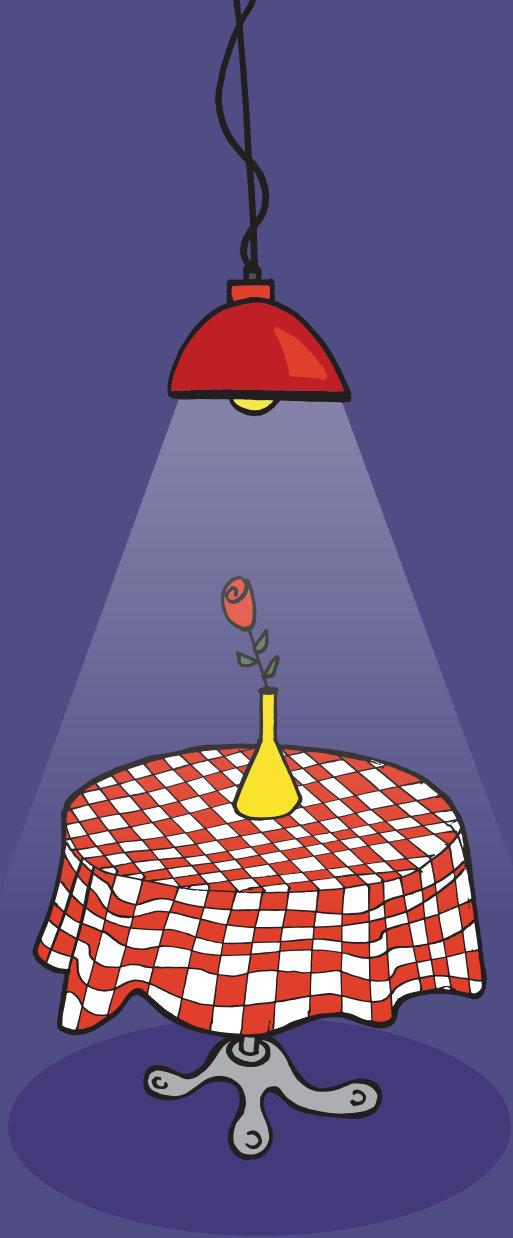


Right Date Wrong Guy



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For Tiana.

Chapter 1

One minute we were heading to the airport like we did every year, then I was all alone. Everything was telescoping away, making the moment seem surreal. Looking through the taxi window I saw Connor get into his dark blue convertible and drive away from our house. He was leaving me, leaving us.

Connor wasn't good at talking about how he felt, or how anyone felt really. He would squirm when anyone asked him how he was feeling. So, to avoid any chance of being asked, he out manoeuvred me. We had what people called a robust relationship. Like any Aries he hated sitting still mentally and physically. Worse still, he hated agreeable people. He wanted opposition and so we debated everything from what TV shows to watch, where to go to dinner, politics, law, religion, whether aviator sunglasses were making a genuine comeback, or if the Lord Mayor of Sydney had committed a fashion crime with a mismatching gown and clutch bag at the last gala dinner. Maybe this was part of the problem.

'Where's your suitcase?' I'd asked him as we walked down the long, timbered hallway of our Paddington terrace.

'I'm not coming,' he replied.

His words caught me in the middle of my chest. We both kept walking, along the hallway and out the front door,

down the steps, through the front garden and onto the footpath. He had waited until it was impossible for me to argue.

‘It’s over between us,’ he said.

I turned to look him squarely in the face. If he was going to end it, I wanted him to look me in the eye. He didn’t falter.

‘I don’t love you anymore, well, not like I used to.’

He turned away.

‘It’s been like this far too long and you know it, and one of us had to do something, so I’m doing it.’ His gaze returned to me and I could see he meant it.

Standing there it felt like swimming underwater in the rolling waves at Bondi Beach, the sound came and went. Then a moment of clarity appeared.

‘You coward, you took me to dinner last night with your parents, and you planned this all along.’ He looked away again, confirming what I’d said was true. ‘Now when it comes to seeing my family, you’re running away.’

