



CATCHING

Lucas Riley

LAUREN WINDER

FARNSWORTH

A NOVEL FROM THE AUTHOR OF *KEEPING KATE*

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{ Chapter ONE }

"COME ON, GUYS! Hustle! Hustle!" Alex shouted, clapping her hands as she walked along the pool deck. Some of her Cache Valley High varsity swimmers shot her dirty looks as they pushed off from the wall, breathing desperately. She smiled to herself, knowing exactly how they felt. She had started swimming competitively at an early age and continued on through high school and college. Swimming was a difficult, demanding sport, but she loved it. Now, as a coach for the local high school team in Logan, Utah, Alex reveled in the opportunity to experience the fierce competition of the sport, with none of the physical pain.

"Come on, coach," Mark Peters complained from lane three. "We've been doing these sprints for twenty minutes now!"

"For every second you complain, I add one more," Alex warned, pointing threateningly at the set on the whiteboard.

"I'm going, I'm going," Mark said quickly, pulling his goggles over his eyes.

Alex chuckled as she turned and began walking the opposite way down the Cache Valley Recreation Center pool. Suddenly she froze as her eyes fell upon a vision of absolute perfection. Through the glass wall surrounding the pool area, Alex saw him smoothly sliding his card through the swiper, laughing at something the girl behind the front desk was saying. He was beautiful. He was inspiring. And he was oh so unattainable.

His name was Lucas Riley. He was the elders quorum president in Alex's LDS singles ward, so she'd had plenty of opportunities to ogle him. Tall and tanned, with adorable curly brown hair and light-green eyes, he looked like

what a Greek god might aspire to. Though she doubted any of the gods could have actually succeeded.

Lucas was a wide receiver on the Utah State University football team. Recently the team had actually begun making a name for itself, and she liked to attribute all the progress to Lucas's efforts. Granted, he had no idea who she was or even that they sat in the same chapel every Sunday, but she just knew that if she were provided with the right moment, everything would fall into place. They'd be married with three kids in no time.

She watched him walk past the window with a couple of workout buddies from the ward. They headed up the stairs toward the weight room, never noticing her spellbound eyes fixed on them. When the gorgeous man was no longer in sight, she imagined him approaching the bench press. Then, single-handedly lifting the two hundred-pound plates and tossing one on each side of the bar, he would flash his dazzling smile, wink cheekily, and—

“Hey, coach!”

Crap.

She turned quickly, shaking her head in the process.

“Are we done or what?” Mark called. The twenty or so swimmers stared at her with hopeful eyes as she strode toward them across the deck.

“Five hundred cool-down, all of you, and then you can go,” she conceded. Amidst the echoing cheers of her swimmers, she headed for her gym bag, the one that had “Eat My Wake! USU Swimming” stitched along the side. Yanking the strap over her shoulder and heading for the door, she considered staging a cool drive-by of the weight machines upstairs. But at the last minute, she veered left instead of right, moving toward the parking lot shimmering in the early August heat.

“Sunday,” she assured herself. “I’ll catch him on Sunday.”

Never mind that she'd been promising herself that she would “catch him on Sunday” for the past three months. He had to notice her sometime, right?

“I’m telling you, if I see these one more time, you’ll wonder where the rest of your pants went!”

Alex heard the war cry as she entered the apartment she shared with five other girls. She recognized the threat immediately as Kacey’s, and she grinned and rolled her eyes.

“But I like those pants!” Rachel insisted, and Alex heard Jaclyn snicker. She walked into the kitchen in time to see Rachel dive for the ragged army pants, nearly face-planting into the closed pantry door as Kacey pulled them away easily. She held them high above her head, which at five feet and ten inches from the ground, was far above Rachel’s reach.

“Might as well give up now, Rach,” Alex said as she headed for the fridge. “Kacey declared war on those pants a long time ago, and while I admire your spirit in attempting to hang on to them, you probably should have known better.”

“I don’t see why she gets to mandate what I wear,” Rachel grumped from the floor, running her fingers through her short brown hair.

“You should listen to her,” Jaclyn pointed out, looking up from her biology homework. “No one in this apartment has had the kind of success with guys that Kacey has. Besides, she’s only doing it for your own good. Admit it, Rach, the pants are hideous.”

“But they’re comfortable,” Rachel complained as she climbed to her feet. “And it’s not like I’m going to wear them on a date!”

