

My Fake Summer Boyfriend
by Ann Herrick

"I've got news for you, Katie Price." Mom stared at me with slits for eyes. "We're spending the summer in Chatfield, and that's final." She tossed the tomatoes she'd been slicing into the lettuce. "It's a wonderful opportunity to get away from it all. Your brother is thrilled with the idea."

"Jason," I replied, "is only eight years old. He's easily thrilled." I didn't mention that Alex Stedman had finally given me a ride home on the last day of school, after I'd been sending him telepathic messages for weeks, or that after making that much progress, I didn't want to lose any ground over the summer.

Dad walked into the kitchen and snatched a piece of tomato from the salad.

"Hi, Dad. Mom and I were just talking." I slipped my arm through Dad's, ignoring the sidelong glance from Mom. "I have so many projects that I should be working on this summer. Couldn't I just stay with Samantha? Or I could even stay right here and watch the house. That way I could feed Ralph." Ralph was our big, orange, affectionate but persnickety cat.

"Certainly not!" Dad sounded seriously horrified. "You're only fifteen!"

"Almost sixteen," I reminded him. Sixteen sounded so much older than fifteen. Dad wasn't the only one I wanted to impress with how, um, mature I was. I felt I needed every ounce of sophistication I could muster if I was going to get anywhere with Alex. After all, he had turned seventeen in May and would be a senior in the fall, not to mention editor of *Scattered Leaves*, our school newspaper. Even though I would be finally making it to upperclassdom as a junior, it was still embarrassing that I would not turn sixteen until October. Plus, my only claim to fame so far was being a third-string reporter on the school paper. I considered myself lucky when Alex assigned me to interview the new school nurse.

"Samantha has promised to feed Ralph, and you're still too young to be on your own. When I decided not to teach any summer courses at the university this year it was because I wanted to spend time with my *family*." Dad looked wounded.

"Yes, John," Mom agreed. "And I could use a change of scenery before I have to face a room full of second graders again."

"Jason is all excited about going," Dad said, as if this bit of news would impress me.

"Okay, *okay*!" I was tired of being bombarded with arguments, especially when I knew I couldn't win anyway. "I'm sure we'll have a great time," I added sarcastically.

That night, after packing my suitcase, I called Samantha to say good-bye for the summer and tell her about the ride home with Alex. I took my phone into my bedroom closet for some true privacy.

"Hi, Samantha. I've got some good news."

"You don't have to go away for the summer."

"No. I couldn't get out of that." I took a deep breath. "I'm resigning myself to an awful summer."

"Now, wait," Samantha said. "Maybe you're, you know, jumping to conclusions. You do have a tendency to do that."

I ignored Samantha's remark. "My *news* is—" I paused for dramatic effect. "—Alex Stedman gave me a ride home from school today!"

"Woo!" Samantha exclaimed. "What about Nicole Kendall? Where was she?"

"Can you believe this? She left school early. She had a dentist appointment."

"That was lucky for you. For the past few weeks I thought maybe she and Alex had been joined at the elbow."

"I know, right?" I sighed. "Who needs to compete with a stunning redhead?" I pushed a boot out of my way and sat cross-legged on the floor. Ralph crawled out of a corner and rubbed against my knee and purred. "Anyway, there I was, just starting to walk home, trying to look as loaded down with the junk from my locker as possible, when who should pull out of the school parking lot but Alex."

"What did you do? Throw yourself in front of his car?"

"Nothing so drastic. I 'dropped' a bunch of my papers, and they started blowing around. Alex stopped his car, got out and helped me pick them up."

"You're getting clever in your old age."

"Actually, he was completely nice about it." I remembered the way his brown eyes crinkled when he laughed as he chased after the papers. I didn't think he was devastatingly handsome, but I like the way his mouth curled as if he was about to smile and how he walked, with sort of a graceful nonchalance. "After we had gathered everything up," I explained, "he offered me a ride."

"Well, how was the ride? What did you talk about?"

"Let's see." I closed my eyes to concentrate on every detail. "He said, 'You're name is Katie, isn't it?' and I said, 'Yes.' He asked how I did on my finals, and I said 'Fine.' Then he said, 'This is your house, isn't it?' and I said, 'Yes. Thanks for the ride.'"

"That's it?"

"It was a short ride," I said. I felt myself turning red. "We both said 'Goodbye,'" I added defensively.

