorry I lied to you and to the class and to everyone who read the blog. I didn't know I wanted to

be with him; it just sort of happened. And now everything is such a mess between us.”

“Hmmm...so let me ask you something, London. If you had met Beau out of this class and he had asked you on a date, would you have gone out with him?”

I thought about the night he ran into me with his bike. “No, I wouldn’t have.”

“And why not?”

This was starting to feel like a counseling session. “I guess because I didn’t know anything about him. I

thought he was just like every other guy on campus.”

“And now that you’ve gone on these dates, you don’t think he’s so average anymore? You think he’s special?”

Well, if she wanted to define special as someone who could make me melt with one look, or someone who didn’t back down from my dares to get him to sing, or someone who could carry me with one arm from the scariest height I had ever encountered, then, yes, he was all of that and more.

“Yes, definitely. I think he’s the

most amazing person I've ever met." He was also the person I voluntarily made a fool of myself for on a regular basis.

"Then, it sounds like we need to make an adjustment to the research." She smiled that cat-like smile she used when she was formulating a plan. "How many episodes do you and Beau have left to follow?"

"I believe we have four dates left to go."

"I'll make a deal with you, London. I probably have mentioned this, so you know I'm a huge *Love Match* fan. Never missed an episode." Oh, good grief. I

should pair her up with Nina. “The show’s rules stipulate that the bachelorette can’t reveal her true feelings to any of the men she is dating. What if you carry out the last four dates without telling Beau any of your feelings and see if the magic of the dates can bring him back around?”

I was hoping she would say exactly that. I smiled. “So he doesn’t know that I’m trying to get him back but I keep blogging like I’ve been?”

“Yes. Now, you’re going to have to do double the work, because I need you to record your true feelings and your observations from each of the dates for

the real research. And I want you to come with me to Orlando to present the study.”

I hadn't expected that bargaining morsel. I had a frightening image of my drunken professor in an Orlando dance club. “I guess that's the least I could do for damaging the project.”

“London, it's not damaged. Research changes. The heart wants what the heart wants. Who am I to stand in the way of true love? Oh, this is going to be so much fun! It's even better than your original idea.” She clapped her hands together.

“Thank you, Professor Garcia. I won’t ruin it this time.” I couldn’t believe she was taking it so well. *Love Match* was like a drug casting a spell over its fans.

“Just don’t tell Beau. I think he’ll come around on his own. Good luck, dear.” She picked up her briefcase and climbed the steps to the top of the class.

I walked out of Manning Hall ready to tackle the world. Garcia was on board and I had avoided the scandal that accompanied a report to the dreaded honor court.

My phone buzzed in my back pocket. I pulled it out to read the text.

Saturday date: show at the Cat's Cradle

Beau was planning the next *Love Match* date. *Yes.* The day was getting better and better. I thought through my response before hitting send.

Good idea.

Victoria and Heath were helicoptered to a secluded island for a private concert. Cat's Cradle was nothing like an island, but it was an intimate venue for a concert.

Zero flirting could be detected. So

far, I was sticking to Nina's plan. I couldn't wait to call her and tell her what had happened with Beau. Missing Tuesday's class might have been a side effect of one of his bucket list items, but deep down I wanted to think it had something to do with us.

This was our seventh date, but it felt more like the first. Beau had texted and said he would meet me at the door of Cat's Cradle, the venue for the Bayou Boys concert. I faced my reflection in the mirror one last time before heading out. There were only three more dates after tonight.

It was as if Beau had flipped a switch. He went from the hot and sweet boyfriend who couldn't keep his hands off me to a cool, distant classmate enduring the last few weeks of school with his group partner. He couldn't keep this up. There was no way the time we spent together didn't mean the same thing to him as it did to me. I held on to the memories from spring break. I knew exactly what Nina was talking about when she said Beau looked at me like no one else. It was all there in his eyes—at least it used to be.

“You look great, London. Stop worrying so much.” Nina peeked her

head around the corner.

“Babe, he’s going to eat you up.” Candace chimed in behind her. I didn’t know she was home tonight. “That skirt is cute.”

“You two are sweet.” I fluffed the back of my hair. “What are you doing home, Candace?”

“I stopped by to say hi. Pearce is having a guys’ night or something like that.” She chewed on her bottom lip.

I didn’t want to pry. I crossed my room to give her a hug. “I’m glad you’re here. I won’t be out too late. I think the concert starts at nine, so I should be

home early. Movie night?”

Nina smiled behind Candace.

“Definitely. More zombies?”

“Absolutely. I can’t take a romantic comedy tonight. I’m living it as we speak.”

“Just remember. Be close, but not too close. Smile, but not too much. And don’t trip or fall or anything like that.” Nina was full of advice tonight.

“Yes, mom.” I rolled my eyes and grabbed the jacket from my bed. Ready or not, it was time to meet Beau.

Date Seven: Down in the Bayou

There was a long line snaking the entrance to the concert. My outfit was carefully planned for tonight, but I didn't think about standing outside in the cool spring air when I choose the black skirt. I stood on my toes, searching for Beau. The guy in front of me was too tall to see past.

“London. Hey.” Beau tapped me on the shoulder while I strained to examine the crowd.

Caught off guard by the contact, I stammered, “Hey.” I wanted his arms around me or a kiss, but shoulder tapping

was the only touch I felt.

“Come on. My friend works the door. We can go on in.” He walked toward the door. Of course he had a connection at Cat’s Cradle. He knew everyone.

I heard a few snarky comments as we breezed past the anxious concertgoers. Thankful to be inside, I smiled at Beau.

“I’ll be right back. I see someone I know.” Before I could even respond, Beau dashed through the throng gathered in front of the stage and disappeared.

Alone, I looked around the quaint concert hall. It was dark. The roadies

were on stage completing the final sound tests before the Bayou Brothers took the stage. I knew things were not the same between us, but I couldn't believe Beau took off like that. We were supposed to be on a fake date. A real fake date.

Not wanting to look like a wallflower, I walked to the bar to get a bottled water. I sipped the water and waited. I had lost Beau in the growing crowd. I tipped the bottle back and felt a hand graze my butt. I whipped around to see who had touched me.

“Derek? What are you doing here?”

“Hey, London. Didn't think I'd see

you here either.” He had a mischievous smile on his face that made me squirm. “I thought you knew how much I liked the Bayou Brothers. I’ve seen them at least six times.”

I had never paid attention to what kind of music Derek liked. I probably wouldn’t have guessed bluegrass-Cajun-funk.

“Yeah. I’m here with someone.” I looked over my shoulder, hoping that my someone would walk up any second.

“Don’t tell me it’s that blog guy again.” His eyes narrowed. “I get that you are committed to your class project, but

did you have to quit Encore?”

The water bottle was my only distraction tactic. I took another swallow and avoided Derek’s question.

“I wrote *Betray Me* with you in mind. Come back to Encore. There’s time for you to rehearse. We’ll pretend none of this other stuff ever happened.” His hand landed on my hip and was resting on my waist.

“Derek? What are you doing?” I took a step back. He had invaded my personal space one too many times.

“Come on, London. I know why you left.” He stepped closer.

“I left because I wanted to spend my last months at Carolina doing something else besides being stuck in the basement.” I raised my hand to his chest. “And whatever it is you think you’re doing, you need to stop.”

The lights flickered on the stage and everyone around us started cheering.

“You don’t mean that.” He leaned toward me and I recognized a lustful look in his eye. One that I never wanted to see from him.

I didn’t have much space to move. The room was packed, and I was shoulder

to shoulder with Bayou Brothers fans.

“Nina is my best friend. Please, just go, Derek. Leave me alone.”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with Nina.” He reached for my waist again, but I was wedged next to a tall man, oblivious to my problem.

“Derek, seriously, back off.” I was starting to panic. Derek was acting deranged and deaf. I had never seen him like this.

“Man. You heard her. Back off.” Beau emerged from the sea of fans. I don’t know how much of the conversation he overheard between Derek

and me, but it was enough.

Derek ignored him. “London, come on. Why don’t you watch the show with me? Leave this jackass.” His hand lunged for me.

“No. She’s my date. We’ve both asked you to leave—nicely.” Beau stepped in front of me, blocking my view of Derek.

“Then why did you leave her here?” Derek stood his ground.

Beau leaned forward and I could hear the low murmur of his voice, but I couldn’t make out any of his words. I

didn't see what happened next, only Derek tunneling through the crowd and out of my line of sight.

"You ok?" Beau looked worried—the kind of worried that made me melt.

"I'm fine. I could handle him." I had to shout over the instrumental bars. The band was starting up.

"Good. I won't leave again. Sorry." He turned toward the stage and threw a fist in the air, then leaned toward my ear. "See? I knew he was a jerk." I thought I saw a smile sneak across his face. He immediately focused on the stage. The Bayou Brothers were ready to start.

I looked at Beau. I wasn't sure if he was sorry he left me standing alone in a pit of guys, sorry that Derek was being an ass, or sorry we were broken up. The banjo sounds filled the room and one of the brothers with the longest beard I had seen, struck the strings on his fiddle. This was no place to think through anything.

“Good concert?” Beau asked as we walked outside.

I stood on the sidewalk, hugging my jacket tightly. “Yes. They were awesome.” They were so much better in person than on the radio. “Thanks for the

date.” I waited, hoping he would ask me to get coffee or a drink. Almost all of our dates were two parts.

“Cool. See you in class Tuesday?” His hands were in his front pockets and he was backing up.

“Yes. See you Tuesday.” I waved. *Shit.* It was only a one-part date. I guess I would be spending the rest of the night with my roomies and zombies.

I closed the front door behind me, expecting Nina and Candace to be waiting for me in the living room.

“Hello?” I called out in the quiet house.

“Oh, hey, babe. It’s just me.”

Candace was in the kitchen retrieving a bag of popcorn from the microwave.

“Where’s Nina?”

“Derek texted her about thirty minutes ago. She went over to his place.” Candace dumped the popcorn in a bowl and threw a second bag in the microwave.

“What? She’s with Derek?” My stomach flipped. I wasn’t prepared for how I was going to tell her what happened with him tonight, but I

intended to let her know what a royal asshole he was. I couldn't let my best friend waste another second on him. He was officially disgusting.

“You look like something's wrong, London. Was the date that bad?”

“Yeah. I mean not the part with Beau. Something bad happened. Candace, there's something I have to tell Nina.”

“Let's go in the living room. Here's your popcorn. The zombies can wait.”

I followed her to the couch, grabbed Ugly Quilt, and told her how Derek pounced on me at the Bayou Brothers concert. I didn't want to think

about how far it would have gone if Beau hadn't shown up.

“Holy shit. This is bad, London. And by the way, he is slime. Not even slime. What’s lower than slime?” Candace looked horrified.

“I know. It makes me sick. But I have to tell Nina. And she’s over there with him right now—probably—you know.”

“Ewww.” Candace had stopped eating her popcorn.

“What should I do?” I realized it had been months since I had been alone

with Candace. I couldn't think of the last time she had helped me through a crisis. It was always Nina. This time Nina was involved in the crisis. Candace couldn't have chosen a better time to reemerge.

“We can't call her now.” Candace made a face. “But first thing tomorrow, you have to tell her.”

“She is going to freak out. She has been in love with Derek since our freshman year.”

“He is such a loser. Maybe we should go over there right now. I don't care what they're doing.” Candace was getting worked up.

“No. No. Tomorrow morning will have to be soon enough. Will you do it with me? You don’t have to tell her, of course. Just be here?”

Candace smiled. “I will be here. For both of you.” She picked up a piece of popcorn and tossed it in her mouth. “Now, for the fun part. Tell me about Beau.”

I sighed and launched into my recount of our fake date.

The pancakes were on the table and Candace had already cleared the counter

from our messy production line. Nina should be here any second.

“Don’t worry, London. She’s going to be ok.” Candace tried to reassure me, but it wasn’t working.

My palms were sweaty. When I heard the front door open, I shook my hands by my side like I did every time before the curtain went up. It usually calmed me. I pushed the syrup to the center of the table.

“Hey, babe.” Candace greeted Nina.

She glanced over the orange juice glasses and the pancakes on the table.

“Derek told me you’d try something like this.”

Candace and I exchanged puzzled looks.

“What do you mean?” I was nervous to ask her.

“London, I’m not mad. Derek told me what happened last night.”

Again, I looked at my other roommate. I was utterly confused.

“What exactly did he tell you?” I shook my hands again, and slapped them against my leg to stop the calming ritual.

