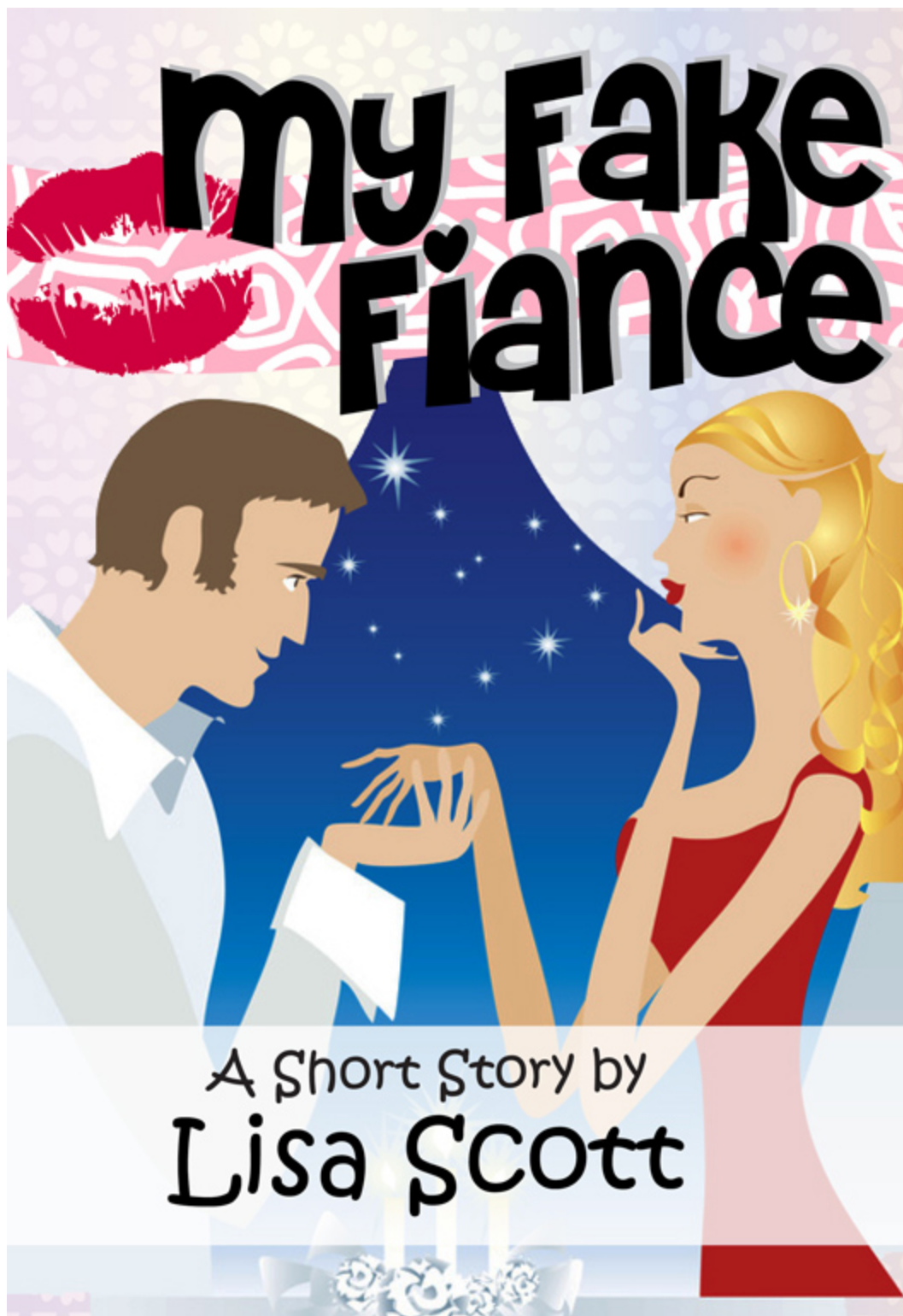




# my Fake Fiance



A Short Story by  
**Lisa Scott**



# **“My Fake Fiancé”**

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“My Fake Fiancé”  
“Bridesmaid Blues”  
“The One That Got Away”  
“Wedding Auditions”  
“Do Over”

Smashwords Edition  
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## **“My Fake Fiancé”**

**By Lisa Scott**

Sorting through the mail, my fingers closed around the thick, glossy envelope that screamed wedding invitation. I passed it to my roommate, Micki, who was sipping her coffee while grumbling about men who tie up the bar, then leave lousy tips when she refuses to hand over her phone number.

“Shocking news,” I told her. “Another wedding invitation.” She was scheduled to be a bridesmaid in eight weddings over the summer and had been invited to another five. It was costing her a fortune. Thus, the grumpy attitude as she detailed the night from bartending hell. She’d been moonlighting to pay for all the wedding costs. Affordable bridesmaids’ dresses are the thing of fairy tales, apparently. But she’d created a wedding advice blog detailing her adventures, so she was making the best of it. “Did you get invited to this many weddings when you lived in Boston?”

She sighed. “Nope. But Springfield’s my hometown, so I know lots of people here. Guess they were all waiting for me to move back before they got married.” Micki held out her hand and took the envelope from me. She looked at the front of it and laughed, tossing it back to me. “Sorry, Sammie, this one’s for you.”

I jumped back and let it drop to the floor with a thwack. Micki didn’t mind standing up in weddings because she had no plans to get married. At least that’s what she told me privately. It was another story on her blog.

I, on the other hand, should’ve been married by now, or at least had a close call, and hated going to weddings—reminding me that at age twenty-nine, I’d never had the pleasure. I didn’t even have anyone I could bring as a date. All this, and I had twenty thousand dollars in a savings account my mother had left me before she died, specifically set aside to throw the wedding of my dreams. A wedding she’d never see. So yeah, I had a few good reasons to hate weddings.

Reluctantly, I picked up the envelope, and slid out the card. A trail of fine glitter and dried rose petals spilled out. I read the invitation and

groaned. “No, no, no. Not Carrie LaMont. Anyone but Carrie LaMont.” I was waiting for a dove to fly out of the envelope next, the way she did things.

Micki poured herself another cup of coffee and doused it with creamer. “What’s wrong with Carrie LaMont?”

I slumped onto the stool and propped my chin in my hand. “She was my number one frenemy in high school before the word was coined. Anything I could do, she could do better.”

“Carrie La Mont. Sounds familiar.” She held out her hand and I passed her the invitation. Reading over the details, she nodded. “Didn’t recognize the name at first. I’m in this wedding. She’s marrying my cousin.”

“Your cousin the brain surgeon?” My voice squeaked.

“Pediatric brain surgeon,” she clarified. “Yes. Despite the gaggle of models and lawyers and beauty pageant queens following him, Carrie LaMont won the game.”

I whimpered. “Why? Why her?”

“You haven’t seen her in a while I take it.”

I shook my head.

“She’s gorgeous, her father’s loaded, and she apparently does things in bed that are illegal in some states.” Micki shrugged. “My cousin’s a talker when he’s drunk.”

“She’s also a natural blonde with a supermodel figure and the prettiest teeth I’ve ever seen.” I stomped my foot. “Why isn’t life fair?”

Micki shrugged. “So don’t go.”

“She’ll think my life is so miserable I’m ashamed to show up.”

Micki tucked her hair behind her ears, showing off the new blue streak she’d added after moving back home. Some people get tattoos to mark life milestones, Micki changes her hair. “But isn’t it true? You were just telling me your dating life is so slow that you only shave your legs once a week.”

I cringed, thinking about my prickly legs. “I can’t let her know that! Besides, there should be some perks to being single, right? Not having to shave every day is one of them.” I went right for my stash of emergency chocolate in the cupboard by the fridge, then settled for a cookie when I realized the chocolate was long gone. I looked for the shopping list stuck on the fridge so I could add chocolate. But chocolate was already on the list. I grabbed the last cookie and then jotted cookies on the list.

Micki snorted. “I guess unlimited sympathy sweets is a perk of being single too?”

I ignored her. Micki could eat anything and stay a size four. “I have to bring a fabulous date and slightly tweak the truth about my life.” I made a teeny-tiny gesture with my fingers. “Oh, and new highlights. Botox? Should I try botox?” I paced around the kitchen wondering if there was any way to make Carrie LaMont squirm.

“You could just go and wish her well.”

