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IT'S A LOVE STORY

ANNABEL MONAGHAN



An Aria Book

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For my beautiful friend Tiffany O'Toole,
now my lucky star

CHAPTER 1

FAKE IT TILL YOU MAKE IT IS A PHILOSOPHY THAT serves in literally every aspect of life. Slap a smile on your face and your brain will eventually think you're happy. That's not just me talking; it's science. Walk around in those Nikes until you feel like going for a run. Dress for the job you want. I was an actress for a big chunk of my adolescence, so you could say I am an expert in harnessing the power of imagination to get yourself where you want to be.

This morning I am also harnessing the power of my flat iron, a newly sharpened brow pencil, and a strawberry Pop-Tart. I need to show up for work looking like a winner, so I've been standing in front of my closet for ten minutes, re-ironing my hair and hoping the right outfit will reveal itself to me. I have a meeting with my boss to talk about next steps for my new project. If it's green-lit, *True Story* will be the first script I've brought to the studio that will actually be made into a movie. If it's made, it will make me. Today I need an outfit that whispers success really loudly. I

don't miss much about being on TV, but on mornings like this I do miss the costume department. I want someone to tell me what scene I'll be walking through today and exactly how I should look.

I sort through my work clothes, blouses and skirts in shades of blue and gray. They're freshly pressed and definitely make me seem competent but make me look more like a flight attendant than an airline CEO. Next to them is my dating wardrobe, which I've chosen with more care than any costume department ever did. My first-date dress is green and white pin-striped and hits right below my knees. It's a dress you can't argue with. It's dignified and says I'm feminine but not trying too hard to be sexy. It says I'm a person you might consider kissing and then later introducing to your grandmother. When my future partner and I tell our kids about our first date, that's how I want him to describe me: kissable and Grandma-worthy. Think Reese Witherspoon in basically any movie.

The rest of the dresses also each have a specific purpose. Second date—show a little more skin. Third date—invite a kiss. And the all-important fourth date—Enter an Actual Relationship. I finish my Pop-Tart, wipe my hands on my pajamas, and pull out the fourth-date dress. It is, in a word, sensational. It's red and silk, not entirely appropriate for August in Los Angeles, but it's a deal-closer. The tags still dangle down the back because I haven't actually had a fourth date since I got serious about my Manifest a Solid Partner project last year. I bought it because I hoped it would bring new energy to the consistently disastrous fourth date. Some-

times it's the guy who blows it—he's rude to the waiter or admits to owning an accordion. Any mention of NASCAR and I'm out. More often than not, it's me. I get comfortable, I forget to be Reese Witherspoon, and he sees me for the B-teamer that I am. By the fourth date, I get impatient to just make it a thing already. I talk too much or too fast. A few times I've suggested plans way too far in the future, as in "My boss is getting married next spring, you should come!"

Oof!

I hold up the red dress and look in the mirror. *Yes*, I think. This is the kind of energy I want to bring to my meeting this morning. Today I'm going on a fourth date with my career. I love this thought so much that I take the dress off its hanger and rip off the tags. "Showtime," I say to my reflection.

I've been trying to get a script green-lit ever since I was promoted to creative executive two years ago. The scripts I've brought in have been low-stakes romantic comedies that I thought were pretty good, but none of them compare to *True Story*. This script is a total game changer. There's a tenderness to the writing and a truth to the humor that has its hooks in me. I even dreamed about it this morning, and I woke up laughing, chest vibrating from the force of it, tears in my eyes. I do that sometimes, laugh in my sleep. I don't know how I'll explain this to a partner if I find one.

I tie my sash in a careful square knot and take a second Pop-Tart and a mug of coffee onto the front porch just as the sky starts to brighten on Montana Avenue. Being a funny kid on TV got me the down payment on this little Spanish

house. It has a big porch and a tile roof and a rounded front door painted a deep French blue. I am training bougainvillea to crawl up the porch and along the roofline. Bougainvillea feels like a kindergarten art project, little petals made out of fine pink paper that blow in the wind but are, oddly, fine in the rain.

I'm two miles from the beach, but if *Pop Rocks* had been picked up for more seasons or had been syndicated, I'd be down on Pacific Coast Highway listening to the waves with the cast of *Friends*. It's fine. Four years of my adolescence as barbecue-sauce-in-her-braces Janey Jakes was plenty. The thing I've learned about funny is that it can be a little reckless. To be laughing is to be a little out of control. And certainly, when trying to Manifest a Solid Partner, it is imperative that you keep funny in check. *You're funny, I'd like to procreate with you,* said exactly no man ever.

That's also science.

The teakettle whistles, and a minute later Clem joins me outside. "Wait. Fourth date?" she asks as she sits next to me on the porch swing.

"Well, sort of," I say and smooth the hem of my dress over my knees.

"There's no way you broke out the sacred dress if you're not a hundred percent sure there's a date. Who is it? I don't remember the third date." Clem raises her dark eyes to me. They're kind and tired. She moved in with me last year after the World's Shittiest Divorce. Of course I'm sorry about her terrible financial situation, but coming home to a house where another person lives has been the best change of my

thirties. Clem was a godsend of a college roommate and is now a full-time geriatric nurse and a part-time bartender. She makes a living tending to human frailty.

"The date's not a who," I say. "It's a script. I've decided that today I'm having a fourth date with my career."

"Oh God, Jane. This sounds like YouTube self-help."