“He told me you hit on him, but I knew it was probably just to make Beau jealous. Sounds like it worked.”

I didn't know what to say. Derek had twisted everything around and Nina bought every lying word. Why did he even care if Nina was mad? He was just using her and stringing her along. It didn't matter anymore what his intentions were—I knew mine.

“Nina, he's lying.” That was as bluntly as I could state it.

“What are you talking about? You didn't hit on him at the concert to make Beau jealous?”

“No. It was the other way around.”

“What? Derek hit on *you*? That’s not how it happened. It can’t be.”

I sighed. I knew I was breaking Nina’s heart, but it was far worse to let her end up with a conniving bastard. “It wasn’t the first time, Nina. He did it on opening night of *Spoiled Hearts*.”

“And you’re just now telling me? This isn’t possible. You’re the one who is lying and twisting this all around.” Her eyes seethed with anger.

“I should have said something then, but I just thought I misinterpreted

the whole thing—until last night. There was no misinterpreting. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry.”

“I slept with him! Twice! Both times after he hit on you!” Her voice filled the kitchen. Candace stayed planted by the counter. “You couldn’t have told me before I did that? And it wasn’t even good the second time!”

“I didn’t know what to do. Please believe me. I didn’t want him to be an asshole. I just thought it was creative moodiness or something. Nina, I’m sorry.”

“You’ve said that. Thanks.” She

grabbed the plate of pancakes and walked down the hall.

“Nina?” Candace called.

We heard her bedroom door close with a bang. She left us standing in the kitchen, pancake-less. I slouched into the closest chair.

“What a disaster.”

“She’s going to be ok, London. You had to tell her. Just give her some time. She’ll come around. I haven’t been here much this semester, but I do know you two are too close to let a guy come between your friendship. She just needs time.”

“Thanks, Candace.”

“I’m going to run over to Pearce’s now. He’s probably starving. I usually do his grocery shopping on Sunday.” She picked up her keys.

“You do Pearce’s grocery shopping?”

She winked. “I do anything he wants.”

Ugh. I could only take one asshole a day. “Ok. See you later.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I had to get ready for date eight with Beau without Nina's help. After an entire week, she still wasn't talking to me. Dealing with a broken heart was enough for her to handle without me adding to her pile of problems. Our friendship could withstand this; we had been through too much over the past four years. I could wait until she was ready to open up even though all I wanted to do was sit on her bed and talk.

It was finally April. That meant campus was budding with flowers, birds were chirping, the daylight hours were growing longer, and the days until

graduation were growing shorter. Spring also meant baseball, at least that's what Beau's text said.

Victoria had five remaining bachelors on the show. During this week's episode, she had gone to a major league ballpark where she and one of the bachelors had private batting practice with the team's best homerun hitter. After practice, they watched the game from a plush box, and then had a picnic in centerfield.

Beau had taken charge of our fake dates and he didn't mention anything to me other than going to the baseball game, but tonight was my first move to change

that. I picked up the picnic basket I had packed with grapes, cheese, brownies, and champagne.

Date Eight: Diamonds Are Forever

Beau stood outside the gate of Boshamer Stadium, the ballpark where our date was planned. I was used to seeing him in T-shirts, but I missed his arms. Catching a glimpse of those muscles flexing made me miss them even more.

“Hey.” He was smiling.

“Hey.” Not running directly into

his arms was taking restraint.

“Do you have your ID?” He pulled his out of his wallet and proceeded to the gate. This was one event that we didn’t need tickets for admission.

Luckily, Candace had given me a quick baseball synopsis when I found out what the date was going to be. She knew all things baseball after dating last year’s star pitcher. This was my first trip to “The Bosh.”

“Yep. It’s right here.” I waved my student ID and followed him past the ticket takers.

The sun was setting and the

ballpark was slowly filling with fans. Beau pointed me in the direction of a block of student seats near first base. Candace told me to clap only when one of the Tar Heels made it to base. She thought that would keep me from making an embarrassing cheering mistake.

We filed into an empty row and Beau stretched out, resting his feet on the chair in front of him.

“Dude. What’s up?” Another T-shirt-wearing guy slapped Beau on the back and sat down behind us.

“Just here for the game, man. What’s going on this weekend?” Beau

turned toward his friend, isolating me from the conversation.

“You going to Jamie’s party later? It’s going to be tight.” The friend was grinning from ear to ear.

“Probably. See you later, man.”

He walked away, leaving me to wonder if my two-part plan was getting ready to fall apart. More importantly, was Jamie a boy or a girl?

“Who was that?”

“A friend of mine from class.”

Beau’s eyes were focused straight ahead at first base. I think this was the part where

Candace said they warmed up.

“Ahh. Right. Friend from class guy. Cool name.”

Beau chuckled. “His name is Drew.”

“Are you going to the party after the game?” I was hesitant to ask.

“Hey, look. They are throwing out the first pitch.” He switched topics..

There appeared to be some kind of ceremony taking place on the pitcher’s mound. I watched as a young girl hurled the ball toward home plate. The crowd cheered. We stood for the national

anthem, and then the first batter took his place, swinging the game into action.

Beau whistled every time one of our players hit the ball. He was intensely focused on the field. He got up a few times to run to the concession stand between innings. We had pretzels, a bag of peanuts, hotdogs, and nachos. It seemed like the ultimate guy dinner.

It was finally the bottom of the ninth and we had the bases loaded. Candace hadn't prepared me for this scenario, but I was on the edge of my seat. If we didn't hit someone home, we were going to lose. I didn't need a baseball manual to realize this was

crucial.

“Come on, Heels!” I yelled at the top of my voice.

“You’ve turned into quite the fan.” Beau smiled at me, then pierced the night with his fan whistle.

I blushed.

Number seven was at bat. This was it. The first pitch whizzed past him. The umpire called it a strike. The crowd around us booed wildly. He shuffled his feet in the batter’s box then steadied himself to face the pitcher. The ball sailed through the air, and I heard his bat hit it with the crystal clear sound of a solid

whack. The stands erupted with cheering. Seven had done it. The runners ran across home plate—we won. The people next to me were going crazy.

Before I knew what was happening, Beau picked me up by the waist and smothered me in a hug. His chest was warm and hard. I didn't even care that he was holding me so tightly I couldn't breathe. As quickly as I was in his arms, he dumped me back on my feet.

“Sorry.” He quickly hopped over the stadium seating and headed for the exit.

I hesitated for a second. I wanted

to rewind that moment, but I remembered the picnic basket in my trunk. Maybe it could happen again.

“London, you coming?” Beau hollered from the top of the concourse.

“On my way.” I took the stairs two at a time, dodging the slow pokes.

Beau waited at the top of the staircase. “Thanks for going to the game with me. It was a good win. I’ll get my date recap posted on the blog tomorrow sometime.”

“Wait. I don’t think the date should be over.” I pulled him over to the side of the line of traffic so everyone could walk

around us.

“What are you talking about? We only have one date this week. We’re right on schedule with the show.”

“Victoria had more than one part to each of her dates. It’s not the first time we’ve had a doubleheader.” I hoped he appreciated I had worked in a baseball reference. “I brought a part two.”

I could see him moving backward. “I don’t think that’s such a great idea. We have enough to blog about after this date.”

“Beau, just give it a chance. It’s in

my trunk.”

“The date is in your trunk?” He paused. “Ok. Well, now I’m curious. Let’s take a look.”

I led him out of the ballpark and down the block to where I had parked my car. The parking lights flashed when I pressed the unlock button on my remote, and popped the trunk. Beau followed me to the back of the car.

“What’s that?” He pointed at the picnic basket.

“Uh, it’s a picnic basket.”

“I know what it is. I mean, why is

there a picnic basket?”

“Look inside.”

He sighed before reaching into the trunk and flipping open the lid of the basket. I watched as he rifled through the contents. I waited for him to register the significance of the menu.

“And you think this is a good idea?” He looked at me with one raised eyebrow and tucked his hands in his pockets.

“In the spirit of the show, I think we have to have a second part to this date. And one where we guarantee not to torch the food. I didn’t bring a single

candle. Promise.”

I could almost feel his resolve thawing. “And where do you propose we have this part two picnic date?” He looked toward the ballpark. It was still crawling with fans and workers.

“How about the arboretum? I know it’s on your bucket list and I’ve never been there at night.”

Beau scuffed his shoe against the sidewalk. A few heavy seconds lapsed before he finally answered. “Ok. But just one drink.”

“One drink.” I smiled. One drink

was all I needed.

Beau pulled the basket out of the car and slammed the trunk. It was a long walk to the arboretum from the ballpark, but it was undoubtedly one of the prettiest spring nights I had ever seen. The gardens were in the heart of campus. I had walked the gravel paths many times on my way to the theater, but I avoided the trails at night.

We entered the grapevine wrapped trellis walkway and turned into the botanical refuge. The garden was quiet and still.

“Where do you want to sit?”

I pointed under a tree that was just off the gravel path. “How about here?”

Beau placed the basket on the ground, and pulled out the blanket I had folded inside. As if he had a beach blanket full of sand, he shook it a few times before letting the corners fall to the ground. I worked out the gathered fabric and sat in the middle, giving Beau limited choices.

I poured two glass of champagne and handed one to my reluctant date. “Want to make a toast?”

“Nah. I’ll pass.” He took the glass and chugged the champagne.

“Brownie?” I offered a container of brownies I had baked earlier today.

“Sure.” He bit into the largest one in the pile. “So, what’s been going on?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. I certainly wasn’t going to tell him Nina had to scrape my brokenhearted self out of bed and put me back together, or that I had been scheming for two weeks on how I was going to get him back. I opted for another truth. “Nina isn’t talking to me.”

He stopped devouring the brownie for a second. “What? She’s your best friend. How did that happen?”

“I told her what happened with Derek last week at the concert. She isn’t exactly over it yet.”

“That sucks. You two are really close.”

“It does. Thanks.” I reached for one of the brownies. “She just needs time, I think.”

“Probably.” Beau was back to his one-word answers. “It wasn’t your fault though. I heard what he said to you.”

“You did? You didn’t mention it.”

“He had no right to say any of that stuff. Like I said—he’s a jackass.” It was

hard to see in the dimly lit garden, but I thought I saw jealousy flicker in his eyes.

“I don’t know if I really ever said thank you for what you did at the concert. So, thank you.” I reached across the blanket, but stopped before my hand touched his leg. It felt too soon. “What about you? How’s the bucket list coming along?” I leaned back, resting on my side.

He looked around the garden. “I can check this one off. Thanks. I’m almost done. I’ll definitely have it finished before graduation. I can’t believe it’s just around the corner.”

Ugh. Graduation. The issue that was

hanging between us no matter how many glasses of champagne I filled us with. I looked at my empty glass and debated refilling it.

“Ok. Drinks are over. Let me get you back to your car.” Abruptly, Beau started shoveling the snacks into the picnic basket.

I thought I'd at least be able to flirt my way into a second glass of champagne. He was like a brick wall tonight that I couldn't climb over.

“I'll just walk back. You can go.” If he wasn't going to stay, I didn't need him hovering.

“No way. I’m not letting you walk alone at night across campus.” He folded the blanket and stuffed it in the side flap.

“Ok. Fine. You can walk me back.” I didn’t want to argue with him. We had actually reached a place where we were at least talking again.

We trudged up the hill, then down a steeper hill until we reached my car. It must have been the champagne swirling in my head because it didn’t seem to take as long to return.

I pulled out my keys to unlatch the truck when they fell from my fingers and hit the pavement. *Shit*. Why did Beau

make me such a klutz? He swooped in front of me and picked the keys off the asphalt.

“That’s settled. I’m driving.”

“No. No. I’m fine. I can drive home. It’s less than a mile.”

“Uh-uh.” He pressed the unlock button and opened the passenger door for me.

Annoyed, I slid into the seat and fastened my seat belt. “But what about your motorcycle?”

“I can run home. I didn’t ride here. It was such a nice night, I decided to

walk.”

I looked at him suspiciously. He was always on two wheels.

“Let’s get you home.” He put the car in drive and careened us up the hill.

Nina’s bedroom light was on. *Good.* Maybe we could talk tonight. Beau parked my car next to hers.

“Good game. And good picnic.” He smiled. I thought I caught a glimpse of that look, but it was fleeting.

“It was. I think I’m turning into a

sports fan after all. I guess I have you to thank for that.” I gazed straight into his eyes, wanting to memorize every little feature on his face and lips. “Thanks for driving me home. I didn’t mean for you to have to do that.”