I gave Micki a dirty look. “Of course I can’t do that. Liam Streeter was all set to ask me to prom and she stole him away once she found out I was interested. Then she dumped him a week later. He was really into me until she came along. I could be married with two kids if it weren’t for her.”

“Okay. She sucks. Tell you what—I’ll help you find the perfect date. Come to the bar Friday and we’ll find the hottest guy, create a drool-worthy history for him, and pay him big bucks to go with you.”

“Micki!”

“What, you think you’re going to find a Brad Pitt look-a-like CEO in three weeks? For free?”

“Three weeks?” I looked at the invitation. “I must’ve been on the second-tier list of invites.”

Micki wrinkled her nose. “More like third tier, I’d say.”

I groaned. “Wouldn’t you think I’d be first tier so she could be certain I was there to humiliate?”

“Maybe she forgot about you until the third round.”

I gritted my teeth. “A Brad Pitt look alike CEO who’s foreign,” I said, upping the ante after such a slight. “Who builds orphanages in Africa.”

Micki pointed at me. “Let’s make him the guy who dumped Angelina Jolie before she hooked up with Brad Pitt. She used poor Brad to fill the void of your mystery man.”

We clinked coffee mugs. “I like it.”

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Easier said than done, as it turns out. By midnight Friday night, we’d found a guy with a lovely accent from Ireland—who was going back to the motherland in a week. The only guy who looked remotely like Brad Pitt—if you tilted your head and squinted—was too drunk to stand up. He certainly

couldn't be trusted to play along nicely at a wedding that was sure to have open bar all night long. One guy who seemed like a good prospect wanted seven hundred bucks to play the part. Would a night out with me be that horrible?

"This was a dumb idea," I said, slumped over the bar, nursing the remnants of my white Russian.

Micki wiped down the bar top. "Now don't give up. You can always come back tomorrow night."

I was about to call it a night when the wait staff from the banquet hall attached to the bar spilled out; some retirement party having ended at midnight.

Micki's eyes widened and she whistled softly. "Hold the phone. Looks like we've got a new waiter who might fit the bill."

I followed her gaze and sucked in a breath. He wasn't a Brad Pitt look-a-like, but who cared. A Matthew McConaughey look-a-like would suffice. "Introduce me," I whispered to Micki.

"I don't know him," she whispered back. "But we can change that." She caught his eye and waved him over.

He looked behind him like he wasn't sure she meant him, and with that, I was sold. Not that I was looking for a relationship with a guy I was going to hire. Just that someone so hot also being so humble was a great quality.

"Hey, I haven't seen you here before. I'm Micki Keegan."

"I'm Justin Banks. Just started this week." They shook hands across the bar.

"This is my friend, Samantha Cooper. Talk amongst yourselves while I get you a drink. What'll you have?"

"A beer would be great. What can I get you, Samantha?"

*Nice, he's thoughtful to boot.* "I'll have another white Russian." With no time to waste, I got busy. "So, you're a waiter?"

"It's one of my many jobs. I'm a waiter, a model, and an actor." He shrugged.

One eyebrow shot up. "An actor?" Was fate finally playing along? "You're an actor?"

Untying his bow tie, he nodded. "Just bit parts in commercials and industrial videos. Only because it pays the bills. I've got bigger plans, but for now, I'm juggling a few different things."



I tilted my head, examining him. “Ever do any live acting?”

“Like theater?”

“Sort of.” I chewed on my lip, wondering exactly how to pose the question, when Micki arrived with our drinks.

“Justin here is an actor,” I told her.

She clapped. “Perfect. Did you ask him?”

He gave me a wary smile. “Ask me what?”

“Geez, Micki, I wasn’t going to jump right in.”

“The wedding’s two weeks away. There’s no time to lose.”

Justin took a long drink of his beer. “I’m intrigued.”

I sighed. “Fine. I’ll admit upfront this is totally pathetic, but I need a date for a wedding in two weeks.”

“Not just a date. She needs a fiancé,” Micki said.

His eyebrows shot up.

“A fake fiancé. Who’s a successful CEO with an Australian accent.”

He laughed and sat on the stool next to me. “I’m none of those things.”

“But you are an actor.”

He sucked in a deep breath—and then another slug of beer.

“I’d be willing to pay you.”

“Let me guess, your ex is getting married? An old boyfriend is going to be there? I won’t get the shit pounded out of me, will I?” I got a whiff of whatever aftershave he’d been wearing. It was nice.

I fiddled with the straw in my drink. “No, no it’s not my ex.”

“Then why would you need to show up with a rich, successful fiancé?”

“The bride was this mean girl in school...”

He held up a hand. “Say no more. I have a younger sister. I once paid a buddy to take her to some big dance.”

“Aww, really?” Something deep inside me hummed.

“Of course. She’s my sister and no one’s going to tell her she can’t land a date. Even if she couldn’t.” He clapped his hands together. “So, what do I have to do?”

“You’re interested?” I hadn’t expected this.

He shrugged. “I need the cash.”

“For what?”

“Does it matter?”

“It’s not illegal is it? Or a gambling debt?” Didn’t want my fake fiancé getting his knees broken at the wedding.

He laughed. "No."

"Okay." I blew my bangs off my forehead. I hadn't really expected to find someone. It'd seemed like more of a lark. "It's not that hard. Just pretend to be the perfect man who's engaged to me."

His eyes twinkled and he leaned forward. "What's your perfect guy like?"

I thought about it. My perfect guy was funny, and was passionate about his work, even if it didn't pay well. He was smart, liked to read, didn't like to party too much, liked cats more than dogs, and appreciated high thread count sheets. Weird, I know, but it's the little things that count, and my perfect guy enjoys the little things. Oh, and my perfect guy is nice to his sister. But Justin had that covered. It's very important to see how a man treats the other women in his life. It's a good indicator of things to come for you.

However, my perfect guy was very different from the guy I needed to make Carrie jealous. "He needs to be rich, successful, handsome, confident, and foreign would be awesome, can you do an accent?"

"Aye, love," he said in a perfect Australian accent.

"Nice," I cooed. "He has to be generous and kind and totally smitten with me."

"I think we can make that all happen in two weeks." His grin was dazzling.

My brain fogged over for a moment. "So, what'll that cost me?"

"I'll have to give up a night of tips, and I usually bring in one-fifty at a decent banquet."

"How about two hundred?" That'd be worth making Carrie jealous.

"We'll also have to get together beforehand to get our stories straight. How about two-fifty?"

I could buy a few new bathing suits for the summer with two hundred fifty dollars. But we were talking about the girl who took a picture of me in my bra in the locker room and sold copies of it for ten bucks so guys could get a glimpse of the smallest tits in school. Luckily, they'd grown some since then. But I'd definitely be wearing a push-up the night of the wedding. Not quite believing what I was doing, I stuck out my hand. "It's a deal."

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I drove home in a daze. *Banks, you're an idiot.* I hadn't been thinking straight. Damn. What had I just agreed to? Acting as a fake fiancé? This setup was not a step away from a gig as a gigolo. Right? Still, I'd never been paid to go on a date. Screw it. This was definitely an acting job. It would be a good challenge. And hell, it would be fun. Samantha was hot, and clearly had a good sense of humor if she was pulling a stunt like this. Or was it more like she was neurotic? Didn't matter. I wasn't looking to get involved with anyone. Not when my mom was still sick. Not when I was still struggling to launch my business idea. It'd be an easy two-fifty and nothing more. Besides, I was nothing like her dream man. Wouldn't be a problem.

I got home and Jekyll and Hyde jumped off the back of the couch and wound around my ankles as I made my way to the fridge. I'm no fool, they were only happy to see me because I could reach the box of dried cat food in the cupboard. If only females of the human variety were as easy to understand.

Dumping a good-sized mound into their dishes, I collapsed on the couch with a bowl of cereal. My dog, Daisy, snoozed in her crate. I was still fifteen thousand dollars away from my goal of buying a used food truck for catering events. No one in town was doing it, and I wanted to be the first out there with the idea.

But it would be at least a year before I had enough cash, and I didn't have the collateral or good enough credit to secure a loan. *Maybe I should be a gigolo.* Juggling several jobs wasn't fun; I worked at least sixty hours a week. Just another reason a relationship was out of the question. Launching a new business wouldn't be easy, either. No, it would probably be a few years before I was looking for love.