‘Yes.’

His voice was thin, like he was in pain. He held my shoulders, leaned in and kissed me on the cheek, like he did last night to his mother.

To say we’d drifted apart was an understatement. He took my suitcase and stepped towards the taxi he’d conjured up and placed the bag in the boot. He opened the back door and I obediently stepped in. As tears welled in my eyes, I saw our life slip into the distance as the taxi driver pulled out and headed towards the airport.

It had come to this, with neither of us willing to defend the indefensible, and he was right, it wasn't like it used to be. How do you rescue a relationship drowned in the schedules of two ambitious people, who were part of the crowd known as the *Sydney Beautiful People*?

I had skidded into this world on Connor's coattails. He was the lower north shore boy who was loved by everyone, but our love was gone. We were functional and familiar at best. It all felt so harsh, particularly when I used to think we were perfect for one another. Isn't that what everyone called us, the *perfect couple*. Wasn't Aries and Leo a feisty match made in heaven? We were supposed to be flying to Tasmania together to spend a week with my Gran, like we did every year. Almost every day I yearned to be back on the farm and whenever I needed to escape Sydney I went to Gran's place in my mind. As the taxi headed to the airport, I was seeing myself sitting on Gran's front verandah looking over Gardners Bay drinking tea and eating jam slice (the one with coconut piled over home-made raspberry jam). In about three hours I'd be there.

Gran walked out the back door as I pulled up next to the shed and got out of the car and didn't ask about Connor. Throughout my childhood she'd always known what was going on before I said anything. This time Connor's absence, the smudged mascara and translucent skin were enough to tell the story. When we hugged, she smelt like

soap and ripe apples, and she'd always smelt that way. Gran's long white hair ran down her back in a single plait and she was wearing a long white cotton apron. It had an embroidered pocket and was smattered with red and green juices the colours of the new season's fruit from the orchard her parents had planted. After a while, she let go and held me at arm's length, searching my face.

'Why don't you pop your suitcase in your room and we'll go for a walk?' said Gran.

I slipped into jeans and a t-shirt and pulled on the boots I'd left there.

It seemed only a moment ago, not a year since Connor and I were in the same room. That was when the silence between us had grown unbridled. His designer suits, A-list parties and convertible were out of reach, and he was determined to prove he didn't belong. When we first started visiting Gran's place he'd wanted to escape Sydney every year, but last year things were different, it felt like he begrudged using a week of his holidays to do something that was important to me. Most of all, I think he thought it wasn't glamorous saying he'd been in Tasmania staying with his girlfriend and her 91-year-old grandmother. He'd have rather said he was skiing in Japan, writing a book in a villa in Tuscany, or in hospital with coronavirus. Almost to prove a point, Connor had sat on the couch reading books written by the world's leading journalists. He seemed to think that he'd be able to absorb journalistic integrity and how to be an incisive journalist through the very pages of these books. Connor was a television news journalist and

as his public profile grew so too did his ego, arrogance, and self-importance. I had hoped it was a phase that he was going through and that we could navigate it together. I was mistaken.

For me, visiting Gran meant a sublime week in the garden and kitchen, and cooking late into the night while catching up on news in the valley. People in Sydney always talked about food and the latest restaurants, like it was a fundamentalist religion. Then at dinner they'd push their food around the plate, like a token in a board game. Round and round it would go, rarely passing anyone's lips and if it did, there was a bathroom visit between courses. It felt so right to get back to the life of my childhood, cooking on an old combustion stove and having neighbours pop in for a cuppa, with fresh scones or raspberry slice always waiting on the kitchen table. Tea was only moments away and it was usually with milk and sugar. The Huon Valley where I grew up was beautiful beyond compare, with a mountain called Sleeping Beauty, fresh air, and the sweetest rainwater on earth. It was there on this tiny island my soul belonged.

