



IN STEREO



WHERE



AVAILABLE

BECKY ANDERSON

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Medallion Press, Inc.

DEDICATION:

To Laura, who made my wedding dress.

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CHAPTER ONE

*Oh be-yootiful, for spacious skies,
For amber waves of gub-rain . . .*

I took a few kernels from the bowl of popcorn and slowly put them in my mouth, crunching delicately, my gaze fixed on the TV. The blonde with the microphone gestured soulfully to the smirking crowd, wet-eyed, the bronzing powder a little too heavy around her cleavage. Her strappy high heels glittered. The shoes were important. Your legs are only as good as your shoes. I glanced at my cell phone beside me on the sofa, checking once again to be sure I'd turned it on. The name across the bottom of my TV screen was "Grace Kassner."

*For purple mountain ma-hajesties
Above the fuh-ruited plain!*

The note went flat and I quickly turned down the volume. Camera angles shifted; the judges winced, their pens tapping against the table. I hit the "mute" button and picked up my cell phone. Less than two minutes later, it rang.

"Hi, Madison."

"Phoebe." I could hear her sobbing, muted, as though she were pressing a tissue against her mouth. "I got eliminated."

“I know. You were *great*, though. Those judges don’t know anything.”

“The one guy said I sounded like a seventh-grader doing karaoke at a sleepover party.”

“That guy says stuff like that to everyone. *I* heard you, Maddie. You sounded wonderful. And the crowd loved you.”

“Did they really?”

“They did. If they went by crowd response, you’d definitely have made it. That’s just one little show, it’s nothing. You’re just paying your dues. You’ll have your chance yet, and then you’ll be able to say you earned it.”

She sniffled. “You think?”

“Absolutely. Anyway, can you see the other girls?”

“No. I’m backstage.”

“Well, I’m watching it right now, and the girl who’s up there is a cow. She’s wearing this scarf shirt, totally trashy, and *flats*, Maddie. Flats.” I was speaking her language, for her sake. I didn’t like cutting people down, but Madison needed this. “Those judges are going to be so sorry they eliminated you. I can’t even turn the sound on. She sounds like those dolls that sing when you go through the ‘It’s a Small World’ ride at Disney World.”

Madison laughed in relief. “Thanks. Look, Mom’s trying to call through. I’ll be back in town tomorrow, okay? I’ll call you then.”

“Okay. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

I set my cell phone down and sighed. Madison’s little white dog, Pepper, was sitting on my lap, nuzzling her nose down into the cushions in search of dropped popcorn. Clicking off the

TV, I stared at the stack of uncorrected crayoned math papers in a file folder on my desk. Tomorrow was Friday; they needed to go home in the responsibility folders, along with the handwriting sheets beneath them. I scooted Pepper over and forced myself off the sofa, reaching for the folder from beside the computer. It knocked the mouse, making the aquarium-fish screen saver vanish. And in an instant, there it was. The e-mail.

Dear Phoebe, it began.

Regarding dinner at your parents' place this Saturday, I don't think I'm going to be able to make it. I know you've been looking forward to them meeting me, but to be perfectly honest with you, I feel like it's almost a little deceptive when the fact is, I don't really have time for a serious relationship right now. I've been thinking maybe we ought to cool it a little, just sort of keep it casual. I think you're a great girl, and I don't want to stop seeing you, but I'm not really in a place right now where I can do the whole meet-the-parents thing. Take care.

Bill

"Read between the lines," Madison had said when I had called her the day before, mystified. "He's saying he wants to get rid of the relationship and keep the sex. You ought to dump his sleazy butt straight-out."

"Really?" I'd asked, disappointed. I'd never even actually gotten that far with Bill. I'd hoped there was some kind of mir-

acle thing that Madison would tell me to say, something that would get him over the hump and on toward producing a ring. I was twenty-nine, after all. It was about time.

“Really. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, because I’m your sister and I love you, but that’s exactly what he’s saying right there. When a man says ‘keep it casual,’ that only means one thing. Sorry, Fee.”

I minimized the window and took the folder of apple-printed math worksheets over to the sofa, curling my legs up beneath me. I’d kicked off the school year with an apple theme—apple stories for reading, apple crafts for art, apple graphs for science. If you cut an apple horizontally, the seeds flared out in a star. You could dry the halves with a napkin and make prints, pressing the smooth white sides into red tempera paint that oozed up around the edges. Three days into the school year and already a parent had written me a note saying I was encouraging devil worship, promoting the use of pentagrams like that. I had written a quick apology at the bottom and sent the note back home. A lot of teaching was about turning the other cheek. That was something I could do. I’ve always been better at that than my sister. She’s the competitive twin and I’m the sweet one, so says our mother. It’s better to have only one competitive twin. I realized that early in life, and I guess she didn’t. I’m also the smart one.