“No big deal. I should know by now what a lightweight you are.” I wanted to sigh—he knew something about me. He turned and handed me the keys. My palm felt his fingertips hovering just over my skin. I clasped my hand around his and pulled his hand toward my waist.

I wrapped my other hand around his neck and urged him closer to me. His

skin was warm.

“London, stop. What are you doing?” He breathed heavily just as my mouth claimed his. I dropped the keys and reached across the seat so that both of my arms were around him. His lips sank into mine and I felt my body burning for more of him.

Beau pushed back and broke the kiss. “I can’t do this.” He jumped out of the car and started jogging. I threw my head against the headrest. *Dammit.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Monday night rolled around and it was time for *Love Match*. I had planted myself on the couch with Ugly Quilt and a hot bowl of popcorn. Beau and I only had two dates left. Two dates until the project was due. I needed Victoria's help more than ever. I needed the kind of date that would bring Beau back. I pressed the power button on the remote and waited for the show to start.

I thought I heard footsteps walking down the hall. I hit pause just as Nina poked her head around the corner. "Hi."

"Nina? Hi." I pulled the quilt back

so that there was an open spot on the couch. She sat next to me, curling up under Ugly Quilt.

“Watching *Love Match*?” She reached for some popcorn.

“Yes. It just started. Want to watch?”

“This week is hometowns. I’m not missing it. This is one of the best episodes of the whole season.” She mumbled as she stuffed more popcorn in her mouth.

And just like that, we were ok.

Before I pushed play, I stopped.
“Wait. What are hometowns?”

“Oh, those are the dates when Victoria goes to each of the bachelors’ hometowns and meets his family. It’s awesome. Someone always has a nutty uncle or something. This is definitely make it or break it time for the men. If Victoria doesn’t click with the family, there is no way he’ll make it through the rose ceremony.”

“I didn’t know anything about this episode. I thought the whole show was dates.”

“Yes, they go on dates, but in the hometown. Just watch.” Nina reached across my lap again for the bowl. “Holy

shit, London! You have to go to Beau's hometown!" She was squealing loudly. I had missed the squealing even if my ears were in pain. "This is too perfect. I had completely forgotten about the episode."

"You realize my life is not a TV show episode? What if he doesn't want to do this hometown thing?" Beau might be more resistant to this idea than to a baseball game. My attempt at reminding him about us ended in an utter fail in the front seat of my car.

"Have you been staying on plan?" Nina sat straight up.

"Sorta." I was going to have to fess

up.

“What’s sorta?”

“I kissed him in my car the other night. It seemed like a good idea at the time. In retrospect, maybe not such a good idea.”

She leaned forward. “What did he do?”

I giggled, remembering Beau running out of the driveway and down the street. “He ran. Literally ran away—all the way back to his apartment.”

Nina started laughing. “Well, that’s one reaction.” She halted her giggling fit.

“But it means he’s totally into you.”

“Really?”

“Yes. He couldn’t handle it, so he ran. It’s obvious. We just need to get you two in a situation where he can’t run. Like hometowns.”

“I don’t want to cage him.”

“It’s not caging, London. You are just eliminating escape exits. That’s all.”

Nina’s eyes zipped back and forth. “How about you take him home with you instead of you going to his house? He will definitely be stuck.”

“To my house? You realize my parents aren’t the most open-minded people on the planet.”

“Oh, they’re fine. They’ll like Beau.”

“But it’s a bit crowded at home. I don’t know if I should take him. Meeting my parents is a big deal. They might scare him away.”

“Your parents aren’t going to do anything like that. It will be fun.” Nina’s smile was wide.

“You really think this will work?”

“You worry too much, London.

Watch how Victoria does it. It's going to work. He'll win your parents over. They'll fall in love with him and then you're on to overnights."

"Overnights?" I was nervous just hearing the word.

"Let's just take it one week at a time." Nina smiled. I was glad to have my friend back.

The phone call to my mother had been awkward. Explaining to her that I was coming home for the weekend with a boy that wasn't my boyfriend was tricky. She was way too nosey.

“But, London, what kind of professor would assign a weekend trip? I don’t see how this is proper by any standards.” This was the same mother who made sure I was in an all girls dorm my first two years on campus.

“Mother, she didn’t assign the trip. It’s just how the project has evolved. He’s nice. You’ll like him. He’s pre-law.”

“Pre-law? Hmm...I’ll mention that to your father. All right, if you have to, then we’ll get the guestroom ready for him.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it. We’ll

see you Friday night. Tell Daddy I said hi.”

“London, be careful on the drive. The roads are still slick at night.”

“Yes, Mother. I’ll be extra careful. Bye.”

I hung up the phone with my mother and sighed. Nothing about this weekend was going to be easy. My parents had always had high expectations for me. I knew they didn’t want me to pursue acting. My mother thought it was a total waste of my time, and my father thought I was neglecting more important brain cells. They both would have been much

happier if I had gone into pre-med or law, like Beau.

Now, to plan B—getting Beau to go along with this concocted Nina idea. I only had a few minutes until class. I grabbed my backpack and headed out the door.

Professor Garcia was particularly wrapped up in today's theory. She recounted her days in graduate school and how she selected a dissertation on gender communication styles. I was trying to be less critical of her; she was, after all, my new ally in class. Without her support,

I wouldn't be getting ready to ask Beau to go home with me for the weekend.

Every few minutes, I saw her taking us in at the top corner. Beau didn't seem to notice the new attention. He had no idea we had our own London and Beau super fan. If only class would end so I could ask him about the hometown date.

“See everyone Thursday. We'll really dissect gender styles then.” She walked away from the podium and unclipped her microphone.

Beau shot out of the seat and had escaped through the doors before I had a chance to utter the first word of my

question. I gathered my notebook and chased him out of the building.

“Hey, Beau. Wait.”

He paused at the bike rack next to the Manning Hall steps.

“I just wanted to talk to you for a second about the hometown date. Did you watch the *Love Match* episode last night?”

“Not yet. I’ll get to it later.” He unlocked his bike from the rack.

“Cool. No problem, but the dates were all hometowns. Victoria went to each of the guys’ family homes.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that. I’ll see it sometime this week.” He grabbed the handlebars and shook the bike loose from its station.

“I didn’t know about the hometowns either, but I already talked to my mom and she said we can go to Asheville for the weekend. I mean, if you want to.”

He swung one leg over the seat.

“Beau? Did you hear me?” I was standing right next to him.

“Yeah. I heard you. I don’t know about that, London. The whole

weekend?”

“We could just go up Saturday night if that’s better? I don’t want you to do it if you’re not into it. It’s the only thing I could come up with after I watched the episode.”

He kept his eyes on the handlebar. I couldn’t even get him to look at me. “No, it’s cool. We can go, I guess. I haven’t been to Asheville in a long time, and I’d be lying if I didn’t say I was curious to meet your parents.” He finally looked up and smiled.

“Awesome! I mean, good. That’s good you want to do the hometown

date.” Could I get more tongue-tied in front of this boy? “I can pick you up Friday. You know, whenever.”

“See you.” He peddled off in the direction of the student union.

He had actually agreed to go. I smiled. Hometown weekend was starting to look more promising by the minute.

Date Nine: Hometown Brotown

It was hard to keep my eyes on the road with Beau in the seat next to me. He kept changing the radio station halfway through the songs. The farther I drove us

into the mountains, the harder it was to keep a station static-free.

“I think you need to give me the crash course in the James family before we get to your parents house. You never really talk about your family.” Beau gave up on finding music and turned the radio off.

“There isn’t much to tell. What do you want to know about them?”

“What do they do?”

“I haven’t mentioned anything to you about this already?” It seemed that in one of my tequila hazes I would have told Beau about my parents.

“No. You just said they were strict when you were growing up and you told me about the bargain they made with you about going to L.A. Is there something you’re not telling me? I’m getting nervous about the weekend now. Is your dad some kind of former spy like Jack Bauer or something?”

I laughed thinking of my dad doing anything threatening. “No, he’s not Jack Bauer—far from it. My parents own a winery.”

“A winery? That’s awesome. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I wasn't sure what had kept me from telling Beau more about my life growing up. We did talk, but it was all about the present. Nothing else seemed to matter when I was wrapped in his arms. I definitely wasn't thinking about my family or my childhood.

“It just didn't come up.” I looked over at him. His forehead was scrunched up and I could tell I had annoyed him. “But that's all about to change. You get to meet the James family in about five minutes.”

We drove past the town sign declaring we had entered the city limits of Asheville. Now, all we had to do was

navigate the rows of coffee shops and wine bars and we would be close to the turn off to the family homestead. Beau's eyes were glued to the scenery outside his window.

“What should I expect?”

“Well, my mom is the business manager and runs the marketing and finances for the winery. So, she's pretty much a no-nonsense kind of woman. My dad was an attorney. I was too young to remember when he practiced law, but now he manages the property, the employees, and the grape production.”

I slowed the car as we reached the

double iron gates. I rolled down the window and punched in my pass code.

“Mystic Vineyards?” Beau looked over the entangled M and V welded into the gate. “Wow.”

I waited for the gates to swing open fully then crept forward, taking us along the winding drive to my parents’ house and the family business. The sun was just starting to set on the rows of vines stretching out in front of us.

“Are there any grapes on them yet?” Beau asked as the gnarled branches crawled past us.

“No. It’s too early in the season.

The vines are just starting to wake up after the winter.” He looked disappointed. “But there’s plenty of wine. We always have wine.”

He laughed.

We turned another corner before the house came into full view.

“Shit.” I didn’t mean to say it out loud.

“What’s wrong?”

In the driveway, parked next to the house, was a line of cars. We had company. “Oh, nothing. It will be fine. You’re going to get to meet more of my

family than I thought.”

“And the mysteries keep coming.”

Beau opened the door and stepped out of the car.

I was on my way to the trunk of the car when I felt my body lifted in the air and tossed over a shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “Gotcha, little sis.”

“Austin?”

My oldest brother ran a circle around my car while I bobbed up and down on his shoulder. If I kicked too much he might drop me.

“Seriously, put me down. I’m going

to throw up, Austin.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He deposited me at the bumper. I reached out for the trunk to steady myself, but felt Beau grab me by the arm to keep me from stumbling.

“Hey, man, I’m Austin.” My prankster older brother reached out to shake Beau’s hand. “Welcome.”

“Thanks.” Beau shook his hand, and then turned to me. “Brother?”

I grinned sheepishly. “Well, about that. I was getting ready to tell you—” Before I could finish my sentence I was whipped up into the air again.

“London! You’re home! We haven’t seen you since Christmas.”

“Ok, you all have got to stop picking me up.” I pounded on my brother’s back. He set me down in time for me to see the other two on their way over to our sibling reunion.

Austin stood next to Beau. As the oldest, he often took charge. “Beau, this is Nash, Jackson, and Roman.”

Beau performed the customary handshake ritual with each of my brothers.

“I’m just so shocked to see all of

you here. Nash is right; we haven't all been together since Christmas."

"Mom called us and mentioned you might be bringing a guy home this weekend. Couldn't miss it." Jackson punched Beau in the arm.

"Oh, no you misunderstood," I stammered.

"London, come inside and get out of the chilly air. Boys, get her things out of the car." My mother was standing on the front porch, smiling sternly.

I shrugged my shoulders at Beau. Clearly, I had not prepared him for the onslaught of the James boys. How could

I? I had no idea they were going to be here, at least three of them. Roman was the youngest and a senior in high school. My older brothers: Austin, Nash, and Jackson were all grown up and living on their own.

“Hi. I’m Lydia James, but you can just call me Mrs. James.” I sighed as my mother introduced herself to Beau. She was always so formal.

“Thank you for letting me crash this weekend, Mrs. James. The vineyard is impressive.”

“Why thank you. London will have to give you a tour tomorrow. Now,

everyone inside. Dinner's on the table and we don't want to make Dad wait for supper." She herded the pack along the porch and into the front door.

I lagged behind, watching my brothers laughing about something. Beau was a step in front of me. I tugged on his jacket before he crossed the threshold.

"I'm sorry about all of this. I didn't know they would be here."

He laughed. "Don't apologize. They're your family. Although, maybe you could have mentioned the four brothers at some point."

I looked at my boots. Why had I

kept so much from him?

“Come on, I heard we can’t let your dad get hungry.” He slung his arm around my shoulder and we walked into the house.

