

Chapter One

The Meet-Cute

Summer Russo believed in destiny, true love, and chocolate cake. She also believed that her perfect meet-cute was right around the corner. Or maybe right in front of her, she thought giddily, while staring up at her very own romance hero.

After months of watching Dr. Dashing from afar, Summer had finally snagged her man. Well, their leashes had snagged and, in trying to free their dogs, they'd become entangled. Thigh to thigh, chest to chest, their personal space bubbles completely merged. Then he'd asked for her number. Which was how she now found herself, on a cool May evening, outside her bookshop, All Things Cupid, staring into the eyes of a man who could possibly be her soulmate.

"Sorry about the dry-humping situation," Dr. Daniel said with a half-cocked grin.

Summer waved a dismissive hand. "These things happen."

"Well, I'm hoping after the . . ."—Daniel leaned down and used his hands as earmuffs for Freckle, his Dalmatian—"snip-snip, this won't happen again."

"He's still a puppy. Think of when you went through puberty."

"I didn't go around humping random women."

The word “random” made her cheeks heat with uncertainty. Sure, they’d only officially “met” a few months ago, and this was their first date, but the kind of rom-com-worthy meet-cute they’d shared didn’t seem to fit the word. Had it been love at first sight? No, but Cupid had been working his magic, because on that February-in-Connecticut day all those months ago, the sun had been out, the sky a brilliant blue, and romance had been in the air. Surely if your eyes met across a crowded dog park on Valentine’s Day, Fate had her hand in the mix.

“Today was nice,” Summer said.

“We should do it again sometime,” Dr. Daniel said, stepping closer. His eyes were the color of melted chocolate—and Summer loved chocolate. He had thick, dark brown hair, a strong jawline, and nice full lips. He was tall-*ish*—five-nine on a good day—and handsome in that I-love-science kind of way. He loved books—mainly medical journals—and dogs, and was a great conversationalist. He believed in science over fate, but nobody was perfect.

“My shop is closed on Mondays,” she offered, and then remembered the promise she’d made to herself when she was sixteen and her secret crush asked her twin to the prom.

Be bold. Be the heroine of your own story.

Summer had spent most of her life between the pages of a book—her heart was safer there. But she hadn’t given up on love. In fact, finding the kind of head-over-heels romance her parents shared was at the top of her list, only she had an embarrassing habit of turning her meet-cutes into meet-uglies. Like dumping hot coffee on Sexy Stockbroker’s shoes, or the time on the bus when she fell onto Handsome Handyman’s lap and elbowed him in his tool. But it hadn’t diminished her desire to find her person.

And the dashing Dr. Daniel might be that person.

He must have thought so too, because Dr. Daniel was checking out her boobs. He wasn't ogling, but every so often his eyes would dart down for a little sneak peek of what was hopefully to come—a passionate kiss beneath the porchlight. Not surprising since the girls were on display tonight, and she'd made a strategic decision to leave the top two buttons of her sexy but Sandra-Bullock-subtle red dress undone. It didn't show everything, but hinted at what was beneath curtain number one. And it was a showstopper.

"Or we can go across the street to The Distillery and get a drink now," she amended boldly, hoping her smile translated into more of a Cool Girl vibe than the Concerned Family Member vibe she normally gave off. "They're dog-friendly."

Summer had never thought that a smile could be sensitive, but Dr. Daniel seemed to have a delicate touch. It probably came from years of helping patients navigate their best and worst days. She needed to compliment him on his work ethic because this was fast becoming one of her best days.

A romantic date at the park, where Princess Buttercup and Freckle had frolicked in a field of dogs, followed by this sunset walk along the lamp-lined Main Street, which was overflowing with spring flowers set against a sea of quaint brick-fronted shops, with yellow and white awnings and a history dating back to the late 1800s.

A cool spring breeze came off the coast, wrapping around them like a comforting blanket.

Old-town Ridgefield had rolled up its doormats before the sun went down, leaving Summer and Daniel alone in the night air. The sun was still setting, so the stars had yet to come out, but the million twinkling lights strung overhead, zigzagging across the street, were creating a ready-made, picture-perfect moment for a kiss.

