LOVE AT FIRST SIGHTING

ALSO BY MALLORY MARLOWE

Love and Other Conspiracies

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHTING

MALLORY MARLOWE



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For Maria, Laura, and Nicole.
This book would not exist if you hadn't convinced me to try something that scared me and reassured me that I could take on something this ambitious. I'm a better writer and person every day because of your support and friendship.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Love at First Sighting is first and foremost a romantic comedy, but it also contains a high-stakes mystery with action/adventure elements including the past deaths of parents (off-page), grief, guns/gun violence, car accidents (mentioned), a car chase, hand-to-hand/fistfighting violence, sex, drinking, smoking, and adult language. If you are sensitive to any of these, please read with care.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHTING

CHAPTER 1

Once you put something on the internet, you can never take it back.

Which is why I think extremely hard about how I'm going to push this sponsorship.

I prop my tripod on a flat patch of ground and take a few establishing shots to guarantee the best-lit angles, especially the ones that'll hide the boob sweat currently dripping down the center of my chest. For an athleisure company that boasts extreme moisture-wicking fabric, it's leaving me extremely moist.

The sun's setting behind the Santa Monica Mountains, casting an orange-and-pink glow onto the ocean behind me. It matches my brand's color palette—blue (my sports bra and yoga pants), orange and pink (the sky), and tan (of the spray-on variety). I'm in a race against time to get these pictures before I lose the sun. I step in front of the camera and shoot a few test shots. The lighting looks good, my skin's glowing, and all that's left is the hard part—making it look like I'm not trying too hard.

Of course, I have to try a *little*. No one climbs up to the top

of a mountain at dusk, alone, with nothing but a tripod, camera, and water bottle, and does it effortlessly.

I hustle through a few poses.

A hand in my hair, laughing at an unhilarious patch of bramble—passable.

Taking a sip out of the trending, overpriced water bottle of the moment—but it blocks my face, and shows off mixed branding messages.

Facing the ocean, a hand on my hip, glancing back at the camera—this is weird and feels like a bad attempt at a Bond Girl pose.

I take one final shot, glancing down at my waistline like I've just slid into the best pair of buttery yoga pants, water bottle in my free hand—competing brand name turned around—and flash a smile to no one in particular. Bingo. This is the one. The right cocktail of casual and capitalism.

Anyone looking at the picture on Instagram would probably see a stunning model with sculpted curves, flawless makeup, and a sports bra that costs as much as a small mortgage. They'd see someone who has a perfect life. Yet, as I look at the smiling woman in the picture on the screen, all *I* see is the lifelessness in her eyes that no filter can fix. She's got no reason to want for anything. This is the picture-perfect life she's always wanted, but it's actually woefully underdeveloped.

But for the sake of Spinx yoga pants, lifeless and plastic is more than good enough. In fact, it might be exactly what their brand is looking for. I transfer the photos from the DSLR to my phone and run a few tried-and-true filters over them to send to my marketing contact.

I draft up a caption—a Thoreau quote and something in-

spirational about how these yoga pants make me feel closer to nature—apply the proper spon-con labels and tags, and hit send. Now all I have to do is wait for their blessing and I'm free to post.

Even a few years ago, there was a thrill to every post, especially as I migrated from my child beauty pageant era to my lifestyle influencer era. Brand transitions are never easy, and the transition from the done-up "Toddler in Tiara" life my mom foisted upon me to "I'm My Own Woman, I Swear to God" felt near impossible sometimes. They're even harder when you have to face them alone.

As I open up Instagram, my feed refreshes and a post from Alaka-Sam floats to the top.

In theory, nothing about a borderline-skeletal grown man in leather pants and a sapphire-sequined pirate shirt should make my stomach knot, but it does. He poses in his dressing room at Houdini House, a swanky and private Los Angeles magic-themed nightclub, fashioned like a knock-off Haunted Mansion. Los Angeles, Vegas, and children's parties are possibly the only places where magicians are cool.

He's dabbing moisturizer onto his alarmingly sharp cheekbones, and the caption reads, Magic is Skin Deep. Now he's got his *own* sponsorship with Epidermeé cosmetics and doesn't need me. Of course, I can't be too upset. While he might have been mostly interested in me for my sponsorship connections, *I* was mostly interested in him for his open invite to Houdini House. A few months ago, *everyone* and their mother wanted an in there, and I had to be the It Girl. But the second their marketing associate DMed him on Instagram, there was no need to keep dating me.