“Dad!” I dislodged Beau’s arm and ran to hug my father as he descended the staircase.

“Hi, kitten. I heard you brought a friend home for the weekend.” My father looked over the top of my head to survey Beau.

“Dad, this is Beau Anderson. He’s my Comm 224 partner this semester, and

he's pre-law." I emphasized the law part.

"Nice to meet you, sir." Beau was probably getting tired of shaking hands by now.

"Welcome to our home, son. Let's go eat. You're probably hungry after that drive. I want to hear more about your law studies, Beau." *Oh, jeez.* I knew this was going to happen. Beau was right—I should have prepared him.

"Mrs. James, dinner was delicious. Again, thank you for having me this weekend." Beau had survived the firing squad over dinner.

“Beau, you are so welcome.” My mother stood from the table with two plates in her hand.

Beau jumped up and leaned across the table. “Here, let me help you with that.” He took the plates from my mother and disappeared into the kitchen.

My mother looked shocked. “Boys, did you see that? There are men who have manners in this world.”

My brothers rolled their eyes. “I’ll go help him, Mother.” I collected a few more plates and joined Beau in the kitchen, where he was rinsing plates and

stacking them in the dishwasher.

“You know, you don’t actually have to impress my parents. But if you’re trying—it’s working.” I winked at him as he threw a dishtowel over his shoulder.

I liked seeing him in my parents’ kitchen. He seemed at ease and relaxed. I wanted to wrap my arms around him and kiss him right here in front of the pile of dirty dishes. The nearby room full of raucous brothers didn’t deter the feelings stirring under my skin.

“London? Where’d you go?” Beau waved a plate in front of my face.

“Right. Nowhere.” I smiled and

grabbed the silverware. This weekend was supposed to be about luring him back to me, but so far, in only two hours, I had managed to fall even more head over heels for him.

“So, what does everyone do around here when the sun goes down?” Beau’s smile quickly transformed into a look of panic. “No, that’s not what I meant. I was just asking about nightly entertainment. Dammit. Not what I meant.”

I giggled. It was nice to see him squirm for a change. “I know what you meant. Do you want to try some of the wine?”

“Definitely.” He eased back into shoveling plates in the loading rack.

“A wine tasting it is. I’m going to leave you with kitchen detail and gather some wine for us. It will just take me a few minutes. Be right back.”

“Ok. I can handle it.” Beau turned to face the tower of pots and pans climbing out of the sink. That should keep him busy for a few minutes.

I slipped out of the kitchen door and walked toward the barn that was adjacent to my house. My parents had converted the barn into a tasting room years ago and used it for corporate

parties, wine launches, and the occasional wedding.

Quickly, I went to work setting up glasses, selecting my favorite wines, and lighting a few candles. Satisfied I had created the perfect wine tasting setting, I dimmed the lights and went to rescue Beau from the mountain of dishes he was plowing through.

“Hey, lil sis. Ready for some cards?” Austin was in the kitchen with Beau and I could tell I had interrupted a conversation.

“Oh, thanks, Austin, but I was going to let Beau taste some of the wines.

Maybe after?”

“That’s too bad. I was going to show your boy here how we play.”

Uh-oh. Beau looked interested in the challenge. “Man, I know how to play. What game?”

“Texas hold ‘em?”

“I’m in.” Beau threw the dishtowel on the clean countertop and followed my brother into the hallway.

Ugh! The allure of male bonding had taken over. “Ok, don’t worry about me. We can try the wines later,” I called out, but they were already gone.

I moped all the way to the barn, and returned the glasses and the wines to their original spots. I blew out the last candle before I turned off the light. So far, my hometown date wasn't going as I had planned.

“Good morning.” Beau was already at the kitchen table, sipping on a cup of coffee when I entered the sunny room.

“Good morning.” I smiled and walked to the cabinet in search of my favorite tea. My mother always kept the best stash of raspberry tea.

“London, you missed a good game last night. Beau here is quite the card player. I lost fifty bucks last night.” Austin looked pleased with himself despite his monetary loss.

My brothers had managed to rope Beau into their clan in just one night. They were definitely better at it than me.

“Sorry, I missed it. I’m in the middle of this amazing book, *Marjorie Morningstar*, and I—”

“Hey, Beau, do you want to shoot some hoops? We have a full court behind the barn. Bet you can’t get past my D.” Even my youngest brother, Roman, was

part of the testosterone conspiracy.

“You have a court? Yes, I want to play.” I don’t think Beau had noticed that I sat in the empty seat next to him.

“Guys, I wanted to show Beau the vineyards.” *Did that sound as whiny as I think it did?*

“Oh, like he wants to go look at a bunch of baby grapes instead of play ball. Come on, London. You can take him sightseeing later.” Nash had chimed into the basketball discussion. I knew this battle was lost.

“Ok, I’ll just see you later, I guess.” I waited for Beau to turn down the hoops

offer, but he looked excited.

“Cool.” He hopped up from the table. “Whose team am I on?” My army of brothers filed out of the kitchen, taking my date with them.

I sighed, a little too loudly.

“Everything ok, kitten?” My father stood in the doorway to the kitchen. He was still in slippers and his long, plaid robe.

“Hi, Dad. Yes. It’s just the guys hijacked Beau and I thought I’d give him a tour of the winery this morning. It’s no big deal.”

My father poured a steeping cup of

coffee and sat across me at the table. “Honey, now I know what your mother told me about the project and I heard what you said last night, but it’s all a bunch of BS. You care about that boy. It is as clear as day on your face.”

I wasn’t sure what surprised me more: my father’s perceptive abilities or the fact that he just said BS. “Dad, you’re reading too much into it.” I wasn’t ready for this conversation.

“Look, I’ve been there. I’ve been at this same exact crossroads you’re facing. College graduation is a scary time, but having someone there with you makes it a little easier to face. The world ahead of

you must seem like a big black hole—the great unknown.”

“Are you talking about when you and Mother were in college?” It was hard to think about my father being afraid of anything, especially as a young man. He was always so certain.

“I am. I faced the biggest decision of my life when I was your age.” He took a sip of coffee and his eyes were warm and reassuring. “I could have moved out of the state and gone to an Ivy League school when I graduated. But that would have meant I was leaving our relationship up in the air. I knew when I graduated I didn’t want to start my life without your

mother in it. I gave up a different career path to have this life with her. I've never looked backed—never regretted it once.”

“Dad, that’s so sweet. I’ve never heard you talk about college like that.”

“I’m not trying to be sweet. I’m trying to tell you that we all have to make decisions and sacrifices. You can’t possibly make it through life without facing a tough choice. If you like him, do something about it before the choice is made for you.”

My father sat back in his chair and smiled at me over his coffee cup. I tried to picture him and my mother fresh out

of school, completely in love, with their whole lives ahead of them. It was hard to think of my parents as anyone but my parents. The sparkle in my father's eye told me there was much more their life together than only parenthood.

“Dad, I think I've already messed the whole thing up.”

“What did you mess up, London?” My mother entered the kitchen right on cue. “And your cheeks are looking quite pink this morning—something is going on.”

“Oh, nothing. Good morning, Mom. Thanks, Dad.” I kissed my father

on the cheek and walked out on the porch before my mother could analyze anything else written on my face. I could already predict the advice my mother would give: stay home and give up acting. I didn't need her to tell me what to do; I already knew what my heart wanted.

I needed a way to get Beau alone—away from the James brothers. *Think, London. What would Victoria do?* The mountains sprawled out in front of me. I rocked on the front porch, sipping my tea and devising a plan to separate Beau from the allure of poker, basketball, video games, and action movies. I had a sinking

feeling I might not be able to compete with any of that. I had delivered him straight into the hands of the perfect guy weekend. Wait, I had a brilliant idea. A resource that was more powerful than testosterone. Divide and conquer. I pulled out my phone to text Nina.

Up for a road trip? I need your help.

It only took a second for my friend to respond.

Where are we going?

How fast can you get to my parents' house? I need you to run interference. My brothers are here.

OMG. On my way. Do I get to pick which one?

Gross. But, yes.

I leaned back in my chair. Nina would probably be here in about four hours. I hoped the boys enjoyed their male bonding. They had just started a new game of corn hole in the backyard. Tonight I was getting my alone time with Beau.

I jumped up and down when I saw Nina's car roll into the driveway.

“You're here!” I hugged her fiercely

before she had a chance to put both feet on the ground.

“You bet. I wouldn’t miss a chance to spend the night with your brothers.” She smiled.

“Ewww, Nina. I can’t hear that.” I covered my ears with both hands.

She laughed. “Your plan. Not mine. Now where is the pack?”

I pointed to the bonus room over the garage. “Up there. After they played basketball for two hours, they ate lunch, started some kind of weight lifting competition in the wreck room, which I think Austin won, and now they are deep

into a Bruce Willis movie. I'm drowning here. Beau doesn't even know I'm here anymore. It's like they initiated him into the brother bond."

"Don't worry. We can break them up. Who's the leader?"

"Definitely Austin. But, Nina, he's the oldest." I thought about my twenty-eight-year-old brother and his reputation for dating. It was doubtful Nina could sidetrack him that much, no matter how flowy her blond hair was or how long her legs were.

"I brought a secret weapon." Nina reached into the backseat of her car and

pulled out a grocery bag. “Ta-da!”

“Cookie dough?” I shook my head. This definitely wasn’t going to work. “That’s it? The magic that will undo all things testosterone?”

“Come on. It’s worth a shot.” She dangled the bucket of dough in front of my face.

“Ok, but I don’t see how this is going to do anything.” I helped her with her overnight bag and a pillow.

The kitchen door closed behind us. Nina was already searching the cabinets for a cookie sheet before I even had her bag upstairs. In twenty minutes, the entire

house smelled like chocolate chip cookies.

Nina and I were sitting at the kitchen table when we heard the low rumble of shuffling feet. Roman was the first to stick his head in the kitchen.

“Did you make cookies?” He ran over to the oven to peek inside.

Jackson, Nash, and Austin sauntered in after him. Nina winked at me.

“All right, guys, give me just a second.” Nina took her time walking to the oven before making the perfect bend at the waist to open the oven and check

the cookies. My brothers were ogling every inch of her bottom, and Nina was fully aware of the attention her ass was getting. I had to turn away. Just as I did, I saw Beau enter the kitchen.

Nina shuffled the cookies around and placed the hot tin on the counter to cool. “Who wants the first one?” She smiled brightly at her captive audience.

Austin cut to the front of the line. “Are you Nina?”

“Yep. In the flesh.”

“Haven’t seen you since we moved London into the dorms her freshman year.” Austin was clearly flirting.

“Oh, were you there?” Nina toyed with him. Ok, she was good.

She reached for a spatula and began stacking the cookies on a plate. My other three brothers waited while she served them cookies. They cleared the kitchen and headed back up the stairs to Bruce Willis. Austin hesitated by the oven.

“Since you just got here, you probably haven’t had a chance to see the winery. Would you want to go on a tour of the vineyard?”

Nina’s eyes lit up. “Now? I just got here. I’m not sure. London, would that be

ok with you?”

I had to bite my lip to stop myself from giggling. “Yes, if you have the time, Austin, that would be really sweet.”

“Sure. Yeah. Come on. Let’s take some cookies for the road.” He piled a few on a paper plate and ushered Nina out of the door. I waved good-bye to my over-the-top-conniving friend.

Beau leaned against the counter. “I didn’t know Nina was coming up.”

“Me either. It just kind of happened.” I walked toward him and reached around him for a cookie, making sure my arm grazed his body in the

process. I tore off a gooey bite and deliberately held the morsel in front of my lips.

Beau's gaze was hungry. "Didn't you want to take me on a tour too?" He cast his eyes to the floor.

"Aren't you in the middle of a movie?" I savored the chocolate and the moment in my mouth.

"I've seen it before. Never been to a winery, though."

I smiled. These chocolate chip cookies were amazing. "Ok, I could probably show you around. Let's go."

There were so many different parts that made the winery function: the vines and grapes, the distillery, the tasting room, and the main office. My mother spent all of her spare time in the office—we would keep the tour away from the number crunching expo.

It was late afternoon—my favorite time of the day to walk through the vineyard.

“How many acres do your parents have?” Beau was walking next to me down a gravel path, his hands stuck in his front pockets.

“It’s almost a hundred. Ninety-six to be exact.”

“Wow. That’s a lot of grapes.”

“Yes, but it’s not all grapes. It includes the house and the office and all of the other buildings used to make the wine.” We had wandered close to the creek that ran along the edge of the property.