“You’ll never GET a date if you wear them,” Kacey said, pointing at her. “Trust me, you’ll thank me someday.”

Rachel murmured something under her breath, just as the door opened to admit Sage and Meredith, who were coming from class.

The six girls in 26A were a mixed bunch. They ranged from five foot nothing to nearly six feet, had representation from every natural hair color, and included an education major, an engineering major, a theater major, an accounting major, and a pre-med. This was the girls’ second year as roommates. They had been placed together by chance the prior year, and when none of them had managed to snag a husband the year before, they decided to give it another go as a team. They were all progressively a year apart in age. Rachel, at nineteen, was the youngest, followed by Sage, then

Jaclyn, then Meredith, then Kacey, and finally, Alex, coming in at age twenty-four. She was the mother hen of the brood, although there wasn't much about her that resembled a mother. Or a hen.

Alex was tall, slim, and auburn-haired. Of the girls in her apartment, Alex was the only one with a completed degree. She had graduated two years earlier in dietetics and now worked at the local hospital in the maternity wing. Her jobs as swim coach and chronic advice-giver at the hospital had predisposed Alex to be outspoken and brutally honest. Her roommates bore bravely the burden that was Alex's mouth, but she had made herself more than one enemy outside the confines of the apartment over the years.

"Aha! The Return of the Army Pants. The saga lives on!" Sage crowed with her financial accounting textbook held high in the air as she viewed the scene before her. "I swear, this is the roommate sketch that will not die."

"She keeps finding ways to get them past me," Kacey muttered, stuffing the pants into a plastic grocery bag and knotting it tightly.

"Well, when you're three feet tall and fifteen pounds, you can do that." Meredith nodded, flipping her long, black hair behind her. She winked an exotic, almond-shaped eye at Rachel, who smiled faintly.

"So what's for eating?" Sage asked, moving toward the refrigerator. "My cost accounting professor used a wedding cake bakery as an example today, and I've been starving ever since."

"Speaking of weddings . . .," hinted Jaclyn, with a significant look on her attractive, blonde pixie-cut-framed face. "Any glimpses of 'Mr. Untouchable' today, Alex?"

"Always," Alex sighed. "And I always manage to make a complete fool of myself when I see him. Seriously, I stop just short of drooling."

"Well, why stop there?" said Meredith, smiling. "After all, the man is a vision."

"And yet completely blind," Kacey commented bluntly. "After all, you'd have to be to not notice someone the size of Alex mooning over you."

"Excuse me?" Alex sputtered, spraying a mouthful of water over the countertop. "Someone the *size* of me? What am I, a red-haired *hippo*?!"

“Oh, calm down, I was simply referencing your height, you drama queen,” Kacey said, waving a hand at Alex. “After all, at nearly six feet, with your hair and everything, it’s not like you’re not eye-catching.”

“Yes, well, Lucas manages to miss me every time.”

“Come on, Al,” Meredith soothed. “There are plenty of fish in the sea. Why not just find another one? One who is as mesmerized with you as you are with him?”

“I want that fish,” Alex said, with a hint of superiority in her tone. “He’s a great catch. And I’m not such a bad fish myself. We could make beautiful, fishy music together.”

Jaclyn snorted into her biology book but didn’t look up.

“Fish sounds good . . . ,” Sage commented as she rummaged through the fridge. “Do we have any of that salmon left?”

“This is painful,” Meredith whispered to Alex as they sat in sacrament meeting the following Sunday. “Sometimes I think that skipping fast Sunday testimony meeting would be an effective plan for lowering my blood pressure. I should suggest it to my doctor as formal treatment plan.”

Alex snorted. “Right. High blood pressure, you? I don’t believe it.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be high if I didn’t come to this meeting every month. I mean, I spend the entire hour cringing in sympathy or borrowed embarrassment.”

“You’re too kind,” Alex said, smirking. “You should just learn to mock like the rest of us.”

“Rude,” Meredith whispered back.

“Shhhh!” Rachel glared with severity as she hissed down the bench at them. “The bishop is watching you!”

Alex glanced up at the stand, noticing Bishop King frowning at her. Whoops. She folded her hands in her lap and looked around, trying to ignore the crying brunette at the microphone. Meredith was right; this really was painful.

It wasn’t that she didn’t appreciate testimony meeting for what its purpose was supposed to be, but the problem was that too many singles

ward testimonies turned into storytelling sessions or academy award speeches. This one was worse than most.