For three generations my family had lived in the green valley that plunged into deep bays. Where neighbours swapped fresh produce with each other, and old-fashioned values were the norm. Gran's neighbours Jenn and Mark worked in town and on weekends they would head out in their dinghy to go diving for abalone and southern rock lobster. Jenn also knew someone who knew someone, who worked at the salmon farms and when a seal lunged through the salmon farm netting in a local bay there'd

be a phone call to let her know there were fish to be had. The escaped salmon were easy to catch with nets and lines, and the local laws meant it wasn't illegal to take them either. After work Jenn and Mark would head out to snag some salmon and some of the fish would make it to Gran's table. In return she would head to her well-stocked pantry to offer home-made black sauce, pickled cherries, tomato relish, strawberry and vanilla jam, the world's best apricot jam, sublime raspberry jam, or plums in port. Her neighbours thought it was the best deal because no-one cooked liked my Gran and it was the perfect arrangement, because Gran thought she had the best deal.

Fresh caught salmon, abalone and rock lobster. 'The food of the Gods' she would say. If this wasn't heaven on Earth, we both thought it was pretty close.

With my boots on, I walked out the back door, leaving the old screen door to swing and clunk shut. Gran came over from picking apricots and took me by the hand and we started walking slowly up the paddock to check on the lambs, which were almost ready for market. Uncle John and Aunt Linda lived up the hill and would be over in the next few weeks to take the lambs off to the sale yards.

'I had a feeling things weren't right. How are you going Sophie?' Gran asked.

It was the permission I needed to speak, and to cry all over again.

'Oh Gran, Connor and I broke up this morning.'

'Is he someone you want to fight for?'

‘I’ve been asking myself that all the way here, and I don’t know. I used to love him so much Gran.’

‘I know, sweetheart.’

Running my hand across my face to wipe away the snot and the tears, a huge sigh came out. It had always been so easy to confide in her.

‘This morning just as we were leaving, he said he didn’t love me like he used to, and it’s just so easy to see how that’s true. We started drifting apart about a year ago and in all that time neither of us stopped it from happening.’

It was always easier for me to talk about hard things while I walked, and Gran knew that. It was as though my feet were the engine to my emotions and looking down at my boots I stepped over nothing in particular, probably over my battered heart if I was honest.

‘When Connor and I first met we did everything together – tennis, the movies, sailing, and days spent lying on Bondi Beach and we also planned holidays together. He used to make me laugh so much.’

A smile came across my face as I remembered the way we were. The moments of honesty that drew us together made it easy to fall in love, but it’d been a long time since we’d shown each other that kind of affection.

‘Do you remember how he’d write me silly notes, with jokes and poems on them and he’d hide them in the pockets of my jackets and shoes so I’d find them days, or weeks, later?’

‘I do, said Gran smiling, ‘You were so sweet to one another. You know he loved you, Sophie.’

‘It’s hard to see that right now. You know he never really liked coming here, well not last year anyway. It wasn’t you it was the silence and there weren’t any parties or dinner guests to distract him.’

‘I know,’ said Gran.

‘All I want is to move back here to be near you. This is who I am. All I think about is how I want to have kids who come to stay with you, eat apples from the trees and learn how to make blackberry jam on your big old stove.’ I squeezed her arm and leant into her small frame. Every year there was less of Gran to hold onto, which made me want to hold her tighter.

When we first dated, Connor said he shared the dream of a slower life in Tasmania, but as time went by he realised he wanted his children to have the advantages that came with city living. He went from being someone who went to work to someone who was living, eating, and breathing his work. As time went on Connor didn’t like the idea of his career shifting down a gear after so many years of clawing his way up through the ranks. It seemed that instead of his journalism being about someone else’s story, it had slowly become about him. The industry and fame had gone to his head and it wasn’t hard to see why when his face was plastered over billboards throughout the city promoting his nightly news program.

‘I often wondered why you wanted to be with a city boy, particularly one so driven. Maybe you’ve outgrown each other?’ asked Gran.

‘Maybe,’ I said, with a heavy heart.

