

Once Upon
a
Romance

A Dream Come True Book 1

ALEX BAILEY


Maiden Voyage Publishing

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Dedicated to fans of
Disney and Christmas magic.
And to Derek Murphy,
who sent the exact words I needed
at the exact moment I needed them.

Chapter 1



The race was on! Sophie, Rick and Ariel dashed Tonka trucks around Sophie's trendy apartment, Barbie dolls barely hanging on in their driver's seats. Squealing tires past the cream-colored tufted sofa and nearly running into the sparsely-decorated Christmas tree in the corner of the living room, they zoomed toward the finish line.

"Aunt Sophie, I won!" eight-year-old Ariel shrieked with glee, throwing hands in the air and bouncing up and down on her knees. Bright red curls made their way back in place with each spring.

Sophie reached over and high-fived her niece. "Awesome!"

"Congratulations!" said Rick, Ariel's dad. "Again!"

"Dad, I thought you said you've been practicing?" Ariel picked up the trucks and moved them back to the starting line at the table in the dining area.

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Rick, a clean-cut thirty-three-year-old TV news correspondent, picked himself up off the floor. “I have, I have. I’m just not as *practiced as you, I guess.*” Rick jabbed his well-manicured fingers into his daughter’s side and tickled her until she wriggled away. “Race again?”

“Hold on a sec, Arie, I need to talk to Aunt Sophie real quick.”

“But Da-ad.”

“It’ll only be a minute. I promise.” He motioned Sophie toward the kitchen, “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure.” Leading Rick into the kitchen, Sophie absent-mindedly flipped her thick auburn hair across her shoulder to her back. “What’s up?” She opened a cabinet door, revealing a row of white mugs in perfect alignment, handles pointed to the right. She pulled two mugs down and handed one to Rick. She definitely ascribed to the tenet, “a place for everything, and everything in its place.”

He smiled a sad little smile. “You remind me of *her* when you do that.”

Sophie frowned. “Do what?”

He slowly sucked in air and poured himself a cup of coffee. “Natalie used to flip her hair the same way you just did. I guess she taught you to do that, since she was your older sister.” He took a sip and then set the cup on the counter.

Sophie gave him a quick side hug. There was nothing she could say to ease his pain—she was hurting as much as Rick was. She’d lost her sister, her best friend, less than a year ago. She hadn’t healed but was finally to the point of not breaking down at every mention of Natalie’s name. But it still got to her each time she saw Rick’s pain. *I better ask quick, before I break down.*

“What did you need to talk to me about?” She poured herself a cup of coffee and took a sip, forcing her mind onto other things.

“First of all, thanks for all the help with Ariel. This weekend . . . and all the other weekends. I’ll be back early tomorrow.”

“You know it’s no problem. I love having her here.” Sophie meant every word. Spending time with Ariel was a joy. And she had planned the day with her niece that included Christmas shopping—something Sophie wasn’t very fond of. The Christmas part, yes, but the shopping, no. Any kind of shopping was not high on her list of things to do on a warm sunny day in December. But having Ariel with her would improve the trip one thousand percent. And if there was time to get their nails done after shopping, the percent of improvement would increase tenfold.

Rick searched the contents of his cup. “Must put a damper on your dating life. I feel like she’s here more than Darren’s here.”

Sophie had dated Darren a little over a year and things seemed to be progressing nicely. He’d asked her to spend Christmas with his family in Denver, and she took that as a positive sign their relationship was headed in the right direction. “Darren’s here plenty. And lots of time he’s here when Ariel’s here.”

Rick gave her an *oh, come now* look. “I know him, Sophie. We work together. He’d just as soon walk across hot coals than spend time with a child.” He paused, took a sip of coffee, and then wrinkled his forehead. “Though I sure wish I’d known that before I introduced you two.”

“Rick, he’s not that bad.” Sophie waved her hand, dismissing his concerns. “I agree. He’s not the biggest

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fan of playing with Barbies, but it's fine. *We're* fine. Seriously."

"Well, that's not what I wanted to talk to you about." He leaned against the counter. "I've got an assignment in London in a few weeks. I leave on the twentieth, and I can't get back until the twenty-fourth, Christmas Eve. I know it's asking a lot, but is there any way you could take care of Ariel? There's a half day of school on the twenty-first, then she's out for winter break. And look, if you have plans with Darren, I'm totally cool with that. I can ask my parents to come stay with her. But no offense to them, she has way more fun with Aunt Sophie."