Finishing my cereal, I loaded chili ingredients into my crockpot. It was Mom's favorite. My secret was half a cup of brown sugar. I liked to tease her and not tell her what it was. She came up with a new guess every time she tried it. She'd come close with molasses one time, but I think she'd be disappointed if she ever found out because she had so much fun trying to pry it out of me. I brought Mom a few meals for the week every Sunday. I chuckled, thinking of my many friends who dropped in on their parents every Sunday to mooch their one good home-cooked meal of the week.

Here I was delivering the food to my mother instead. I gave the chili a stir, and chopped up another onion.

My little sister, Jill, lived across the country, and my father had left Mom fifteen years ago. We didn't talk about the divorce, but I shouldered a lot of blame. If not for me, they might be together. Now, I was all she had, besides a small group of friends who helped when they could. Her cancer was in remission, but there was no telling when it could come back. She was miserable that I wasn't married or at least in a serious relationship so she'd know someone would take care of me when she was gone. She liked to say if she died while I was still single, she'd come back to haunt me. I totally believed her on that one.

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To her credit, she waited until after polishing off a bowl of chili—and incorrectly guessing the secret ingredient was carrot juice—to ask about my love life. “Met anyone interesting, dear?”

Right. Since last week? Then I remembered that I had. Only not in the way Mom meant, of course. But a little white lie wouldn't hurt. And Sam was interesting. What the hell, I could concoct a fake relationship, too. One that would end in a few weeks and would never require a visit with Mom. At least it might make her feel better if she thought I was “getting out there” as she liked to say. I can't imagine the anguish Mom would be in if I were a daughter and still single at thirty-two. Luckily, my sister was married with a kid.

I smiled at Mom. “Actually, I met this great girl. We're going out again later this week.”

She clasped her hands and sucked in a breath. “Really? What's she like?”

I paused for a moment. If Samantha could create her own dream guy checklist for me to follow, I'd do the same. How would my mother know? She'd never meet her. “She's great. She's a cute blonde, funny, friendly.” I didn't mention her killer curves and sexy pout. She was on the short side, around five foot four, which was perfect for me. For some reason, I was drawn to shorter women.

“Oh, that's wonderful. What does she do, dear?”

Huh. I hadn't even asked. Well, this is my dream girl we were creating; she could be whatever I wanted her to be. "She's an art teacher." That surprised me. Normally, I'd think of a swimsuit model or an actress. No, that was more of a hookup dream girl. This was the fake girlfriend you'd want to bring home to Mom that I was creating.

But an art teacher? Yeah, Samantha seemed like she could be an art teacher. And something about that appealed to me—a woman with creativity and passion that was bound to show up in bed. Plus, good with little kids, getting home in time for when our children got out of school. Wow. That set off alarm bells. Good with kids? It sounded like something my mother would say.

Mom cleared the dirty bowls off the table. "She sounds wonderful. I'd love to meet her."

I coughed, trying to cover up the strangled feeling in my throat. "We just met. Let's not rush things."

"Of course, dear. But you know, I'm not getting any younger and we never know when this cancer could come back."

"Stop. It's not coming back." It just couldn't. I couldn't bear to see her battle the rounds of chemo again, losing her hair and her appetite, unable to eat no matter what I made her. Not to mention the insane medical bills. She'd been too sick to handle the piles of paperwork coming in from the doctors, so I took over paying off the bills. She gave me access to her checking account, but it wasn't enough. She had no idea I'd spent a good chunk of my money paying them off, too. She'd be livid, but what was I supposed to do? Let her go bankrupt trying to stay alive?

Mom rinsed out the bowls and stood in front of the sink, staring out the window, pulling her cardigan tight. The top button was missing. "You're right. I should be more positive. I have a doctor's appointment next month. I'm sure everything will be fine."

I kissed her head and grabbed a bowl to dry. "You'll be okay."

"I have to be. I have to live to see you married. I'm not so sure I want to come back as a ghost."

I sighed. If my mother had beer in her fridge, I'd be grabbing a few right about now.

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I stood in the bathroom, inspecting my hair while polishing off a chocolate bar—dark chocolate, so at least I could pretend I was eating it for its health benefits. At this rate, I’d pack on ten pounds trying to cope with this damn wedding.

“Sam, are you really going through with this?” Micki asked, as I got ready to meet up with Justin to create our backstory. I’d tried on five different outfits since a google search didn’t turn up any wardrobe suggestions for a meeting with a fake fiancé.

I hesitated and leaned out of the bathroom to look at her lounging on the couch. “Sure. Why not?”

She tossed her magazine aside. “You’re not a very good liar.”

This was true. Back in high school, when I turned in a fake excuse to get out of school for senior skip day, I confessed on the spot and got two days detention. “I have a very good incentive for lying this time. It’ll be fine.” I doused my ‘do with hairspray again, like that might somehow help firm up the fib.

With the wedding now a week away, I had work to do: dress shopping, a hair appointment, and a meeting with the man I was supposedly going to marry. In all my childhood wedding fantasies—sometimes solo at the beach, sometimes in a big royal-worthy ceremony—paying someone to pretend he was going to marry me was never part of the deal.

Hiring him wasn’t that strange, was it? Because if you think about it, were I in fear for my life—like if I’d witnessed a mob hit—I’d be totally justified hiring a bodyguard to accompany me to the wedding. And truthfully, I was afraid; I was terrified for my emotional well-being by going to Carrie LaMont’s wedding. I might lose it. Why karma hadn’t ridden a bus over that girl a time or two is beyond me. She didn’t deserve this good luck. Especially when I’d had so much bad luck. So Justin really was more like a self-esteem guard than an escort, I told myself. Not a far leap from a bodyguard at all.

I blinked at myself in the mirror. *Damn, I’m good at justifying things.* Too bad there isn’t a job where that skill comes in handy. I guess it might help lawyers, but I’d rather gnaw off my big toe than be a lawyer. I really didn’t know what my dream job was, but I knew it wasn’t my receptionist gig. I could feel my heart crumbling as I assessed my life, and felt perfectly justified hiring a fake fiancé. My self-esteem depended on it. I grabbed my purse and headed for the bar.

*Boy, I hope this guy doesn't think I'm a nutcase.* I snatched another candy bar from the emergency stash for the ride over.

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I walked into the hotel bar with a thundering heart and chocolate-scented breath. *Guys like chocolate, right?* It was a Friday night and Justin was finishing up his shift after working a banquet. He slipped off his bowtie and loosened the top button on his shirt as he walked up to me. "I've been thinking about you all week, Sam."

I felt my eyelashes flutter and my hand landed on top of my breasts. Oh, my God. He'd been thinking about me?

Then he grimaced and said, "Sorry, I meant, I've been thinking about you all week, Sam," delivered in a perfect Australian accent.

Embarrassed that I'd been swept away by the ruse, I forced a big laugh. "That was great. Really convincing."

He gestured to a table where we could sit down. "Let me grab us drinks. White Russian again?"

I nodded, and did some deep breathing before he came back. He was more charming than I'd remembered. That damn Carrie LaMont would probably try to steal him away from me at her very own wedding.

He slid our drinks on the table and sat across from me, folded his arms on the table and smiled. "This is different."

"This could be a whole new job for you: the fake date. You could help women out all over New England. Probably some guys, too." I puckered my lips around the straw for a long sip.

He laughed. "Let's see if we can pull this off next week first."

"Oh, we have to pull it off. My entire emotional health depends on it." I tried to sound sarcastic.

He rubbed his hands together. "Then let's get to work and figure out how we met, what I do that drives you crazy—in and out of bed—and the sickeningly sweet way I proposed to you."

I lost my breath again, but remembered how to nod. I wondered how fictional the bedroom details were going to be. I found myself leaning across the table toward him, biting my lip, while my eyelids slid to half-mast, all the while wondering if I should throw a clause into our contract about mandatory kissing.

Then I snapped out of it, sat up straight in my chair and thought about my inbox at work. And the national debt. And puppy mills.

“So, did we meet through work? What do you do?” he asked.

I frowned. “I’m just a receptionist. Kind of fell into it when my English degree got me nowhere. I can quote Shakespeare, but employers never seem too impressed by that. Guess we need to come up with a better story for me, too.”

“Something that’s not easy to check.” He studied the ceiling for a few moments, then snapped his fingers. “Say you work for yourself. Maybe a writer, with your English degree?”

