

Half Baked

A Better Late Romance

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Maggie Milne has everything she needs—a loving family, a delightful bakery, good books, and cat food.

But when Stephen Fox, a health food nut, opens a sporting goods store and café across the street and some of Maggie's loyal customers begin to replace their morning donuts with gluten-free grub, Maggie's ire, as well as her yeasty rolls, begins to rise.

Fresh off a heart attack and divorce, Stephen Fox needs to change his ways. Now it's clean-eating and small-town-living for him. Since his relocation to Rancho Allegro, there's only been one woman who has caught Stephen's eye: a charming masked woman in a butterfly costume he met at a Mardi Gras party.

Imagine his horror when he learns Maggie, the obnoxious baker who has been trying to ruin his business from day one, is the masked woman he's been searching for!

It's double- chocolate donuts meets kefir. Can two people from separate grocery store aisles overcome their differences?

CHAPTER ONE

MARCH

Halfway across the dark parking lot, Robbie stopped and tugged on his collar. “I hate these things.”

“The duds or the gala?” Maggie straightened her brother’s cheap clip-on bowtie and had a vivid flashback through decades past to the senior prom, where she’d tried to smooth down Robbie’s cowlick. Balding had long since cured that problem.

The prom had also been held at this place, the Rancho Allegro Country Club. It seemed like a lifetime ago, and yet, here she was with her brother—again—in fancy clothes. It was as if she were on a spinning wheel, revisiting the same places with the same people over and over again.

“Both,” Robbie growled. “All these pompous posers looking down on the rest of us peons.” He shuddered.

She thought about pointing out that his generous salary probably made him richer than most of the people attending the Mardi Gras party—not to mention in the world—but since she knew he hadn’t gone into medicine for the money, she pressed her lips together and strode toward the lights and sound spilling out of the club’s doors.

She flicked her gaze over him. “Why aren’t you wearing a costume?”

Robbie smoothed down his dinner jacket. “I am.”

“What are you supposed to be?”

“I’m Charlie Chaplin.” He held up his cane as proof. “Obviously.”

“Where’s your mustache? Where’s your hat?”

“Hey, I’ve got the cane. That’s enough.”

Her brother, the minimalist.

“I like your costume.” Robbie’s gaze flicked over her. “The blue wig should make you look like a Smurf or Marge Simpson, but somehow you pull it off.”

Maggie fluttered her wings. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it? Tessa made it.”

Robbie’s smile tightened, and a closed expression like a hood passed over his face.

She bumped him with her hip. “Why don’t you like her?”

“I never said I don’t like her,” he grumbled, and tugged on his collar.

Maggie stepped in front of him to readjust his tie. Again. Even knowing it was a lost cause—he’d probably try to loosen it again the moment her back was turned. “You clam up whenever she’s around.”

He shrugged away from her. “It’s weird you’re friends, that’s all.”

She trotted to keep up with his long strides through the parking lot. “Why?”

“You’re nothing like each other. You’re you and she’s... She drives a Mercedes.” He tucked his hands into his pockets.

“So?”

He shrugged again.

“A Mercedes isn’t a pimp-mobile.”

He elbowed her. “Come on, I have to show my face.” As head of the pediatric department, he was right. He looped his arm through hers and led her up the curb. “Thanks for being my date tonight.”

They passed the valets milling around the Teslas and Land Cruisers. Because Robbie didn't believe in valets, they had parked in the neighborhood adjacent to the club. A honky-tonk jazz band began to play.

"No problem. I love free food."

He smirked and shook his head. "I don't get you."

"Yes, you do." She slid him a glance. "If not you, then who?"

"You're right. I do get you, but I just don't understand how you can spend all day around food and never get tired of it."

"Do you get tired of helping children?"

"No, but it's different."

"No, it's not. You save people, I feed them. We're in the same line of work."

They passed the valets—young, lean men in button-down white shirts and tight black pants—without looking at them. Their parents had taught them that trick—never make eye contact with someone who might expect a tip. Of course, since they hadn't parked in the lot, they didn't need to tip the handsome young men, but Maggie felt their questioning glances on her back as she followed Robbie up the stairs.

"Stop." Maggie took Robbie's arm.

"What?"

She held out her hand.

He rolled his eyes but placed his hand in hers and gave her their secret handshake, the one they'd come up with right before Maggie had started kindergarten. He'd been the one to take her to school because their parents couldn't leave the bakery. When she'd started to cry, he'd shown her what he called their very own secret handshake. It meant that they would always be

there for each other. They looped their fingers together and bumped wrist before breaking a part and grinning at each other.