“It’s like its own little city. I never thought about wine like this before.” He glanced at the vines running near our path. “To think it starts here on that nubby branch and ends up all the way in a

big barrel on tap at the wine bar.”

I stopped at the edge of the water. The stream bubbled over the rocks and flowed into the woods. I pulled my backpack off my shoulder and sat on the cool ground.

“Since we didn’t get to have our wine tasting last night, I brought a few samples.” I pulled out our glasses and the bottles I had opened last night.

Beau took a glass from me and began pouring from the Pinot Noir bottle.

“So, my father always instructs the tasting seminars, and his wine mantra is

‘swirl, sip, savor.’”

Beau repeated, “Swirl, sip, savor. I think I can do that.”

I watched as he rotated the glass in a circle and the red wine sloshed around the sides. He took a sip. “Mmm. Pretty good. Not that I know anything at all about wine. But it’s good.”

I smiled. “My father would take the compliment.” I swirled my glass before sipping. I felt the warmth spread through my limbs. I edged closer to Beau.

“Ok, so you have to tell me. I know my roommates gave you a hard time

about your name, but seriously, why are all of the James kids named after cities?”

I blushed. “It’s kind of embarrassing. Really embarrassing.”

“What is it?”

“Before my parents were upstanding members of the community, they used to travel a lot. They weren’t very conventional—at all. I would say they were kind of like hippies or something.”

“So they liked unique names?”

“I guess that’s part of it. They said they wanted our names to be special. So,

they named each of us after the city where we were conceived.”

Beau choked on his sip of wine.

“Uh. That is not what I thought you were going to say.” He started to laugh.

“I don’t tell too many people, but since you’ve obviously been initiated into the James family pack, you can probably handle it.”

He grinned. “Yeah, your brothers are awesome. It sort of makes me wish my parents had wanted to have more kids. A brother would have been fun. I’m having a great time with them.”

“I’m glad. They obviously love you.

You have managed to experience every competitive sport offered at the winery.”

“So what changed?”

“What do you mean?”

“With your parents. Why did they go from gypsy-hippies to strict, iron fist ruling dictators?”

Beau had asked a question my brothers and I had asked repeatedly. Austin was the only one who could remember all of the trips they used to take and the life that was so different from the one I grew up experiencing.

“I don’t know. They aren’t really

dictators.” I thought back to the conversation with my father in the kitchen this morning. He was always genuine and warm—just cautious. I was their only daughter and that wasn’t an easy post to hold among my brothers. They were all protective of me. “I guess they grew up and had responsibilities with five children. They started the winery as a dare almost, but it turned into their entire life. I think they thought it would be more fun and less business. Turns out running a winery is a full-time business.”

“Isn’t that what everyone worries about? Life might stop being fun?” Beau watched the water rippling over the rocks.

“Are you worried about law school in the fall? I’ve heard it’s not much fun. All those vicious one L horror stories.”

“Me? Worried? No.” He slammed back the remaining drops in his glass. “What’s the next wine on the tasting?”

I reached into the bag to pull out our next sample. I let the crimson liquid flow into his glass.

“This one is good too.” He smiled. “Are you worried about L.A.?”

Of course I was worried. I was terrified to move across the country, but I couldn’t tell Beau that. “That’s silly. L.A.

is going to be amazing. I know I'll probably just get commercial spots or be a movie extra for awhile, but it's still going to be amazing." I thought about all of the casting calls I had tossed in the trash. I hadn't even applied for the first spot.

Beau sighed. "I thought you might say that." He stood up. "It's getting dark. We should probably get back to the house before your dad gets hungry."

"But we didn't try all the wines."

I was frantically trying to think of how I could drag out our time away from the house and my brothers. Beau held out

his hand. From my position on the ground, I looked up at his brown eyes covered in sadness. I placed my palm in his, allowing him to ease me off the ground.

“Another time, movie star.” His hand still held mine. I didn’t want to let go or break contact with him. I reached down with my free hand and slung my backpack over my left shoulder. His fingers entwined in mine. We walked back to the house, not talking, but somehow I felt Beau was saying something much more important with his hand pressed into mine.

“I feel like you’ve been holding out on me, London.” Nina was busy tucking in the sheets to my trundle bed that we had just erected from under my bed.

“Nina, I love you, but I cannot hear you talk about my brothers. It’s just gross. Nothing. Not one detail. Ok?”

“Awww...but who am I supposed to tell that Austin is such a great kisser?” She giggled as I hit her with one of my throw pillows.

“Ick. That is exactly what I don’t want to hear. You already kissed my brother?” I tried to erase the image

burning a hole in my brain of my older brother lip-locked with my best friend.

“Hey. I came here to do you a favor.” She picked up a pillow and pretended to hit me with it.

“You’re right. Thank you. The cookie dough was the perfect magic to break them up.”

“So? What happened? I haven’t had a chance to talk to you since dinner. I can’t believe we played in a card championship all night. They are relentless.”

“Yeah, my brothers are extremely competitive. They play any game they can,

any chance they get.”

“And? What about Beau? What happened when you got him alone?” Nina positioned herself on the edge of the single bed.

I smiled. “He held my hand. It was nice.”

“What? Held hands? Why didn’t you jump him in one of those big wine barns and rip his clothes off. That’s what I would have done.”

“He initiated it. It was perfect, actually.” Twenty minutes of hand-holding might be regarded as taking it

ultra slow, but considering we were broken up and Beau had put up every roadblock to my other advances, I considered it a true victory.

“You only have one date left, London. Then it’s the end of classes and graduation.” Nina looked stressed.

“Don’t remind me.” I slid between the covers. Beau was only a few feet away, sleeping in the guestroom at the end of the hall. I probably wasn’t going to get any sleep tonight.

I awoke to the smell of bacon. Mmm...bacon. I quickly darted in the

bathroom, washed my face, brushed my teeth and hair, and changed out of my pjs before racing downstairs. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I couldn't believe what I saw.

They were all there. As if cooks in an assembly line, my brothers were manning the breakfast stations, along with my favorite houseguest, Beau.

“Wow. What's gotten into all of you?” I scanned their faces for an answer. My zombie movie-watching experience told me an apocalypse had probably occurred while I was sleeping.

“There she is.” My dad was at the

table reading the morning paper. “Isn’t this a treat? Your brothers were possessed in their sleep last night and we get the benefit of them making us breakfast. Sit. Sit.”

I wandered over to the table, still not sure if I was awake. Who knew Roman could scramble eggs or that Nash was any good with toast? Austin handed me a cup of tea.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.” I took the tea and swirled in a teaspoon of sugar. I glanced around the kitchen. This was utterly amazing. All of my family, my best friend,

and the boy I was crazy about were in the same room.

Beau walked over with a tray of bacon. “Don’t you look happy this morning.”

“I am. I really am.”

The parking lot was crowded. It looked like everyone in Beau’s apartment complex had returned from their weekend excursions. I steered into an empty spot far from Beau’s building.

I shifted the car into park and turned to face Beau. “Thanks for going

on the hometown with me.” After the rocky start, the weekend had gone better than I ever could have imagined.

“It was awesome. I loved meeting your family. Your brothers are cool to hang out with. I don’t think I’ve ever played that much basketball and corn hole in one weekend.” My brothers had cornered Beau into every competition they could create. I was surprised they didn’t get into competitive eating.

“So, you’ll go easy on them in your blog?”

The smile that had spread across his face faded. “You’re worried about

what I'm going to write for my post?"

Shit. "No, that's not what I meant. They are overwhelming sometimes. There was so much that happened this weekend." My joke was a fail. I should have said something about the way he washed dishes and won my mom's respect, or how he impressed my dad at dinner with his newly learned wine technique, or how my world suddenly felt so complete with his hand in mine. But no, I had to mention the blog.

"Right. I better go. Thanks for the weekend." Beau opened the door, retrieved his overnight bag from the backseat, and jogged toward his building.

Dammit. Two steps forward and
three hundred steps back.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nina shoved her phone between the pillows on the couch as I walked into the living room, ready to start *Love Match*.

“Who was that?” I eyed the bumpy cushion. She seemed especially jumpy.

“You won’t be mad if I tell you, will you?” Nina was biting her lip.

“No.” I lied.

“It was Austin. He was just calling to say ‘hey.’”

“My brother is calling you now? Austin is calling you?” This was

unbelievable.

“You said you wouldn’t get mad.”
Nina was pleading with me. “It was just a simple phone call, but if you don’t want me to talk to him anymore, I won’t. He is your brother. I guess things could get weird.”

I laughed as I folded my legs beneath me on the couch. “Who am I to stand in the way of true love? Austin obviously likes you. And even though he might be an annoying big brother to me, I know he’s a good guy. He’s a hundred times better than Derek. At least he better be.”

I didn't realize when I invited Nina to the hometown date over the weekend that I might be stirring the pot for another romance. My brothers constantly surprised me.

Nina squealed. "Oh yeah! I was hoping you would say that. I didn't know what I'd do if you said no."

I hugged her. "Probably sneak around." We both smiled. "My brother is smarter than I thought, but just be careful. He is a lot older." I reached for the remote.

"Yes, ma'am. Besides, if things don't work out with Austin, Nash is next

in line. He's single right?"

"Nina! My brothers are not the next *Love Match* bachelors."

She laughed hysterically on the couch. "I'm just kidding. Calm down. The only one I'm interested in is Austin. We're taking it super slow. We're just going to get together next weekend to see how it goes."

That didn't seem slow to me, but Nina looked happy, and for the most part, I trusted Austin. He wouldn't hurt her like Derek. "Ok, so give me the lowdown on this episode. You said something about an overnight date?"

“Best episode of the season! You aren’t going to believe these dates.”

“Why? What happens?”

“It’s unreal. Ok. So, they’ll have whatever date for the day, then they’ll go to dinner and on the table is an envelope from Mitch Henderson. He leaves them some kind of note enclosed with a room key for a dream suite.”

“Dream suite? That sounds a little strange.”

“Oh my God, London. It’s amazing. They always have champagne and roses and there is usually a hot tub.

It's so magical.”

“So does Victoria choose which one of the guys she has the overnight date with?”

Nina laughed. “No, she doesn't have to pick one—it's all of them. Three dates, three overnights.”

I wasn't sure how I was going to handle my one overnight date with Beau, if I could even get him to agree to it, much less how I would manage three of them. “This is crazy!”

“No, it's called romance, London. Shhh, it's starting.”

The rose petals fluttered across the screen. “Good evening, I’m Mitch Henderson. On tonight’s episode of *Love Match*, Victoria will face the most challenging decision yet on her journey to find love. Our bachelorette will have three different dates with three special men who have all professed their love for her. Who will she choose? Who will she let walk away? Will she be in love by the time these nights are over?”

I looked at Nina, who was glued to the TV. This was the last *Love Match* episode Beau and I had to reference for our date project. The final was due next week and we were going to have to complete our research before the finale

aired. Granted, neither one of us was aware of the hometowns or the overnights when we planned the project in January, but it seemed unavoidable at this point in the semester. One last date. One final overnight before the end of the project.

I watched as Victoria spent one lavish night after another with the bachelors. I wondered if Beau was watching too. I pulled out my phone.

You watching LM?

I waited for him to respond for what seemed like ten minutes, but commercial breaks are excruciatingly long

when you watch TV in real time.

Yep

Ok. He was back to one-word responses. Every time we were apart, it felt like I had to start all over again. I worried I wasn't going to succeed in my agreement with Professor Garcia. Beau and I weren't so far apart, we were still connecting, and I just needed Beau to remember that. I needed to erase all of the excuses that kept surfacing that he used to distance himself from me. Excuses that were interfering with us. I could remember how we felt together. He had to, too.

Where do you want to go for the overnight?

I typed the question into my phone and hit send.

Are you serious?

Very

This was my last chance. If Beau didn't go on this date, everything I had done was for nothing. I didn't need to channel any of my leading lady roles—this was all me—this was London James.

Finally, he texted.

Last date, right?

I let out a deep breath.

Yes

Ok. I'll plan it.

I almost leapt off the couch.

“London, what is going on?” Nina looked at me suspiciously.

“Beau. He agreed to the final date.”

“Oh...he wants some London time.” She started making obnoxious kissing sounds. “That hand-holding definitely wasn’t enough for him.”

“Very funny, Nina. It doesn’t

matter why, does it? We're going on a date." I smiled at my friend.