I shook my head. “I’m more of a reader than a writer. Plus, she’d go looking for my books.”

“Good point. You’re an artist.”

I drummed my fingers on the table. I did have a lot of coloring books as a kid. And I always loved playdough. “Okay. I’m a sculptor.”

“Who only works on commission, just in case Carrie wants to know where your stuff is on display.”

“Yeah.” I nodded, liking how this was coming together. “And you hired me to design something for your office.”

“Very good. Now, why do you love me?” A smile split his face.

I blinked at him. Carrie could take one look at Justin and get a good idea why I loved him. Theoretically loved him, that is.

His grin disappeared, and his leg started bouncing under the table. “It can’t be that difficult to pick a reason or two.”

I forced a laugh and tried to remember my dream guy checklist. “Because you’re successful and driven, and wild in bed.”

He wagged a finger at me. “No, no. You’re the wild one. I can hardly keep up. I’ve never met anyone like you. I dumped two of the Patriot’s cheerleaders for you. Twins. And remember that time on my boat with those thigh high boots?”

I reached for my glass and took a long drink. “Ahoy captain, you’re an excellent seaman,” I finally said.

“And the chocolate body paint. There’s just no stopping you.”

I blinked at him. Justin and chocolate would be a memorable combination.

He reached across the table and patted my hand. “See? We’re coming up with an awesome scenario.”



I was relieved when he pulled his hand away. *Note to self: touch this man as little as possible. May lead to spontaneous combustion, and no way will that be pretty at Carrie LaMont's country club wedding.*

An hour later, we'd decided on a perfect back story: he'd seen some of my work, hired me to sculpt something for his lobby, flew me to his office in Australia to oversee the installation and it was love at first sight. I stayed with him for two weeks and then he decided to spend some time in his Boston office, and commute there from Springfield. On his private jet. He proposed to me with an ad on a billboard he'd created and installed on the Mass Pike, and now we were just deciding which office he'd work from after the wedding.

"Sound good?" he asked, after rehearsing our spiel one more time.

"It sounds like a dream." Well, the kind of dream that would make Carrie jealous. I'd die if someone proposed to me in such a public way. And an ad exec with worldwide offices certainly wouldn't have time to go for long walks in the park or even notice what the thread count was on our sheets. He'd never be home. But it didn't matter what I wanted. What mattered was what I thought Carrie wanted.

I stood up. "Thanks. I better head home. Gotta spend tomorrow picking over the scraps on the wedding registry." Hopefully, something under two hundred bucks was still left.

"Let me walk you to your car." He led me out of the bar, held the door for me, and walked me to my five-year-old Accord.

"Hey, what kind of car do I drive?" he asked.

"A Mercedes?" I suggested.

He laughed. "Then we better not valet park next Saturday, just in case anyone gets a glimpse of my old VW Beetle."

I laughed. "Can't wait to see it." And I meant it. I'd always loved punch buggies, imagining kids in backseats slugging each other whenever one drove past.

He was closer to me than felt comfortable, so I stepped back even though I was dying to feel his lips against mine. It was possible we might have to kiss at the wedding, just to make it authentic, but I already looked desperate enough hiring him to be my future husband. I wasn't going to humiliate myself and move in for an unwanted make-out session. I certainly didn't have enough chocolate in stock if he protested.

He must have sensed my reluctance because he moved back and smiled. "See you next week, my dear wife."

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I redid my tie for the third time, and finally was happy with the knot. *Wish I could get rid of the damn knots in my stomach.* What the hell? I never got nervous before performances, and this was nothing more than that—a performance. Maybe because I didn't want to screw it up. Sam was counting on me and I didn't want to let her down.

Or maybe it was because she was hot—and I was nothing like the man she wanted. I looked at myself in the mirror and shrugged. "It's just a job," I said to myself. "So play the part."

My phone rang as I was leaving, and I pulled my cell out of my pocket. It was my mother. "Justin, are you bringing your new girl to my birthday party next week?"

"Uh, hmmm. I hadn't thought about it. She might be busy." More knots tied up my stomach.

"Oh. I ordered an ice cream cake and everything. I just really wanted to meet her. It's been so long since you've gone out with anyone..." Her voice trailed off and her disappointment almost killed me. Or was she playing me?

I got into the car and bounced my head against the seat. Maybe if I told Sam she didn't have to pay me, she'd help me out and return the favor. "I'll see what I can do."

"Excellent. I've got the menu all planned."

"Dinner, too? Not just cake?"

"Yep. I've already gone shopping. This is a special occasion. It's not every day I meet a new girlfriend."

I hung up. Oh, yeah. I was being played.

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I was debating over which shoes to wear, when Micki flew through the door.

"You're back! Did he dump her at the last minute?" I grabbed her arm. "Please tell me a pregnant girlfriend showed up. A sex tape surfaced on the

internet?” This wedding was making me whacko; normally, I’m a fairly nice person.

“No! I’m wearing the wrong dress. This is for the wedding I’ve got in two weeks. Carrie almost threw up when she saw me in this. And she’s pissed I didn’t get rid of the blue streak in my hair.” She unzipped her dress and let it drop to the floor. “Help me change! Grab the slate gown in my closet while I get out of this.”

I ran to her room and looked at all the dresses hanging in her closet. “What color is slate? Silvery gray or blue-gray?”

“Blue-gray with one strap and the Swarovski crystals.”

I should have known the outrageous one was for Carrie’s wedding. I dashed out to Micki with it and sighed. “Am I entirely pathetic bringing a fake date to the wedding?” I still had time to back out of this.

She grabbed the dress from me and tossed me the green one. “Not entirely,” she said, shimmying into the gown. “Someone entirely pathetic wouldn’t have the capacity to realize it. Don’t worry. Everything should be fine.” Then she flew out the door.

“What do you mean by ‘should?’” I called after her. But she was long gone. I looked at the crumpled dress on the floor and picked it up. Carrie LaMont probably would have left it there. Like I said, I’m usually a nice person.

I still had to put on my fake eyelashes, when my doorbell rang. “Shit! I’m not ready.” I ran to the door and felt my knees wobble a little when I saw Justin standing there.

His eyes swept over me. “There’s my girl. You look great, love.”

I wandered over to the couch so I could sit for a moment after hearing that accent again. How had I never dated a guy with an accent? Instant lust.

“You ready to go?”

I squeezed my knees and stared at my hands, taking a deep breath. *You can do this, you can do this.* Then I screamed. “I forgot to get a fake engagement ring!” I screamed again.

He walked over and held out his hand. “Come on. We’ve got time to stop at a store. Where were you planning to get one?”

I threw up my hands. “I wasn’t. I totally forgot about it.” I bit my lip and tried not to cry as my plan unraveled. I popped up and started pacing the room.

Justin slid a big hand over my elbow. “We’ll work this out. I’ve got an idea.”

He walked me to his bug, and as we pulled out of the parking lot, I wondered how late we were going to be. Fashionably late would be good. Make it look like I didn’t care that much. That her wedding was an afterthought I could squeeze in. After my tennis lessons. *Yeah, that’s it.*

“Where exactly are you going to get me an engagement ring?” I asked.

He took a deep breath. “My mother. She’s divorced, but I know she still has the ring. It was this beautiful antique passed down through the family. Should do the trick.”

“And she’s just going to let you walk off with it.” I shook my head, a tendril from my updo grazing my cheek. “What are you going to tell her?”

“That it’s for my girlfriend.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Man, should have cleared that up sooner.

He paused and looked out his window. “No, but she thinks I do.”

I had a bad feeling in my stomach. “And who is this pretend woman?”

He turned to me. “You.”

I blinked at him.

“I told her about you.”

He told her about me? I was worthy to be his fake girlfriend? That set my heart fluttering. “Really? Why?”

He sighed. “She’s been pestering me about not having a girlfriend for quite a while, and when you asked me to fake it for you, I thought I could fake it, too—for her sake. She’ll be thrilled to give me the ring. Of course, I’ll give it back when we break up.”

I nodded. “Of course. What if it doesn’t fit?”

“Let’s just take a chance and see. It’s our best bet right now.”