Alex allowed her eyes to wander around the chapel, searching for the curly head she thought she'd seen slip in just after the opening prayer. Finally, she found it, two rows up and to the left. Alex was thrilled to see that Lucas was not sitting with any girls today. In fact, he had sat next to Calvin Jones, a special needs young man who often sat alone. Alex felt her heart constrict. How could anyone not fall for Lucas Riley?

It took her several minutes to realize she was staring, very obviously and shamelessly, with a sappy look on her face. Looking around quickly to see if anyone had noticed, she glanced quickly up at the stand. Her eyes met the piercing blue gaze of Sealey Witchburn, the ward executive secretary. Meeting the eyes of the ward executive secretary was never a good idea, unless you were dying to be next Sunday's sacrament meeting fodder, but in Sealey's case, it was suicide.

Sealey was tall, blond, and extremely good looking, but no one ever noticed that part once they actually met him. The guy was the epitome of intimidating. He saw everything—noticed everything. He had his well-shaped finger placed directly on the pulse of the ward, and he was not afraid to use his mysteriously acquired knowledge for his own sadistic purposes.

Alex looked away quickly, afraid he would divine from her gaze all her deepest, darkest thoughts and wishes with regard to Lucas Riley. Few people knew Lucas as well as Sealey did—they were best friends and roommates, attended all the same ward council meetings, and even worked for the same company. She couldn't afford Sealey letting Lucas in on her secret. But she felt her heart sinking.

She knew she had been careless, staring so fixedly at her heart's desire—Sealey's knowing smirk had been enough to convince her of that. She should have been more aware of who was watching her. There was not a chance in the world that Sealey didn't now suspect how she felt about Lucas. What would stop him from revealing the secret? What would he demand of her as his price for keeping quiet? She shivered from the sixth row of the chapel, knowing that in order to preemptively save her dreams of

one day catching Lucas Riley's eye, she would have to confront Sealey Witchburn.

* * * * *

"All right, what do you want?" Alex asked straightforwardly to Sealey's back after the meeting had ended.

"Why, Sister Foamer," Sealey said in his silky smooth voice as he turned to face her. "What an honor to be willingly approached by such . . . ah, grace." He eyed her thunderous expression with amusement. "And how are we this fine Sunday?"

"Stop messing with me, Witchburn," Alex retorted. "Just tell me what you want."

"Whatever do you mean?" He looked at her, wide-eyed and innocent, but his mouth curved into a wolfish smile.

"I mean it. I'm not in the mood. I don't want this splashed all over the ward, so either tell me what I have to do, or just swear right now to keep your mouth shut."

"Well, it's not like you're working all that hard to hide it," he pointed out, dropping his façade. "I wouldn't be surprised if everyone knew already."

"I'll take my chances," Alex said, sneering.

"Why are you so afraid of getting it out there, anyway?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "He might actually stare back at you if he knew you liked him."

"I want to do it my way," she insisted. "I don't want to get all high school about this."

"Well, then," Sealey said, his manner suddenly almost businesslike. "In that case, I can help you."

"You can—what?" Alex said, thrown off by his change in tone.

"If you're wanting to be adult about your advance, then let me help you. Where are you going to find someone who knows him better than I do?"

He's got a point, Alex thought, but she stared distrustfully up at Sealey. "Why would you volunteer to help me? What's in it for you?"

“Just happy to see another young couple in the ward blissfully wed,” Sealey responded angelically.

“Yeah, right.” Alex rolled her eyes. “What is it really? Why are you willing to help me get Lucas’s attention?”

“That’s my business,” Sealey said straightforwardly. “Just be grateful I’m in this giving mood today. Normally I might just have thrown you to the wolves. Otherwise known as apartment 34B.”

Alex shuddered, thinking of the apartment of six girls who lived in her complex. They functioned as the ward information superhighway. Whether the information was verifiable or not was entirely another matter, and one they didn’t concern themselves with.

“So let me get this straight,” Alex said, narrowing her eyes up at Sealey. “You are going to help me get into Lucas’s line of sight, and I don’t have to do anything or say anything or give you anything in return?” Her tone plainly showcased her disbelief.

“I didn’t say that,” Sealey said. Alex grimaced and nodded her expectance of such a response. “As payment for my services, you have to do *everything* I say within the confines of our mission. I require your absolute and total trust. You tend to be a bit of an argumentative snot, Foamer, and to argue is to waste time and energy.”