"Maybe what you ought to do is have yourself a summer fling to warm up for another try when school starts next fall."

"What do you mean?"

"You know. No one ever take a summer romance seriously. You meet someone, you know you'll never see each other again, so you can flirt, have fun and not worry about making a fool of yourself, because you're never going to see him or any of the other summer people ever again."

"You mean I could practice my approach to Alex without having to worry about what the kids at school might think?"

"Exactly!"

"Samantha, you're brilliant. No wonder you're my best friend. I think I'll try it."

"Great. Have a nice summer."

"If I do what you suggested, I'll have a ridiculously fantastic summer."

Samantha laughed. "I hope so. See you in September. And don't forget to, you know, write!"

I sighed. Mom said she was told cell phone reception at our part of the beach in Chatfield was "sketchy at best," so she insisted that we just go ahead and make it a totally "no electronics" vacation. Already I was feeling withdrawal pains. "I'll write—and thanks again for the great idea about having a practice summer romance."

After crawling out of the closet and shooing Ralph downstairs, I stretched out on my bed. I thought about Samantha's idea, and the more I thought about it, the better I liked it. A summer romance could be the perfect rehearsal for the real thing in the fall with Alex. I could do it *without* the usual attentive audience consisting of the entire student body at school. I hugged myself and let out a small laugh at the thought.

Jason charged into my room in his usual heavy-footed fashion. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"Can't you remember to knock?" I glared at him. He stared back with his big, round, innocent-looking eyes. I'd always thought it was unfair that Jason had inherited Dad's blue eyes and Mom's golden-blond hair, while I'd somehow wound up with a mousy, washed-out version of Dad's chestnut-colored hair and a pale imitation of Mom's dark brown eyes.

Jason hopped up on my bed, ignoring my question. "Are you ready to leave tomorrow? I can't wait. I love to swim. Will you help me build a sand castle?"

"Yes, yes." I tickled Jason under his chin, hoping to shut him up. His endless questioning drove me nuts.

"Aaaaaeee!" Jason snapped his chin down toward his chest and jumped off the bed. He stepped backward. "You can't reach me now!"

"I guess I can't." I knew that he wanted me to chase after him, but I wasn't in the mood. He was a complete nuisance. I was about to order him to bed when Mom and Dad called him. "You know what they want," I said. "You'd better scoot."

Jason dashed out the door. He thumped all the way down the hall and into his room.

I undressed, got into my pink polka-dot shorty pajamas, and slipped under the covers. Through the window a silvery rectangle of moonlight spilled across my bed. I closed my eyes and pictured myself at the beach in Chatfield, "accidentally" bumping into some handsome guy, making clever small talk, suggesting a walk on a secluded part of the beach. We would hold hands, then find a sheltered spot to sit. I'd say something funny, and he would laugh, then I would lean my head on his shoulder and he would put his arm around me. I would look up at him, and he would tell me I was beautiful. Oh, yes ... it would all be so easy with a summer boy.

I would start to say something, and he would place his fingers on my lips. Then he would put both his arms around me and pull me close and

"Wake up, wake up, wake up!" Jason tugged at my arm. The bed vibrated. I clutched the mattress so I wouldn't fall off. Jason smiled as he bounced on the bed. "It's time to get up," he announced. "It's time to get up!"

"No kidding." I gave Jason a mean look.

"Come on, come on. Get up!" Jason jiggled the bed.

"You're making me seasick. I might puke."

That did it. Jason hopped off my bed.

"Get out of here now," I commanded. "I have to get dressed."

Jason raced out of the room.

After breakfast I did my last-minute packing. I tucked my comb, toothbrush and makeup into the corners of my suitcase, then picked up my swimsuit, which was sitting on top, and fingered it fondly. I liked the color, turquoise, and all the little tucks and folds actually made me look shapely.

Eventually, everyone finished packing and the car was loaded. As we pulled out of the driveway Jason started singing "Merrily We Roll Along" at the top of his lungs. Mom and Dad joined in, and I scrunched down in my seat, hoping no one I knew would see us. I closed my eyes and tried to remember that only yesterday I had been alone in a car with Alex Stedman.

After the boring ride down I-90, Dad turned onto the Connecticut Turnpike, and before long Jason was pointing out our exit. "We're in Chatfield!" he shouted. He leaned forward, sticking his arms into the front seat. "I got there before Katie!"