Justin seemed as nervous as me and I was touched by the lengths he was going to help me out. Do you add gratuity on for a job like this? Is he going to expect me to put out? *Not that I’d mind...*

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Sam stayed in the car while I went in to talk to my mother. I had to pull this off quickly. I knocked on the door, and she was surprised to see me. “Hi, honey. Is everything okay?” Concern lined her eyes. My mother

was always expecting bad news to slink into her life. She had good reason to believe so.

“Everything’s great. I have something important to ask you.” I took a deep breath. Even though the whole thing was a setup, I felt nervous. My mom was going to be on cloud nine about this news, and then I was going to pull the plug in a few weeks. I hoped she’d be able to get over the disappointment.

Mom sank onto the couch, like she didn’t believe I could be marching in with good news. That just didn’t happen in her world. “What is it, honey?”

“I know this sounds crazy and impetuous, but I’m going to propose to my girlfriend and I was hoping I could use your ring. I can’t afford one, but I’m crazy about her. It was love at first sight.” I hoped I sounded convincing. It was hard for me to act around my mother.

Her eyes widened and a tear slipped out. She got up from the couch and framed my face with her hands. “I’m so happy for you. Of course you can have it.” She kissed my cheek then scurried to her bedroom. “I can’t believe I haven’t even met this girl, but if you’re happy, I’m happy,” she said from her room.

I heard her rooting around in a drawer. Then she came back to the living room and set a small white leather box in my hand. “I hope this brings you more happiness than it did me.”

It was true. That ring hadn’t brought much joy at all. Life with my father hadn’t been great. He was demanding and overbearing and he’d cheated on her when I was in middle school. I should have seen the signs. I should have made him stop. But I did nothing, and now she had nothing. Nothing but me.

I hugged Mom and felt like I should spend some time with her before dashing off with her ring. But Sam was waiting. “I’ve got to split. I’m going to a wedding with her and it just struck me that it would be the perfect time to propose.”

She sighed. “Such a romantic.” She squeezed my hand. “I’m so happy. This is the best news I’ve had in years. Can you bring her by tomorrow? I can’t wait until next week to meet her.”

I froze. “Um, sure. I’ll try.” I kissed her and dashed out to the car trying to remember if this is what my stomach felt like the last time I’d puked.

Sam's face was pale. "Did she give it to you?"

I handed her the box. "She's thrilled. And she can't wait to meet you tomorrow." I gave her my most endearing smile.

"You're kidding."

"Unfortunately, no."

She twisted her lips. "What if you just tell her I said no to your proposal? That we broke up?"

I started the car and headed for the church. "I was hoping we could keep up this charade for a while. My mom's been ill, and I haven't seen her this happy in a long time. Tell you what. Instead of paying me for tonight, you pretend to be my girlfriend for a few weeks and we'll call it even. It would really mean a lot to her. And to me."

She blinked at me. "I'm a horrible liar. I don't even know if I can pull this off tonight."

"Let's see how it goes. If it works, can we just try it tomorrow?"

She shrugged. "I'll do my best." She snapped open the tiny box and took out the ring. She gasped. "This is absolutely gorgeous. It's so old fashioned looking." She slid it onto her finger and splayed her hand. It looked like it belonged on her. "It's a little big, but it'll work." She smiled at me. "I can't thank you enough, Justin."

"No problem." I just hoped the next few weeks together wouldn't be a problem. Sam was great, and my mother might not be the only one upset when we broke up. Spending more time with her wasn't going to be easy. Especially how she looked so beautiful tonight. And the way she smelled. Her perfume was driving me crazy. And her short dress showed off gorgeous legs...

"What happened with your parents?" she asked, interrupting my lascivious thoughts.

I opened my mouth then closed it. That question cooled things down. I hated remembering. "They got divorced."

"I'm sorry. What happened?"

"He cheated on her." I didn't tell her the role I played in it. My father was the coach of our football team in middle school. He was a college star, and the school was thrilled to hire him part time. But I was so wrapped up in my own world, that I didn't notice how close he'd gotten to my buddy Mark's mom. She was in the booster club. They'd be in his office after

practice and I was busy in the locker room with my Game Boy, clueless. I could have stopped it. I should have stopped it. But I didn't.

Sam touched my arm. "Guess it still really hurts."

I nodded. And I didn't think I could ever make it up to my mom. Which is why I had to get my shit together while she was still here with me.

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With the ring on my finger, and my hot fake fiancé at my side, we got to the church ten minutes after two and dashed up the steps. I opened the door slowly; Carrie and her father were standing in the entryway waiting to make their way down the aisle. She looked like she'd stepped out of a photo in a wedding magazine. If life was fair, she'd have a big zit on the end of her nose, but she didn't. She frowned at us busting in at the last minute.

I grimaced. "Sorry!" I whispered.

She looked at me, and I could tell it took a moment for her to place me. "Samantha. I'm so glad you could come," she said without a hint of a smile. Then her eyes flicked over to Justin.

He grabbed my hand. "We'll just grab our seats," he said, in a divine Australian accent.

Carrie's eyes widened and we dashed off.

I liked the feel of Justin's hand in mine, and was disappointed when he let go as we sat down. But then he put his arm around me. I looked up into his big brown eyes and smiled. "Thanks," I whispered.

He leaned over and his breath was hot on my cheek. "We never set any rules about kissing and hand holding. How do you want me to handle that?"

"Whatever seems appropriate."

"We're supposed to be crazy in love, right?"

"Like, nauseating."

He nodded and kissed my cheek just as Carrie and her father walked past. I was so distracted by the way his soft lips felt on my skin, I didn't even get to scrutinize Carrie's hair and bouquet as she walked past.

He reached for my hand again and squeezed. "Can't keep my hands off you because I'm thinking ahead to our wedding."

I nodded, and held back a few tears as I tried to remember the last time I had a boyfriend sweet enough to hold my hand at a wedding. My last boyfriend never held my hand at all. When I'd asked him why, he'd

shrugged and said, “I’m just not a mushy kind of guy.” Stupid Martin. Never got flowers from him either, and he worked for a landscaping company and handled flowers every day. Figures.

That brought me back to reality in time to catch the small orchestra in the balcony and the twinkle lights that had been hung from the rafters and the hardcover program book we’d been handed when we walked in, featuring an agenda for the day and photos of the bride and groom along with the personalized vows they’d written for each other. Damn. Churches should have little barf bags attached to the pews for occasions like this.

Carrie cried just enough during her vows to be sweet, but not to ruin her perfect makeup. Doves and balloons were released when they left the church as man and wife—I just knew doves would be involved somehow—and then a parade of horse-drawn carriages led the wedding party to the country club down the road.

I saw Micki jotting a few notes on a pad she’d pulled from her purse. Carrie’s wedding was excellent blog fodder.

“So far so good,” I told Justin as we drove toward the country club.

“I was thinking, maybe we should show up later.”

“Why?”

“The fewer people we have to talk to, the less likely we’ll blow this. They’ll be getting their pictures taken for a while, and we’ll have to mingle.” He looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

“True. Where should we go instead?” Part of me was hoping he’d say, my place, but instead he said, “The Apple Blossom festival.”

I waited for him to laugh, but he was serious. “Really? You’re a big apple fan?”

He laughed. “Not exactly.” He sighed. “Okay. Confession time. I’m saving up to open a catering company that operates out of a food truck for special events, like casual weddings, reunions, and that kind of thing. There are going to be dozens of food trucks from Boston at the festival. I’d just like to poke around and see how they operate, see how people are interacting with them. Would that be ok? We’ll be back in time for the reception and we won’t risk blowing our cover.”

I didn’t care where we were. I just liked spending time with him. “Sure. That’d be great.”

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I was working on a giant mound of cotton candy (who knew it came in apple flavor) as Justin inspected one of the food trucks. The guys had been nice enough to let him check it out during a quiet spell when the crowd was busy watching a kids' chorus group sing.

While we strolled the festival grounds and sampled all sorts of apple goodies, Justin explained how he was saving every penny to start his business. "That's why I haven't had time for a relationship. Between that and taking care of my mom, women have been the last thing on my list."

"What do you mean, taking care of your mom?"

He looked down, like he hadn't meant to tell me that. Then he finally said, "Remember I told you she's been sick? She's been battling ovarian cancer. Her last test showed she was in remission, but she was stage four when she was diagnosed. My sister lives across the country, so I've had to drive her to her doctors' appointments and stay with her when she's really sick. I don't mind at all. I'm happy to be there for her. She really doesn't have anyone she can count on but me. It's just severely stunted my social life."