"Not just any date—the you're-gonna-get-some date. You know he loo-ooves you. I saw him at the vineyard. That boy is smitten; he's just too stubborn to admit it."

"I hope you're right, Nina. I hope you're right."

Date Ten: Sweet Dream Suite

It was the Carolina Inn. As in the most popular, most Carolina place to stay in Chapel Hill and somehow Beau had

snagged a suite for us for the night. I shouldn't be surprised anymore. He knew everyone and no matter where we went, people were happy to help him. That was because they had to see what I saw.

I looked down at the shiny patent leather Carolina blue five-inch heels I was wearing. My grandmother often purchased presents for my brothers and I on a whim. One of those whim gifts was on my feet now. They had been in a box in the back of my closet for a year. Tonight they were making their debut. It was nice to throw in a touch of blue with my little black dress.

The Carolina Inn was like many

places on campus; I had walked right past it and never stopped to enjoy it. I crossed the parking lot and walked in through the main lobby for the first time. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't Beau standing in the lobby dressed in a dark charcoal suit.

He was holding a single stem red rose between his fingers. "Wow. You look—" He stammered. I smiled.

"Thanks. You look pretty good too." I eyed him from head to toe. If I had known he could look like that in a suit, I would have concocted some kind of fancy *Love Match* date where suit wearing was a requirement a long time

ago.

He held out his arm at almost a ninety-degree angle for me to loop my arm under. I wrapped myself around it tightly. “This way. We have dinner reservations that start now.” He glanced at his watch.

We entered the dining room and I steadied myself on Beau’s arm. It was incredible. The satin embroidered chairs, the candlelight, the orchids perfectly placed everywhere, and the music. I couldn’t imagine a more romantic dinner even if the *Love Match* crew had been in town. I felt like I was walking through a movie.

Beau shuttled me to the hostess station where the blond hostess led us to our table. He wasn't kidding about the reservations. Taking in our surroundings, I imagined tardiness was not something the dining room was accustomed to accommodating.

I felt like I was in a trance. Beau ordered a bottle of something I hadn't heard of and ordered an appetizer before I could read through the menu. He seemed nervous.

“I probably should have let you order the wine.”

“Why? Because of my parents?
That doesn’t make me a wine expert.”

“You definitely know a lot more about it than I do. I would be happy with a beer, but I don’t think they even have beer here.” Beau glanced over his shoulder, taking note of the tuxedo-donned men doling out directions to the servers.

Our waitress returned to the table with a bottle and began the ritual of presenting the wine to Beau. I stifled a giggle as he pretended to approve the selection. Ceremoniously, she handed him a glass to swirl. I thought I saw him mutter, “Swirl, sip, savor,” to himself

before tasting the red liquid. He nodded at her.

I took the glass of the freshly poured wine and held it up. “Should we toast?”

I expected Beau to squash the idea, but he held his glass toward mine. “To making it count.” He smiled.

“Oh, you’re going the classic, throwback route?” I giggled before tapping my glass to his.

“Something like that.” He sipped the wine.

Beau ordered a steak, and I selected

grilled chicken with a fancy cheese I couldn't pronounce. I wanted to savor every bite and every second of this meal. Things were suddenly feeling different.

“I read on your blog that you finished everything on your Carolina bucket list.”

“I did. It's a pretty awesome feeling.”

“So, what was your favorite one?” I sipped my wine.

I could tell his mood was playful. “You really have to ask?”

“Yes. Tell me. All-time favorite

bucket list item. Go.”

He leaned closer to me so that his low voice didn't carry to the other tables. “I would have to say the afternoon with you in the study room.”

I felt the heat rising to my cheeks.

“Wait, no that's not the one. Probably trying to undress you in front of Gimghoul Castle.” It looked like he was undressing me with his eyes right now at the table.

“Ok, that's not fair. It wasn't that. It was definitely the fifty-yard line. I will never forget the fifty-yard line.”

I was having trouble breathing. My skin was tingling all over and I wanted to kiss him so desperately it hurt, but I kept my hands folded in my lap and tried to act as if what he said didn't stir a burning for him in the center of my body.

“What about you, London? Do you have a favorite memory on your bucket list?” Oh my God, he was being so devilish.

“I. Um—” I wanted to say something sultry and seductive, something that told him that every memory of him kissing me was my favorite Carolina moment. “It wasn't on my list before, but I think the night at the

planetarium.”

He laughed. “Yeah, we almost burned down the place, but it was pretty hot.”

The waitress cleared our plates and turned for the kitchen. I played with the napkin in my nap, not sure what was supposed to happen next. Beau slid an envelope across the table and left it where my plate had been.

“What’s this?”

“Open it.”

I pulled on the inner flap of the envelope and freed the note from inside. I

held the card close to the flickering candle and read the words aloud.

“London, enclosed is a key for an overnight date with Beau in the dream suite. It is yours if you choose to use it. Signed Mitch Henderson.” I laughed at the pretend signature of Mitch Henderson.

“Mitch signed this?”

“That’s what it says. I don’t make the show rules.”

I looked at Beau and then at the card. I wasn’t sure what had caused his one-eighty attitude change tonight, but I hoped it had something to do with our

amazing dinner, my little black dress, and what could happen if I accepted this key card.

“What do you think, Beau? Should I accept?” I wanted him to say yes, then pick me up and run to the suite, but I was trying to show some kind of restraint. Playing hard to get was getting harder and harder for me to pull off.

“I want you to do what you really want to do. This is our last date for the project. Do you want to go to the suite with me? It’s up to you.”

Something in the way the words left his lips made me sad. I didn’t want

this to be our last anything.

“Yes. Absolutely. I accept the date card from Mitch Henderson.” I held the key card up.

He reached for my hand and gently led me from the table. “Then, let’s go.” He didn’t need to say another word. I was ready to follow Beau anywhere he wanted to go.

Outside of the room, I handed him the key card and waited with heavy anticipation for him to open the door. Beau fiddled with the card and slid it into the mechanical slot. The light blinked red.

He looked puzzled, and then inserted it again. Another red blinking light appeared. He rattled the card in the opening, but the red light persisted.

“Do you want me to try?” I offered.

He looked doubtful as he retrieved the plastic key and placed it in my palm. I raised it to my lips and blew on it like a pair of dice. With the arrow pointed toward the floor, I placed it in the door. Green light. I giggled. “Follow me.”

“London, wait.” Beau reached for my arm, but I pushed the door to the suite open.

I couldn't believe it.

A foyer divided the suite. On one side was a living room with a bar and on the other was a bedroom. I walked into the living room. It was like every *Love Match* date we had ever had was here in this space. I turned to look at Beau, who was having a hard time keeping his gaze off the floor.

“You did all of this?”

“I kinda wanted to talk to you before you walked into the suite.”

On the bar was the glazed championship platter and cylinder from

Pottery Paints. I had forgotten to pick them up after the first week. I smiled. Resting on the end table was a climbing harness, the *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack, and two margarita glasses. There was a blue and white pom-pom in the chair with the tickets from our basketball game. I laughed when I recognized the half-burned picnic basket on the couch. There was a postcard picture of Gimghoul Castle next to the CD we recorded. The Bayou Brothers latest album was propped on the coffee table next to a baseball. At the edge of the table was a bottle of Pinot Noir from Mystic Vineyards. There was something from each of the nine dates right here in this room.

I spun around. “I can’t believe you saved all of these things. This is amazing, Beau. More amazing than any single one of the dates we had.” I raced toward him, ready to throw my arms around his neck.

“Whoa. Whoa. London. I thought we could use it for the project.”

I stopped just short of his perfectly pressed suit. “What? The project?”

“Yes, that thing we’ve been working on all semester. It’s due next week and this is the last weekend we have to put together any ideas.”

Was he having fun torturing me?

He couldn't possibly think I could lay eyes on these memories and not feel more than I already did for him. Our entire journey this semester was on display in the suite of the Carolina Inn, and he didn't seem to care about the effect it was having on me. Maybe I had misjudged who he was all along.

My eyes started stinging, but I fought the tears harder than I ever had. I wasn't going to break down in front of Beau. Not in my beautiful black dress and killer heels. He wasn't going to see me come undone because of a class project.

I stepped around him and headed for the door.

“Where are you going? We have a lot to work on.”

I couldn't turn around. If I looked at him, I would fall apart. I needed to keep it together at least until I got to my car. I tried to calculate how many steps and breaths it was from the suite to the parking lot.

I reached for the handle. “London, wait.” Beau's warm hands gripped my shoulders. I inhaled deeply, holding the tears at bay for at least another second.

“What's wrong? Why are you leaving?” He sounded worried. He

sounded like the Beau I had grown to—I couldn't even finish my sentence. I didn't want to think it was love. If it was love, I was in serious trouble, because my heart was broken in a million tiny rose petal pieces.

Feeling his hands on my skin interrupted my escape plan. I couldn't turn the handle and I couldn't form any words without crying. I pivoted slowly to face him.

“London, just say something.” His forehead was furrowed in concern. And there it was—the look. The one Nina was always talking about.

I let one hand slide along his arm and encircle his neck, grazing the sliver of skin above his starched shirt. I tugged him toward me just as I tilted my gaze. He leaned down, taking my mouth with a fury I felt him wanting to unleash. Both his arms wrapped around my waist, pressing me against him. The hurt and devastation wracking my spirit faded away with each kiss. My body didn't care that my heart was broken. It only wanted one thing—Beau.

His hands explored below the hemline of my dress, shifting the layers higher up my thighs. My body bowed back as his fingers played along edges of my skin, driving me crazy with

anticipation. With my body leaning away from him, his mouth trailed along my collarbone and planted gentle kisses against the skin on the parts of my breasts exposed from the sweetheart neckline of my dress. For the first time in weeks, everything felt right again. I missed him so much, his kisses, the way he played with my hair, and the way he made me wait for what I wanted most.

I sighed as the heat of his breath sent chills along my arms. I wanted his mouth to keep moving downward and take my dress with it, but before I could remove the dress I had so painstakingly chosen, I felt his hands slide up my back until they landed on the zipper. I

redirected his lips to mine and playfully slipped my tongue in his mouth. I urged him to unzip the fabric. Slowly, he peeled the dress from my chest and pushed it over the curves of my hips, making sure I felt the pressure of his fingers splayed against my stomach and forcing their way into the inner softness of my thighs. My knees grew weak until the dress was a heap on the floor. Careful not to trip in my heels, I stepped over the black pile and pinned my body, clad in a matching lace black bra and panty set, against Beau. If he didn't know what I wanted by now, I would write him off as the campus idiot.

I caught my breath as he lifted me against him, tucked his arms under my

knees, and carried me into the bedroom. There might have been rose petals arranged in a heart, but everything was blurred once I knew Beau's intentions. Heart-shaped petals didn't seem to matter right now. His lustful eyes devoured the little bits of satin fabric I was wearing, although I knew I wouldn't be wearing them for long. He wanted me. Everything he was doing screamed that he wanted me as badly as I needed him. The weeks that had come between us faded away.

He gently lowered me on the bed, as if I was fragile, but I felt anything but breakable. I sat up, frantically tore at the buttons on his shirt, and loosened his belt buckle until his pants were on the floor.

So much for the pressed suit—it was now a wrinkled mess. My hands roamed around his torso and back. The piles of embroidered designer shams flew across the room as Beau swept the pillows out of the way and pulled the covers back. I didn't have time to think about why we were ripping each other's clothes off or how we ended up under the sheets when only a few minutes ago I was ready to drive home. It didn't matter. I wanted to be close to him again.

Under the covers, the kisses grew deeper, and with each one, I thought I would explode if he didn't give me what I wanted. With talented finesse, he maneuvered me under him until my only

view was his broad chest and shoulders. I couldn't keep my hands from rubbing his chest and sliding over the disciplined tightness of his stomach. I loved how he felt under my touch. Each of my strokes brought him closer to me, and I smiled with each growl I elicited from his lips. If I couldn't tell him how I felt, I was determined that he would feel it every time I moved, every time I moaned, and every time I came.

Every touch of his fingers was sending me farther away in a spiraling wave of sensations. I couldn't wait much longer. I arched toward him, rocking my hips against him until he was groaning in my ear.

“London, I missed you,” he whispered before pressing his palms into mine until our hands were locked in unison.

I wanted to tell him how much I missed him too, but my body took over and shook with abandon as he moved against me, throwing me farther and farther into a heated spiral of vibration. I felt the core of my body open to him and hold on to him with everything that I had. I didn't want to let go. All I wanted was more of him. I gripped his back and ran my fingers through his hair, forcing his mouth back to mine. Just when I thought he had fulfilled every craving

burning through my body, I opened my eyes. Looking into his gaze, I knew then that I was so deep in love, there was no way out.