Originally, the country club had been a hunting lodge back when Rancho Allegro had really been a ranch. Long ago, coyotes and mountain lions had been nearly as plentiful as the bunnies now terrorizing the gardeners. Strange how the gentlest of the creatures were the ones who actually survived urbanization.

They passed through the wide, heavily carved wooden doors. In the lobby, several people vied for Robbie's attention all at once. Maggie, a baker without food and therefore a nobody, wandered off to peruse the refreshment table, not necessarily because she was hungry, but because she liked looking at beautiful food displays.

Her feet, clad in ballet flats, were silent on the shiny tile floor. A chandelier as big as her dining room table hung over the hall and cast scattered light over the guests.

When she reached the refreshments, Maggie had to stop herself from whistling in admiration. The caterers, men and women dressed in black, moved like perfectly choreographed dancers around the room, bearing trays that looked more like portable art than appetizers. *Edible art*. The phrase came to Maggie's mind and rested there. Could she try to copy any of this in her bakery?

Her fingers itched for her phone, but she'd left it at home. She wished she could take pictures of the tables. Did Robbie have his? Undoubtedly. He was available to his patients twenty-four seven. She searched for his gleaming head above the crowd, but when she spotted him surrounded by a cluster of beautiful people, she decided not to interrupt him. Like a poorly behaved puppy, he needed, but despised, socialization.

Who were the caterers? Maybe she should skirt around outside to catch a glimpse of their van. Hopefully, it would have a logo on it. Her nose wrinkled when she spotted asparagus spears wrapped in a flaky crust and a piece of bacon. She would never understand the compulsion to ruin perfectly good baked goods by partnering them with vegetables.

“What, no donuts?” Tessa, dressed as Florence Nightingale, appeared at her side. “They should have hired Maggie’s Muffin Stop.”

Maggie turned and gave her friend a hug. “Maybe next time.”

Robbie was right, they were an unlikely pair. Maggie was a tall, red-headed match-stick while Tessa was as blond as Tinker Bell and just as pixyish. But why was Tessa wearing this unflattering costume? The black dress and white apron did little to show off Tessa’s darling figure, and the cap was hideous. For Tessa, a successful clothing designer, it was an odd choice.

“Really?” Tessa’s eyes lit with excitement.

A small thrill passed through Maggie. “Robbie said he’d recommend me.”

Tessa smiled and said, “That’s great,” but her gaze darted around the room. Was she looking for Robbie? Or someone else? After not finding what or whom she’d been searching for, she returned her attention and a critical eye to Maggie. “The costume looks really good on you.”

“Thanks to you.” Should she lie and return the compliment?

Tessa flushed and straightened Maggie’s wings. “I love making beautiful things even more beautiful.”

Maggie glanced around the patio. The strings of lights over their heads cast sparkly reflections in all directions. “It looks fabulous here, doesn’t it?”

The DJ called all the single men to the dance floor. A few obliged. When the Village People began to wail, “It’s fun to stay at the YMCA!”, some good sports

went through the motions, but Maggie turned her back. She wasn't interested in single men.

"Yes," Tessa said with a touch of pride. "My dad wondered if they were going to cancel because of yesterday's earthquake, but the Lodge wasn't impacted. Thankfully."

Maggie's thoughts flitted to the chandelier, and she made a mental note to not be caught standing beneath it if another tremor hit. "Any damage at your shop?"

"Nothing I couldn't take care of myself. How about the bakery?"

"A lot of rattling pots and pans, but not much else." Which was amazing. The bakery was as old as she was—over fifty—and very few renovations had been made over the years.

Tessa bumped her with her hip. "We're lucky."

Maggie wished that were true. Her parents used to say she was their lucky penny, and she'd always felt that way...until Peter got sick almost ten years ago. Sometimes it seemed like she'd been trying to win her way back into Lady Luck's good favor ever since.

The DJ thanked the men, and a conga line formed.

Tessa took Maggie's hand. "Want to dance?"

"Sure, but first let me check my purse."

Tessa winced when she saw Maggie's old beat-up leather satchel. It matched the costume like a paper bag accessorized a tuxedo, but Maggie refused to be embarrassed. She loved her purse—she'd had it for nearly a decade. And yes, it looked like the poor country cousin among all the Coaches and Kate Spades on the shelf, but she didn't care. She handed it to the coat check girl and, not knowing what else to do with the receipt, she tucked it in her bra.