“Or we can go back to my place.” She pointed at the upstairs window of her apartment, which sat atop her bookshop. “My sister’s away on business, so I’ve got the place to myself. I’ve got some wine in the fridge and homemade dog treats.”

At the word “treats,” Princess Buttercup, Summer’s French bulldog, stood to attention, one ear cocked, head tilted as if trying to read the room. Something Summer was trying to do herself, since Daniel’s answer was to look at his watch with a furrowed brow.

He glanced across the street at the upscale bar and sighed. “I wish I could, but I’m presenting at TEDMED this weekend and I still need to finish my presentation. Between rounds at the hospital and my podcast, I’ve barely had time to focus on my speech.”

Not only was Daniel a renowned fertility doctor, and a Doctors Without Borders frequent flyer, he was also the host of a successful podcast—another thing they had in common. Where Summer’s was called *All Things Cupid* and talked about romance, cake recipes, and book recommendations, Dr. Daniel was the host of *Scrambled Eggs*.

“What’s the speech about?”

“Ovulation Foreplay and the Miracle of Masturbation.”

Okay. Wow. That was a lot to unpack. “That sounds interesting.”

His eyes lit up. “I want to destigmatize the process of egg recovery. In vitro can be sexy and strengthen marriages if framed in the right way. Just the image of a wife assisting her partner to come to a climax for the sole purpose of fertilization is what love stories are made of. Don’t you think?”

Summer didn’t want to think about that image. As the book buyer for her shop, she’d read a lot of spicy stories. To her recollection, not a single one had involved sperm collection.

What she did find sexy was his passion for his profession. Plus, what kind of man dedicated his life to helping create families? Hubby material, that's who. She could already hear them laughing to her friends about their first date. Bookstore girl meets sexy doctor, they fall in love, have test-tube babies, and live happily ever after. It was suddenly one of Summer's favorite romance tropes. Pair that with their chance meeting on Valentine's Day, and it was as if it had been written in the stars.

"Which brings me to something I've been wanting to ask you all day." He moved closer, his voice lowering until it was as rough as tossed gravel, and her belly bottomed out. Anticipation had been coursing through her body since that day at the dog park when they'd laughed about their game of leash-Twister and he'd started asking the kinds of questions men ask when they're interested. "I know this is late notice, so there's no pressure to say yes, but TEDMED is in Hawaii this year."

"Hawaii?" Summer could picture Dr. Daniel on the beach, shirtless and smiling as he rubbed lotion all over her body.

God, how long had it been since she'd had a man's hands on her?

"That sounds amazing." With her knuckle, she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "A few days on the beach sounds like just what the doctor ordered."

"Exactly. I mean, there will be a lot of time spent in an unknown number of conference rooms, which is why I'm staying an extra day to relax, snorkel, unwind."

Man, after the past three years of working nonstop on growing her bookshop and podcast, Summer could use a little unwinding. She could also use a man-made orgasm.

"So, I was wondering . . ."

She blinked up at him, her eyes dropping to his lips, mesmerized as he spoke. Dreaming of how it would feel when he hauled her up against his better-than-mediocre, shirtless chest, wet with the ocean, and then asked if they could do a little tangled-sheets snorkeling of their own.

It would be difficult to take a weekend off during one of the busiest weeks of her month, but she could make it happen. For the right man, she could definitely make it happen—

“... if you could doggie-sit Freckle?”

“I’d love to,” she breathed, then suddenly felt a proverbial cold bucket of water crash over her head. “Wait. What?”

“I know it’s a big ask. But he gets this preposterous separation anxiety and doggie daycare isn’t his thing. I’d leave him at my parents’, but my mom’s allergic.”

For a heartbeat, Summer contemplated gently squeezing his hand in that teasing aren’t-you-a-jokester kind of way. He’d squeeze back and say, “Joking! In fact, I’ve been thinking about you in a swimsuit all night.”

“I mean, Freckle and Princess Buttercup get along so well,” he went on, and this time the bucket was filled with ice. “I was just hoping he could stay with you for the weekend.”

