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Laura Foster Dominic Edward Danvers Needham Angela & George Foster Mary Fielding Charles Jo Dan Amy Simon Foster Vivienne Lash Lady Rose Balmore Lady Lavinia Needham London, England 2005; 2003 namatay yung tatay ni Nick Laura Foster is a hopeless romantic. Her friends know it, her parents know it — even Laura acknowledges she lives either with her head in the clouds or buried in a romantic novel. Its proved harmless enough, even if it hasn’t delivered her real-life dashing hero yet. But when her latest relationship ends n a disaster that cost her friendships, her job and nearly her sanity, Laura swears off men and hopeless romantic fantasies for good. With her life in tatters around her, Laura agrees to go on a vacation with her parents. After a few days of visiting craft shops and touring the stately homes of England, Laura is ready to tear her hair out. And then, while visiting grand Chartley Hall, she crosses paths with Nick, the sexy, rugged estate manager. She finds she shares more than a sense of humor with him — in fact, she starts to think she could fall for him. But is Nick all he seems? Or has Laura got it wrong again? Will she open her heart only to have it broken again? “ Amy’s pregnant, Laura" Dan released her, and Laura could feel the dampness his hands left on the side of her face. He was quite sweaty, she thought as if watching this scene idly from another room, another life. “ Laura, are you listening? " Dan said sharply. “ Yes…" Laura cleared her throat. “ You…" Her eyes filled with tears, and one ran down her cheek. She gave a tiny cough, almost a gasp, and sat up straight. No, she wouldn’t cry. She would not cry. “ Laura… I wanted to tell you, I’ve been trying to-“ Laura pressed answer on her mobile phone, her jaw set. “ Laura. You know who its is. " She hadn’t seen Amy for so long, hearing her voice came as a huge shock. Sickly sweet, slightly rasping, scary. It didn’t sound violent, or overly emotional, or hormonal. It sounded in control. “ Don’t you hang up on me, bitch, " Amy hissed. “ You fat, spotty, spineless bitch. Dan finally told me who he’s been screwing, like I couldn’t guess anyway. Okay? You’re too fucking coward to talk to me after what you’ve done, are you? Fine. Let me spell it out for you. I know what you did. If you ever go near him again, I’ll find you and I’ll make your life misery. Even more miserable than it must be now. You fat, stupid dog. He told me how you chased him, how you begged him, just like the ugly dog that you are. Like you were at school, always begging. You’re pathetic, Laura. You are pathetic. " “ My darling girl, " Mary said. “ Stop crying. Stop it. From what you tell me, I imagine you have luckiest of escapes. Now, dry your eyes, and sit still, and I’ll get you another drink. Its over now, don’t you see? Isn’t that wonderful? " “ What? " said Laura, wondering what on earth she could mean. “ Its not wonderful. I feel like a complete fool. I’ve lost my best friend, I’ve lost my job, I’ve behaved like an idiot. " “ I think its wonderful, " said Mary, standing up. She went into the kitchen. “ You fell in love, well, that’s wonderful. All right, it was with a completely wrong man. But its over now, and the best of it is, no more secrets. No more living your life in half shadow, which is what it seems to me you’ve been doing these last few months. " “ Yes, " Laura said, staring into the gloom of the kitchen. “ I hadn’t thought of it like that. But — I’m always doing it, always falling for the wrong person. I’m so stupid. " “ No, you’re not, " said Mary. “ You just haven’t met the right one yet. And until then, at least you’re not lying to everyone you know anymore. " “ The quality you castigate yourself most about — your tendency to fall in love with the most inconvenient people — is what I love about you darling. " “ Oh Gran, " said Laura, trying not to sound impatient. “ That’s just not true. Its awful — I should get a grip, not-“ Mary banged her ring hand on the arm of her chair, as if she were Elizabeth I inspecting the English fleet. “ No darling. You have a great capacity to love. Be careful. Use it wisely. But be proud of it. So much love in your heart. That’s why I worry about you. " She coughed. Laura listened, relieved to be talking about it at last, but not really knowing what to say. “ I worry you will