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Stephen strolled into the country club and sought out Tessa. Because of her diminutive size, she was often easy to miss. Most of the guests were wearing masks, but Tessa had told him she'd be wearing a Florence Nightingale costume. He spotted her talking with a tall, blue-haired yet beautiful butterfly. He watched Tessa's companion tuck something into her bra. An unwelcome thrill passed through him.

Because he was new to Rancho Allegro, Stephen only knew a handful of the guests. Tessa's father, Uncle Jack, the president of the St. John's Hospital chain and had insisted he attend. Even though Stephen was probably now worth more than his Uncle Jack, Jack was still a difficult man to disappoint. The entire family, not just Stephen, kowtowed to the rich uncle...even when there were, now, wealthier cousins.

Although, Uncle Jack, Aunt Miriam, Mitch, and Tessa weren't actually blood relatives. Since he was an only child born to a pair of only children, Uncle Jack and Aunt Miriam had made him an honorary cousin when he was young because his mom and Aunt Miriam were best friends.

The DJ invited all the single ladies to the dance floor. Stephen flicked his gaze over the crowd, wondering if the butterfly would dance. He didn't see her, and his interest dimmed. As he crossed the patio, something crinkled beneath his shoe. Given the noise—the music, the chatter, the clattering cutlery—he almost missed it. What was it that people said about the sound of falling coins—everybody heard it because people heard what they wanted to hear? Stephen stooped and picked up the hundred-dollar bill beneath his shoe. Someone must have dropped it.

He glanced around at all the bejeweled people in their fancy costumes. Only one bald man wasn't in a costume—although he was wearing a bowtie. Did he think that was costume enough?

In most crowds, someone would be frantically searching for the lost bill, but here, no one seemed to notice. Still, it had to have been an accident. He held it up and slowly turned, hoping someone would take note. Someone did.

“I’ll take that.” Mitch, dressed as a pirate, moved to swipe it from his hand.

Stephen tightened his grip on the bill and shoved it into his pocket, away from his cousin’s greed.

“Hey,” Mitch complained. “This is a fundraiser. I’m just trying to raise funds.”

Stephen tried not to roll his eyes. “If I can’t find the owner, I’ll give this to someone who needs it.”

“The hospital needs it, you loon.” Mitch waved his saber at the party and came close to knocking off the fake parrot on his shoulder. “That’s why we’re here.”

“Put away your sword before you hurt somebody,” Stephen said. “This is a hundred-dollar bill. It cost, what, three hundred dollars to get in here? Besides, I already made a generous donation to the hospital. I’m going to give this to someone else.”

“Who?” Mitch scowled and adjusted his eyepatch.

“I’m going to give it to...” Glancing around the room, he debated. A valet? One of the servers? He could wait and donate it to one of the regular charities on his list: The Red Cross, St. Jude’s Medical Research, or Orange Wood Foster Homes.

But then it would weigh on him until he actually made the donation, and more important, Mitch might suspect he was keeping it for himself. Better to get rid of it immediately. His gaze landed on the coat check. One scruffy leather satchel stood out from the rest. He strode over to the bored-looking girl with a pigtail on either side of her head behind the counter.

“See that purse.” He pointed at the satchel.

“This one?” Surprise for a moment overrode the girl’s bored expression. She obviously didn’t think a man in a Zorro cape would be interested in a scuffed leather satchel.

“It belongs to my girlfriend.”

“And now you’re a liar,” Mitch whispered in his ear.

The girl narrowed her eyes and tightened her lips. “I can’t give out any of the purses unless you have a ticket.” Her pigtails bounced when she spoke.

Stephen hurried to placate her. “I just want you to tuck this into it.” He pulled out the bill and showed it to the girl. “Can you do that?”

Pigtail girl’s nostrils flared, but she did as he asked.

“You’re a crazy person,” Mitch said.

“Crazy like a fox,” Aunt Miriam said from behind him. Approaching eighty, she looked and acted like someone nearly half her age. Her cheeks were flushed pink, her eyes bright, and diamonds sparkled in her ears and around her neck. Even her flapper dress seemed to shimmer. She snaked her arm around his waist and looped the other through Mitch’s arm. “A silver fox! How did two of my favorite boys ever grow to be so old and yet so handsome?”

Mitch flushed. “The same could be said of you, Mom.”

“Hush!” Aunt Miriam shook her long cigarette holder in Mitch’s face. “I don’t want anyone to know I’m old enough to belong to you.” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “You could pretend I’m your date.”

“I could,” Mitch said, pulling away. “But I won’t.” He gave Stephen the stink eye. “Let’s ignore her.”