The lambs were looking fat and healthy as they wandered around the ewes. The pastures were green for the time of year as it'd been an unusually wet summer and the cooler weather meant the paddocks hadn't dried out.

'You know I've been meaning to tell you about my very first boyfriend,' Gran said, trying to distract me from my thoughts.

Her words piqued my interest, I loved a good intrigue and Gran always seemed to have plenty tucked away.

'When I was young, before the war, I fell in love with a man called Arthur Stanley.'

'Oh, I don't know about him,' I said.

'No, you don't. He was a tall, thin man with beautiful cow-brown eyes that melted my heart. He had dark brown hair that fell across his face, and he held my hand so softly, as we walked up this hill together. My father would stand on the front porch to let Arthur know he was being watched.'

'How funny Gran, that's too sweet.'

'Yes. It was different then,' said Gran. 'His parent's farm was at Port Huon opposite the wharf where the apples used to be stored and shipped. They grew apples and pears just like my father. But it wasn't meant to be. Towards the end of the war, Arthur went to Melbourne, where no one would know him, he lied about his age and signed up. Like so many others he never came home.'

'Oh, Gran I'm so sorry, how heartbreaking,' I hooked my arm in hers and squeezed her tightly.

World War II had changed the Huon Valley and what Gran described happened to a lot of girls, their sweethearts and husbands joined the war effort and never returned.

‘After the war your granddad was one of the men who did come home and he made it clear he fancied me. He would speak to my father about taking me to a dance and my father would say no and tell him to stop calling by the house, because he knew I was still heartbroken.’

‘Oh Gran.’

‘It’s a long time ago now. But you know what, I found out something about your Grandad Jack which changed my mind completely.’

‘What was that?’

‘Well, your grandfather was born on the ninth of June.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Well so was Arthur Stanley. Right then and there I knew it was a sign. One of those things I just knew in my heart was right. I believed I was destined to be with a man born on that day and I’d simply chosen the wrong man.’

‘Wow that’s so New Age of you Gran!’

‘Oh, I didn’t tell anyone that, they would have thought me as mad as a hatter! I kept my thoughts to myself and I told my father I would like Jack Westacott to come for tea.’

As it turned out, the more time Gran spent with Jack the more she realised she had far more in common with him than she ever had with Arthur and they fell in love and were married in 1947. Like Gran, Jack loved to dance and they would go to all the local halls when a band was

playing, and even travelled to the surrounding valleys and towns. There were photos from the 1950s with Gran all dressed up and Grandad looking dapper in his suit. Gran and Grandad would go horse riding by the Huon River and birdwatching on the islands that were home to hundreds that migrated there every year. As it turned out Arthur Stanley never liked dancing much and he wasn't very interested in birdwatching either.

'Jack and I had so much more in common than Arthur and I ever did, and in the end, I wondered whether we would have been a good match at all.'

My memories of heading down to the icy cold waters of the Huon River with my grandparents came back in an instant. They would each hold one of my hands and swing and bounce me over the tall grasses as we headed to the edge of the river to go bird watching. The three of us would take it in turns to stare through the binoculars out to Eggs Islands, south of Huonville.

'We were so mad on birdwatching, we spent hours sitting in the grass opposite the islands watching the birds, season after season,' said Gran.

You could hear the smile in her voice and we stopped for a moment while she closed her eyes to remember. Our granddad had been gone for five years and we all missed him terribly. Grandad and Gran had raised my sister and me, after our parents had died, and he was like a father to me.

Jack was a gentle man who never grew very tall, as his exploits in the war had meant he'd been malnourished for too many of his growing years. He'd gone to Sydney where

no one knew him, lied about his age, and signed up when he was only 16, sailing into Singapore Harbour just a few weeks before it fell into the hands of the Japanese during World War Two. He was captured and spent the next few years in the notorious Changi prisoner of war camp. Like so many others, when he returned home, he never spoke about what had happened, but focussed on the future and his family. The war had softened his heart to those he loved the most and there wasn't anything he wouldn't do for any of us. He was the kindest, gentlest man I'd ever known.

