



*Blind
Bet*

Tracey Richardson

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Also by Tracey Richardson

No Rules Of Engagement

Side Order Of Love

The Candidate

For anyone who's ever had to pick up the pieces...

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About the Author

Tracey Richardson is also the author of *No Rules of Engagement* (a Lambda Literary Award finalist for Best Lesbian Romance, 2009, and a Golden Crown Literary Society finalist, 2009), *Side Order of Love* (a Golden Crown Literary Society finalist, 2009) and *The Candidate* (a Golden Crown Literary Society finalist, 2008). Tracey has worked for more than twenty years in the daily newspaper business in Ontario, Canada, as a reporter and editor. Visit www.traceyrichardson.net.

CHAPTER ONE

Proverb on gambling: Luck never gives, it only lends.

Courtney Langford hadn't run this fast since her softball days in college.

“Son of a bitch!”

Her breathless expletive echoed around the empty seating lounge—a lounge that minutes ago would have been congested with noisy, anxious travelers. She'd give just about anything to be in the midst of that bedlam right about now—spilled coffee, whiny kids, cranky people, luggage to trip over. All of that was preferable to the silence that greeted her now, because it meant only one thing.

Courtney summoned her trademark confidence and instinctive self-assertion and bounded up to the airline receptionists wearing regulation blue jackets and bored expressions. She was reasonably sure she could convince them to

call back the damned plane, the one that was now reversing out toward the tarmac. There were no impossibilities to Courtney, only challenges.

“I need to be on that plane!” Sweat tickled her scalp and her voice was hoarse with adrenaline. The male and female duo, stony-faced and as bereft of personality as their starched uniforms, didn’t raise so much as an eyebrow at her.

“Sorry, ma’am. There’s nothing we can do.” It was the girl who spoke, her tone as neutral as her brown eyes and brown bob. She wasn’t a girl, actually. She was probably in her late twenties. But Courtney, at thirty-eight, considered any woman that much younger than herself to be a girl.

Courtney shook her head furiously. *Wrong answer.* “You don’t understand. I *need* to be on that plane.”

“What’s your name?” asked the guy with a badge that identified him as Bill. *Bill as in bland. Bill as in not particularly brilliant. Bill, who’s being way too fucking calm!*

Crap. They didn’t need her goddamn name. They needed to get that plane back here. Frustration raised her voice even as she acquiesced to his demand. “Courtney Langford.”

At his computer, Bill punched a few keys. “You were supposed to be on that flight.”

No shit, Sherlock. With effort, Courtney held her tongue.

“We had to pull your bag when you didn’t show. I can direct you to baggage claim.”

“You don’t understand, *Bill*. I don’t need my bag. I need to be on that flight or I’ll miss an important meeting. I have a colleague already on the plane waiting for me.”

The plane was teasing her, rubbing her nose in her lateness, as it backed out further and further. Its silver fuselage gleamed with the shimmer of a coin under water, barely out of her reach.

Bill tapped the computer keys again, the *click click* reminding her of the seconds ticking away. “The best we can do is put you on the next flight, which leaves in ninety minutes, though you’re welcome to try another airline.”

Courtney’s sigh came out as a groan. The two of them could

care less if she was going to be late for a wedding, a funeral, an assignation with a lover, a doctor's appointment, a job interview. Clearly they had heard it all before and then some. There was no point in explaining that she was to meet with one of the East Coast's top advertising agencies to work on the final ad campaign for Microsoft's newest Xbox game. The meeting would have to wait for her. Her boss would not be happy, though, because time was money. And right now she was wasting both.

"I'll check with a couple of airlines and get back to you," Courtney replied curtly. She was resigned to being late, but she would at least put up a fight.

It was far too early on the West Coast to call Nan, her administrative assistant, to help her sort out this fiasco. Danny was on the plane, but she wouldn't be able to reach him either. All the passengers by now would have been told to shut off their electronic devices. She would have to try and get to Boston as quickly as she could.