Madison called me the next afternoon, breathless and excited. Her phone was fading in and out, her voice mixed with the rush of the wind. She drove a Mercedes convertible—an old one, but

still, it was a Mercedes.

“Guess what?” she asked. The wind crackled in her phone.

“I can barely hear you,” I warned her.

I heard the hum of her roof going up. “Guess what?” she asked again.

“What?”

“I got a part! On another show!”

“You did? I didn’t even know you were auditioning.”

“I wasn’t. The woman came up to me about five minutes after I got off the phone with you yesterday and asked me if I wanted to be on their new reality show. She said I have exactly the qualities they’re looking for. Can you believe it? All this time driving back and forth to New York, and then out of nowhere—”

“Reality show? What kind of reality show?”

“Oh, I don’t know. They aren’t going to give away the plot. Something about a guy, you know, where you win the guy at the end.”

“Win the guy?” I asked, enunciating slowly. “Like he’s a washer-dryer?”

She laughed. “Better than a washer-dryer. Hey, I don’t have a boyfriend or anything. What do I have to lose?”

“You mean not including your self-respect?”

“Oh, phooey. Maybe it’ll be fate, who knows? Anyway, it’d be exposure. Maybe this will be my big break!”

I groaned. “Maddie . . . every radio DJ around here was cremating you this morning over the way you sang ‘America the Beautiful.’ Aren’t you even a little worried they’re casting you as . . . kind of a joke?”

“That’s fine,” she said blithely. “Then I’ll cash in on my fifteen minutes and show them what I’ve really got to offer. It’s all about

timing, Fee. *Timing*. And connections. There's no way I can pass this up. I've got to be on a plane for Georgia on Friday."

"Georgia? Why Georgia?"

"Who knows? I'm just going to follow this rainbow and see where it takes me. What's the worst that can happen, right? I end up with some crummy guy I don't want and then I dump him. I've already done that a hundred times." She laughed.

"I think you're out of your mind."

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you. Look, can you drive me to the airport on Friday afternoon? My flight doesn't leave until seven. Say yes, Phoebe. I'm going to be gone for *three months*. Oh, and can you keep watching Pepper? I don't know where else to stick her."

"Sure, no problem."

"Great. I'm about to go through a tunnel, okay? Love ya. Bye-bye."



"How was your date last night?"

My apartment-mate, Lauren, was sitting at our little dinette table with both hands wrapped around a cup of coffee as though it were a life preserver. She was still in her T-shirt and undies, didn't even have her glasses on yet. I had to be in at work a lot earlier than she did. Lauren was a pharmaceutical rep and spent her days going around to doctors' offices with samples and promotional products. She liked her job, and it came with a lot of freebies. Her coffee mug, for example, spelled out *PROZAC* in bold purple letters.

"Crummy."

I poured myself a bowl of Honeycombs. “Why crummy?”

“Not my type. He’s a political consultant. And he has a tattoo.”

“Where?”

She turned her arm over and pointed to the underside of it, halfway between her elbow and wrist. “A sun.”

“Must be a Democrat.”

“Yeah. It was a waste of time. I really *hoped*, though. Everything else was perfect. Age, zip code, education, hobbies, you name it. He’s got a master’s degree, and he bikes.”

“What about his personality?”

She shrugged. “Fine. He opened the car door for me. I can’t do the tattoo thing, though. That’s okay. I’ve got another date next Saturday.”

“Who is it this time?”

“A computer programmer. He’s thirty-four, and he likes sci-fi. We’ll see.”

“That sounds a little scary.”

“Yeah, but he’s a Libra. He lives in 20740, plus he’s a Dog and I’m a Rabbit. So there’s potential there.” She picked up her coffee mug and pointed to a picture on the newspaper beneath it. “Hey, look. It’s Madison.”

I picked up the newspaper and scanned the page quickly. Madison’s face, framed in a wet circle from Lauren’s mug, hovered above an italicized headline. “*Local Girl Bleats Her Way to Stardom,*” I read.

Lauren winced. “Ouch.”

“Maryland’s own Grace Kassner is still holding most of her fifteen minutes of fame in escrow after her comedic interpretation of ‘America the Beautiful’ on Tuesday night’s episode

of *Singing Sensation*.” I sighed and handed the paper back to Lauren. “Couldn’t they be just a *little* nicer?”

“Nice doesn’t sell papers.” She studied the photo, ignoring the coffee ring that was slowly trickling down the page. “Are you *sure* you’re identical twins?”

“Yep.” I drank the milk from my cereal bowl and scooted my chair back. “Except for the nose, the boobs, the starvation diet, and the hair, we look exactly the same. Take my word for it.”