“You can ignore me, but you better not ignore your wife,” Aunt Miriam said, nodding at the approaching Lydia, who was wearing a Queen of Hearts costume.

Mitch groaned but also grinned, as Lydia came to wrap her arms around her husband’s waist and lean her head on his back.

There were lots of things Stephen didn’t admire about his cousin, but he did envy him his long and happy marriage. Mitch had married ten years before Stephen and hopefully would be married for many years after. Lydia had been good for him.

“Can we get the couple who has been married the longest to take the floor?” the DJ asked.

“How are we supposed to know that?” an elderly man dressed in a Joker costume called out.

“Everyone clear the floor for the couples who have been married for more than twenty-five years!” the DJ boomed.

People shuffled around, making way for a crowd of couples.

“Everyone, give them a round of applause,” the DJ called out. The audience obliged. “If you’ve been married for less than fifty years, you’re excused.”

Stephen turned his back on the DJ and the couples circling the floor. He and Monica had been married for twenty-seven years. He didn’t like to think about it.

The butterfly he’d noticed earlier approached the coat check, fished into her bra to pull out a receipt, and handed it to the girl. In return, coat-check girl handed the butterfly the beat-up purse that now carried his one-hundred-dollar bill.

His gaze met coat-check girl’s.

“Your girlfriend, huh?” coat-check girl asked.

Surely this was a breach of some sort of coat-check etiquette.

The butterfly turned and stared at him.

Aunt Miriam perked up. “Your girlfriend?”

Mitch grinned. “Yeah. About that, Stephen?”

Stephen rubbed his chin and, on a whim, decided to go along with it.

“There you are,” he said. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“For me?” The butterfly put her hand on her chest. Most of her face was covered by a jewel-studded mask, but her lips were full and red, and her skin creamy and white. Definitely girlfriend material.

Stephen braced his shoulders, determined to carry through with his charade. “I want to introduce you to my aunt Miriam and cousin Mitch.”

The butterfly blinked and took Mitch’s extended hand. “I’m Grace,” she said.

“Come on, Grace,” Stephen said, taking her hand and pulling her toward the dance floor and away from his aunt and laughing cousin.

Grace stumbled after him until they reached the dancing couples. “I don’t know who you are or what you’re thinking,” she began.

He silenced her by putting his finger on her lips. “Just go along with me, please. There’s a hundred-dollar bill in your purse for your trouble.”

“I’m not a prostitute.”

“I never said you were. Look, all I’m asking you to do is dance with me. Consider the money a gift.”

“No strings attached?”

“None whatsoever.”

“But only married people are dancing.”

She was right. Now, only gray-haired and stooped couples were on the floor. The DJ thanked the octogenarians, and most of them shuffled to their seats.

“Are you married?” Stephen asked, his voice suddenly loud since the music had momentarily hushed.

“Not anymore,” she said, her voice tight.

“Me neither,” Stephen said.

“And now, here’s to the new lovers in the crowd,” the DJ said. The music shifted to an old Frank Sinatra song, “Strangers in the Night.”

“An oddly appropriate song,” Grace said. “Did you plan this somehow?”

He shook his head, placed one hand on her waist, and took the other in his. She fit against him nicely and moved easily to the music. He told her what had happened.

“You didn’t want your aunt to catch you in your fib? How come?”

“I have a standard I’ve kept since high school. I don’t lie to my mom.”

She craned her neck to look around him, as if she were checking out his butt.

He tried to look over his shoulder. “What are you looking at?”

“I was wondering if your pants were on fire.”

He laughed. “I’m not a liar.”

“But you just admitting to lying to your aunt.”

“In general, I try not to lie.” He grinned. “But the rule is hard and fast for my mom.”

“So, why are you fibbing to your aunt?”

“It just happened really fast.” If he told her he’d wanted to give the money to someone who needed it—as her purse suggested—would she be insulted? Some people were touchy about money and about being on the receiving end of charity. He didn’t want to offend her, but he also couldn’t figure out what she and her scruffy purse were doing at this pricy event if she needed money. She was a riddle he couldn’t solve, and she intrigued him.

But she probably thought he was a lunatic. As well as a liar. Which he was. Sort of. Not usually, but she’d caught him in one.

Frank Sinatra’s crooning about strangers in love faded, and the DJ spoke into the microphone. “All of the couples on the dance floor—I want to see some smooching! Go ahead, don’t be shy! Plant a juicy one on your partner!”

Stephen had intended to peck the butterfly on the cheek, but she turned at the last moment, and his lips met hers. And once he started, he couldn’t stop.

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