“Again,” I whispered. I didn’t want the night to end or for Beau to be anywhere but right here, fused with every part of me.

He nuzzled into my neck and squeezed my hands, lulling me into total stillness before his rhythmic movements started again. I sank into the bed, closed my eyes, and gave my body over to Beau, hoping this never ended.

Morning came way too early. I shielded my eyes from the sunlight filtering through the curtains. Beau was stretched out across the bed with the pillow securely pinned under his head and chest.

I rolled to the edge of the bed and cautiously placed my bare feet on the floor, careful not to wake my sleeping partner. I watched his back rise and fall with long, steady breaths. He was out.

I tiptoed to the bathroom and splashed water on my face. Hot and wild sex did not make for a glamorous morning after look. An enormous tub spanned the length of the bathroom. I

decided to add and then immediately check off something on my personal bucket list: luxurious bath at the Carolina Inn. I turned the silver-handled faucet and doused the rising pool of water with a stream of bubble bath.

Gingerly, I eased myself into the tub and let the warmth envelop my body. I submerged my head under the mountain of bubbles and popped back up for a breath. I knew there was a big smile on my face. Last night was incredible. Beau and I were—well, I wasn't sure what we were. Defining it didn't seem as important as the fact that we had finally reconnected after all of these weeks of circling each other.

I traced the tops of the bubble peaks with my toes. Beau felt the same way I did; he didn't have to say it with words. Every touch he made last night told me. I thought about the room full of artifacts from our dating journey that was on the other side of the door. He had saved all of those tokens from the dates. But we still had to finish the damn project. *Shit!* I had an agreement with Professor Garcia. There had to be a loophole. There had to be a way I could tell Beau how I felt and still keep my promise to the nutty professor.

I slid deeper into the water until the ripples lapped around my neck. I

drifted, suspended in the tub. If I waited until the project was turned in to tell Beau how I was feeling, I risked losing this place we had just found. I thought about the grade I needed to graduate. The grade I needed to start living my dreams in California. But did those dreams even matter if Beau wasn't in my life?

My hands and feet were officially pruned. I had soaked myself right out of this pensive state. I knew exactly what I was going to do: dry off and tell that boy sleeping in the other room that this was the most incredible semester of my college career, and I had been falling head over heels in love with him since the day he ran me over on his bike. I wrapped the

spa-like robe around my chest and fastened the white tie in a knot. My hair shook out over my shoulders. I was ready. This was it.

I pulled open the bathroom door, ready to tackle Beau with the emotions pouring through my heart. Why hadn't I done this sooner? I had wasted so much time worrying about grades and graduation that I had let the most important part of my college life fall to the side.

"Beau?" I surveyed the empty bed. The sheets were scattered and his suit was missing from the floor. I padded out to the foyer then walked into the center of

the dating display.

Beau wasn't in the suite. *Shit!* I had waited too long.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I called him three times and sent ten texts. I was dangerously on the edge of being a stage five clinger. He could call me a clinger, a deranged ex, or a psycho—I didn't care as long as he called. I was extremely grateful that the bellhop had delivered my overnight bag to the room before dinner, or else I would have had to complete the walk of shame in the classiest hotel in town in my rumpled black dress. I had packed lightly for the night, so there was enough room in my bag to pack the dating mementos Beau had collected for three months. The rest I shoved in the half-scorched picnic basket. I wasn't leaving a single piece of our

history behind.

I checked my phone a hundred times before leaving the suite. Beau wasn't answering or calling, but the impulse to make sure I didn't miss a communication attempt from him was stronger than the logic I had settled on. He wasn't going to call.

With one last glance at the suite, I slung my bag over my shoulder, rested the charred basket in the crook of my arm, and walked out of the Carolina Inn. The hotel's Sunday morning patrons eyed the basket over their morning papers and coffee cups, but I kept my head high and charged toward my car.

April in Chapel Hill was stunning. The blooms, the birds, the buzz of students getting ready for the end of the semester were contagious. My heart should have felt heavy, but as I meandered through the parking lot, I felt renewed. I was in love. Head over heels, make-a-fool-of-myself, ditch-every-plan-I'd-ever-made in love. I threw my bag in the backseat and looked at my phone again, just in case I didn't hear a text from Beau when I was walking through the lobby. Eleven o'clock—I could make it home and post my blog before him. It was the last chance I had to make everything right.

I cracked open my laptop and launched a blank document. The project wasn't due until Thursday. Even though I had agreed to hold off revealing my feelings until then, I couldn't wait. Professor Garcia could report me or fail me—I didn't care.

Last Date: Re-creation of Victoria's overnight dates in the dream suites with the remaining bachelors

Show Myth to Debunk: Spending quality one-on-one time together overnight in a romantic dream suite leads to love

I took a deep breath and exhaled across the keyboard. I couldn't believe I was actually doing this. What was it that Mitch Henderson always says? *You can't find love if your heart doesn't want to walk the journey.* True, it was corny and obviously written for commercials, but the sparkly blue-eyed host had a point.

Last night, my Comm 224 partner, Beau Anderson, and I were supposed to fulfill the final requirement of our semester-long project chronicling our re-created Love Match dates. During last week's episode, the show followed the bachelorette over the course of three nights. Each night she spent the evening with a different bachelor in a dream suite. When I saw the show, I couldn't believe Victoria could spend three

separate nights with three different men. How confused is this girl? It didn't make sense to me that on this journey to find love she was so willing to share so much of herself with more than just the one man she's meant to be with. Because when you're in love, there's nothing you want more than to see that person every day and every night. They are the why for your sudden smile. They are the reason for new chances you're willing to take. They inspire you to be more, to be better, and to be real. Loving someone isn't a hobby or a project—it's part of your being.

All season I've watched Victoria on her journey to find love. I've gone on the dates and you have read about every single one of them. I told you how Beau and I didn't have a spark and that no matter how romantic the dates were,

nothing he did could convince me that Love Match was anything but a fraud.

The truth is Love Match isn't the fraud—I am. I have been lying since my first blog. The reason I think Victoria is crazy for splitting her time between three guys is because for me there's only one guy. And with him, I can't imagine spending one single second having dinner or laughing or kissing anyone else.

Maybe it's because every time we were on a date, he held the door for me or put a coat around my shoulders when I shivered. Maybe it was the way he held me and coaxed me down the rock wall, or maybe it was how he taught me that there are five fouls in a basketball game. I could make a long list of all the things that he

taught me about living in the moment and making the most of every second we had. I don't know what it was or how it happened, but I, London James, am completely head over heels in love with Beau Anderson. I'm just sorry it took a reality show to help me figure it out.—L.J.

If Beau had taught me anything, it was that this was my graduation, my future, and my life. I tapped out the last sentence and pushed the enter button with certainty.

It was done. Now I just had to wait.

Monday morning I knocked on

Professor Garcia's office door. She was one of the rare instructor's who spent more time in her office than out of it.

“Come in.”

I crossed the threshold into the cramped cubby the university labeled as an office. “Hi, Professor Garcia.”

“London. Isn't this a nice surprise?” She pulled her glasses down on the brim of her nose. With warmer weather, she had traded in her boots for bright pink sandals. I didn't think the woman knew what a neutral wardrobe was.

“I wanted to talk to you about the project.”

“I saw your post. It’s not exactly what our agreement was.”

I sat in the empty seat next to her desk. “I know, but you can still have all of the research and I’ll still go to Orlando with you this summer for the conference.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a situation quite like this one. Tell me, what did Beau say after he read your post yesterday?”

My eyes hit the floor. I knew

writing the blog was taking a chance, but I wasn't quite prepared for the embarrassment that had followed in the past twenty-four hours.

"I haven't heard from him." I bit my lower lip, waiting for Professor Garcia to launch into some kind of I-told-you-so speech. She never thought Beau was compatible with me from the start of the project.

"Oh, dear, you must be devastated. Oh no." She planted her hand on my knee. "When I read your blog yesterday I realized that maybe I had gone about this project with you two the wrong way."

“What do you mean?”

“The class is supposed to be about real relationships, but all of the other students were navigating business dealings, roommate problems, and human survival instincts. You two were the only ones analyzing love—in retrospect that wasn’t a fair position to put you in. I just didn’t realize it until last night.”

“I don’t know what to say, Professor.”

“I’m the one who is speechless, London. I’m going to call my colleagues and back out of the Orlando conference. It’s too much to ask of you, especially if

Beau isn't talking to you."

I didn't really need her to remind me that I had bared my soul to the entire world online and I hadn't heard a peep from him. The site was overloaded with responses from our fan base, but not a single comment came from Beau.

"No, a deal is a deal. I went into the second half of the project giving you my word that you could have the research. The show is real—it works. People can fall in love on these crazy dates. I'm your living proof, even if Beau doesn't feel the same way anymore."

I didn't like the look of pity coming

from the professor's eyes. "London, I might be a member of the academic community, but I'm not about to put you through a rigorous panel of research questions just to get my name in a publication. I'm a woman first, and if there is one thing I know, it's heartbreak. No one should have to live it publicly. You didn't sign up for that. I'll tell you I definitely didn't with Pablo. Did I mention him to you?"

"Um. Not really. Is he the guy from spring break?" Where was this conversation headed?

"Trouble. I knew he was trouble. But did I listen to my logical side? Hell

no. I just let loose and well—we are supposed to be talking about you. Anyway, I think we can cancel the Orlando trip.”

“Ok. Thanks, I guess.” I couldn’t believe I was actually bonding with Professor Garcia over boys and broken hearts. The conversation faintly resembled one of my late night talks with Nina. I had to admit I was dying to see a picture of Pablo.

“I’ll see you in class, London, for your final presentation. Good luck with everything.” She smiled then turned back to a stack of papers she was sorting.

I pulled my backpack over my shoulder and walked out of her office.

The brightness of the spring sun hit me before I had a chance to locate my sunglasses. My eyes started watering while I scrambled in the pocket of my bag for the glasses. I was certain I had stashed them in the front compartment before entering Professor Garcia's office. I could feel the mascara streaming down my face as the watering intensified. *Shit.* Everything was a blurry mess and it stung.

“London?” I heard his voice over my shoulder.

Ah-ha! My hands felt the familiar plastic sticks of the sunglasses. Quickly, I shoved them on before spinning around.

“Beau!” I smiled as I wiped my cheeks trying to clear the mascara streaks. I could tell by the way he was looking at me that my efforts had the opposite effect.

“What are you doing on campus on a Monday?”

“I just had a meeting with Professor Garcia about the project.”

“Funny, that’s why I’m here.” He shuttled his bike into the closest bike

rack.

“Beau, can we talk? I need to tell you everything that’s going on.”

I had pictured some epic scene where he would come to the house and we’d talk in my room and pour our hearts out to each other and then end up hot and sweaty under Ugly Quilt. The middle of campus wasn’t part of the make up fantasy and neither was a mascara crisis.

“Oh, now you want to talk? Now you finally want to open up? I read it, London. I saw your post. I don’t know what we need to talk about.” He started to walk past me.

“Are you kidding me? I just told the whole world that I’m in love with you, and we don’t have anything to talk about?” A few students walking through the mini quad stopped to watch our exchange unfold. *Damn our blog fame.*

“Right. You’re in love with me. So you think because you posted something online that everything is just taken care of? That I should forget how you’ve broken my heart repeatedly? It doesn’t work like that, London. This isn’t some scene in one of your little plays you can act your way through.”

I took a step back. His words stung. “What are you talking about? How did I

break your heart? You're the one who disappeared yesterday." I kept my voice low and I walked closer to him. I didn't need the rest of campus to know Beau ran out of our suite.

He threw his hands in the air.

"You. Are. Leaving. There's nothing else to discuss. The other night was just good-bye. I shouldn't have let it get that far. I admit that was my fault—it was a mistake."

I was utterly confused. "That was good-bye? Good-bye sex is actually a thing? I thought we were starting over." I didn't want to think anything about our night together was a mistake. It was

perfect.

“How can we start over? It’s only going to end one way—with you on a plane to California.” His eyes looked desperate.

“But, I want to be with you. That’s why I wrote the blog, that’s what taking you home was about, and the other night in the suite—this is what I want. I’ve been trying to show you that on every date we’ve had since you broke up with me. Didn’t you see it? Couldn’t you feel it? I’ve been trying to tell you with everything but words.”