Needless to say, I was not devastated to be dumped by a

man named Alaka-Sam, but the post feels like a particularly harsh blow to my ego nonetheless.

I do not hit like on his post.

Instead, I close up shop and begin the trek down to my car now that the sun has dipped behind the horizon.

I'll be the first to admit that I've climbed *way* out of my way to take these pictures. I broached quite close to a rusty gate that *might* have said NO TRESPASSING, but the faded letters look more like NO ASS at this point. But if I simply went to the populated overlook near the highway, I'd look like a tourist, and that's not part of the brand.

Above me, the sky turns a deep cerulean, with twinkling stars that look like the face glitter I wore to Coachella a few months ago. My phone buzzes in my back pocket and I slide it out. I'm well used to my notifications popping off, full of comments from my fans, fair-weather friends, and fraudulent bots. Usually, they're full of affectionate emojis, ads for suspicious clothing giveaways, and pleas to "please come to" whatever country happens to want me that day.

Today, at the very least, there's a text from my mom.

MOM (7:42 PM): Contractor said the kitchen would look better with a backsplash. Can you send $

Our green-and-white ping-pong of a conversation is scarcely full of love and care. The last few messages aren't much different from this one. I wonder if the repetition is really that lost on her. There's no inquiry into how I'm doing or desire for a catch-up. Just a favor. A *financial* favor. I shouldn't be shocked, and yet the pinpricks of pain stab in my chest. This is how it's been for a long time.

She'd been delighted when a modeling scout hawked me down at age five at the Fashion Fair Mall in Fresno. Once the scout, and ultimately the photographers, saw dollar signs in my cherubic cheeks and big doe eyes, so did she. It was the least I could do to support a single mom. If my smiles paid our bills, who was I to complain? But I think the glamour shots and filters hid the girl I was underneath, the one who craved a normal relationship with her mother. Now my brand projects a girlboss who doesn't need anyone. She can handle anything on her own.

It's always been *on her own*.

I have more—shampoos, fitness equipment, exclusive invites—than most people could ever dream of.

The things no one ever offers are love and care.

Yet I keep trying, in hopes someone might prove me wrong.

EL (7:43 PM): Of course, send me the invoice.

I seal it with a heart emoji. In return, I get a thumbs-up reaction. Instead of letting it get to me, I keep trucking forward until the sounds of traffic and waves are punctuated by a gentle whirring. It's not the thunderous staccato of a helicopter or the deafening drone of a landing plane. This, I feel instinctively, is something that doesn't want to be heard.

I peer over my shoulder and catch sight of a faint shimmer over the deep blues and sandy browns of the mountainside. I blink and wonder if it's a trick of the light, but it can't be. There's something *there*. The backdrop ripples around it like a fun-house mirror as it inches closer to me.

I pick up my pace and begin to move quicker through the

ravine to reach my car. I'm a sitting duck out here, and the inevitable murder podcast plays in my head.

Because it took so long to find Ms. Martin, her body had fully decomposed and a small family of rabbits had made a home in the tented sanctuary of her blue yoga pants.

I don't get far before a blinding white light floods behind me. I panic for a split second before I run. Whatever this thing is, it might be after *me.*

It whirs faster as I dash away, stumbling over rocks and downed bramble as I try to remember the path back to my car. I pass the same NO ASS sign and trip over a shrub. A scrape bleeds through my poor Spinx yoga pants.

"Fuck," I mutter, rubbing at the wound. I use my tripod to climb back to my feet, but my stalker is still breathing down my neck with its floodlights.

This is far from the fake problems I solve with my sponsorships, like greasy hair or a wine-stained shirt emergency. This is *real.* I mentally run down my contacts list, follower lists. Since I'm really in danger, who would come? Certainly not my roommates. Not Alaka-Sam. Maybe my random fans who'd ask me for an autograph midmurder. Then they'd claim I was rude for not paying enough attention to them as I bled out.

I genuinely don't know if anyone would try to help me.

What I do know is that if these are my last moments, I'm sure as hell not going to go quietly.

I pull out my phone, flip the camera on myself, and go live.