I grabbed his hand even though no wedding guests were there to see it. "That's wonderful of you."

"I'm lucky to do it. I don't know how much longer she'll be around."

I nodded. "My mother died four years ago. Car accident. She skidded off the road and hit a tree. I don't even have anyone I can be mad at. Just one of those stupid things that happen." I swallowed back the tears.

He stopped walking and searched my face. "I'm so sorry." He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and his finger trailed down my cheek.

My throat tightened. "There are so many things we didn't get to do. I hate that she didn't get to see me married."

He planted his hands on his hips and looked off behind me. "I know. That's a big one for moms, isn't it?" He looked back at me and smiled. "That's why I'm so grateful you're going to carry on this fake fiancé thing for a while. I know my mom will be disappointed in the end, but at least she won't have as much guilt. She's convinced I'm single because of her. I don't want her thinking that."

I grinned up at him, the smell of apple blossoms sweetening the air. "I will do my best to be a fantastic fake future daughter in law."

He kissed the side of my head. “Now let’s get back and finish up with Carrie LaMont.”

I felt a little silly as we drove to the reception. I was pulling off this ruse to make a childhood enemy jealous. He was going to do it to make his mother happy. Not fun feeling like a juvenile jackass. But we were at the wedding, I’d bought the dress and the gift, and we might as well go through with it.

As we walked into the reception hall, I realized our timing was horrible again. Carrie and her new husband were just getting ready to be announced to the crowd as husband and wife. I also realized, as I passed by a mirror, that most of my lipstick was gone—probably consumed along with the cotton candy—and wisps of hair had escaped from my updo.

Carrie caught sight of us, and Justin kissed me as we walked past.

“Where have you two been?” Micki asked loudly, lined up behind Carrie.

Justin winked at her. “Just passing the time with my fiancé. Getting a little practice in.”

I playfully jabbed in with my elbow and noticed Carrie’s jaw drop a bit.

We scooted off to our table and watched Carrie and her new husband enter the room like royalty as they were announced to the crowd. I expected to feel jealous, but I was too busy looking at Justin, thinking about his plans and problems and the way his lips felt the times he’d kissed me. I hoped to God I’d get a chance to feel them again.

We were sitting with co-workers of Carrie’s husband, Gerald, and we tried to keep them chatting about themselves during dinner, which wasn’t too hard. But when Carrie and Gerald started greeting guests at their tables, she came right over to me first.

“Samantha! I’m so happy you could come. I wasn’t sure, with the invitation being so last minute. But I realized I’d forgotten to invite you, and I had someone else cancel so I could squeeze you in.”

*Witch*, I thought, proud of myself for not saying it. I gave her a great big smile and felt quite confident I could pull this off. “No problem. I didn’t remember your name at first when I got the invitation, but then when my roommate told me she was in your wedding, I wanted to come and support her. She’s in like a thousand weddings this summer.” I looked at her husband. “I live with your cousin, Micki.”

Gerald seemed to turn a shade paler, but smiled. “Really? Great girl. Has she said much about me?”

“She says you’re chatty when you get drunk.” Just what a pediatric brain surgeon wants to hear in front of his colleagues.

Carrie put her hand on my shoulder. “So, who is this with you?”

I sucked in a deep breath. *Show time.* “This is my fiancé, Justin.”

Justin stood up to shake her hand. “Lovely to meet you. Very nice wedding. We’re taking some notes since we’ll be getting hitched soon ourselves.”

“Is that an Australian accent?”

He nodded.

Carrie turned her model-perfect face to me with a fake smile and wide eyes. “Samantha, wherever did you meet an Australian?”

Justin jumped in with the answer. “I’m sure you know she’s a sculptor. I saw her work in Boston, commissioned a piece for my Australian office, and when she showed up to install it...” He slapped his hand over his heart. “Love at first site. Never believed in it until I saw my Sammie.” He squeezed my shoulder, and I just smiled and shrugged like I couldn’t help being so instantly loveable.

He went on in a perfect, sexy accent talking about his many offices and his private jet and all that.

Carrie gave me a pained smile. “Congratulations. I’ll have to get in touch to talk about commissioning a sculpture. I’d love something for our new home. We’re building an eight-thousand square foot colonial.” Blech. She actually trilled her voice.

I wrinkled my nose. “I’m booked for the next two years.”

“And she’s really expensive,” Justin added.

“Oh,” she said. “Well, I hope you enjoy the reception.”

When they wandered off, I squeezed Justin’s knee. He leaned closed to me and whispered, “I’m impressed. You’re an excellent liar.” Then he kissed my ear.

Gerald’s partner asked for my card. “We could use a sculpture in our office. Can you do something with a boy and a kite?”

“I’ll get back to you.”

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Justin led me to the dance floor and I whispered in his ear. "I think we should leave early, like the wedding's not interesting enough for us."

He brushed his lips along my cheekbone. "Or because we can't keep our hands off each other."

I gulped. "Even better."

Justin had some impressive dance moves and maneuvered us near the bride and groom. That's when he took my face in his hands and grazed his lips across mine. It wasn't the kind of public kiss that made you cringe and look away. No, this was the kind of kiss that would make wives glare at their husbands and wonder when they'd last been kissed like that.

"You're amazing," he said in his Australian accent.

A tall, beautiful blonde approached us. "Excuse me, are you Australian?" She batted her eyelashes.

I could feel Carrie watching us. I hoped this girl didn't have any questions that would trip us up.

"Yes, why?" asked Justin.

She blew out a breath. "I just have a thing for Australians."

"So do I," I said.

And by the way Carrie was looking at him, she'd suddenly developed a similar craving, too. The blonde continued staring at my man and I wasn't sure how to shoo her away.

Luckily, a short brunette grabbed the woman's arm. "Miranda, you have your own Aussie. Remember? The one you're marrying this summer."

Miranda rolled her eyes "Of course I do, Jane. I'm just looking."

I couldn't have scripted it better if I'd hired them for this ruse, too.

Jane looked at me. "I'm so sorry, she was hypnotized at a magic show to chase hot men from down under. Unfortunately, we don't know how to snap her out of it." Jane clapped her hands in front of Miranda's face, then shrugged.

"No harm," said Justin, pulling me closer. "No one could tear me away from my Sammie."

"We'll just be going now," Jane said, pulling the blond goddess away. "Can't you see they're totally in love?" she asked the blonde as they walked away.

Justin kissed me again, like he was proving that point. When he pulled away, Carrie was watching us. I smiled at her. "I think we'll be going now. Congratulations!"

“What about the cake?” Carrie asked, sounding hurt.

“We’ll get our own dessert.” Justin said, grabbing my hand. Then we scurried off the dance floor. I followed him into the parking lot and we collapsed in his VW, laughing. I high-fived him and next thing I knew, we were kissing again. But this time, it was a kiss that would make a person cringe in public. Only we were in a car, the moon was full, and I wanted him bad.

When I finally pulled away breathless, I said, “I suppose we should get used to acting like we’re engaged since we have to keep this up for a few more weeks.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I was thinking.”

That brought me back down to earth. “So, what did you tell your mom about me?”

“That you were beautiful, and funny, and smart.”

*Yes, yes, go on....*

“Oh, and you’re an art teacher.”

My heart slipped a little. Was he too embarrassed to be fake-engaged to a receptionist? “First a sculptor, now this.”

“I guess I like the creative types.”

Which was bad news, seeing as how I’d never even used a glue gun. I didn’t even hang up cardboard bunnies at the office for Easter, or anything cute like fun receptionists do. “Wait. I don’t have to fake an accent, do I?”

He laughed. “No. You just have to be crazy in love with me, and ready to take good care of me the rest of my life since my mom probably won’t be around much longer to fuss over me.”

“I can handle that.” I tried not to let him know how choked up I was. I didn’t have a mom to do that for me either.

“Let’s go out and celebrate.”

And that’s how we ended up dancing and drinking, and finally tumbling back to his place where Justin proved to be even more amazing than I could’ve ever imagined.

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I woke up with my arms wrapped around warm, soft curves and realized I hadn’t dreamt that I’d spent the night with Sam. She was in my bed and her sleepy smile had me ready for another round. Then I

remembered I hadn't put that grin there; a successful Australian businessman had. I resisted the urge to brush a silky blond curl off her cheek. I rolled over and sighed. I couldn't fall for this girl; I was nothing like her dream guy. I was a guy who wanted to buy a food truck. The guy obligated to take care of his mother. Nothing sexy about that.