Oh, hell. She worried about Danny, but he wasn't a child. He would figure out for himself that she would catch up with him later. In her haste to try to make the plane, she'd forgotten to call him earlier—had even forgotten to turn her phone on. *Sorry, Danny boy, you're on your own for a while.*

At a bank of nearby courtesy phones, Courtney quickly tried three other airlines. Every flight to Boston out of Chicago for at least the next hour was filled, putting her back to square one. Contrite, but barely, she returned to the check-in desk and ordered Bill to put her and her luggage on the next flight to Boston. Rubbing weary eyes, she settled in for the wait.

Courtney slumped in a plastic chair that was about as comfortable as a church pew. She hadn't felt this tired in a long time, her limbs limp like noodles, her eyes as scratchy as sandpaper. She'd flown in late the night before—the routine she followed any time she had to go to the East Coast for a morning meeting. Spend the morning at Microsoft in Redmond, outside Seattle, catch an afternoon flight to Chicago or even Detroit, get a decent night's sleep, then take an early flight to her final

destination. It worked seamlessly. Or had, until now.

Her big mistake last night had been going to the hotel bar for a couple of drinks. Well, *that* part hadn't been the mistake. Flirting over martinis late into the night with a very beautiful flight attendant on a layover had been the mistake.

When the proposition finally came, Courtney managed to resist, even though the voice in her head kept asking incredulously if she was crazy. For the first time in a long while, she had been truly tempted. The flight attendant was scorching hot, and the conversation, about all manner of things unrelated to computers and games, had been a welcome distraction.

But, stubbornly, Courtney wasn't the type to go for a one- or two-night stand. She never had been, really, and although she was totally single, she couldn't persuade herself to throw caution to the wind and go for it. It wasn't that she had some great moral aversion to it or anything, and she certainly liked sex as much as the next woman. It was the whole getting-to-know-a-stranger thing, fumbling around in the dark and then, she supposed, having to pretend to come, that put her off. It was much less complicated to read a book and drink a glass of wine or watch a late movie on TV.

And so, reluctantly, she'd said no thanks to the gorgeous blonde in the bar and dragged herself back to her room for a few hours of grumpy tossing and turning. She didn't fall into restful sleep until what seemed like mere minutes before her alarm clock sounded. She had a fuzzy recollection of shutting off the offending noise. She didn't wake again until thirty minutes before her flight was scheduled to take off.

Courtney glanced at her Movado watch—a tangible reminder of Celine's sudden and still-puzzling departure. She had given the watch to Courtney at Christmas. By New Year's, she was gone. Courtney blinked away the memory. She didn't need thoughts of her ex compounding her pissy mood.

She focused again on the dial. It was 6:12 a.m., still the middle of the night back in Redmond and too early to catch anyone at the ad agency in Boston. *Oh, shit.* She felt helpless, as though

she'd stepped back thirty years in time. She was almost always attached to her BlackBerry or laptop, wired to the rest of the world, but now, there was nothing she could do but sit, wait and stew in her own regret for making such a stupid mistake. Hell, she hadn't slept in and missed something important like this since the math midterm she slept through when she was a college freshman. This was simply inexcusable. She was a professional, and professionals didn't make amateur mistakes like this.

Courtney rose and hurried to the nearest Starbucks kiosk, hoping a jolt of caffeine would get her back on track and smooth the nightmare this day was becoming. She took a long, satisfying sip of her large Sumatran coffee and closed her eyes for a moment. In her mind's eye she saw her mother, heard her telling her, as she always had in life, to stop being so hard on herself.

It was true, all her life Courtney had been harder on herself than anyone else. A bad mark in school, failing to make the softball team in her freshman year of high school, whatever. She hadn't cared in the least what anyone else thought of those things. She was the one who beat herself up for days over her failures, vowing to never let them happen again no matter how hard she had to work. She hated screwing up and would do whatever she had to do to make up for it. She knew she would be castigating herself over the missed flight for at least the next week. She pitied her colleagues and anyone else she'd be coming into contact with.

Courtney smiled to herself. "All work and no play" was what her mother would say to her if she were here now. *Does that mean I should have played a little with what's-her-name last night? Gone a few athletic rounds with her between the sheets?* Well, maybe she should have. But she'd still have been late, she'd still be pissed at herself and, what the hell, she probably still would have had to fake an orgasm.