"Hi, guys," I start, squinting and still trying to focus on fleeing. "So, I was out shooting some really great Spinx content that should be coming in a few days, and I'm on my way back to the car, but there is something *following* me. I can't

see what it is, but it looks like a ship or something. I don't know, but look, it's just behind me."

That makes it mad. The lights flash from white to red to blue and it picks up speed. So do I. Then a horrible thought crosses my mind: Am I getting abducted by aliens?

Like actual, for real aliens?

Aliens are *so* not my brand. I believe they're real because the universe is too big for us to be the smartest things out there, but I did not expect them to come to Earth. I did not expect them to follow me home from my photo shoot. I know I'm hot and might be hearty stock for their intergalactic babies, but I didn't think they'd *pick* me. My brain plays an Instagram carousel of photos of what's to come—little green men standing over my bed, probing, *way* too much chrome.

I have a meal delivery service and a snail face mask to promote by the end of the week.

I do not have *time* to get abducted by aliens right now.

"Holy shit," I gasp as I stumble again. Dirt and rock shards dig into my palms. I scramble for the phone, the tripod, and the water bottle I've dropped. As I grasp the bottle and the craft nears, I get an idea. I hurl the aluminum water bottle into the air at full speed and hope my one season of softball in fifth grade prepared me for this. It clangs hard against the metal, and I anticipate that maybe a laser beam will sear me in half, but instead, the craft wobbles.

Then it spins.

Then it crashes.

Then I realize that this Well bottle could definitely be used as a murder weapon.

The lights along the front flicker as they die, and sparks

pop from the pile of sheer dark metal. It looks like *translucent* scrap metal, but far thinner, far silkier. It actually looks like the dress I wore to Corbin Bleu's fragrance release party a few years ago. The craft isn't nearly as large as it first seemed. The flashing lights and shimmering iridescence made it seem massive and unknowable. I reckon *maybe* it's the size of a golf cart, but lying crumpled and destroyed, it feels like much less of a threat.

I grab my phone and turn the camera back on myself as I move toward the crash.

In California, fire season has become a yearlong event, so I role-play my best Smokey Bear and scuttle down the side of the hill to the wreckage. Thankfully, the smoke has dissipated by the time I reach it.

"I don't know what I just saw, you guys." I'm out of breath and my fitness watch tells me my heart is racing, as if I didn't already know. "I have no idea what just happened, but I hit it with my Well bottle and it crashed. It's like . . . busted, oh my god. Not only was it a lifesaver, but I'm glad I have my Well bottle here to . . ."

I sprinkle water over the few sparking embers, to make it clear I am preventing a forest fire like a true friend of the environment. There's been debate after I almost got canceled for taking a private jet from LA to Coachella. But that's when I realize that even with the flash on, it's near impossible to *really* see the iridescent, reflective sheet metal on camera.

I kick aside another piece of metal and it flips over. This time, it displays a serial number and product info. It's stamped on, mostly smudged, but it could be enough to find the culprit.

"What does that say?"

The logo is a circle with three letters printed along the inside and three stars beneath each letter.

PROPERTY OF PI . . .

I can't make out the rest of it. But I take a screenshot of my live video anyway. If only I knew who to tag . . .

I'm breathing again. The craft is destroyed and I stopped a forest fire, but I still feel a sense of looming dread and adrenaline that'll take hours to get rid of. Whatever this was, it could have killed me. I could have *died* in Spinx yoga pants.

And the brutal reality is that I'm not sure anyone would have cared. Or believed me.

"Guys," I say into the camera. "I have *no* idea what just happened, and I doubt anybody is going to believe me, but I need to share this. And in case someone murders me on the walk back to my car, you'll know what happened and where to find my body. Uh, peace and love. Bye?"

I end the stream and email the live video to myself, at two different email addresses for extra security. I once lost an entire vlog because I deleted the wrong video off my phone. Can't let it happen with this.

I haul my ass back to my car. My hands hold steady on the wheel as I try to fight the shake of my fingers and the nauseous feeling in my gut. I spend the drive focused only on the road but jump at every set of headlights that flashes behind me. Each vibration or rattle my car makes sends me into a spiral. It's a miracle I make it back to the Hollywood Hills in one piece.

I am still full of dread as I pull up to the Bird's Nest and park. The Nest has been my home for the past two months and is meant to be temporary, so I haven't fully unpacked and

gotten comfortable yet. The most lived-in part of my room is the corner with the best lighting, which I dubbed Content Corner.

