

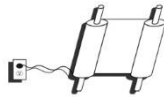


SECOND *Love* IN
NEW YORK CITY

KERI BROOKS
MCWHORTER

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Dedication

To my Dad who will cringe knowing his name is on the pages of a romance book, but has constantly encouraged me to put my talent on paper. Thanks for passing down your imagination and ADHD to me.

Chapter One

I can't believe Angela talked me into this. I paced behind my front door, looking out the peep hole, then the window. Maybe this was my sister's early Christmas gift to me. One that I wanted to return. My flats tapped on the tile floor with each step. What if I say something stupid? What if I end up with food in my teeth or snort when I laugh? If I laugh at all.

“Ugh!”

This is such a waste of time. Is it too late to cancel? I know Angela meant well but she knows how I feel about dating and marriage, so how did she talk me into a date? A blind date nonetheless.

I heard a knock at the door. I must have missed him walking up the steps while I was shaking my fists at the ceiling and feeling sorry for myself. I took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Hi,” I muttered. I sounded like I was ten years old and

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this was my first encounter with the opposite sex.

“Hello, I’m Sam.” He smiled.

“I’m Madelyn, nice to meet you.” I put my hand out to shake his, realizing too late I should have kept my hands to my side. He gave me an awkward smile and took my hand to give me a weak, clammy shake. I gulped in disgust and whisked my hand away quickly. The fact that I rarely date had become obvious at that moment.

“You ready to go?” he asked cheerfully, wiping his sweaty hand on his pants.

“Yes,” I muttered. I couldn’t quite get my words out, but no, I wasn’t ready for this. I rubbed my hands across my pants too. I tried to remember if I had some hand sanitizer in my purse.

I think I’ll stop answering the phone altogether after this. Is it possible to know within seconds of meeting someone if you like them or not? Because I already knew.

He was probably a foot shorter than me, with blonde hair; at least what was left of it. A possible comb-over? I wasn’t sure what was going on there. I felt like I was staring at a live mugshot, or maybe a neighborhood peeping tom.

“You okay?” he asked. His eyes squinted as we walked to the car.

I had been staring at him and quite possibly making some sort of disgusted-confused combination face. I quickly shook my face into a smile. “I’m good. Just a little nervous, I guess.”

“Your sister mentioned that you haven’t been on a date in a year or so.”

I just smiled and shook my head. *Wow, thanks Angela. What else did she tell you?*

I was surprised when we pulled into Chick-Fil-A. I admit

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I love the place, but I had a different setting in my head. He picked a table in the middle of all the action. Kids yelled and jumped up and down in their seats while their parents ignored their antics.

A man dressed as a cow stood near the order line with balloons strung up behind him. The door to the play center opened and shut, allowing laughter to go in and out of ear shot. It was a good distraction for me.

“What would you like?” he asked, interrupting my thoughts once again.

“I love their cobb salad.” I tried to smile.

“Oh, I thought maybe you’d like a sandwich,” he said slowly.

My eyes squinted in confusion.

“You know, their regular Chick-Fil-A sandwich.” He shook and tilted his head to the side as if to remind me that that is what I wanted.

“That sounds great.” I didn’t even try to smile this time.

When it was his turn to order, I watched him hand over a coupon for a free sandwich. I hid my face in my hands. *This is not happening.*

When he returned, I quickly ate my sandwich and the few fries that he set between us to share.

“You eat fast,” he said, throwing his head back with laughter. But this was not an ordinary laugh. It sounded like a horse. A drunk horse.

“Glad my eating amuses you,” I said. I didn’t see how Angela could have ever thought Sam would be a good match for me. What was she trying to do?

“So, what is it exactly that you do for a living?” he changed the subject as his chuckle came to a halt.

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I looked up to answer him and there it was, a piece of lettuce stuck between his two front teeth. I didn't know if I could continue on with the night. I closed my eyes and prayed him gone, but when I opened them he was still there.

"I work at a counseling center for troubled kids and teens," I disclosed with a slight sigh. I didn't want him to know anything about me.

"Oh, did you end up there after your husband died?" he asked solemnly, still with green in his teeth.

I exhaled deeply. I usually didn't mind talking about it. But tonight, coming from his mouth, I was almost offended. "Yes," was all I could muster.

"Your sister told me you were an accountant until Luke died and then—"

"I'm feeling sick to my stomach. I think it was the sandwich. Please excuse me." I quickly shot up from the table and headed for the bathroom.

"It couldn't have been the sandwich," he mumbled as I walked away. I locked myself in the largest stall and started pacing. I pulled out my phone and started texting. The first one to Angela, cursing her and her awfulness. Then one to Ben.

Help me please. EMERGENCY!!

He quickly texted back.

What happened? Are you ok? Do you need me to come and get you?

Major date fail. I don't know what to do. He just brought up Luke and I can't take it.

Ok, calm down, you are going to be fine. Go back out there, tell him you don't feel well and ask him to take you

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home.

It was a plan I could have and should have easily come up with on my own, but for some reason, I needed to hear it from Ben.

Sam wasn't happy when I shared the news with him. "What about the rest of our date? We were going to take a walk in downtown Gilbert and look at the Christmas lights. And then I have coupons...I mean, I wanted to get you a Frosty at Wendy's."