She sighed to herself, not quite able to loosen the invisible chains she so often wrapped herself in. It was exhausting being so uptight all the time, so hard on herself and others too. Her mom had once told Courtney that she was more severe in nature than the Pope himself. Well, Courtney had proven that theory wrong

at least once—at the women’s Hot Flash dance in Portland three years ago. If her mom had been looking down on her that night, she’d have thought someone else had taken over Courtney’s body. Somebody a hell of a lot wilder and crazier. Someone who most definitely did not resemble either her daughter or the Pope.

Courtney was still alternately amused and horrified by what she’d done at that dance. She’d had a few too many drinks after a day in the hot sun and, at the relentless encouragement of her boisterous friends, went absolutely nuts to Rick James’ *Super Freak*. She’d been super freaky, all right. Stripping down to her sports bra and boxers and dancing on a table, air grinding like there was no tomorrow...she didn’t even remember what all. *Oh, Jesus*. It’d been the most fun she’d ever had, but also the most embarrassing. For months afterward, women on the streets of Portland and even Seattle had smiled knowingly at her or winked in acknowledgment. A few had even handed her their phone numbers or tried to high-five her. She’d been so humiliated, she briefly considered asking for a transfer away from the Pacific Northwest.

There had been another reason to regret that night, unfortunately. For that was the night she met Celine, who, after witnessing that dance floor display, had decided that Courtney was the coolest, most adventurous dyke on earth. What a joke that turned out to be. By the time Celine realized what Courtney was really like—working sixty hours a week, then hiding out alone with a good book on her down time—they’d begun shacking up together like an old married couple. Dinner at eight, bed at ten, Courtney up by dawn so she could get a session in at the gym before her workday started. Weekends she spent on her BlackBerry or trying out game ideas from one of her developers. It was a routine that Celine couldn’t accept, as it turned out.

Courtney glanced at the time again. Her flight to Logan Airport would start boarding any minute. *Thank God*.

At that same moment, in Boston, a loud thunderclap rolled in from the ocean and reverberated off skyscrapers tinged pink by the rising sun, breaking the calm of a glorious April morning.

Still at her Chicago gate, Courtney flinched, as though an invisible hand had given her a small shove. Shaking off an odd feeling of foreboding, she gathered up her carry-on bag and joined the others queuing up for the plane.

Courtney spent the entire two-hour flight on her netbook, working on budget projections. It occurred to her momentarily how right Celine had been about her being a workaholic. *Tough shit*. She could work as much as she wanted now. Celine was gone; there was no one to bitch about it. It was heavenly to work without the guilt.

Courtney felt her neck muscles relax. She enjoyed her work. It challenged her and made her feel like she had a purpose—a purpose much in demand by her company. She was the manager of the division that created Xbox games and was paid handsomely for it. She owned a healthy portfolio of company stocks and had been given an Audi S4 as a bonus a year ago. She was appreciated at work. Which was a hell of a lot more than she'd felt at home the last couple of years.

Courtney dismissed thoughts of her nonexistent home life. There was no point to the exercise. Instead she drafted a long e-mail to her department sub-head. She wouldn't be able to send it until after she landed, but it was one more item to strike off her mental to-do list.

No one on the plane suspected anything was wrong after they landed in Boston until the wait on the tarmac began to stretch out. The plane's door remained closed, keeping them trapped in that tin can like so much tuna fish. Fifteen minutes passed and still they weren't allowed to disembark. Courtney sighed loudly, unfastened a button at her collar to cool herself. This was going to make her even more late for her meeting, dammit. She flagged down a flight attendant.

“What's going on?”

She was answered with a shrug and a lame smile, as though

this sort of thing happened all the time. “Probably a ground crew issue, ma’am. I’m sure we’ll be out of here any minute.”

Yeah, right, Courtney thought. *It’s just not my fucking day.*

No sooner had the thought begun burning in her mind than the plane’s door opened and passengers began streaming out. *Finally.* Courtney breathed a sigh of relief, her thoughts catapulting ahead to her meeting and how she’d kept everyone waiting. Her long strides carried her through the enclosed ramp. She shot ahead of most of her fellow passengers, intent on getting her luggage and a cab as quickly as she could. She chose not to turn on her BlackBerry yet. She could do that in the cab.