It might be an ostentatious multimillion-dollar modern house located up in the Bird Streets of the Hills, but it's still the closest thing I have to home at the moment. As I pull into the driveway, I see Bex, our house leader, through the wide front windows filming a tea tasting. I'm hoping I can avoid her en route to my room.

As I step out of my car, another whooshes past, sending a harsh gust of wind my way. I jump and scurry toward the door. Meanwhile, in my back pocket, my phone is buzzing off the hook.

> Wtf is this shit
> No one pays you to talk about your feelings
> I would love to see this bitch deal with a flat tire on the side of the road

> I guess it's true—the pretty ones always die first in horror movies

Of course, there are more positive messages, too, but I know I've committed influencer crimes numbers two *and* three.

1) make it look effortless
2) stick with a cohesive color palette
3) always consider the brand

I trudge inside. The Bird's Nest is horrifically white and open concept, with sprawling windows that overlook Los

Angeles. When Bex's father, a wealthy real estate developer and owner of the property, struggled to sell it because the last owner died inside from a botched liposuction procedure, Bex concocted a simple plan—let some influencers live here to gain sponsorships and turn it into a cash cow like the Hype House. Moving in felt like a wise business decision to grow my brand, and in my line of work, grasping any relevance or spotlight I can is always beneficial.

I got an in through a mutual sponsorship with How Glow Can You Go?—a do-it-yourself spray tan kit. When I first moved in, I was living with two girls—Lea and Becca. Lea has over ten million followers across several platforms and she makes bank becoming an expert on the crisis of the week. She has a bachelor's degree in photography, but her bio reads "Global Nuclear Relations Commentator" this week. Last week, she was an "Anti-Crypto Environmentalist."

And then, there's . . .

"'Bout time you made it back here!"

Two months ago, Becca was trying to break into the young Christian mom influencer circles for some reason. But on account of having no kids and claiming no particular religion, it didn't go so well. So, she did what any wealthy influencer does when they're in a crisis, and went to Europe. She hopped on a plane to London and came back with a new brand and the most horrifically fake British accent I have ever heard, and insisted she was no longer Becca, but Bex.

Apparently, a few weeks experiencing another culture shifted her entire perspective, and her time in the UK made her feel seen. Adopting the accent was inevitable when she heard it nonstop for three weeks. She's currently clad in a checkered skirt, a pair of Oxford shoes, and a Union Jack crop

top and smells like her new signature scent. It smells like Earl Grey tea, so I can't complain, but she insists we call the tea "cuppa," which I'd rather get canceled on the internet than do. Time has yet to tell if the British gimmick is actually working for her.

If I had to pick two roommates to bring to Houdini House with me, I would take Lea twice just so I didn't have to take Bex.

"We gotta 'ave a chat."

"Right now?" I try to hide the fact that my hands are still shaking.

"What the bloody hell is *this*?" Bex raises her phone, showing the glaring black void of my shared live video.

"Did you watch it?"

"Of *fookin* course I did. So did 'alf a million people. And 'alf a million people watched you throw a wobbly on the telly—"

"It was Instagram."

"You know what I mean." Bex's overplucked eyebrows raise. I know her goal is to be as British as possible, but day by day, she's morphing into a sixth Spice Girl named Desperate Spice. "If we're going to keep sponsorships comin' out our arse, we can't have you acting off your trolley."

I bite my lip. "Pretty sure that's still ableist even if you say it as British slang."

"You're right, sorry. I can't do two Notes app apologies in a month. But your profile looks like shite now. Are you even *thinkin'* about your brand? You're putting all our reputations on the line."

I can't *stop* thinking about my brand and all the ways I'm tarnishing it. I'm breaking my own content rules, breaking the laws of Influencerdom. This feels different from any of my

other vulnerable posts. For a girl with a picture-perfect life, I can't let people know it's not. I can offer mild candid shots on a few select topics and reveal I get periods (only if I'm selling expensive au naturel menstrual products). I have to confess my hair gets greasy in order to sell shampoo. I post one makeup-less photo a month to prove I do have a face under all the sponsored foundations and blushes.

But I want everyone to see what happened tonight. I want them to see it more than my yoga pants photos or anything I've ever posted before.

