



MARISSA CLARKE

Playing matchmaker to
the boss's sexy daughter
is harder than he
expected...

AN
ANIMAL
ATTRACTION
ROMANTIC
COMEDY

A bouquet of tulips in various colors (pink, purple, white) is arranged in a light green ceramic vase with a scalloped rim. The vase sits on a patch of bright green grass. A pink tag is attached to the bouquet, featuring the text 'DEAR JANE'.

DEAR
JANE

DEAR JANE

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ROMANTIC COMEDY

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Entangled Publishing, LLC
2614 South Timberline Road
Suite 109
Fort Collins, CO 80525
Visit our website at www.entangledpublishing.com.

Lovestruck is an imprint of Entangled Publishing, LLC.

Edited by Liz Pelletier
Cover design by Heather Howland
Cover art from iStock

ISBN 978-1-63375-859-9

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition January 2017

LOVE
→-struck→

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For my husband, Laine. My real-life hero and forever love.

Chapter One

Operation *Smooth Sailing* had officially entered week two. All Eric Blackwell needed to do in order to make junior partner at Dixon, Rosenbaum & Schoot was maintain the status quo for the next six weeks. Basically, he just had to stay under the radar and get the Anderson Enterprises acquisition to work out on paper without screwing anything up.

He straightened his tie and pushed the button for the fifteenth floor. Six weeks. No problem. Well, except for that little bit of bad news about some potential negative tax consequences for Anderson Enterprises that the analysis department had missed. Yeah, that.

He straightened his tie again. Being team leader, it was his task to brief Mr. Dixon on the details, and he'd been putting it off, hoping someone in his department would find some case law precedent, or a loophole, or a freaking magic spell to fix it.

The elevator doors slid open, and before he made ten steps into the lobby, a booming voice stopped him in his tracks. “This message arrived yesterday afternoon, Marcie. Why am I only now receiving it?”

The receptionist cleared her throat and slumped in her chair behind the semicircular teak desk in the lobby. “I’m sorry, Mr. Dixon. So many things came at once near the end of the day. I emailed your secretary and she said to—”

Face red, Mr. Dixon waved the paper in front of Marcie’s nose. He wasn’t a small man by any means, but when he was angry, he filled a room. “So, now you’re going to blame someone else?”

“No sir, your secretary said to... I... I...”

“There are two things I can’t abide: people who shift blame, and procrastinators.”

Yep, well, today probably wasn’t a good day to deliver late news about the analysis department’s mistake. Eric froze near the west wall of the lobby and did his best wood paneling imitation, hoping his dark suit jacket was sufficient camo to keep Mr. Dixon from noticing him. This was the last thing he needed first thing in the morning. He hadn’t even made it to his office yet.

“Dixon, Rosenbaum & Schoot prides itself on reliability, punctuality, and accuracy.” Mr. Dixon emphasized his statement with a palm slap on the desk, causing poor Marcie to almost launch out of her skin. “We expect all our employees to uphold this standard.”

“Yes, sir.” Marcie stared down at her hands.

Mr. Dixon folded the message and placed it in his suit pocket. “Well, then.”

Eric held his breath as the man strode with purpose

toward the hallway to his office.

“Mr. Blackwell.”

Shit, shit, shit. How did he do that? He’d never even turned around. No way could he have seen him standing there. “Good morning, Mr. Dixon.”

“I believe you are late delivering the financials on the Anderson deal. I’ll hold three o’clock open for you. Since I haven’t heard anything on this, I expect good news.”

“Three o’clock.” Eric’s stomach sank. Yeah...sank. Perfect. Man the lifeboats; Operation *Smooth Sailing* just hit an iceberg.

Once Mr. Dixon disappeared from view, Marcie covered her face with her hands. Crying did it to Eric every time—yanked his heart out and stomped on it. When he was younger, he’d do anything to stop his mother’s crying, and he’d do anything now. Poor Marcie.

He took a deep breath and approached the desk. “Hey, Marcie. Sorry about that. He’s really not all that bad.” Well, that was a bust. It came out more like a question than a statement of fact.

To his relief, her eyes were completely dry when she lowered her hands from her face. “Yes, he is. He’s...” But she didn’t finish her thought before the phone rang. “Dixon, Rosenbaum, & Schoot, could you hold please?” Without waiting for an answer, she pushed the hold button. “I just had a million things come in at once this morning, too”—she gestured to a foot-tall stack of mail on the corner of the desk—“and I can’t possibly handle all of it and answer the phones. And Mr. Dixon scares me.”

Yeah, second that. His grip tightened on the briefcase containing the bad news report on the acquisition. “Is there

something I can do to help you?”

“No.” She adjusted her headset. “You’re sweet to ask, though.”

The elevator slid open, and a delivery guy stepped out with an enormous bouquet of flowers. Making a line straight for Marcie, he set the vase on the desktop and shoved a clipboard at her right as the phone rang again. She put two more calls on hold as the guy stood there, clipboard out, clearly unaffected by the harried receptionist.