Alex opened her mouth to retort, but Sealey held up a hand. “Trust me, if you want Lucas to notice you, you need my help. You’re better off just agreeing to my terms.”

Alex closed her mouth, deflating. He was right. She knew that without his assistance, Lucas would be married to a perky little cheerleader before she had the chance to distract him.

“All right,” Alex agreed, hesitantly. “But so help me, Witchburn, if you humiliate me or make me do something undignified, simply for your own enjoyment, I will make you very sorry.”

“Well, you’ll try, anyway,” Sealey replied, supremely unconcerned. He turned and began walking toward the bishop’s office. “Meet me in the gym after the mingle,” he instructed over his shoulder. “Bring your game face, Foamer. We’re heading into battle.”

Alex watched him go, her stomach clenching queasily. What had she gotten herself into?

{ Chapter TWO }

"WHAT HAVE YOU gotten yourself into?" Meredith cried, her hands to her face. It was ten minutes later, and Alex sat in Sunday School with her roommates, waiting for class to start. "What were you thinking, going to *Sealey Witchburn* for help?"

"I didn't go to Sealey Witchburn for help!" defended Alex. "I went to Sealey Witchburn to prevent the entire ward learning my secret, and he *offered* to help. I accepted. There's a difference."

"But he's . . . he's . . . *evil*," Meredith whispered dramatically. "Didn't you hear what happened to Skye Matheson when she publicly called him out for refusing to support last year's stake date auction?"

"I know, but—" Alex started, but Jaclyn interrupted her.

"I didn't. What happened?" She chomped her gum in excited expectation.

"It *somehow* got around that she had once been engaged to that guy who got arrested last winter for chucking rocks at cars along Highway 89. Remember all those accidents? It was even suggested that he went all nutso because she had broken up with him. She ended up transferring to *Dixie State*," Meredith finished affectedly as though Dixie State College were where rumor legends went to die.

"Seriously? Skye was engaged to that homeless dude?" Jaclyn stage whispered as the Sunday School teacher got to his feet and cleared his throat loudly. "I didn't know that. Well, dang, I'd move too if something like that got around."

“You don’t know for sure that Sealey said anything,” Alex defended, somewhat weakly.

“But, Alex, really, who else would have known something like that?” Sage asked incredulously, ignoring the teacher as he glared openly at them. “He knows everything about everybody. It’s downright *creepy*. And you’re playing right into his hands!”

“Oh, relax,” Kacey interrupted. “I think she was smart to go to Sealey. He’s one of Lucas’s best friends. Add that to the fact that he probably knows all of Lucas’s darkest secrets, and Alex has got a valuable weapon in her hands.”

“Right, like Sealey’s going to turn on his best friend, just to help Alex.” Jaclyn rolled her eyes. “If anything, he’s going to turn on Alex and make her look like an idiot in front of Lucas, just for the entertainment value.”

“Are you guys going to listen to anything today?” Rachel glared at each one in turn. “Why come to church if you’re going to spend the whole time ignoring the stuff that actually matters?”

They all shut their mouths guiltily, recognizing Rachel’s point as their collective conscience.

With the conversation finally halted, Alex ruminated on what she had done. How could she trust Sealey Witchburn? It was well known how dangerous he could be. Man alive, even his *name* sounded evil. Maybe she should just back out. Would he allow her to? What if he turned on her for attempting to break a deal with him? Oh, why couldn’t she just have fallen for a guy who knew she existed?

* * * * *

Alex stood in the center of the church gym, scuffing the floor with her heel as she nervously waited for Sealey to show up. A thousand scenarios had run through her head in the past couple of hours, each one more unlikely than the last. By the time Sealey strolled through the door, she was ready to grab him by the collar and shout, “Let me out! Let me out, I beg you! I shouldn’t have done it, I know, but I beg of you to *be merciful and free me!*” But one look at his face assured her she would never be successful. Sealey’s expression was one of fixed determination.

“You ready for this, Foamer?” Sealey asked, his ice-blue eyes focused on her face. “You look queasy already, and I’m not a big fan of vomit on my shoes. I told you to bring your game.”

“What does that even mean, anyway?” Alex asked, taking deep breaths and molding her face into nonchalance.