“The weekend?” she croaked.

“Four days tops.” Finally, she got that hand squeeze. “I’m desperate.”

“Something I can relate to,” Summer said brightly.

“God, Summer. You’re a lifesaver.”

“I’m something.” The word “pushover” came to mind.

“No, seriously, I don’t have any other friends I’d trust with Freckle.”

And there was the nail in this meet-cute coffin. That F-word heard around the world which seemed to follow her everywhere.

Romance was her life and her profession, so she knew how this story would end. With a new guy friend looking for a woman's perspective on dating, while Summer was looking for love. It was a tale as old as time. Girl meets boy, boy flirts with girl, then he asks her to spend the weekend picking doggie poop up off the sidewalk, while boy goes on an exotic vacation and meets his one true love, to whom he becomes engaged. The epilogue would be their wedding, with the first girl invited to sit at the singles' table.

Maybe Summer should just RSVP now, put in her request for the roasted chicken—which would likely be as dry as the other single men at the table.

"Humping aside, Freckle is a great dog. Easy, quiet"—Freckle barked—"friendly and very social. Look at how good he is with Buttercup."

A sneeze exploded out of Buttercup's nose, spraying liquid all over Summer's thighs and dress hem. Then she stood up on her Q-tip legs—a hard feat since she had the body of a bowling ball and the feet of a rhino. After a long moment of mutual adoration, Buttercup let out a single bark, the one that always had Summer caving, then flashed those doggie eyes at her expectantly.

Maybe it was fate. Summer had a long weekend ahead. Preparing for a local author to come do a signing, and looking ahead to her first podcast interview, about intergalactic love, then there was the annual Russo family reunion just a month away, and payroll, inventory, and making a new spring window display. Having a playdate around for Buttercup might be a good thing

With a resigned sigh, Summer bent down to give Freckle a ruffle behind the ears. He panted in ecstasy, then rolled over to show off his doggie bits. "When do you want to drop him off?"

"Does Friday morning work?"

As the fixer in the family, a characteristic that had bled over into her personal and professional life, Summer had developed a finely tuned facility for being a human pacifier.

“Sure,” she said, her cheeks hurting from the weight of her smile. “Why not.”

It wasn’t like a cute dog with attachment and humping issues would scare away her customers.

God, what was she thinking?

She should say no. Stand her ground. Tell her inner people-pleaser to shut up. Remind that stubborn witch that she wasn’t looking for a friend, she was looking for her forever. And, for a moment there, she’d thought she’d found him. Maybe Summer could salvage the situation, keep herself open to a friends-to-lovers kind of situation. Or maybe she was looking for love in the wrong place.

Her sister would know how to turn this date around. How to get out of the friend zone. Autumn had this magnetic and sensual confidence about her that drew people in, especially men. She made being popular look easy, and there wasn’t anyone she couldn’t win over.

Unless it was about books or movies, Summer had a hard time striking up a conversation with strangers. It was a leftover from a quiet childhood spent watching people through the lens of her insecurities. Insecurities she could no longer afford if she was to stand any chance of finding her person.

Even as babies, Autumn had demanded center stage: walking first, talking first, being the right amount of snuggly and independent. Summer would rather be behind the spotlight, shining that beam on anyone but herself. For the most part, it worked. But there were times, like tonight, when Summer wondered what it would be like to have that easy confidence her twin sister

possessed. How different would her life be? And now many things about herself would she have to alter to become the kind of woman a man like Dr. Daniel, or her ex, saw forever in?

Autumn flew by the seat of her pants, always landing on her feet. She could step through dog poop and come out smelling like roses, leaving the poop for someone else to clean up—someone like Summer. But Summer was tired of being on poop duty; she wanted to smell the roses with someone who saw her as spotlight-worthy.

Before she could retract her offer, Daniel pulled her into an awkward side-hug. “I’ll pay you back. You need a handyman, a wedding date, a wingman, I’m your guy.”

He was most definitely not her guy. He was just another in a long line of misshaped meet-cutes.

“Couldn’t ask for a better wingman.”