“Well, London, sometimes people

need words. I needed to hear it from you.”

“I kinda made a deal with Professor Garcia and I couldn’t tell you what I was feeling. You had to read it, though. The words were there in the blog.”

“What kind of deal? Are you talking about the research? This is exactly the problem. You put the grade and the project first.” Beau sighed. “I can’t do this, London. Just leave me alone. Stop making this harder on both of us.”

In the epic make up sequence, I didn’t get mad, but right now, I was starting to fume. Beau was pissing me off.

“What in the hell is wrong with you? I saved both of us with that deal.”

The circle of people around was growing. We had a full-fledged audience.

“Me? What’s wrong with you? I gave you chance after chance, London, to tell me that what we had meant something to you. That it was bigger than your plans or your perfect grade point average. But every single time I tried, you threw your career in my face. At some point you had to realize I wasn’t going to keep taking it.”

He was right—completely right. At the mere mention of jeopardizing the

grade or going anywhere other than L.A., I changed the subject and cut him off—every time. In his room, by the creek at the vineyard, even during our margarita date—I never failed to tell him I had one priority. This might be my last chance to tell him how wrong I had been for so many months.

“Beau, I am telling you right now that this is what I want. *You* are who I want. I was wrong before. I get it. I pushed you away. It was as if I couldn’t get out of my own way or something. Can’t you just give me a chance to show you?”

“No. I can’t. It doesn’t matter that I

want you more than I've ever wanted anything in my life." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "The semester started off as fun, I liked showing you new things, and I laughed every time you crept out of your comfort zone. How could I not fall in love with you, London?"

"But—" I was trying to sort through what he was saying. My heart was stuck on the fact that he had just said he was in love with me.

He continued. "But, loving you and wanting you isn't going to change the reality. You're moving three thousand miles away and I'm not going to have a single break in the first year of law school.

We'll never see each other. We'll be lucky if we get to talk on the phone. And you don't deserve that. I can't do that to you. So, I'm out. I know I said it weeks ago, but now that we're actually going to have distance between us, I can finally stick to my word, because anytime I'm near you, I can't trust myself not to—”

I didn't let him finish. I didn't want one more word building a wall between us. I threw my arms around his neck and jumped toward him so that my lips landed square on his mouth. Beau wasn't ready for my full throttle tackle. His feet slipped as he grabbed me around the waist, taking us both to the grassy ground.

I looked over Beau's shoulder. The circle of onlookers began clapping and throwing wolf whistles. Beau started laughing.

“London, what am I going to do with you?”

“Kiss me.”

“Didn't you hear anything I just said?” He was attempting to sit up. “Nothing is different except now I know you can tackle.” He rested on his elbows.

“I heard you. But you are so wrong. Everything is different. I am in love with you, Beau, and I am absolutely not letting

you break up with me again.”

“Really? You can rewrite the future?”

“If that’s what I have to do, then yes. I will rewrite anything you want. We are not over.”

“Is that so?” His eyes sparkled and he was grinning.

“It is.” I gently pushed on his shoulders and let my hair fall around his face before pressing my mouth into his. The rest of the quad faded from my view. All I remember was Beau’s warm lips and his arms holding me against his body for all of campus to see.

“How much popcorn are you popping in there?” Beau called from the living room.

“It’s the finale. Nina is watching with us and it’s three hours long. We need snacks.”

“Three hours of this *Love Match* crap? I didn’t know that’s what I was signing up for when I said I would watch it with you tonight. You know the project is over. We don’t actually have to watch the show anymore.” Beau grabbed the heaping bowls of popcorn from my hands

and set them on the coffee table. “There are so many other things we could do tonight.” His hands gripped my waist and he pulled me on top of him. He began working the straps of my tank top down my shoulder with his teeth.

“So, was it worth an entire semester of dating me to get that A?” He kissed just below my ear, pressing his mouth into the side of my neck.

It took me a second to regain control of my thoughts. “Um hmm. Definitely worth all of the terrible things I had to endure.”

“Good.” His hand slipped down

the back of my shorts causing me to arch forward. He growled into my neck and I could feel his muscles tightening. “I can think of a few other things we haven’t tried yet this semester.”

“Beau! Nina is going to be here any minute.” I laughed, while fighting the fire building under my skin. It would only take him a minute to dissuade me completely from watching the show. Admittedly, I wanted him to carry me to my room and abandon our TV plans. Wrapping myself up in Beau was so much better.

“You know I can’t keep my hands off you.” He was slowly sneaking his

other hand under the front of my shirt.

Maybe just a minute wouldn't hurt. I closed my eyes and rolled my head to the side as he pressed under the edges of my lacy bra.

“Ok. Ok.” He unlocked my legs from his hips and lifted me from his lap. “But, as soon as it ends, you're mine for the rest of the night. Deal?” He reached for a handful of popcorn.

I sighed, wanting to plant his hands back under my shirt. This would be a long three hours. “Deal.” I pouted.

Within seconds, I heard the familiar rattle of Nina's keys in the door.

“Hey, y’all. I made it just in time.”

“Yep. Just in time.” Beau smiled at her. I nudged him with my elbow.

She dropped into the open recliner. “Can you believe it’s the finale? How cool is it that we’re watching it together? I mean, this show is responsible for bringing you two together. And by two degrees of separation, it’s responsible for Austin and me being together.” She beamed.

Nina and Austin had spent every weekend seeing each other since I had schemed for Nina’s help on the hometown date. They didn’t seem to

mind the weekend drives and the phone calls every night. Nina hadn't said much about what she would do after graduation, but I had a feeling Austin's zip code was in her job search area.

The front door breezed open again. "Do you have room for two more?" Candace smiled, pulling Pearce into the living room with her.

"Sure. We didn't know you were coming home." I hopped up from the couch to hug Candace. "I can't believe you two came to watch with us."

"Well, the London James and Beau Anderson *Love Match* story is kind of

famous. We had to be with you when you watched the finale together.”

“That’s so sweet, Candace.”

The towering football player looked uncomfortable by the front door. Watching *Love Match* was probably something he had never done. I nodded at Beau.

“Hey, man, I’m Beau.” He reached out to shake the wide receiver’s hand. “Want a beer?”

I saw the look of relief spread across Pearce’s face. “Definitely. Thanks, man. Nice to meet you. I’m a huge fan of your blog. I’m down to just a few things

on my bucket list.” He followed Beau into the kitchen. I laughed. If only Pearce knew how much Beau admired his stats and skills on the football field.

Candace gave me a “thank you” smile before settling in on the end of the couch. I would have to ask her later how she convinced Pearce to give up a Monday night for our favorite dating show.

Nina squealed, “It’s on! It’s on.”

I turned up the volume just as the rose petals drifted across the screen. I smiled. Beau returned, with a beer in hand, sat on the couch, and wrapped his

arm around my shoulder. I snuggled closer to him.

“Hello, I’m Mitch Henderson and welcome to the finale of *Love Match*.”

Tails California

It was hard enough to keep my hands from shaking let alone make sure I wasn't sandwiched between five cars on the interstate as I raced to the airport. L.A. traffic was supposed to be terrible, that was all part of the allure. Right now, it was making me a nervous wreck.

My turn signal blinked rapidly as I cautiously veered into the far right-hand lane. After one month of the traffic, smog, and fast-paced city life, I was starting to feel at home in the City of Angels and less like a fish out of water.

The apartment my parents moved me into after graduation wasn't much. I had a kitchenette-living room

combination and a bedroom that accommodated my bed and a three-drawer dresser. I had become especially creative about how to organize my shoes. It helped that I didn't have to haul my sweater collection across the country.

I checked the rearview mirror one more time before merging onto the exit and spiraling into another stream of cars. I had plenty of time before Beau's flight arrived, but I wanted to park and meet him inside baggage claim. It's not everyday your boyfriend moves from one coast to the other to be with you.

I grinned, thinking about the journey Beau and I had been on since

January: a series of fake dates followed by real dates, and then a handful of confusing breakup dates, and then the best part—all the makeup dates. I giggled remembering the lengths I went to, to get him back.

I found an open parking space and shifted the car into park. This was it. Our real journey was about to begin. I took a deep breath, shook my hands, and marched into LAX.

Passengers scuttled by like ants. I watched warm embraces and smiles as families collected their loved ones by the baggage carousels. I couldn't believe we were actually doing this. Beau was

moving to L.A. into my tiny shoebox apartment and I was here to take him home. *Home.*

I'm not sure whose parents were more upset when he decided to forego law school: his or mine. We both knew his heart was never in it, but Beau needed to admit that to himself. I wasn't there when he broke the news to his mother. I can only imagine she wasn't thrilled that her only child was giving up law school to pursue a job in California. It was probably best I wasn't there.

I glanced up at the arrival screen. Next to flight 752 from RDU, the word "landed" flashed. I bit my bottom lip. He

was here. Beau was in California.

The day I tackled Beau in the quad, I was determined with every fiber in my five-foot being never to let that boy get away. Sure, kissing him was unbelievable, but without his arms wrapped around me, nothing made any sense. With him, I could take chances I never thought were possible. I tried new things and I saw old things in a completely different light. I knew I couldn't live with three thousand miles between us. Lucky for me, he couldn't either.

Neither one of us wanted to admit to the other that at twenty-two-years-old and fresh out of college, we were willing

to give up everything for a match rivaled only by reality TV.

In my first thirty days in the Golden State, I had already landed two jobs as an extra. Spending an entire day waiting around to drink a cup of coffee over and over again wasn't my ideal role, but it led to something much bigger—a speaking part in a pilot. I had been cast as the neighbor for two male roommates who were trying to make it as comedians in New York. The show was called *Laugh Mates*. No one even knew if the pilot would get picked up, but I didn't care. I had one foot in the Hollywood door and was starting to make connections.

On our last night at Carolina, Beau surprised me with a re-creation of our planetarium date. Beau's words from our rooftop date still echoed in my ear, "London, this project changed me. You changed me. I always talked a lot about living my dreams, but I wouldn't be doing it if I hadn't met you."

His eyes were warm and playful, making it hard to concentrate on what he was trying to tell me. "I've made a decision."

"A decision? What do you mean?"

"I'm moving to California."

“You’re what?” The champagne in my glass sloshed over the side as my arms flew around his neck.

“Yeah, I can’t stay in North Carolina if you’re not here.”

“Are you serious? We don’t have to do the whole long distance thing?” I probably sounded like Nina squealing at the top of the stargazing perch.

“I’m serious. No long distance. I can’t stand to be away from you. I learned that the hard way.” His hands tangled in my hair as he pulled me closer in his lap.

“What about law school?”

He grinned. “Law school? I’m going to be a consultant for an outdoor equipment company. I’ll be testing out gear and working with adventure sports centers to give them the best recommendations. Who needs law school?”

I couldn’t think of a better fit for my adventurous boyfriend. “Beau, that’s amazing. When did you find out about it? I can’t believe you haven’t mentioned this.”

He stared directly in my eyes. “Truth?” I nodded lightly. “I’ve been applying for jobs in California for months.”

“Months?” If that meant what I thought it did, Beau had been planning on moving the entire time we were broken up—he had never given up on us.

“I didn’t want to say anything until I actually had something I could tell you about. I just found out today I got the job. I start next month. So tonight is about celebrating, not saying good-bye.”

I crushed my lips against his. “I’m so happy right now.”

He growled into my ear. “Me too.” His hands began nimbly releasing the buttons on my shirt. “You know, there’s

something I've always wanted to do with you on this rooftop.”

I giggled. “Why don't you show me?”

That was a month ago. Today, I watched as more passengers emerged from their gates into baggage claim. I was convinced everyone had gone into snail mode. I wanted to shuttle them out of the way. Then, I saw him. He smiled from the other side of the room and I took off running in a full sprint. I didn't care about the rose in his hand or the backpack weighing him down. He was here.

“Hey, movie star.” He smiled as he engulfed me and swept me into his arms. My legs wrapped around him and I kissed him with every breath I had. All I ever needed and wanted was right here.

About the Author

T.A. Foster is a Southern girl whose heart and spirit are connected to the beach. She grew up catching rays and chasing waves along the North Carolina Outer Banks and now resides in the state with her adventurous pilot husband, two children and two canine kiddos.

T.A. has an undergraduate degree in Journalism and Mass Communication from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a graduate degree in Educational Psychology from Texas A&M University. When she's not chasing her two-legged and four-legged children or trying to escape for date night, you can

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