“It means that from now on, the only expression you’re allowed to have on your face is one of complete confidence,” Sealey answered. “No weakness allowed. Well, not unless I tell you that you can be weak. Some weakness is charming. Men typically don’t want an Amazon.”

“Was that a stab at my height?” she demanded, glaring at him.

“I seem to have touched a nerve,” Sealey smirked. “Well, no need to burst a blood vessel. It was just an expression. All right . . . now where to start?”

“You’re the expert; you tell me,” Alex sighed.

“Well . . . typically the first step would be a full-scale, professional-grade makeover, but—and don’t take this for more than it is—you’re actually already pretty easy on the eyes, Foamer.” His tone seemed to invite Alex to thank him for his observations.

She responded by raising an eyebrow scornfully.

Sealey ignored her and began circling her slowly, studying her from head to toe. “Yes, indeed,” he muttered, his tone difficult to read. “Plenty of usable material here.”

“When you’ve finished checking me out,” Alex said sharply. “Could we maybe move on to something relevant? Like how I’m going to get Lucas to introduce himself to me?”

“If you don’t think how you look is relevant to getting a guy to notice you, we’ve got bigger problems,” Sealey responded, fixing his eyes studiously on her legs, a contemplative expression on his face.

“Right, well, I want him to more than just look at me,” Alex demanded. “I want him to willingly talk to me.”

“Oh, well, that’s easy,” Sealey said, finally focusing on her face. “We’re going to force him to talk to you.”

“Pardon?”

“We are going to manipulate the situation to where he has no choice but to talk to you,” Sealey repeated. “Trust me, it’s very simple.”

“Okay . . . how?”

“The annual stake date auction,” Sealey said, his eyebrows lowered, his voice ominous.

“The date auction?” Alex said in surprise. “But you hate the date auction!”

“As does every other individual with a certain level of respect for social and intellectual progress,” Sealey replied. “Including Lucas Riley. But he’s forced to participate as the elders quorum president. So . . . we make our move.”

“I’m sorry . . . I don’t get it,” Alex complained. “How does the stake date auction help me? What are the chances that if I bid on a date with Lucas, I’ll actually win it? Every girl in this stake wants to date him!”

“This is why you’re so lucky you have me in your corner,” Sealey replied, shrugging his shoulders. “I have far more influence than you give me credit for.”

“So what do I need to do?” Alex asked hesitantly.

“Show up at the auction next week with five bucks in your pocket,” Sealey said, heading for the door.

“Wait, that’s it?” Alex cried desperately. “That won’t be nearly enough for the highest bid!”

“What was my price for this venture?” Sealey thundered, his voice echoing throughout the cultural hall. “Total and absolute trust, Foamer! Date auction with five bucks!”

And he was gone.

* * * * *

“Will someone please explain to me what we’re doing here?” Jaclyn complained as the six girls walked into the stake center cultural hall. Chairs were evenly spaced, all facing the stage at the far end of the room. “If I really wanted to find someone to date, I would not spend two hours looking for an opportunity to pay money to locate them.”

"I admit, the concept is flawed," Alex said distractedly, looking around. No Sealey yet. No Lucas either. *So help me, if Sealey doesn't show up and leaves me to do this on my own . . .* Alex muttered in her head.

"The auction's for charity!" Rachel exclaimed, as if that explained everything.

"Jaclyn, you had every opportunity to be on the receiving end of the deal," Sage pointed out, ignoring Rachel. "All you had to do was enter yourself as a potential date. Then you wouldn't have had to pay anything."

"And have no say over who I spend an evening with? No thanks," Jaclyn said, looking at Sage incredulously. "Really, the only reason I'm here is to see what happens with Alex and Lucas. I'm morbidly curious."

"Aren't we all?" Alex muttered under her breath. She relaxed slightly as she saw Sealey enter the room. "Excuse me, girls," she said, pushing past them. "My, uh, consultant has arrived." She could feel five pairs of eyes following her as she approached Sealey Witchburn.

"So what's the plan?" she asked breathlessly. "What do I do?"

"Well, hello to you too," he said, with an eyebrow raised.

"I don't have the energy for niceties," Alex claimed, and her voice betrayed her panic. "What am I doing here?"

"You're going to bid," Sealey said simply, shrugging. "That's it."

"I'm going to bid?" Alex repeated, her voice nearly a screech. "That's your brilliant plan?!"