None of this is smart. But it's the first real thing to happen to me in years.

"No," I push back. "I was trying to make sure that if I *died*, someone knew about it."

"Okay, well, you're safe now, love. Delete it."

Anger furls in my stomach. I don't *want* to delete it.

"No. If you don't mind, get out of my way. I want to go upstairs and shower."

I push past her and up the stairs. I lock my bedroom door and strip out of my athleisure. When I turn on the shower, the faucet vibrates and lets out a bellowing moan. I slam it off before it can make any more noise. I live it all over again. The noise. The lights.

I sit down on the cold tile for a minute and watch the video again. And again. Each time, I think I pull some new detail out of the darkness. And the comments keep piling up. I can already envision the headlines that'll emerge out of this by morning. Within hours, my mom will have seen it and asked if it'll impact my finances. By the time I finally muster the courage to shower, I've hit another fifty thousand views. I try to scrub off my fear with several freebie shower gels I've been

given, customized shampoo I promoted six months ago, and a loofah infused with Icelandic volcanic ash and charcoal.

My entire life is a facade of my own crafting. No one really knows me. No one really knows the truth.

Now I need them to.

I've wrapped a towel around myself and stepped back into my room when there's a knock on my door. I stand on the other side of it but do not open it.

"What?"

"Thank you!" Bex shouts.

"For *what*?"

"For deleting the video!"

Deleting . . . I didn't . . .

All it takes is a quick scroll through my page to realize my live video is gone. There's no notification of it being taken down for violating guidelines or anything. It's like it was never there.

I don't know what I saw, but I now know I was not supposed to.

SKROLL NEWS

Published 3 hours ago

NEW BRAND ALERT? INFLUENCER EL MARTIN'S CHAOTIC VIDEO BREAKDOWN

By now, if you're not living under a rock, you know who El Martin is. The 28-year-old social media influencer has been on the scene for almost ten years but has gained recent popularity after joining the Bird's Nest,

an influencer house in the Hollywood Hills. Raking in over a million followers, the model is mostly known for her scorching photos and beauty tips.

[photo from @elohelmartin, featuring a white woman with dark hair posing in a black bikini on the beach.]

But is she about to be known for something else? Like UFO hunting?

[GIF of an alien dabbing]

Last night, Martin went live on Instagram, in a video featuring the influencer out and about in the mountains, followed by a series of bright lights coming from an invisible source. "I have *no* idea what just happened, and I doubt anybody is going to believe me, but I need to share this," a clearly flustered Martin tells her followers.

[Screenshot of a blurry video from @elohelmartin, featuring the subject with bright lights casting behind her.]

Eventually, Martin was able to defeat and evade at least *one* follower. "And in case someone murders me on the walk back to my car, you'll know what happened and where to find my body. Uh, peace and love. Bye?" the influencer concluded before ending the video. However, the video quality makes it difficult to see exactly what she's filming.

[Embedded video from @elohelmartin reading "This content has been deleted."]

It's a sharp contrast to her usual content—sponsored ads for shampoo, makeup, and athletic gear—and doesn't match the perfect aesthetic image she's cultivated over the years. Could this new freak-out be a hard launch of a new brand?

In recent years, other influencers have taken to film and TV projects, including Mikey Mayhem, who has been making waves in the new streaming show *Clean Break*, about a surfer recovering from a nasal decongestant addiction. You can read Skroll's review of *Clean Break* here.

Maybe El's video is an easter egg. Internet sleuths have begun picking apart the influencer's latest post for clues, but the reactions are SENDING us!

cobrakyle23

it's giving *cloverfield*

xMeggyx

I've given up on believing anything I hear from these "influencers." They'll do anything to sell a product. Can't wait to see the brand of flashlights or LED headlights she's trying to promote in a week. Also, a terrible actress.

jason52612456

If aliens come to earth and she's the first person they make contact with, they'd just go back to their planet

alltherave @jason52612456

lmao or they'd try to sleep with her and then go home. She's hot.

> Whether El's launching a new creative venture or is suffering a public meltdown, we're intrigued to see what she does next! Maybe her next collab should be with the hit Skroll series *The Out There*??
>
> *[Embedded video: "The Out There Episode #15: Swamp Girl Walks with the Skunk Ape"]*
>
> El Martin has declined to comment for this story. Skroll News will update this article as it develops.