“Can anyone sign for those?” Eric asked when the phone rang again. The deliverer handed him the pen, he signed for the flowers, and the guy went on his way while Marcie directed a call to the Worker’s Comp Department and another to the Family Law Division.

She stood and checked the card on the flowers, and with a groan, slumped down in her chair. “I have the worst luck ever. Of course they go to the office farthest from my desk.”

He turned the arrangement to find out who it was for. “Jane Dixon” was scrawled in blue ink on the undersized envelope held in place with a plastic pitchfork-looking thing.

Jane Dixon. Eric played the image of her through his head. Small and blonde with huge blue eyes—not anything like her father, the man currently waiting to kill Eric’s partnership dreams. He and Jane had been in the same meetings on occasion, but they’d never spoken to each other...just stared—well, *he’d* stared; she probably hadn’t even noticed him.

Jane put in long, long hours, like he did. He knew this because even though she worked in the Family Law Division and he in the Business Mergers and Acquisitions Department, her office was down the hall from his. One of

the highlights of his day was when she walked by his open door. On most nights, her office light was still on well after nine o'clock when he packed it in to go home.

He stared at the card, dying to peek inside and see who was sending her flowers. Maybe a boyfriend... A strange ping of jealousy flared and he almost laughed. Jealous. He was the pitiful guy who left his door open to score a look at her. She didn't even know who he was. It wasn't like he'd ever dreamed of asking her out or anything—okay, well, maybe he had dreamed of it, but it was a ridiculous fantasy. Not only was there a strict non-fraternization policy at DR&S, she was the boss's daughter, for fuck's sake.

Jealous? Nope. Pathetic? Absolutely.

The switchboard lit up again, and the receptionist gave a frustrated huff.

“Listen, Marcie. I'm going down that hallway anyway. Why don't I just drop these off for you?” He picked up the vase.

“Oh my gosh, Mr. Blackwell. You're the nicest guy. Thank you so much.”

Nice... Yeah, being Mr. Nice Guy had nothing to do with getting a close-up look at Jane Dixon. Nothing at all. Again, pathetic. “Not a problem. I hope your day gets better.”

“It just did.”

Yeah, so had his.

Chapter Two

After dropping off his briefcase in his office, Eric made his way to the end of the hallway and knocked on Jane's door, flowers in hand.

He felt ridiculous. Sort of like he had before his prom in high school, only Jane wasn't going to dance with him and the flowers were from someone else. Still, this was a chance to actually speak to her and that was an opportunity he couldn't pass up. He was about to make her day with a clearly expensive bouquet of flowers from another man. His chest tightened. So did his grip on the vase. He was beginning to think pathetic wasn't a strong enough descriptor.

"Come in," she called.

When he opened the door, she didn't look up from her computer screen, clearly engrossed in whatever she was reading. Brow furrowed, she tapped the end of a pen on the side of her monitor. Holy shit, she was beautiful—intensely focused with the sun from the wall of windows

making her hair shine like gold. He'd never been this close to her before and found himself a little overwhelmed, which was ridiculous. He was head of an entire team at one of the most prestigious law firms in New York City. Nothing should overwhelm him. *Get it together, Blackwell.*

When she finally looked up, her eyes widened and she pushed to her feet behind the huge, shiny desk. "I'm sorry. I thought you were Marcie dropping something off."

"Well, I am... Not Marcie, but dropping something off." *Great. Just great.* He groaned inwardly at how ridiculous his first words ever spoken to this woman were.

Her large blue eyes flitted from his face to the flowers and back again.

"These are for you," he said, awkwardly holding them out.

"Oh...um..." She circled her desk, moving closer. "Wow. Thanks."

"I'm Eric Blackwell." He cleared his throat. "From Mergers and Acquisitions."

She smiled, flashing straight, white teeth. "Yeah, I know."

She knew? His heart hammered harder, which seemed impossible. He cleared his throat again. "Marcie was swamped and asked me to deliver these for her."

"Oh..." She glanced at the flowers, her smile fading slightly.

"Yeah, she had a bunch of stuff come in at once, and I was already heading this way, so..."

She nodded. "That was nice of you. Thanks." With her hair pulled into a knot on the back of her head, her eyes looked huge.

Eric placed the vase on her desk, taking a deep breath.

Shit. She even smelled good. Maybe it was the flowers. “These are nice. You must have an admirer.” And his morbid curiosity wanted to know who it was so he could direct his irrational jealousy appropriately. He pulled the envelope from the arrangement and handed it to her, hoping not only to extend his time this close to her but also get some intel.

He gritted his teeth as she pulled out the card. This level of interest was incontestable proof that he was working way too hard and playing way too little. Since his break up with Shannon almost a year ago, he’d done nothing but work. No wonder being this close to a woman was the highlight of his day. He had to fix this. Quick.

No. He needed to hold tight until after he made junior partner. That had been his goal from the start. It was *important* he get that promotion. The money would be nice, but really, it was all about the security, something he never had growing up.

Jane’s face clouded as she studied the card. “Who does this kind of thing? What kind of...” She waved a hand in an exasperated motion. “What kind of jerk uses a romantic gesture as a way to deliver a message like this. Really?”