"Calm down, Foamer," Sealey hissed, looking around. "It's not that difficult, right? Raise your hand and bid five dollars. That's it. I've taken care of the rest."

For some reason that last statement made her more uncomfortable than ever. "What do you mean you've taken care of the rest?" she demanded. "What did you do?"

"Never you mind," Sealey said, moving past her. "Just do as I say. Do otherwise, and you're in breach of contract." He winked impertinently at her and walked away.

She rejoined her roommates, her expression indicating the dread she felt.

"Well? What did he say?" Kacey demanded. "What's the plan?"

“He just told me to bid,” Alex said, hopelessly. “He said he took care of the rest, but I have no idea what that means.”

“You know what I don’t get?” said Meredith, running her fingers through her long hair and examining the ends. “Why doesn’t he just introduce you to Lucas himself? I mean, they’re best friends, aren’t they? It’s not like it would be hard to finagle a simple introduction.”

“Oh, come on,” Kacey said, rolling her eyes. “Isn’t it obvious? He’s trying to make sure Alex makes a lasting impression! Just being introduced probably wouldn’t do it. He wants to make sure Lucas *remembers* Alex.”

Alex stared in horror at Kacey. What exactly had Sealey arranged that would ensure that Lucas remembered her? Was she about to be publicly humiliated and she didn’t realize it? She trembled more than ever, trying to find the resolve she usually had by default.

“Welcome to stake FHE, everyone!” exclaimed a cute blonde from the stage. “Tonight, we’re raising money for charity by auctioning off dates with some of our stake’s most eligible bachelors and bachelorettes!” She flashed a white, toothy grin around at the room at large.

“Here’s the deal. As soon as you see the man or woman of your dreams onstage, that’s your cue to start bidding. There is no limit, but remember, you can only bid cash or canned goods. No IOUs will be accepted. Now let’s get started!”

Cheesy game show music played over the sound system, and Bishop King, wearing a loud, checkered blazer, took the microphone.

“Brothers and sisters, welcome!” he said cheerily. “Tonight’s main purpose is to support those members of our community who may be less fortunate, followed closely by our motivation to get as many of you married as possible.” He grinned as a collective, good-natured groan echoed throughout the gym. “I am confident that at least one of you will find your eternal companion tonight,” the bishop continued, smiling optimistically down at them. “So for that reason, don’t hesitate to empty your pockets in the attempt. Now, for our first date auction participant!”

Alex watched numbly as various individuals strutted across the stage with their best catwalks, most of them dissolving into laughter in the process. The bidding was fierce, but friendly, and each participant was quickly

claimed. Alex felt her heartbeat go into overdrive as Lucas Riley finally walked across the stage. He sauntered, cool and unconcerned, to the chair in the middle of the stage, smiling calmly at the breathless audience.

“And your name is?” Bishop King asked needlessly.

“Lucas Riley,” Lucas answered smoothly into the microphone. He looked supremely unruffled, and Alex didn’t doubt he was. After all, what did he have to worry about? He was the most eligible bachelor in the stake.

“All right, let’s start the bidding at ten dollars!” Bishop King boomed into his microphone. Alex froze in horror. He had started the bidding at two dollars for every other participant! Why was he getting exorbitant *now*? He must be trying to milk the “golden boy” potential for all it was worth.

Alex looked around in panic. Sealey had told her to bring five dollars and no more! The bidding was starting at twice what she had! She looked around frantically for Sealey, needing his instruction. But something stopped her panicked search.

The room was dead silent. Nobody was bidding. Her eyes swept the gym, looking for the untold number of females that were sure to want to date Lucas Riley for so small a sum as ten dollars. Nobody moved. Alex noticed several girls moving uncomfortably in their chairs and looking around furtively. What was going on?

“Okay, fine,” Bishop King said crossly. “We’ll start at seven dollars.”

Silence. Alex’s roommates looked at each other in shock. This was unprecedented! Never in Stake Date Auction history had the starting bid amount been reduced for a date entry! Bids typically came in fast and furious, even for the less-desirable options.

“Seriously, ladies?” The bishop looked incredulous now. Alex glanced up at Lucas, noticing how red his face looked. In fact, he looked downright mortified. She had never seen him so off-center. Her heart ached for him. She looked around again for Sealey, finally spotting him leaning against the far wall, a crooked smile on his face. He was enjoying this! He caught her eye and, noticing her panicked expression, shook his head.