She entered the terminal, searching for the sign that would point her to the baggage area, her mind going a mile a minute with all the things she had to do. It took several moments to register that something was terribly wrong. The sharp scream of a woman stopped her in her tracks. There were muffled cries and sobs too. Whispered conversation that was somber and urgent. The atmosphere was incredibly still, almost funereal, and there was a heaviness in the air, as though something had sucked all the oxygen out of the massive airport.

Courtney glanced around. There were small groups of people huddled together. Some were crying, others were comforting them. Priests and pastors sat or walked slowly with people, holding onto their arms tightly. Airline officials, looking grave and a little scared, clutched clipboards or cell phones like lifelines. They were trying to look helpful but clearly they were overwhelmed.

What the hell is going on?

Courtney had traveled many thousands of miles throughout her career, and she had never seen anything as bizarre as this. It was like being in the eye of a hurricane, because in spite of the stillness, it felt as though malevolent and chaotic forces were swirling around them. She felt her face drain of color. The metallic taste of fear filled her mouth. Something most definitely was horribly wrong.

“Excuse me.” Courtney tugged the sleeve of the nearest

airline employee. “What’s going on around here?”

The employee, a middle-aged African American woman, scrutinized Courtney for a long moment. She looked frayed, exhausted, like she was having a much worse day than Courtney. “Flight 351 from Chicago crashed into the ocean two hours ago. Families of the passengers are congregating here. If you have no further business here, ma’am, I respectfully suggest you move along.”

Courtney blinked hard, taking in the tableau of sorrow around her. It was surreal...almost like a scene from a movie. Except it was all too real. These were real people, people whose loved ones had just been killed. They were devastated, horrified, lost. Some looked adrift, numbed by shock. For others, the reality of what had happened was painfully sharp.

It was too much for Courtney to comprehend. She resumed her trek to the baggage claim area, moving along at a much slower pace. She wanted to get the hell away from this place and yet she was inexplicably connected to it.

Halfway to the baggage area her legs suddenly gave out. She sagged against a wall, her heart pounding furiously in her throat. *Holy shit! I was supposed to be on that flight.*

She doubled over, fighting the urge to vomit. She forced deep, even breaths into her lungs, the way she’d been taught at a stress management workshop for managers a long time ago.

Except...I wasn’t on that flight. I wasn’t on it, and there’s nothing I can do about it now.

A moment later another realization slammed into her. Danny *was* on that plane.

Oh, my God! She couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think. Couldn’t feel anything in all this emptiness. Her reality—the order of her world—had been neatly excised in the few seconds it took a plane to plummet into the sea. How could Danny, her young, hotshot game developer, that great kid with the killer dimples and teddy bear eyes, be dead? And how could *she* still be alive?

Finally, like a camera lens coming into focus, her thoughts began to coalesce. She had a meeting to get to, a job to do. Yes,

the meeting she was two hours late for—that was what mattered now. She had to get her feet moving again, had to get there and get on with it. She did not want to be stranded here with the others who were trying and failing to make sense of it all.

Courtney forced herself to straighten up and take another deep breath, commanding herself to stay calm. She would not think about the alternative. *Couldn't* think about it. Could not fathom the fact that she could be dead instead of standing here. *Dead like Danny.*

She clenched her jaw, firming her resolve. She was *not* going to become part of the collateral damage of Flight 351's crash, dammit! She was not going to be a victim of this tragedy!

Courtney pushed herself forward, not even feeling the ground beneath her. She had places to be, things to do, people to see. Soon she was no longer walking, she was running.

The frantic e-mails from Nancy, her assistant, were heart-wrenching, but not as heart-wrenching as the e-mail that Danny must have sent when he got on the plane and saw that Courtney wasn't there. It had popped up the minute she finally remembered to turn on her BlackBerry in the cab. She couldn't get his words out of her mind. *Miss you boss, where the heck are you? Will carry on without you for now.*

His e-mail had been followed by a dozen more, increasingly frantic, from Nan, who was old enough to be Courtney's mother and who often watched over like a surrogate parent. Steeling herself, Courtney punched in Nan's phone number. She answered halfway through the first ring, sobbing uncontrollably when she heard Courtney's voice. She'd desperately been trying to reach Courtney and Danny ever since hearing about the crash and realizing their itinerary placed them on the fatal flight.