'So, maybe Connor is your Arthur and maybe Connor's birthday is the right date, but you have the wrong man,' Gran said.

A smile broke across my face.

'I've got the right date, but the wrong guy?'

'Yes, that's it in a nutshell,' Gran said.

'You're so funny Gran,' I said.

We started walking back to the house and I thought, it's hard to end an eight-year relationship but I'm pretty sure Connor isn't the right one for me anymore. In so many ways he was right for me, but it was clear we were no longer right.

As though she'd been reading my thoughts Gran said, 'You need to find someone who's plotting the same course, so you arrive at the same destination. Now when was Connor's birthday? It was April sometime wasn't it?'

'April 11,' I said.

'Why don't you see if you can meet someone else born on that day?'

I knew that voice. It was the one she used when she picked me up off the ground when I'd tripped over as a child. It was the hands of love that dusted the dirt from my knees, wiped away tears, and then hugged and coaxed me to be okay with the hurt.

There are a million reasons for dating someone. One of my girlfriends dated four guys in a row called David, another only wanted to date redheads, and then there was one who wanted to date someone taller than her. Things like names, hair colour and height weren't all that important to me, but they mattered to them. Finding someone born on the 11th of April wasn't that strange, was it, and it couldn't be that hard, I'd done it before, so surely I could do it again? This time though I'd be sure to find the right one.

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It's taken more than a village to get this book off the ground, and what it has shown me is that I have deep, caring, and supportive relationships that have carried me, and continue to carry me through life. Whatever I have done, I have had one or more willing to believe in me, and for this I am so terribly grateful.

I'm afraid that if I write a list of names here, that I might miss someone who has been on this journey with me, but here goes. Thank you to Gina Richman for setting me up on a date with a guy who turned out to be born on the same day as my ex, which showed me that dates can play a strange and interesting part in life. Thank you to Rebecca Carmody, Katie Schaefer, Sonia Thomashoff, Carolyn Deveny, and Cath Hughes for making the most awesome share-house memories a person could ever wish for. Thank you to my mentor, the wonderful and incredibly talented author, Danielle Woods, for guiding and teaching me how to bring my ideas together and to stay focussed. This book would only be half of what it is, if it weren't for the colleagues and friends in Tasmania who eagerly took my manuscript and then told me what they loved and hated about the characters and the story. It was through their insight I saw my book differently, which allowed me to add further depth, and to build on my characters. You also

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In 2020, my determined, rambunctious, and effervescent sister Tiana van Burck passed away. She was an amazing woman who forged a life well lived, well loved. She was looking forward to holding this novel in her hands but it wasn't to be. This book is dedicated to her.



SARAH SCHOFIELD is an Australian writer whose passions are romance fiction and getting lost in the adventures of her characters. Her love of reading and writing began in her youth, and so it only seemed natural to her that she studied journalism and English literature at university. She then worked in radio and television for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Brisbane, Hobart, and Sydney for over a decade. She is now a communications professional and lives in Canberra with her partner.

Right Date Wrong Guy is her debut novel.

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Sophie Westacott had it all, a celebrity boyfriend, an inner-city Sydney terrace, a great job at a top-tier law firm, and invitations to A-list events within the tight clique of

Sydney's Beautiful People.

But it all slips away when her boyfriend, Connor Bayles, Channel 8's newsreader, breaks up with her, leaving Sophie to wonder how she ever thought they were the perfect couple.

After eight years of being out of Sydney's dating scene and faced with a barrage of websites, events, and apps, she wonders how she'll ever find someone.

A visit to her grandmother on the family farm in southern Tasmania, reveals a long-held family secret, one that will help focus her search.

Sophie comes to believe the man of her dreams is born on the 11th of April, and with the help of her friends, she jumps onto a roller coaster ride of parties and dates trying to find him.

A funny and heart-breaking adventure of what one woman will do to find the right man!



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