"Big deal," I snapped.

From the exit we drove to Main Street, turned left and rode a couple more miles until we turned right at a sign proclaiming *Beach Area*.

"When we get to Bob's Beach Store, turn left." Mom read from her notes scribbled on the back of an envelope. "There! I think that's it straight ahead."

I spotted two guys in front of the store and, for a second, got remotely excited. But as I got a closer look I realized they were only about twelve years old. *Oh, well.* Through the open door of Bob's I could see a row of red stools in front of a long shiny black counter. A neon pizza sign flashed in the front window. It looked like a place that might be worth investigating.

We continued along a tree-lined street where the houses were large and expensive looking. One even had a turret sticking up through the oak and maple trees surrounding it. I hoped we would be staying there—the turret looked mysterious and romantic. But we rode on by. Abruptly, the scenery changed. The line of trees ended, and the houses gave way to cottages crowded onto narrow sandy yards.

"Our place should be here somewhere," Dad said.

I glanced around. To me it looked like the Mohave Desert, especially after just having ridden through that lush oasis with the luxurious houses.

"Look for number sixty-eight," Mom said.

"There it is! There it is!" Jason pointed out the window to a white cottage bordered by a falling-down picket fence half-covered with roses. At first I thought the gate was open. Then I saw that there was no gate. All that remained were two rusty hinges where a gate had once hung.

Dad pulled into the parallel depressions in the sand that served as a driveway leading to the side of the cottage. "Look at that!" he exclaimed. "We're right on the beach."

I scanned the beach hoping for a likely romantic prospect, but all I saw were a mother with three small children wading at the edge of the water and an elderly couple, fully clothed, lying on a blanket.

"Let's get everything inside." Dad hopped out of the car and practically skipped on his way to unlock the cottage.

I grabbed my suitcase and lugged it inside. I hadn't expected much, so I guess I wasn't too disappointed when all I saw was a long narrow room in which a U-shaped counter set off the kitchen at one end, a table and four chairs served as the dining area in the middle of the room, and sheet-covered chairs and sofas at the far end formed the living room.

"Phew!" I fanned my hand in front of my face. "It's boiling hot—and it smells in here!"

"It's just a bit musty from being closed up all winter," said Mom, who had come in right behind me. "We'll get all the windows open and let in some fresh air."

"That won't help," I muttered. I unlocked one of the windows and tried to open it. It didn't budge. I tried again, grunting with the effort. Still nothing. I hammered upward at it with the palms of my hands. It opened a crack. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead. The back of my blouse was damp. I groaned. "We'll suffocate in here."

"Maybe opening the windows is a job for your father," Mom said. She reached for her purse on the kitchen counter and pulled out the envelope with the scribbles and read from it. "Little's Store. It's across the street and six doors down." She handed me a pile of change. "I think that's enough to get some soda. Why don't you pick up a carton at Little's? We can do the rest of our shopping in town once we get settled in here."

"Okay." More than happy to escape the stuffy cottage I took the change and hurried out the door, gasping for air. A strong breeze blew in off the water. By the time I reached Little's, the sweat had evaporated off my face.

It didn't take long to find the store. A faded, peeling sign hung over the door of a skinny orange building. A gaggle of girls about ten years old was gathered around the front steps. One girl giggled

as she peeked through a window in the front door. I checked my reflection in window. I wanted to look nice, just in case I spotted any good-looking guys. So far I hadn't seen any likely candidates, but I was going to keep my eyes wide open for possibilities.

Inside the store narrow aisles were crowded with everything from beach balls and suntan lotion to potato chips and canned asparagus. I looked around for a cooler. I was desperate for a cold soda.

I noticed someone at the rear of the store stacking cereal boxes on a shelf. As I approached him I saw that, from the back, with his tall, broad-shouldered build and dark hair, he looked kind of like Alex Stedman.

"Excuse me." I cleared my throat. It was nice to have a ready-made excuse for talking to him. Maybe I could even find out his name. I tried out a flirtatious smile. "Do you have any cold soda?"

"In that far corner." The voice was familiar. The boy turned around as he pointed. He smiled broadly. "Well! Hi, Katie."

My smile faded. A sea of red washed over my face.

It was Alex Stedman.

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