“If you say so.”

“I say so.” I threw my school bag over my shoulder and picked up the stack of files from the breakfast bar. “Except that I’ve got a better singing voice.”

But it bothered me more than I let on. Naturally, she should look exactly like me: light brown hair, flattish nose, a body that felt too small on the top and too big on the bottom. Average-looking, inoffensive but not exactly pretty; we attracted attention when we were younger, but only because we were twins. Madison, however, had modeled since she was eighteen, and she’d always done well enough to get by. Little jobs—catalog work, the bikini photos for tanning salon ads, a couple of commercials, an extremely small part in an extremely soft-core *Playboy Fantasies* video that our parents still didn’t know about—but still, she could honestly say that she was a model. It was interesting, seeing who I might become with a little deprivation and a few thousand dollars here and there. It could also be a little disorienting when people pointed out what a knock-out she was, after a lifetime of hearing, *Why, I can’t even tell you two apart!* I tried not to find it insulting.

Grace Kassner. I couldn’t ever remember calling her that, although I suppose I must have, once. She hadn’t become Mad-

ison until we'd watched the movie *Splash* when we were six and she had insisted on naming herself after the mermaid. If I forgot and called her by her real name, she pinched me. She made mermaid tails for our Barbies out of green construction paper and staples, and took long, frequent baths, hoping for fins to appear. It went on for two years until she changed her mind and decided she wanted to be a horse. That stage was shorter and a little less obsessive. Our mom put her in riding lessons, and after a few months of helping shovel out the stable, she lost interest. After that she settled for covering our walls with pictures of unicorns.

So far, Grace Kassner had won not a single credited role that she had auditioned for, and she was starting to get a little desperate. I wasn't surprised she was willing to do some win-the-man reality show at this point. She had lived in Los Angeles for five years until she ran out of luck and money, and although she was proud to tell people she'd been in three top-grossing blockbuster movies, she was tired of being an extra. She was tired of traveling aimlessly and losing touch with friends and being in debt up to her eyebrows. And, like me, she was twenty-nine. It was about time.

I slid into the seat of my Plymouth Horizon and dropped the folder of corrected math papers on the seat beside me. My cell phone turned on with an impersonal little buzz, and I set it on top of the folder, then started the car. Just as I pulled out of my space it chirped, letting me know I had voice mail. That was a little unusual. Maybe it was Bill. I put my foot on the brake and dialed my own number to retrieve it.

"Hey, Karen, it's Jerry," said a nervous, unfamiliar voice. "I, uh, I met you at the teachers' conference last week. Look, if

you get this message tonight, give me a call and maybe we can get together. Okay. Thanks.” He left his number and hung up. Just a wrong number. No more messages. No call from Bill. Oh, well.



The best part of the day, always, was walking into my classroom first thing in the morning, before the kids came in, before anything was taken out. I liked the order of it—the dollhouse perfection of each chair turned upside-down over its desk, the carpet sample squares in a stack by my rocking chair, the easy-reader books tidily arranged in their plastic bins. For half an hour or so I would move around the room, arranging the words to add to the Word Wall that day and the materials for the science lesson, taking the time to write the date neatly on the chalkboard. Without the chaos of my kids around me it felt peaceful, anticipatory, perfectly organized. Naturally, I *loved* the kids. I loved to teach them, to watch them have fun and struggle and wiggle with joy when they sounded out a word they had thought they couldn't read. But in the constant motion of the day, there was no time to reflect on anything bigger than the moment at hand. That was what the morning was for.

Hearing a knock at my door, I turned from setting up the tapes at the listening station. It was Antonia, the kindergarten teacher whose classroom was next to mine. She was short and shy, with long dark hair that fell in rippling waves from its center part; you could tell that, if she cut it, it would instantly curl up into an unmanageable frizzy mess. She was the third of six children in a big Italian Catholic family, and she matched every

stereotype Lauren had for middle children. Watchful. A good listener. A peacemaker. I saw her only occasionally outside of school, but within our workday together she was the closest thing I had to a best friend. She was probably the only person in the world, for example, who knew that I was a virgin. Even my own mother and twin sister had long since assumed otherwise. Even my *father*. He cracked jokes around me that I didn't get. Antonia understood. She'd had the same problem, but then, she'd been married at twenty-four. Even *she* felt a little sorry for me.

"How did your sister do on *Singing Sensation*?" she asked softly.

I set the headphones beside each of the tape players. "She got eliminated."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"That's okay. She's got another job already. That's Madison for you. She's always got something on the horizon. The next big thing."

Antonia smiled. "I thought *she* was the next big thing."

"Yeah," I said, smiling back. "She's been the next big thing for almost twelve years."