In the back of a taxi, her phone at her ear, Courtney tried to calm Nan down. The older woman couldn't seem to stop crying, however, especially when she learned that Danny *had* made the

flight. Looking around her, Courtney realized she was only minutes away from her meeting. It was cold to cut Nan off and order her to liaise with the airline about Danny, but she had to concentrate on her meeting now. She had a multi-million-dollar ad campaign to organize. Unfortunately, business didn't grind to a halt because of personal tragedies.

Courtney knew that if ever there was a time to shelve her feelings, this was it. Luckily, compartmentalization was something she was an expert at. It was as easy for her as brushing her teeth or getting dressed. She could write a book on how to ignore a dying relationship or to put aside grief. She still hadn't really grieved for her mom because work was always a handy filler. It was her savior, her excuse, her *raison d'être*. The day Celine had left, Courtney had gone off to work as usual, only vaguely wondering throughout the day if Celine really was gone for good. She was.

Shocked faces and murmured sympathy greeted Courtney as she strode into the conference room of McKerroll and Stanley. It was obvious they already knew she was to have been on that flight and they were all eager to express their relief that she had missed it. They didn't know about Danny—she hadn't told them she was bringing anyone with her—and she didn't tell them now. It didn't feel right to have them express sympathy for someone they didn't know and care about. She let them fetch her ice water, pull out a chair for her. They treated her like someone's ancient aunt. The company's CEO, Roger McKerroll, offered, while patting her hand, to delay the meeting a week or two—whatever she needed.

Courtney stared at him, unblinking, and for a second felt a sob catch in her throat. It would be so easy to cry, to get angry, to be grateful, to be sorry, to be guilty—to give in to all of these emotions that now battled inside her. But she couldn't give in to them. She would not play the role of victim, someone to feel sorry for or to make special accommodations for, someone to be pitied.

No. She was the head of this project, the leader, the alpha dog. It would not do to crumble and cry like a baby. How pathetic

would that be? Especially when there were probably dozens of others waiting, like vultures, to prove they could do her job and do it better. Well, the vultures would have to keep on circling, because she was tough. She knew how to get up after a fall. She'd been doing that all her life and she wasn't about to stop now. This was a piece of cake next to her dad abandoning her and her mom when Courtney was just a kid, Courtney having to help her mom pick up the pieces, emotionally and, later, financially. No, this meeting, she could easily do.

"I'm fine," she declared, her voice cracking from the adrenaline still coursing through her body. "I'm here now..." She smiled, though she didn't feel like it. *I will not think about Danny, I will not!* "This project is on a tight deadline, ladies and gentlemen, and we cannot afford to lose any time. We've shortlisted the ad campaigns down to, what, four I believe?"

McKerroll nodded.

Courtney opened the purple binder before her, no longer able to hold their questioning gazes. "Good, then let's take a close look at those. We'll narrow the campaign down to two today, then we'll test-market those. Understood?"

The heads around the table reluctantly nodded. They still looked like rubbernecks at a traffic accident, stunned and curious, constantly watching her to see if she'd crack or fold. Why the hell weren't they all getting on with their work? It was terrible that those poor people had died this morning, that loved ones were grieving. Courtney was absolutely sick about Danny. He wasn't married, she knew that. She didn't think he had a significant other, but she wasn't sure. He was young, eager, good at his job, a nice guy. He looked up to her, and his good work had made her life easier. It absolutely sucked that he had been on that plane. But hell, what was she supposed to do? Was she supposed to fling herself on the pyre? All the tears in the world couldn't change what happened, wouldn't bring Danny and the others back. Life went on. There was work to be done.

The direct flight back to Seattle wasn't quite as unnerving as Courtney expected it to be. The lorazepam she'd borrowed from someone at the meeting helped. It went down quite nicely with the vodka and orange she'd downed in the airport lounge, as a matter of fact. She was mostly able to banish thoughts of Danny and crashes and flying again. It was difficult to ignore the constant assault of the TV news, which was unrelenting, but somehow she'd managed it. She didn't want to hear another goddamned thing about that crash—not how it happened nor anything about the passengers. When she overheard her fellow passengers whispering about it in the row ahead, she got up and moved. She could keep it all together if only she didn't have to think or hear about what she'd narrowly missed—and about what Danny had not missed.