On cue, Freckle jumped in on the action, or the non-action as it were. She could feel his hips undulating against her calf and his claws digging into the fabric of her too-much-for-her-budget-but-looks-fabulous new sundress.

“Freckle, down,” Daniel ordered. Before he could get a hold of the pup’s collar, a loud rip tore through the evening breeze, leaving Summer with a slit she felt from her waist to her toes. Not to mention the sudden gust of crisp air.

It was as if someone had plugged in an air conditioner and aimed it at her butt.

“Oh my god.” Summer plastered her hands on her ass and looked over her shoulder to check out the extent of the damage. “Oh my god.”

It was even worse than she’d imagined. Her entire backside was on full display. No amount of tugging could close that hole. A hospital gown would have been less revealing.

At least she had on her sexiest pair of panties. Not that Daniel was looking. He kept his eyes front and center and his hands to himself.

Summer waited for him to say something quippy to lighten the mood and make the embarrassment flooding her cheeks subside. A real hero-to-the-rescue kind of banter, straight from the pages of a Nora Ephron screenplay. Instead, he simply said, “Uh-oh.”

Uh-oh. A real heartstopper there.

“Summer, I am so sorry. We’re still working on commands like ‘down’ and ‘sit.’”

And “no humping,” she thought.

Humiliation hitting her like a cannonball to the chest, Summer gripped the tattered edges of her dress and backed away, wishing she could disappear into the wall. “It’s okay. It was an accident.”

Daniel cataloged her from head to toe and then chuckled—and it was not a you-look-beautiful-even-if-the-dress-is-ripped chuckle. “You know, when you first approached me at the park—”

“I didn’t approach you. Our leashes got tangled.”

“—I thought you were Autumn. But after tonight, I can totally see the difference.”

Summer’s pride took a direct hit. “You mean when I tripped over my words, or when your dog ripped my dress?” Because neither of those things would have happened to Autumn. She wouldn’t allow it.

“I didn’t mean—”

“What did you mean? That when you said yes to the date you thought you were going out with my sister?”

Daniel ran a hand over his face. “You guys look exactly alike. It’s a trip.”

“It’s called being twins.”

“But I should have noticed the difference right away. I mean, Autumn’s loud and laugh-a-minute and she’s got this mysterious quality to her. And you’re more—”

“—reserved and predictable.”

“Predictability is a good thing,” he said vehemently. “Guys might want a little mystery, but after a while they just want something comfortable, loyal, and warm.”

“You just described your dog.” Summer told herself that it didn’t matter, it would only add insult to injury, but she couldn’t stop herself from asking, “Would you have said yes if you’d known it was me?”

“I was relieved it was you,” he said with no hesitation, and her bruised ego recovered just enough so she could take in a breath without inflicting too much pain. “I’m not looking to date right now. Between work and my research, I don’t have the energy for anything more than friends.”

“So you knew I’d be a friend right off the bat?”

“Didn’t you? I mean, you asked me to meet you at the dog park. We talked about books and medical journals, and our dogs’ gastrointestinal systems. That doesn’t really scream ‘date.’”

She crossed her arms over her chest, flashing the public be damned. “I wore a new dress. A red, hot-date kind of dress.”

“Maybe, but your energy is dialed to ‘waiting for someone else to come along.’”

Was it?

Summer liked to think of herself as open and responsive, genuinely looking for that right connection. Maybe she’d been so busy looking for the insta-love that she’d missed out on a slow burn with a great guy. But she’d tried the slow burn with Ken, and the embers had been so

contained that he'd walked away to start over, three thousand miles away—where, according to a social-media deep dive on her part, he'd found his flame.

Daniel stilled, his eyes going soft with something that made Summer nauseous. “Did you think this was a date?”

Yes! Of course I thought it was a date. Any woman would think so! Then again, she wasn't any woman. Summer Russo was Ridgefield's honorary bookworm and shy girl with a penchant for chasing away great men. “I've got to go.”

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “So we're still good for Friday?”

Summer gave a lame two thumbs up and Princess Buttercup barked. “So good.”

She waited until Dr. Daniel and Freckle had disappeared around the corner before she leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes.

