

Plus One Problem

by Lenora Vale

A fake relationship. A real wedding. Completely genuine feelings.

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JOSIE

The problem with asking your best friend's brother to be your fake boyfriend for a wedding weekend was that her best friend's brother had been the subject of approximately forty percent of her romantic imagination for the last four years, which she had not disclosed to anyone and was not planning to.

"Just for the weekend," she said, to Eli Park, who was standing in his kitchen eating cereal at seven PM and looking at her with the expression of a man being asked to do something he already knew he was going to agree to. "My ex will be there with his fiancée. I just need someone to—"

"Look like your boyfriend," Eli said.

"Look like someone I might reasonably be dating, yes."

He considered his cereal. "Who does the bride think you're bringing?"

"She thinks I've been seeing someone."

"And you've been lying to Min for how long?"

"Four months." Josie winced. "It escalated."

"What's his name?"

"I panicked. I said Eli."

He looked at her.

"I know," she said.

"You told my sister your fake boyfriend's name is Eli."

"I panicked!"

He put his cereal bowl in the sink. Turned around. He was tall in a way that his sister wasn't and had his mother's cheekbones and four years of the specific kind of problem that Josie had created for herself by being a person who noticed cheekbones.

"What do you need me to do?" he said.

"Show up. Be pleasant. Hold my hand occasionally. Leave before breakfast."

"Leave before breakfast," he repeated. "So we're staying in the same room."

"It's a country house wedding. They've assigned rooms. You're on the list as my guest."

He was quiet for a moment.

"What's in it for me?" he said.

"My eternal gratitude and you get to eat wedding food, which is always better than whatever that was." She pointed at the cereal bowl.

"It's a perfectly good cereal."

"Eli."

"Yes," he said. "Fine. Yes."

ELI

The problem with agreeing to be Josie Tran's fake boyfriend for a wedding weekend was that he'd been approximately four years too slow about being her actual one, which he also had not disclosed to anyone and was also not planning to.

She had told his sister her fake boyfriend's name was Eli. He had several feelings about this which he was keeping in a box.

He drove them up to the house on the Saturday morning. She was in the passenger seat in a green dress he'd not seen before, her dark hair down, talking about the plan — who knew the ex, what the ex's fiancée was like, the general landscape of the weekend. He listened and drove and did not look at the dress or think about the plan in the specific way he was trying not to think about it.

The country house was exactly what country house weddings looked like: old stone, roses, cars parked across a gravel sweep, the specific social energy of fifty people who had collectively decided to have feelings in a formal register.

Josie took his hand at the car door. Automatic, without comment, and he felt it from his palm to somewhere behind his sternum.

"Okay?" she said.

"Fine," he said.

The ex — Marcus, tall, no particular offence to him as a person — was exactly where Josie had predicted, with a fiancée who had the specific glow of a woman in the planning stages of something large and expensive. Josie's grip tightened on Eli's hand about three seconds before they came into view. He moved his thumb across her knuckles once, quietly, and felt her exhale.

"Josie," Marcus said, with the carefully pleasant tone of an ex who had done something worth the pleasantness.

"Marcus," Josie said, with the kind of smile that looked warm and meant nothing. "This is Eli."

Eli shook hands. Said the right things. Stood where he was supposed to stand. He was good at reading rooms — it was a useful quality — and what he read in this room was: Josie was braver than she thought, Marcus was more interested in her than his fiancée would appreciate, and the weekend was going to be more complicated than *show up, hold hand, leave before breakfast*.

JOSIE

The room had one bed. This she had known. What she had not fully modelled was the reality of Eli Park in the room with one bed at eleven PM after four hours of being credibly in love with each other for an audience.

Because that was the thing. He was good at it. Not performatively good — not the kind of person who put on a show. The kind of good that looked like the real thing. His hand at her back. The way he listened to her stories at dinner like they were interesting, which they weren't, they were the edited highlights of the last four months, but he listened like they were. The moment Marcus made a comment about her work and Eli responded — not aggressively, just clearly — with such a complete sense of her perspective that she'd had to look at the table for a second.

Now they were in the room. The bed was a double. The window was open to the sounds of the estate, distant music from the outdoor reception still going.

"You can have the bed," she said.

"I'm fine with the—"

"The chair is a decorative chair, Eli. It's for looking at."

He looked at the chair. It was a small Victorian wingback clearly intended for atmosphere rather than occupation.

"The bed's fine," he said. "We're adults."

They did the bathroom rotation. She got in on the left side. He got in on the right. The music drifted up from the garden.

"Thank you," she said, into the dark. "You were—you're good at this."

"You're easy to be with," he said. Simply. Like it was information rather than something else.

She looked at the ceiling. "Eli."

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"Mm."

"When Marcus asked how we met, you said the farmers' market. Which is true."

"It is true."

"But you added the part about me arguing with the cheese vendor."

"That also happened."

"You remember that."

"Josie." His voice was quiet and direct. "I remember most things about you. That's not a new development."

The music. The ceiling. The bed, large enough to have real distance and not quite enough distance.

"How long?" she said.

"A while," he said. "Long enough that when you said your fake boyfriend's name was Eli, Min called me and laughed for about four minutes."

"Min knows?"

"Min has known since approximately year two." A pause. "She thought you knew I knew."

"I didn't know you knew."

"I didn't know you—" He stopped. "Four months of a fake boyfriend named Eli."

"I panicked," she said.

"You panicked," he agreed. And then, quieter: "Josie."

"Yes."

"Can I—"

"Yes," she said, before he finished. Returning the favour of four years.

ELI

She kissed first, which he would tell the story of to a small number of people for a long time. She turned and kissed him with the directness of someone who had been thinking about it long enough that the thinking was done.

He kissed her back with four years of accumulation, which was not as overwhelming as he'd been privately concerned it might be — it was actually very simple, because Josie was exactly as she was in every other context and he knew every other context and this was just the rest of the map.

She made a sound low in her throat when he pulled her closer and he heard it with his whole nervous system.

"We're going to have to tell Min the fake part was very short-lived," she said, at some point.

"Min will not be surprised," he said.

"She's going to be insufferable."

"Yes," he agreed. "Entirely."

The window was still open. The music was still drifting up. Outside, fifty people were having formal feelings about someone else's love story. Inside, something considerably less formal was happening.

He didn't leave before breakfast. They agreed, jointly, that this was the correct decision.

Min texted at 9 AM: *So. Fake, huh.*

Josie replied: *Shut up.*

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Min replied: *You're welcome. Also Eli owes me twenty quid.*

Eli showed Josie the message. She looked at it for a moment.

"You bet on this?"

"She bet on it," he said. "I just didn't argue."

She kissed him again, which he took as a position statement.

Outside, the roses. Inside, the decorative chair, which no one had sat in.
The map, finally finished.