The rest of the week, back at work at Microsoft's sprawling headquarters, which was like a small city unto itself, Courtney stayed the course. She worked twelve-hour days, pounding her body at the gym for an extra hour each morning before work, taking a couple of stiff drinks at home before dropping into bed each night. She graciously accepted the acknowledgments of sympathy for her department over Danny's loss. She rallied her remaining troops, telling them that the best way to pay homage to Danny was by doing the kind of stellar work he had done. Showed them that strong people carried on and moved past their grief, that work was their salve. She was stoic at the memorial service for him, even as Nan and many of the others fell apart.

She was, in fact, the picture of dependability and strength—until eight days later when a phone call plucked her from the reality she'd created for herself. She answered the phone at her desk only because it wouldn't stop ringing, belatedly remembering it was past five and Nan had gone home.

“Is this Courtney Langford?”

“Yes.”

“Bob Warren. I'm a reporter with the *Boston Globe*.”

Courtney didn't deal with the media. Microsoft had a very

lovely and very large department full of people to deal with reporters. “I’m sorry, Mr. Warren. You’ll have to talk to our PR department.”

“No, it’s you I want to talk to.”

“Look, I don’t talk directly to—”

“It’s about the plane crash outside of Logan Airport last week.”

Courtney’s breath left her in a silent rush. Her ears began to ring.

“I’m sorry, but you must be looking for someone else.” She knew she sounded weak and shaky. If he wanted to talk about Danny, he’d have to talk to public relations or human resources. She sure as hell wasn’t going to talk about Danny to some stranger.

“No, I’m looking for the Courtney Langford who works for Microsoft. The Courtney Langford who was supposed to be on that flight that crashed.”

Oh, God, what could this guy possibly want with that piece of information? And how the hell did he find out? Had someone at the company squealed? Someone at McKerroll and Stanley? The airline? It wasn’t that she’d done anything wrong or unusual or heroic, or...anything at all, except miss a flight that her colleague had not been as fortunate to do. “Look, Mr. Warren. I don’t know where you got your information, but—”

“My sources are reliable. Ms. Langford, there were one hundred and sixty-one people on that flight. You’re the only one who was supposed to be on that plane but wasn’t.”

“Are you implying something?” Courtney was horrified. Did he think she had orchestrated some kind of plot to get Danny killed but not herself? Or that she was supposed to feel *bad* for missing that flight? Did he think she had received some sort of divine information that she should have shared with the other passengers or the airline to keep that plane from flying to Boston? *What?*

“Not at all. I just want to talk to you about how it feels. You know, to be a survivor and all.”

Courtney couldn't speak. *Survivor*. The word hung over her like a guillotine.

So that's what I am now. That's what I'm supposed to be known ever after for...for missing a flight that crashed and killed everyone on board. Courtney Langford, airplane crash survivor. Or Courtney Langford, the luckiest woman alive. Not Courtney Langford, Masters in Business Administration. Or Courtney Langford, division head of Xbox games development for Microsoft Corp.

This Warren guy, and plenty of others, would not think of her as anything other than the woman who should have been on that doomed flight. Hell, she'd noticed that many of her colleagues were having a hard time looking her in the eye and that the ones who did looked like they didn't have a clue how to act around her. Or like they even wanted to be around her, because she might be some kind of ghost or bad luck charm.

Courtney tried to say something, but her voice had completely deserted her. With a shaky hand, she slammed down the phone instead. At some point in the conversation she had stood up, and now she rocked on her heels, dizzy, as the ringing in her ears intensified. She was shaking too. Scared that she would pass out, Courtney slumped back into her leather chair. She buried her face in her hands. Her chest hurt like a son of a bitch. Was this the way a nervous breakdown started? Or an anxiety attack? It was like a speeding train bearing down on her, and there was nothing she could do to get out of the way.

Courtney didn't know what was happening to her, but she knew she was in trouble. She had never felt so alone in her life. Or so damaged.

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