And here he’d thought dropping off the flowers would associate him with something positive in her mind. Today sucked.

“I thought I’d gotten a date right for once, you know what I mean?”

Nope. Not a clue. How could a woman like this—obviously smart since she worked at one of the premier law firms in NYC, and gorgeous on top of that—get anything wrong on a date? Eric had an overwhelming urge to hunt down and beat the shit out of the prick who sent those

flowers.

When she turned, her eyes brimmed with tears. Not the stream down your face kind, but controlled and held in. *Oh God, not tears.* They made him feel helpless and “holdy.” That’s what his mother had called it. His solution for tears was to hug, which he absolutely under no circumstances could do to Jane Dixon. The image of holding her soft body against his harder one, made him... well, harder. He clasped his hands behind his back to keep from taking Jane in his arms. “I’m sorry. I...”

She blinked, pushing the tears back before they could fully form. “No, *I’m* sorry. You were just doing something nice for Marcie. You had no idea you’d been thrown in the room with the One-date Wonder.”

“Maybe I should—” He stepped backward toward the door.

She threw her hands up. “Seriously, how I can screw it up every time? Every. Single. Time.” She paced to the edge of her desk. “Do you know that I haven’t had a second date since I graduated law school?”

His day had just gone from pathetic to surreal. All he could do was shake his head.

She paced to the potted plant in the corner and then back to her desk. “Oh yeah. Loads of first dates. Never a second. And you know what?”

Hopefully that was rhetorical, because no way in hell could he possibly guess what would come out of her mouth next.

“I’m so done. I’m never going to find a guy to ask me out twice. I should swear off men forever. Men suck. Dating sucks.” She took a shuddering breath. “I suck.” And then

one of the tears she'd held back this whole time escaped—only one—as she stood perfectly still and silent.

As if on auto-pilot, he crossed to her and folded her in his arms like he'd done with his mother so many times in his life. This wasn't anything like those hugs, though, and his body made that fact painfully clear as she circled her arms around his waist under his jacket and leaned her cheek against his chest. And it was definitely her and not the flowers that smelled good.

After a few seconds, Eric's heart hammered so hard he was certain Jane could hear it. There wouldn't be enough lifeboats in the world to save Operation *Smooth Sailing* if he continued to rub his hands up and down his boss's daughter's back. Reluctantly, he loosened his grip, pulled away to create some space between them, and gave her shoulder an awkward, platonic pat.

"Sorry." She straightened his lapel and brushed it, stepping back to arm's length. "I..." She took a deep breath. "...got a little emotional on you there."

Eric remained frozen in place, only a couple of feet from her, completely clueless what to do or say. He needed a how-to manual for this kind of thing.

She leaned against her desk, facing him. "I'm so frustrated."

Ditto.

"I mean, why can't a guy just go out on a date without an agenda or strategy? And why are women held to a different standard?"

Rhetorical. Please let that be rhetorical. He tried to look somewhere else, but couldn't draw his gaze away from her hands as she fiddled with the necklace that disappeared into

her cleavage behind her silk blouse.

“If a guy spills ice water in his date’s lap, she wouldn’t hold it against him forever. She wouldn’t send him flowers with a Dear John letter attached. Am I right?”

Ice water in his lap might be just the ticket right now, Eric decided, finally pulling his gaze away from the freckle on her neck peeking out from under her silk collar. “No. Uh... I mean, yes. Yes, you’re right.” Right in so many ways it made him dizzy. Coming to her office had been a mistake. It had to be the ten months of abstinence in combination with the ridiculous hours he’d been putting in leading up to this merger, and the stress of blowing his promotion this close to his annual review that had him in this state.

“I guess I’m just scared I’ll never find a guy who’ll go out with me more than once. It’s kind of a joke in my family. My three brothers are married and I can’t even get a second date.”

“Maybe it’s just that you’re going out with the wrong guys. I know lots of men who would give anything to go out with someone like you.”

“You do?” Her eyebrows rose, her expression hopeful.

“Sure.” He could think of one in particular, but sadly there was that non-fraternization clause he’d signed when he was hired.

“Ohmygod, you’re the best, Eric!” She held out her hand. “You’re on.”

What the hell? He accepted her extended hand, and she gave it a vigorous handshake.

“I’m free on Fridays after seven.” She scribbled on a Post-It note on her desk. “Give one of your friends my number, and we’ll set up a time.”

He took the slip of paper. “O—kay.”

She smiled. It was a huge smile that lit up her entire face, like the sun coming out. “Great. You’re the best. Really, you are.”

Oh yeah. He was the best for sure. The best at mucking everything up. He finally had Jane’s phone number and now he was tasked with finding another man to give it to. Perfect.

“Oh. And I have another favor to ask.”

Maybe this could turn around.

She held up a finger and wagged it. “No lawyers. I will never date one. Ever. I’d rather stay single the rest of my life.”

Nope. No turning this disaster around.

Numb, and not exactly sure how he’d gone from up-and-coming attorney to flower delivery boy to Jane Dixon’s personal dating service, Eric shuffled out the door and down the hallway to the safety of his office. This time, he closed the door.