After about five minutes of trying to explain my fake illness to him he conceded and agreed to leave, but not before he asked the cashier for a refund on the sandwich that made his date sick. The free sandwich. What a tight-wad. Finally, after what seemed like hours, we walked outside into the Arizona winter. I could breathe again. I buttoned up my light coat, wrapped a scarf around my neck, opened my own car door and shut it behind me before Sam could get there.

"Is Ben the reason why you don't usually date?" Sam asked after a beautifully silent five-minute drive.

My eyes widened and my fists tightened in my lap. "Ben and I are best friends, Sam, and I rarely date because I don't want to be married again. Ever. It's that simple," I said, looking directly at him.

We pulled up to my house and he put the car in park. "I had a lovely time Maddie. Can I call you Maddie?"

That was it, I couldn't take it anymore!

"I can't do this." I blurted directly to Sam. "Thanks for the sandwich, I think you are a nice guy, just not the guy for me. Please don't call me again." I exited the car as fast as I could.

"Wait!" he yelled stumbling out of his side of the car, "I

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bought you French fries and I was going to get you ice cream, too.” He now had his own hands up in the air, “Your sister said you were—”

I slammed my front door behind me before I could hear what else my sister said. I locked the door and laid my head back against it, taking in a deep breath. *Does Angela even know me at all?*

Chapter Two

All I wanted to do was put on my pajamas, break open a Dove Bar, and catch up on *Greys Anatomy*. I plugged in the lights to my Christmas tree, smelling the pine needles as they brushed my face.

I plopped down on my couch and Bucket jumped into my lap. I had always been obsessed with English Bulldogs and finally gave in to buying one after my husband died. He was loyal, kind, and very cuddly. I pulled him in close to me and stroked his back while I snatched the remote and located my show.

I grabbed my phone, turning the sound back on. There were a million text messages from Angela. *Erase. Erase. Erase.* Then one from Melanie.

How did the date go, Mom?

She was still hoping some man might catch my eye.

She was getting married in a week and somehow during all her planning she still had time for my love life. She texted

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again.

Don't forget to finish packing, I don't want to miss the plane tomorrow.

I had mostly everything packed. It would not only be my first Christmas away from Arizona but my first time in New York City. I started to text Mellie back when my phone beeped again.

It was Ben.

Did he kiss you? Did you fall in love and run off to Vegas?

No, I did not kiss, fall in love, or go to Vegas.

Oh good cuz I still need you to pick up my tux in the morning.

Oh ha ha thanks for caring.

I do care. Care that my tux is taken care of.

I changed the subject.

Do you want to come over and watch Seinfeld or something? I have extra chocolate, or I'm sure I can muster up the energy to cook you up a cheeseburger or something.

Can't. Heather is here right now.

I always got a little sad when he mentioned Heather. *The other woman* is what I privately referred to her as. Ben's girlfriend of almost seven months. She was sweet and beautiful and very eager to marry.

She is there right now with you and you are texting me? What is wrong with you?

It's fine, I just took a quick break to check on my best friend.

Ok fine, call me tomorrow then.

I liked Heather, but sometimes I wanted Ben all to myself.

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I heard giggling as Mellie and Jared walked through the front door. I smiled thinking about the great man she found to marry. Even though they'd known each other for years, they say they fell in love in New York City. They spent a semester there through a college history course.

"Hi, Mom." Mellie smiled, still holding Jared's hand.

"Hey, Mom; heard your date went well." Jared laughed.

I loved that he called me Mom.

"My Dad wanted me to remind you to get his tux in the morning."

I laughed. "He just texted me about it." I rolled my eyes. "He has Heather over there and he is bossing me around over here."

My encounters with Heather have always been short, so my already anxious self was worried about what a trip will be like with her tagging along.

About the Author

Keri Brooks McWhorter is a sixth generation native of Chandler, Arizona. Her mother fed her love of books, and Keri's been writing all her life, starting with short stories in her childhood. She's a fourth-generation graduate of Chandler High school, and has a Bachelors in Psychology from Arizona State University. She served a mission for the LDS church in New York City, and met her husband while she was there. They have three children, a love of family, and an English Bulldog.

Connect with me online:

Website: www.electric-scroll.com

Email: k-mcwhorter@electric-scroll.com

Facebook: I Swear I'm a Writer

Madlyn's and Ben's families have been close friends since they moved next door to each other. When Madlyn's husband Luke died, she swore she'd keep her marriage vows intact by remaining single for the rest of her life.

She and Ben relied on each other for everything after he joined the widower club.

Now Madlyn's daughter is marrying Ben's son, and everyone's going to New York City for the wedding – including Heather, the woman Ben's been dating.

Will Heather succeed in breaking up Madlyn and Ben's friendship, or will they discover their second love in New York City?

“A VERY sigh worthy novel! I can't remember the last time I was so invested in a character's emotions. It was like falling in love all over again!” - Betsy Love, Author of the StarBride Chronicles

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While serving a mission for the LDS Church, she met her husband in New York City. They have three children, a love of family, and an English Bulldog.