Not yet, he mouthed at her. Her eyes shot back to Lucas, his face almost purple with humiliation now.

“All right, starting the bidding at five dollars, then!” Bishop King said, the disbelief clearly ringing in his voice. “Five dollars is a *steal*, girls, for this young man! You couldn’t find better than Lucas Riley. He’s the catch of all catches! I promise you . . .” At each attempt at persuasion, Lucas looked like he wished he could burrow further and further into the ground.

Finally, Alex couldn’t take it anymore.

“Five dollars!” she cried.

“Five dollars!” Bishop King called in relief. “Five dollars going once, five dollars going twice, *dated* for five dollars!” The last part was spoken so fast that it took Alex several seconds to process it.

As the realization dawned, Alex registered that nearly every female eye in the room was fixed on her. Some of them were smirking, but many of them looked truly concerned. Alex was sure this was a result of whatever Sealey had done to keep the female population at large from bidding on Lucas Riley, so she wasn’t terribly alarmed. She’d find out sooner or later which taboo rule she had broken.

Finally, her eyes met those of her prize. For the first time in living memory, Lucas Riley’s green eyes met Alex Foamer’s brown ones, and he smiled in willful acknowledgement.

Sealey Witchburn was a wizard.

“I don’t believe it!” crowed Sage, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel as she drove. “I can’t believe it worked! What Sealey Witchburn must have done to keep an entire stake of girls silent when presented with a specimen like Lucas Riley, I have no idea, but it must have been a doozy!”

“He told the girls in 34B that Lucas had a psychotic redhead stalking him and she would go ballistic on any girl who bid on him at the date auction,” Kacey replied, flipping through an institute brochure in the front seat. “I heard one of them talking about it after the closing prayer. Obviously, with their skills, a tidbit like that spread throughout the stake inside of a week.”

“So now everyone’s going to think that Alex is the psychotic stalker!” Rachel exclaimed, looking sympathetically over at her.

“Or that she was the one person brave enough to stand up to the psychotic stalker,” Meredith pointed out, resting a reassuring hand on Alex’s arm. “And maybe they’ll just think it’s a coincidence that they both have red hair.”

Alex was barely listening. She stared out the window, reeling over the idea that she was secured at least one date with Lucas Riley. She had never actually believed she would get this far. One date was really all she needed to get her foot in the door. It took her several moments before she realized her phone was vibrating in her hand.

“Hello?” she said vacantly, not bothering to check the number.

“Hi, Alex?”

She knew the voice immediately, but she was totally unprepared for it. She felt her blood instantly carbonate as her hand tightened convulsively on the phone.

She nodded stupidly for a moment, before remembering he couldn’t see her. “Yes?” she finally squeaked, trying not to hyperventilate. Her roommates’ eyes were fixed on her.

Somehow, in all her fantasies of dating Lucas Riley and kissing Lucas Riley and marrying Lucas Riley, she had never imagined herself *talking to* Lucas Riley. Her mind was a fury of white-hot panic.

“This is Lucas Riley,” he said. “My friend Sealey told me your name and gave me your number. I just wanted to thank you for bailing me out back there. I really appreciate the save.”

She blinked frantically out the window, her phone clutched in her hand, willing her mouth to move and coherency to issue from it. “No problem,” she finally peeped. She took a deep breath, remembering Sealey’s demand that she be the picture of confidence at all times. “I live to save. I mean, serve. I mean—”

She heard her roommates snickering around her and she longed to kick each one of them, in turn, squarely in the shins. She could practically hear the smile in Lucas’s voice when he responded.

“Well, in return for the rescue, I insist you let me take you out, instead of vice versa. It’s the least I can do.”

“Well, if you insist,” Alex agreed, much too quickly. She could almost hear the imagined smack of Sealey’s hand hitting his forehead at her eager response. *Play it cool, play it cool*, she lectured herself. “I mean, if that’s what you want, who am I to complain?” Alex corrected, molding her voice into as much honey as she could muster.

“Great!” Lucas replied, his voice enthusiastic. “When are you available? A girl like you probably has all kinds of guys after her, so I’m happy to wait my turn.”

Alex attempted to process this comment. Was that an effort to flatter her, or an effort to push off the date as long as possible? Oh, men were infuriating! Forcing her pulse to slow, she endeavored to think like Sealey. *Don’t be too available . . . he won’t want something no one else wants. Make him think that you are in high demand . . .*

“Well, I am booked this weekend and next,” she lied easily. “But I could probably swing something the week after that. What about you?”