Her lashes fluttered as she woke. She seemed confused as her eyes scanned the room and then widened when she looked over at me. "We're going all the way with this ruse, aren't we?"

"Guess we can consider it method acting." I was happy at least that she didn't run screaming out of bed.

She just smiled. "I don't think you were acting last night." She raised an eyebrow. "I know I wasn't faking."

I pulled her to me and planted another kiss on her lips. "I really appreciate you agreeing to let my mom think we're together. And just a reminder—we're supposed to stop over there today. And pretend we're engaged. And in love."

She gave me the cutest grin. "Maybe I could just be so smitten I hardly say anything at all?"

"You'll be fine."

She smoothed her hands over the sheets. "These are nice."

"Eight-hundred thread count. I like to be comfortable when I sleep. It's the little things, you know?"

I swear she growled before pulling me back down on top of her for another round.

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My mother was crying. Sam patted her back, and to her credit, didn't try to withdraw from the hug. Mom finally stepped back and wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm just so happy to meet you. You two make such a lovely couple. Have you thought about a date yet?"

Sam looked a bit pale. "Oh, no. It's just all so new. It's hard to believe it's really going to ever happen." She cleared her throat.

I draped my arm around Sam. "It's going to be something small."

Mom wrung her hands. "I wish I had more money to contribute. But I'm sure we can come up with something nice."

Sam's eyebrows rose. "Oh, don't worry about that. My mother saved quite a bit of money to pay for my wedding."

Mom clapped her hands together. "How wonderful. I'd love to meet her."

Sam looked at the floor. "She died four years ago."

The only sound in the room was the clock ticking. Mom reached out and touched Sam's arm. "I'm sorry, dear. I don't know if Justin told you about my cancer scare. I'm so lucky to be here to see the two of you get married. I'm sure your mother will be watching from above."

Sam sniffed and nodded. The mood was getting way too intense for a fake engagement celebration.

"My son is a wonderful man. I know he'll be a fantastic husband, and that catering idea of his is just bound to take off." Her face looked younger and hopeful.

"Yes, we were checking out some of the food trucks at the Apple Blossom festival yesterday. I love his idea. He's very clever. Have you thought of a name, Justin?"

"Nothing that's really struck me yet."

"You'll figure something out. Together." Mom wiped away another tear. Man, she was going to take the breakup hard. "I just hope I get to see it before..." She didn't say it, but we both knew what she meant.

I kissed her. "You'll see it, Mom. I promise. We gotta go. We'll be back next week for your birthday."

Mom kneaded her hands. "Samantha, would it be okay if I came along when you look for dresses?"

She sucked in a breath. "Gosh, I hadn't even thought about the dress yet. But sure, yes. I'll let you know when I'm going."

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Justin's mother wanted to go dress shopping. For a wedding that wasn't going to happen. I was quiet on the ride home. "Justin, this is harder than I thought. Your mom's going to be really upset when we break up."

His fingers tensed on the steering wheel. "I know. She was really likes you."

"How long are we going to do this before you tell her we broke up?"

He rubbed the back of his head. "I'm not sure. I'll have to tell her you dumped me. She'll never forgive me if I break up with you."

How had I gotten into this mess? Then I remembered the wedding. "I have to thank you again for last night."

He cleared his throat. "I enjoyed it too. All four times. And this morning."

I nearly choked. "I meant the wedding. Carrie was definitely impressed. I just hope she doesn't call about a sculpture."

"Oh, right. Yes of course. Well, she had good reason to be jealous. You looked beautiful. Her husband was checking you out. I don't predict a long marriage." He pulled into my parking lot and looked at me.

How this man was still single, I had no idea. With just that look I was reliving our night together. Was it wrong to want more from him than a pretend relationship? I was only a receptionist—and not even a good one. I had no ambitions. And I couldn't cook. Some weekends, I didn't even change out of my pajamas and I wasn't a reliable flosser. The dental hygienist sighs throughout my entire cleaning. I was not the type who'd be able to take care of him like his mother hoped. I wasn't the kind of girl he wanted at all. But he was sitting there with his dreamy eyes, and his delectable mouth—and we ended up in my bed. He was a bit too preoccupied to notice I had equally nice sheets as he owned.

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Work dragged on Monday; I even let a few calls just ring until the callers just gave up. Justin made me feel alive. My job made me feel like I was dying. My life was stuck in so many ways. I made plans to meet Micki out for dinner after work so at least I had something yummy to look forward to. And I needed to talk about these crazy feelings I was having for a guy I knew was just pretending to like me.

"Guess things went alright at the wedding," Micki said as she slid into her chair at the restaurant. "Seeing as how you didn't come home for twenty-four hours. I was just about to choose a picture for your missing person flyer."

I planted my chin in my hand and sighed. I didn't even care about Carrie any more. "He's wonderful. Do you believe in love at first sight?"



She grunted. “I don’t even believe in love, period. You’re asking the wrong girl. My parents are divorced. All three of my sisters are divorced. I tried to break the trend by doing the serial monogamy thing without the pressure of a wedding, but Jared still cheated on me.” She rolled her eyes. “Ridiculous beach romance. He was a beach bum, all right.”

That was the reason she moved back to Springfield—to get away from him. I reached across the table and patted her hand.

“I only called my blog ‘The Bridesmaid Blues’ so people feel sorry for me and keep reading, hoping I’ll find true love. I have no intention of ever getting married. I’m just going to hook up and have fun. So don’t ask me about true love. Sorry, kid.”

I sighed. “I just really feel something for him, Micki.”

She took a long sip of her appletini. “He must be a really good actor. Remember, he’s not really an Australian businessman.”

I sighed. “He’s better than that. He loves his mother so much that we’re pretending to be engaged a while longer for her sake. And he’s got this great idea for a mobile catering company using a food truck for unique wedding venues. Once he gets enough money.”

That caught her attention. “That’s an interesting idea. I’ve been thinking it would be a great business venture to work as a matchmaker for engaged couples. You know, set them up with another couple getting married on the same day to share flowers, decorations and all that. Setting up the same menu with a mobile caterer would cut costs too. My blog is really taking off, but I wish I had money to invest in his idea.”

I sat up straight. I did have money I could invest. “You really think it’s a good idea?”

She nodded. “People are always looking for ways to make their special day unique—and affordable.”

I could barely concentrate on dinner. I had to talk to Justin.

I went to his apartment without calling. When he opened the door, his smile let me know my unexpected visit was welcome. “What’re you doing here?”

I took a deep breath. “I have a great idea. Can I come in?”

He led me to his couch and grabbed us each a beer from the fridge. “What’s up? Are we going to crash Carrie’s honeymoon?”

I laughed. “That’d be fun. She’s in Fiji. That’s not it, though. I’m interested in making an investment.”

He looked confused.

“I want to use the money set aside for a wedding to invest in your mobile catering business.”

He just looked at me.

“I thought you’d be excited.”

“I’m more shocked than excited. But why?”

I popped up from the couch and started pacing the room. “I was talking to my roommate about it—she’s kind of a wedding expert—and she thought it was a fabulous idea. And I realized I might never get married the way things are going for me. Why not do something with the money instead, and worry about funding a wedding—if and when the time comes. I hate my job. Maybe I could be a partner some day. A business partner,” I clarified. “I could work events with you.”

He just blinked at me. “You’re sure about this? Because I’ve got the truck all picked out. I’m ready to move on this.”

“Yes. We should get some formal paperwork drawn up, but let’s do it.”

He set down his beer, stood up, and pulled me into his arms. “Sam, no one’s ever done anything like this for me.” His voice was thick.

I pulled back so I could look at him. “I believe in you.”

“Thanks. And this is going to make my mother so happy.” He frowned. “How am I going to break up with you now?”

I felt a stab to my gut. “We don’t have to worry about that just yet.”

He sucked in a breath and nodded. “Let me call my lawyer and get the ball rolling.”

And then we ended up in bed again. He might have been my fake fiancé, but everything in the bedroom sure seemed real.

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I had a bad feeling I was going to get burned when this whole thing with Sam ended. I wasn’t what she wanted, and she’d realize it soon enough. But for now, our supposed engagement and the business deal were keeping my mother happy.