When Rick's face lit up like her Christmas tree, Sophie got a warm feeling all over. Not just because she knew how much fun she had with her niece, but because any time Rick smiled, was a time to celebrate.

Sophie had spent a lot of time in the past ten months with her niece and had loved her company. She had practically become her surrogate mom. Ariel also resembled her sister, Natalie in many ways, though not physically, as Natalie had been a blonde, like the rest of Sophie's family. In fact, Ariel had often been mistaken for Sophie's child, since they looked so much alike. But Ariel had a joyous disposition and loved many of the things her mom had loved. Being around her niece was Sophie's way of holding on tight to what she'd lost.

Sophie needed a reason to take time off of work. She had plenty of vacation leave because she had used practically none all year. After Natalie's funeral, she hadn't been in a vacation mood.

Her boyfriend, Darren, would have to understand, plans or no plans. Denver could wait. "Of course. I'd love to. Though friends at work may be shocked. They

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got me a miniature pick-and-shovel key chain for my birthday and told me I needed to start chiseling away at that mountain of leave I've got stashed."

"Thanks. You're the best." He lifted his cup to his lips, but before he took a gulp said, "Christmas is only three weeks away, and I haven't even begun to shop for gifts. Been working too much."

Sophie knew all too well about Rick's work schedule. "Let me know if you need help with any of that. I've got some ideas, and I'm willing to help with the shopping."

"Thanks. Just knowing she'll be in good hands while I'm gone . . . that's really a ton off my mind right now. Anyway, I gotta get to the airport. Thanks again." Rick walked into the living room and bent down to Ariel, "Can I get a hug before I go, or will that interfere with Barbie's race?"

Ariel shot up. Her loose curls tumbled to and fro when she threw her arms around and squeezed her dad's neck. "Daddy, do you have to leave again? I thought we were going to have another race?" She let go and looked at him with big sad blue eyes. "Why can't you get a job where you just stay here? Brenda's dad just sits at a desk all day, and he's home every night by dinner time."

He frowned. "Who's Brenda again?"

"Da-ad, she's my bestest friend." Her hands sprung to her hips, as if they were magnets. "How could you forget that?"

Rick squatted and hugged his daughter. "Uh, maybe because your bestest friend changes from week to week?"

Ariel shook her head. "No. She's been my bestest since the beginning of the year."

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He drew back and gave her a questioning look. “Last week it was Geni. I know, because I asked her where her bottle was. Remember that?”

Ariel rolled her eyes. “It was a dumb joke, Dad.”

“I thought it was pretty funny, actually.” Rick shrugged and gave her a sideways grin.

“It’s not funny if you have to explain it. It was one of your old-people shows from when you were a kid in the fifties. Geni and I never even heard of it.”

“*I Dream of Jeannie* was in the Sixties, not the Fifties.” Rick gave his daughter a half-frown. “And I wasn’t even born then! I watched a lot of TV Land before I met your mom. Anyway, I specifically remember you introduced Geni as your best friend.”

“Yes, Dad. *Best* friend. Not *bestest* friend!” Ariel sighed, as if she were explaining something everyone should know, like Santa Claus was the one who brought Christmas presents. “Anyway, why do you have to go *again*?”

“This one’s a quick trip. Promise. Just stopping in Houston for a day for a story about a dog that traveled from Atlanta to Houston to find its owner. We’ll watch it together when the station plays it next week. I’ll actually be back tomorrow morning.”

“If Aunt Sophie remembers to turn it on. She doesn’t watch much TV, especially the news.” Ariel glanced up at her aunt, gave her a look of distress, and then back at her dad.

Sophie hated the goodbyes between Ariel and Rick. It conjured up all the feelings of the loss of her sister to see Ariel’s momentary panicked look, as if her dad might not return. It was understandable since she’d just lost her mom, but it always tugged at her heart.

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Rick eyed his daughter with a silly grin, “Wanna watch *Star Wars* when I get back? You can pick which one this time.”

Ariel smiled, “Um, what kind of question is that? Of course, I do!” But then her smile faded into a frown and she looked at him sideways. “Wait. Is that some kind of bribe?”

“Yup. Now be good for Aunt Sophie.”

When Rick stood, Ariel jumped into his arms, and hugged him around the neck. “I love you from the Earth to the stars.”

“I love you from the stars to infinity.” He wrapped his arms around his daughter, squeezed, and gave her a kiss on her cheek.