“Three weeks from now it is, then,” he replied, and she could see him flashing his gleaming white teeth in her mind’s eye. “How about that Friday night?”

“Perfect. I’ll pencil you in,” Alex said, finally getting the hang of the silky smooth tones.

“Sounds like a date to me,” Lucas said. “I’ll see you then. Have a great night, Alex.” He hung up.

Alex sat motionless in her seat, the phone cradled in both hands, the trauma of the moment finally settling around her. Her roommates gazed at her silently, looks ranging from fear to scorn to amusement on their faces.

Kacey opened her mouth, her head craned around to stare into the backseat, but Alex held up a hand. “Don’t ask,” she said. “I am in no fit state to discuss it at this moment.”

Kacey rolled her eyes and shrugged. Alex jumped a mile when her phone began to vibrate again in her hands. “Oh no! It’s him again!” she exclaimed when she saw an unfamiliar number flash on the screen. “I’ve already exhausted my stores of conversation for the evening! Somebody else answer it!”

“Oh, for crying out loud,” said Kacey, reaching around and grabbing the phone from Alex’s hand.

“Hello?” she said boldly into the phone. She listened for a second and then pushed the phone at Alex again. “It’s not Lucas.”

“Oh,” said Alex, sighing in relief. “Who is it?”

“It’s Sealey,” Kacey replied, a smirk on her face.

Alex doubted that was any better than the original assumption, but the difference was, she had *plenty* to say to Sealey.

“Well, hello, you dirty, rotten—” she started to say.

“Not bad, Foamer,” he rode right over her insults. “Rough start, but by the end you had him eating out of your hand.”

“How on earth do *you* know how the conversation went?” she demanded.

“Luke made the call on speaker from the car, and I was with him,” Sealey said matter-of-factly. “How else would I know?”

“How do I know how you discover your diabolical secrets?” Alex retorted. Now that the date auction ordeal was over, she felt the irritation at the level of helplessness she’d endured all evening and had every intention of expressing it. “All I know is, you didn’t bother to actually prepare me for exactly what I was going to be doing tonight, did you?”

“I told you to bid. All you did was bid,” Sealey pointed out.

“Yes, after spending a full thirty seconds in cardiac arrest!” Alex screeched. Rachel put her hands over her ears and Jaclyn winced irritably at her.

“I couldn’t give you all the details beforehand,” Sealey said calmly. “If I did, the whole thing would’ve looked too scripted and Lucas would be onto us. You’re not *trusting* me, Foamer. And I did get results, did I not?”

“Yeah,” Alex muttered.

“Then stop your yammering and just be grateful. Now, I’ll be over at your house after work tomorrow to work out our next steps.”

“The date’s not for three weeks!” Alex exclaimed, her eye twitching at the thought of Sealey in her apartment. “What could we possibly have to discuss?”

“You really don’t want any contact with Lucas until your date? You really think that’s the best plan of action?”

“But—”

“Foamer, if you want this thing to go anywhere, he has to already be interested in you by the time you go out,” Sealey said, his voice clearly exasperated.

“Why?” she almost wailed.

Sealey groaned, and she imagined him holding his head in his hands. “Because,” he finally responded, his voice fatigued. “The only reason he asked you out is because he felt obligated. However, in a perfect world, he would have asked you out because he was actually interested in you. Therefore, in order for this date to start out on the right foot, he has to be interested in you before it starts. Otherwise, you’ll be spending the entire date trying to get him interested, and believe me, two hours will not accomplish a task that daunting.”

Alex glared silently out the window at the passing scenery.

“*Capisci?*” Sealey prompted. “I’ll be over at your place by 5:30 p.m.”

“I have swim practice till six,” Alex informed him. “Come over at seven.”

“Fine,” Sealey agreed. “See you then.”

He hung up abruptly, and Alex’s phone fell into her lap. On one hand, Sealey had already proven his usefulness and his expertise. But on the other, she had never met anyone whose company was so fraught with conflicting emotion. Being near Sealey Witchburn was frankly exhausting, but he’d gotten her this far. She trusted him enough to actually admit that she needed him now.

Sighing, she allowed her head to rest against the cool window, even as the car pulled up to the apartment building and her roommates began exiting the vehicle. She prayed the anxiety was worth it.

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