"They'll discover her one of these days. They have to."

"I hope so. Nobody works harder than she does to get noticed. If it never happens for her, at least it won't be because she didn't give it her all."

Antonia came a few feet farther into my classroom, stopping at the fish tank to play with the goldfish through the glass. "How are things with Bill?"

"He dumped me. I think."

"Oh, no. I should stop asking you questions. It's all bad news today."

“No, it’s okay. I’m kind of bummed about it, but it’s really not that big a deal. He was kind of annoying. And he was always working on his degree.”

“You’ll meet somebody better. There’s someone for everyone.”

I thumped the side of a stack of worksheets against the table. “Says who?” I asked teasingly.

“Don’t you think it’s true?”

“I think it’s kind of like your mother telling you you’re beautiful. Maybe it’s true and maybe it isn’t. People aren’t like a bag of plastic Easter eggs, where all you have to do is find the matching half.”

She twisted a piece of hair around her finger. “Don’t be pessimistic.”

“I’m not. I’m only being realistic. I’m at peace with it.” I smiled. “More or less.”

From down the hall came the slow roar of kids being let in from the first bus to arrive. Antonia grimaced and hurried back toward her classroom. “See you at lunch,” I called after her.



When I’d told Antonia that I was at peace with being alone, I’d lied. That evening I rifled through the recycling bin until I found one of Lauren’s printouts of potential men, each covered with a red X. At the top of the page was the Web site’s address: Kismet.com. *Find romance with Kismet!* read the banner ad. *Free \$50 profile!* Well, it was worth a try.

Lauren came home from the gym while I was filling out my free \$50 profile. She had on a black leotard, Juicy Couture yoga pants, and a sweatband that said “Seasonale.”

“Are you really wearing the name of your birth-control pill on your forehead?” I asked her, clicking on my answers to the personality-test questions.

“Beats wearing your heart on your sleeve,” she answered. “Hey, you didn’t answer that one right. You do *not* ‘generally make decisions quickly and decisively.’”

“Yes, I do. I teach first grade. I make snap decisions a thousand times a day.”

“Not in your personal life, you don’t.”

“It doesn’t *say* personal life. It says—” I clicked the “next page” button and a string of men’s photos appeared. “Who are *they*?”

“They’re your matches. They’re all customized to your personality profile and zip code.”

I scrolled down the screen. “*Two hundred and eighteen* of them? All perfectly matched? Seriously?”

“Yep.” She pointed to a picture of a shy-eyed, brown-haired guy. “He’s cute. Click on him.”

I read aloud from his profile. “I enjoy movies, hiking, and taking my dog, Sally, on long walks through the park. My ex-girlfriend says I’m thoughtful and romantic.’ He sounds nice.”

Lauren shook her head. “Thumbs-down. Never go out with someone who mentions their ex or names their pet. He’s already got two women in his life.”

“Oh.”

She pointed to a dark-haired guy with a sexy, all-white smile. “Try him.”

“Hey, ladies, what can I say about myself?” I read. “I’m an average guy. I like the Redskins, the Orioles, the Capitals, and the Wizards. I’m looking for a—”

“Don’t worry about what he’s looking for,” Lauren said quickly. “He already told you he won’t respect you in the morning and he’s unavailable fifty-two Sundays a year. Move on.”

“He said that? No, he didn’t. That’s not what he said.”

“Read between the lines, Phoebe.”

I sighed and clicked the next page. “You and Madison. Maybe you should come on dates with me as a translator.”

Lauren patted me on the shoulder and sipped at the straw in her iced latte. “Don’t worry, Fee. I can get you through this. I’m a professional.”



CHAPTER TWO

Madison spent her few days back home signing autographs for the neighborhood kids and posing for pictures taken by their excited mothers, a celebrity just for the two minutes she'd spent singing badly and getting cut down by a bigger celebrity. That Friday, on the way to the airport, Pepper ran back and forth in the backseat of my car, bumping hard against the doors with every turn. She wasn't much of a car dog. Pepper was a purebred Maltese, one of those dogs with straight white hair that falls all the way to the floor, making her look like a well-groomed dust mop. She had a yappy little bark and a prissy little walk, and whenever I fed her, I got a guilty sort of feeling that I should be serving her dinner in a crystal goblet like they do in those TV commercials.

"How's she been, anyway?" asked Madison.

"Fine. She's a good girl. She's not fighting with the cats anymore."

Madison reached into the backseat and scooped her up. "Mommy missed you, yes, she did! And Mommy's going to miss you some more. Poor baby."

"I'll take good care of her."

"You always do." She held Pepper up in front of her, nose to nose. "Maybe Mommy will bring back a daddy for you. Wouldn't that be a nice little souvenir?"