Sophie turned away momentarily and choked back a tear, knowing the next line in their routine would have come from her sister. Natalie had switched the words in a quote from *Toy Story*, to ‘*from infinity to beyond*,’ and then the three of them would have laughed while hugging.

When the door shut behind Rick, Sophie asked, “Arie, I’ve got to do some Christmas shopping for my friends at work. Would you like to help?”

“Okay,” Ariel said without looking up. She plunked Barbie dolls on top of two trucks and raced them around the living room.

“Want to race again?” Sophie said. “I can push one.”

“Here, you take the dump truck. That one’s name is Sophie. I’ll take the firetruck. Her name’s Natalie.”

Sophie’s heart swelled. She knew the Barbie’s names but just hearing Ariel say them brought a smile to her face every time.

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“We’ll start here.” Ariel moved her truck to the edge of the couch. “And we’ll push over to the table this time.”

Sophie mimicked revved-up engine noises, pushing her dump truck back and forth, readying it for a race. She loved playing with Ariel. It took her mind off all sorts of things, like losing her sister and best friend.

“Ready? Set? Go!” Ariel pushed so hard that her truck careened across the hard wood floor and then stopped before it got to the table.

Sophie spun her truck in the wrong direction, on purpose. “There you go again, You won! Maybe one of these days, I’ll catch you.”

Ariel threw her arms in the air like she’d just made a soccer goal.

Sophie moved her truck to the corner with Ariel’s other toys, sat on the sofa, and patted the seat next to her. “Arie.” She wanted to do some investigative digging into the Christmas wishes of a certain young girl. It was going to be a tough time for everyone, but especially for Ariel, and her first Christmas without her mom. The least Sophie could do was uncover Ariel’s Christmas wish.

She jumped up onto the sofa and sat where Sophie’s hand had just been.

“So, you wrote your letter to Santa, right?”

Ariel nodded.

“What did you tell him you wanted for Christmas?”

Ariel crossed her arms in front of her and shook her head. “Nope. Can’t tell you or I won’t get it.”

“That only counts if you tell your parents. But your aunt, that’s another story. Aunts are as magical as Santa.” Sophie had decided on a Barbie race car. But just in case there was something else, she wanted to hear what

Ariel preferred. Plus, she could always give the idea to Rick.

“Okay, but I’m going to whisper it in your ear.” Ariel climbed up onto her knees, cupped her hands around Sophie’s ear, and said, “This is what I told him. The only thing I want for Christmas is the whole family to go to Disney World and ride my mom’s favorite ride.” She sat back down and looked up with a blank stare. “I think that’s what my mom would want.”

Sophie’s heart felt like it had just been submerged under water. She knew her heart was still there somewhere in the depths of the ocean, but she had no idea where to find it. It wasn’t just because Natalie had been a Disney fanatic; hence, naming her child after her favorite princess, but Sophie hadn’t been to the parks since Natalie graduated from college, about ten years before. Her parents offered to take the family when Sophie graduated three years later, but Sophie had had enough of her only-Disney family vacations and opted to go to the beach with her friends instead. She rebelled against her Disney-loving parents and sister and vowed to never set foot in that place ever again. After growing up with Disney décor, stick people on the cars, princess outfits, even Mickey Mouse-shaped pancakes, Sophie wanted nothing to do with it.

But how could she deny her niece the only gift she wanted—a gift that not only honored her mom’s memory but one that would make them both feel as if Natalie was back with them?

And Sophie knew very well what ride Ariel was referring to, because they could never leave the Magic Kingdom until they had ridden it. Several times. The Carousel of Progress was the original ride from the 1964

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World's Fair and Natalie sang along with the narrator, much to Sophie's annoyance.

Sophie leaned back into the sofa's plump cushion. How could she say no? Could she actually get on that ride with all the memories of Natalie singing as loud as possible so that everyone in the audience heard her? She'd made sure they *all* knew that she knew the words. *Every* word.

"Aunt Sophie, are you okay?" Ariel tapped her arm.

Sophie sat up straight. "Oh. Um, yes. I'm fine. Just lost in some thoughts."

"So, what do you think?"

Sophie blinked a few times, hoping the question would take flight.

"Do you think Santa will make my wish come true?"

Ariel looked so much like Natalie at that moment, Sophie could do nothing but smile and hug her.

As much as she hated the idea, and her boyfriend Darren would hate it too; it was something she had to do. "Of course he will. Santa always comes through."

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