Why was this her life? This was the seventh failed meet-cute just this year, and it was only May.

“Upward and onward,” she said to Buttercup.

Buttercup looked at her with those big doggie eyes and cute wrinkly jowls and farted.

“Pretty much sums it up.” She straightened and led Buttercup through into the shop, the jingling bells welcoming her and bringing her back to the first time she'd stepped through that door.

She was immediately greeted by the musty smell of ink on paper, glue from the bindings, and a hint of the aroma of the hand-pressed Italian espressos that had been served to customers earlier that day. She was also greeted with the many memories she'd made there. Huddled on her grandmother's lap, both in their pajamas, reading *The Secret Garden* or *Little Women*. She could

almost feel her nonna's arms around her, whispering in her ear the words that one day this shop would be hers.

Summer wasn't a storyteller like her father or a shining star like her twin. But in this bookstore, she could become anyone she wanted to be. A fair maiden, a deadly assassin, or even the sometimes awkward but endearing girl who, through self-exploration and pluck, got the boy of her dreams.

Summer took it all in and found herself smiling. So the date hadn't gone as planned. So what? She was living her dream. Spending her days at All Things Cupid, using her superpower of pairing the right love story with the right person.

After unleashing Buttercup, who immediately waddled to her food bowl and then plopped down in front of it like one of Her Majesty's Guards protecting the Crown Jewels, Summer unbuttoned her dress and slowly made her way back toward the counter, where she kept a spare change of clothes. She looked at herself in the mirror that hung behind the register and let out a sigh that came from the depths of her soul.

Normally, being in her nonna's shop, surrounded by all the beautiful books and endless adventures, could erase even the worst of days. Owning All Things Cupid was every bookworm's dream and every booklover's escape from the daily grind of life.

But not tonight, she thought as she looked at her reflection. Tonight, she felt like a big red fire hydrant in a dog park. She was covered in fur, snot, and possibly had dog poop stuck to the underside of her heels.

"You never know, this may end up being a friends-to-lovers situation," she told herself, pulling her dress over her head and inspecting the gigantic rip. The dress was ruined, but her

night hadn't been a total disaster. She'd gone on a date with a charming man, gained some new experiences, and come out one failed meet-cute closer to her soulmate.

Her ability to see the romance in everyday life was another of her superpowers. She lived her life like that quote from the movie *Love Actually*: "Love is actually all around us."

Summer believed that, with all her being. Just look at her family. They were crazy and loud and intrusive, but they loved as fiercely as they nosed into each other's business. It was the kind of love and passion her parents had that Summer was craving in a partner.

"One more trope down, a hundred to go," she said, dropping her dress to the floor.

"You know," someone said from behind her, "if you'd gone at him in those, you'd have probably gotten a kiss. Maybe even some two-legged action."

A scream stuck in Summer's throat as she grabbed her work shirt and hugged it against her chest. In the mirror, she could see a tall, broad, axe-murdering shadow.

Never a fan of the damsels in distress, Summer tapped into her best heroine-saves-herself confidence and grabbed the heaviest thing within reach—a signed first edition of *Anna Karenina* that her nonna had hand-carried from Italy. It weighed as much as a concrete slab and had edges as sharp as a fileting knife.

On instinct, she spun around and launched the literary grenade at her intruder. Only, Summer had never been the most coordinated twin—that title went to Autumn—and so the book flew into left field, crashing into a shelf housing Bigfoot erotica.

"Should I call foul, love?" the clipped and precise British voice said from the buttery leather couch in the reading area that he'd completely overtaken.

She'd know that pompous, entitled voice anywhere. The evenly stressed syllables, the slight trill on the r's making the words almost musical—not in a good way like Prince Harry, but

in an entitled way that grated on her every nerve. To think she'd once found him a bit dashing and charming.

A slow smile spread across his face as he leaned over to pick up the book and lazily thumbed through it. She growled in frustration. Of all the people to witness her botched date, why did it have to be the all-around book snob and corporate raider who gobbled up mom-and-pop shops for breakfast? Not to mention that he was dead set on putting Summer out of business.

Evil incarnate—Wes Kingston.