"No, this is coming from me. I have a meeting with Nathan this morning, and I am a hundred percent sure this script is the one that's finally going to get made. I can feel it." I don't say what I've been thinking: that this script is like an Aquarius or the number eight, just exactly right. I don't say that the universe has sent it to me to save me from the rumored round of fall layoffs. Which it totally has. I've lived in Los Angeles my whole life, and I know enough to know when I sound like it.

"And it's worthy of that dress? Wow. I hope you two will be very happy." She gives me a sideways smile and sips her tea.

"I swear I have a crush on this script," I say. "Like I might be madly in love with it." My voice cracks a tiny bit when I say this. I don't know what my problem is. There is something about this script that scares me a little. Just the heart of it. It's like I've swallowed the world's tiniest crowbar, and it's floating around inside me prying my closed bits open. To be clear, I don't actually believe in true love. I'm a grown-up. But if this script can affect me this way, then normal people are going to lose their minds.

"Is this the one where he puts his hand on his heart at the end?"

"Yes," I say. "And then she knows." I have my hand on my heart as I say it, and I swear I feel something move. "You'll see. This movie is going to make me legit."

I PULL OUT of my driveway, turn on the radio, and it's Jack Quinlan playing his number four single, "By My Side." I change the station, and it's Jack Quinlan playing his number two single, "Purple." I switch to a reliably country station and, you guessed it, Jack Quinlan. I turn off the radio. I knew Jack when we were teenagers. The whole thing was embarrassing. This wouldn't be such a big deal if we weren't two people who started our careers in the same spot and only one of us is a recently minted megastar. The other one, incidentally, is me. I have it in my head that by my age I should be doing whatever my forever is going to be. Making big career strides with a partner by my side. I should have a pet. I thought by now I'd know Spielberg and how to use my oven.

I arrive at the office before nine o'clock. The lobby is nearly empty, and I have the sense that this place is entirely mine. Pantheon Television, where I spent my adolescence on camera accidentally sitting on nachos, is a half mile away, but inside this building, I'm an executive, calling the shots. I am not told where to stand or how to act. I am a decision-maker. I check the integrity of the square knot on my dress and then say it out loud: "Decision-maker."

The elevator doors open, and no. No, no, not today. Not when I'm about to turn literally every single thing around.

"Good morning, Jane," he says.

"Don't jinx me. Just press twelve. No, I'll do it. Don't touch anything." I am supremely agitated. It's stupid Dan Finnegan, with his mop of black hair, presumably coming up from the underground parking where he's crushed his clove cigarette next to his unicycle. Of course it's freakin' Dan Finnegan. I have no proof that he travels by unicycle, but he's the kind of above-it-all, know-it-all jerk who probably pays up for cruelty-free cashew butter and then blogs about it. I've seen him around the studio, of course, since he called my last project "trash" and set in motion the events that would have it murdered, dead on the floor. He thinks I'm a little unhinged, so he puts his hands up when he sees me, in mock fear of an outburst. Oh, it's hilarious all right.

"I know not to make any sudden moves," he says, eyes straight ahead.

"Good one," I say.

"You're here early," he says. He's wearing khaki pants and a white shirt, untucked. Untucked and unbrushed are worse than unhinged, if you ask me.

"Yes, big day," I say and gesture to my dress. I don't know why I've done this. This small gesture with my hand has opened up the door for me to tell him that I have a new script. I don't want Dan anywhere near it, but I also want to rub it in his face. "I have a new project."

"Another think piece?" I refuse to look his way, but I can feel a little smile off of him.

Now I'm rolling my eyes. "It's going to be the film of the year."

"I'm sure." The elevator stops on the twelfth floor, and he steps forward and holds the door open for me. His navy blue eyes are disarming every time. All of his features are, as if a sixteenth-century sculptor with a too-sharp chisel arranged them on his face. But it's the eyes, wide under his black brows, that have the intensity to match his arrogance. "No one wants to watch two people who they don't care about fall in love for absolutely no reason."

He's just so superior with his omniscience about what everyone wants and doesn't want. He was so casual about crushing my first real project like it was a gas station receipt. So I step out of the elevator, turn back to him, and spill it. "It's funny and offbeat, with oddball characters. But more than that." I don't know why I'm selling this to him.

The elevator door starts to close and he stops it with his sneaker. "Wait. *True Story?*"

"No," I say. If you could throw a word at a person, I would have shot-putted this one at his chest.

"No, it's not *True Story?*"

"No. I mean yes. But not you." My hands ball up, all on their own accord, as Dan steps off the elevator and lets the doors close behind him.

"Yes, me," he says. "Jane, I'm meeting with Nathan about this at nine. He wants me as cinematographer, and I need it."

"You need it," I say, my voice has gone jagged. "This is about you now? Just trying to get all the facts straight."

"We both probably need it. But I don't hate this script. In fact, I can see it, in my mind, exactly how it should be."

The movie I've been imagining as I fall asleep is the same one he's been imagining, but probably with weird lighting and subtitles and whatever arty stuff wins awards and sells absolutely no tickets. He presses the button and the doors open. "If you can just act like a normal person, we can make this movie."

I am a normal person. In fact, I'm so normal that I don't scream those words at him. There's nothing that makes a person act more insane than trying to prove how sane they actually are. I have a little sweat beading up on my chest now and I really need to calm down. "This cannot be happening," I say as the elevator doors close between us.