Mom had cried when I told her Sam and I were opening the catering business together. And she was thrilled to spend her time leafing through bridal magazines hoping to come up with suggestions and play a part in the whole thing. When she asked me to stop by on my day off, I figured she

was going to bombard me with information on reception sites or wedding cakes. But when she opened the door, the life was gone from her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Her lips quivered as she led me inside, and she folded her hands on her lap when she sat down on the couch. She let out a long sigh. “The cancer’s back.”

Bile slicked my throat. “So we do chemo again. You can beat this.”

Her shoulders slumped. “The doctors give me a fifty-fifty chance. I’m afraid I won’t be much help with the wedding.”

“We’ll push it back. We need to concentrate on you.”

She gripped my arm. “No. All these wonderful things happening to you? It’s the only thing keeping me going. I need that wedding, Justin.”

It felt like a punch to the gut. It was like I was twelve again and Rob Myers had landed a blow square to my stomach because we lost the football championship. “We would have won if your stupid father hadn’t screwed Mark’s mother and gotten kicked off as coach.” Then he’d hit me again while everyone watched, and I hadn’t even fought back, because it was true. Dad did screw up everything. Dad did ruin our season and our family. I couldn’t argue that; I had to take Rob’s beating. But now it was me who’d done the same thing. Mom was pinning all her hopes on a big wedding and it was all my fault. This felt worse than any pummeling Rob could have given me.

I choked back a sob. “I’ve got to talk to Sam.”

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We had to find a way out of this. My mother expected a wedding, and I wasn’t going to be able to deliver. I asked Sam to meet me at the bar after a wedding I was working Saturday night. I was afraid if I invited her to my place, we’d sleep together again instead of disentangling ourselves from this mess. It’d been a month since we started this whole fake engagement and we were still playing the part—in public and in private. Clearing off the last table in the ballroom, I shook my head, disgusted that I’d let this spiral out of control.

Sam met me in the bar outside the ballroom. Guests were finishing up from dinner and hitting the dance floor. I had a drink waiting for her as she walked up to me. I hadn’t realized it, but I’d fallen for her. She was funny

and kind, beautiful and passionate, and she believed in my business plan. She was everything I wanted. But I knew I wasn't the dream guy she had in mind.

"I've been thinking more about the name for your business," she said. "How about Justin Time Catering?"

I grinned, despite the bad feeling in my stomach. "That might work." I took a deep breath, ready to give her the bad news about my mother, when a guest from the ballroom walked up. She looked familiar.

"Can I help you?" I asked

"Excuse me, this is going to sound silly, but are you dating Samantha Cooper?"

That's when it clicked. It was Carrie, from the wedding. Sam's face went white when she heard her voice.

I swallowed, uncertain what to say.

Carrie spotted Sam, even with her back to her. "Samantha, what's going on?"

Sam turned to face her, saying nothing.

Carrie's eyes flicked between the two of us. "I thought you were a big shot Australian CEO. Suddenly, you're just a waiter—with an American accent?" She stifled a laugh and my stomach dropped. I was a joke; it was true.

Sam pursed her lips and jumped off the stool. She planted one hand on her hip and pointed at Carrie with the other. "You know what? Justin is better than that fake bio we created. He's smart, he's creative, and he cares about people. Yeah, I asked him to pretend to be someone he wasn't to impress you. But you know what? I don't care what you think. What a waste of energy. I was never good enough for you and I never will be. So what? But at least coming to your wedding and asking Justin to pose as my fiancé proved to me that there are good people like him in the world, and that if I'm lucky enough, one day I'll have someone like him."

Carrie covered her mouth, not hiding her laughter very well.

I stood up and took Sam's hand in mine. I looked at her and felt the tightness in my chest morph into a smile. "Sam, you do have me. I'm crazy about you. Honestly." I shrugged. "But I know I'm nothing like the dream guy you want."

Her eyes widened, and glistened with tears. "Justin, that's not the person I want." She jabbed her thumb at Carrie. "I only thought that's what

would make her jealous. I thought we've just been pretending."

I slid my hand around the back of her head and pulled her to me, kissing her hard. I stepped back and looked at her. "Did that feel like I was faking it?"

"No," she whispered. She blinked a few times, then looked at Carrie. "And I'm not an artist. I'm a receptionist, but Justin and I are opening a new company together." She wiggled her fingers and looked at the engagement ring. "We're not engaged, but if we ever do get married, I'll be sure to invite you."

Carrie rolled her eyes. "I won't hold my breath. You two enjoy your sad little charade." She looked Sam up and down. "And your tits are still small." She walked away and I shouted after her, "They're not small, they're perfect! And hers are real." Then I pulled Sam back toward me.

Sam blew out a breath and rested her head against me. "I'm not even upset. I don't even care what she thinks. I only care what you think." She laughed. "How incredible. Thank you."

"I need to tell you something." I knew my voice sounded serious.

Her smile fell and she pulled back. "Oh, no. What now?"

"My mom's cancer came back and she's desperate to get this wedding underway."

Her face paled and she nodded. "I should give this back. So you can tell her the truth." She twisted the ring on her finger, but didn't take it off.

I felt that same punch to the gut Rob had delivered. But this time, as resignation slid through me like I deserved what was coming, something inside me shouted, no. I wasn't going to let that feeling rule me this again. I was done feeling like I didn't deserve anything good in my life. I looked at her and held out my hand. "I do need it back."

Her eyes flicked away from mine, and she took off the ring with a shaky hand.

I looked at the ring and remembered what it had meant for my mom; what it had meant for me and Sam, if only for a very short time. Why did life have to be about suffering and hurting and constant disappointment? If Sam had taught me anything, it was about taking risks, and chasing dreams. Sucking in a deep breath, I dropped down to one knee. "This might sound crazy, Sam, but I don't want to give you up. I love you. Will you marry me? For real?"

Her jaw dropped and tears fell and I hoped that was a good sign. Then she nodded yes. I jumped up and slid the ring on her finger and hugged her. After several minutes of kissing and crying, I said, "It's just too bad we used all your wedding money on the catering company. Maybe we can save up enough in a year or so."

She kissed me, salty tears tickling our lips. "No way. I'm not waiting that long. And neither is your mother. I'd give anything for my mom to see me married. Your mother deserves that gift."

I hugged her tighter, wondering what I'd done to deserve the kind of luck that had brought her to me.

\*\*\*

I wasn't sure if Micki was going to kill me or not, but I passed her the wedding invitation as we were sorting through the mail. "Hope one more's not going to kill you," I said.

She sighed. "I hope this isn't from another blog reader. Strangers keep inviting me." She ripped open the invitation, scanned the information, and it slipped from her fingers. "Is this for real?"

I nodded. "Do you think you could fit in bridesmaid duty one more time this summer? You could even wear one of the dresses you already have. Except Carrie's, of course."

She wrapped an arm around my shoulder. "Not only will I be your bridesmaid, I will be your wedding planner and show the world what we can do in three weeks. That'll get your catering business up and running. What's the name of it, anyway?"

I grinned when I thought about the argument Justin and I had about the name the night before. I wanted Happy Endings Catering. But after an entirely unfair tickle fight, I gave in to his choice. "Great Beginnings Catering," I told her.

"Excellent," Micki said. "Because it will be. For all of us."

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## **From Lisa Scott, the Author**

I hope you enjoyed reading this story. I'm a former TV news anchor who now enjoys making up stories instead of sticking to the facts. I've dreamed of writing professionally ever since penning my first creative writing assignment in second grade. I know—that dream sure took a while to sprout.

When not begging my husband and two kids for a few minutes of peace to write my stories, I work as a voice actor and putter around in my koi pond and garden in upstate NY.

If you liked this story, please tell a friend—I'm trying to spread the word that short stories aren't short on fun! And if you enjoyed it, please leave a review. I always love hearing from readers at [readlisascott@yahoo.com](mailto:readlisascott@yahoo.com). If you like "Read Lisa Scott" on Facebook, you'll get the latest news on upcoming releases. (Fairy Tale Flirts 2! is next, along with a few more Willowdale Romance short stories.) Occasionally, I blog on my website, [ReadLisaScott.com](http://ReadLisaScott.com). Stop by and say hi!

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# Table of Contents

[My Fake Fiancé](#)  
[Midpoint](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](#)