walk away from that. That this will close you up, make you forget how wonderful falling in love can be. Don’t. " “ Right, " said Nick, smiling. “ Right, " said Laura. “ So I have to meet them to get started with -“ She stopped, suddenly remembering what she said before. “ Them… and, and… my boyfriend, I mean. " Nick raised an eyebrow at her. He smiled sardonically, his eyes glittering with amusement. “ So you don’t have a boyfriend , then, " he said, throwing his keys up in the air and catching them. “ Yes, " Laura said hotly. “ He likes tea towels too. He’s just not here. He’s, er… oh, God. Never mind. " “ Never mind, " Nick agreed politely. There was pause. “ Boyfriends are for losers, " Laura muttered after a while. “ Are they? " said Nick. “ Really. " “ Not really, no, " said Nick. “ I have no boyfriend problems. Perhaps I should, though. Perhaps I should spend ages in my room reading magazines and writing about how horrible boys are in my pink diary with padlocks so flimsy and crap that blind fingerless newt could break into it if they wanted. " “ Oh God, " Laura whispered into the phone. “ Help. " Then she realized Nick was still there , and said, “ Sorry" “ Don’t be, " he said and she could hear her laughter in his voice. “ So you’re going to the marsh, and then to the Seeker’s tribute band concert, and you’re not going to let me take you out for a drink? " “ No, " said Laura sadly. “ I’ve said I’ll go. I can’t get out of it. " “ Right. " “ Right. " “ Of course, " he said. “ I’m not the kind of man who’d ask you to lie to your parents and get out of an evening with them so I can see you again. " “ No", said Laura. “ You’re not. " “ And you’re not the kind of girl who’d agree to lie to get out of the evening in the first place. " “ No, Nick, " said Laura again. “ I’m not. " “ So, " he said, “ I’ll meet you at six-thirty, then? " “ Whre? " “ The north gate? " “ See you there, " said Laura smiling into the phone again as her mother emerged from the house. Laura waved her arms around her. “ The house, the history, all of your family. All of it. Its massive. And you’re trying to pretend it doesn’t matter, but it does, Nick. " He folded her hands into his, like he always did. “ Laura. If I cant have normal life outside of it, I’m doomed. Of course all of these are important to me. But there are other things too, " he said, and he leaned forward and kiss her. She pulled away from him. Nick looked at her in disbelief. “ You’re really going to throw this all away, because you’re an inverted snob, " he said angrily. “ You’re a coward, " he said, his voice harsh. “ You know, I actually thought I might be falling in love with you, " he said quietly. He turned and walked toward the house, and didn’t turn back once. Laura drove out of the stables onto the long, wide driveway, not daring to look in the mirror in case she caught sight of Chartley behind her, or the figure of climbing the steps at the front to disappear inside. Tears rolled down her cheeks; she gripped the steering wheel and put her foot on the accelerator. “ The trouble is, I’ve fallen in love with you. " “ Im here to tell you I love you, " Nick said. “ What? " said Laura. “ Yep, " Nick said. He nodded. “ I wish I didn’t, most of the time. But I do. " “ You…" “ Yes, " said Nick calmly. “ It’s a real pain. " He pulled her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her. “ You are a thorn in my side, Laura. " He bent to his head and kissed her. After a few seconds he lifted his head, still holding her tightly. “ An annoying gorgeous thorn in my side. And I can’t seem to get rid of you, of feeling like this. So that’s why I’m here. I’m in love with you, and I know whatever you say, I always be. " He kissed her again. “ Not to be with the one you love, the one person you should be spending your life with — its like a kind of living death. " “ I think you might have missed he right person, your true love, because you have spent your whole life looking too hard for him. " “ You have a great capacity for love. Don’t run away from it. Use it. Stop wasting it. Throw yourself into it and don’t be scared. I promise you, with all my heart, that you will never live a day when you regret it. " “ People don’t fall in love because it is convenient. They fall in love because they fall in love. " “ Because if you love someone, be brave enough to tell them. Don’t let them go. "