

# Breaking the Mold

by Jenni Fogle

## Vanessa

“Welcome to Psychology.” Mr. Burton turns around and calls the class to order.

I wait while the syllabus gets passed around until it comes to me. I tune in and out as he goes through the usual speech. Attendance is imperative. Participation grades. Absences. I’m sketching an idea for a pottery design in the margin of my paper when I hear the words “semester project” and “fifty percent of your grade.” At this, he has my attention.

“You’ll be conducting a social experiment. It can last from a week to the entire semester. Some experiments require more time than others, so it really depends on what you choose to do. You’ll be working in assigned pairs, and I don’t allow reassignments, so don’t ask. You won’t get your partner until next class, so don’t ask that either. You will need to run your experiment idea by me before you begin, so I can approve it. Side note: it’s generally a good idea to keep the topic of your study a secret for the most part in order to get objective data. Questions.”

Susan Morgan raises her hand at once, which isn’t a surprise since she’s the biggest overachiever the school has ever seen.

“Could you give us an example of the kind of social experiment you’re talking about?”

“Sure. A few years ago, I had a student who wore her shoes on her hands for an entire week and walked on her hands from class to class. Another student of mine went to the mall with a leash and pretended to have a dog with him. That paper was one of my favorites.”

I raise my hand. “So, there’s a paper?”

“Oh. Right. Thank you.” He nods to me. “After you’ve collected all your data, you and your partner will submit one paper explaining your experiment and the data you gathered. You will each write a separate, short piece telling me what you liked about your project, what you didn’t, what worked, and how you could improve.”

“When do we need to have our ideas submitted?”

I glance over my shoulder to see who’s talking. It’s Derek Patel. He’s a senior—good-looking, rich, and runs in crowds that avoid me like the plague. He catches my eye, and I turn around.

“As soon as possible,” Burton replies. “The sooner you begin, the better data you’ll have and time to organize it...Anything else? No? Okay. We have about fifteen minutes left. Talk quietly amongst yourselves.”

The room around me explodes in conversation, and I quietly put my things away and pull out my sketchbook. I’m an artist, but my medium is clay. I sculpt. I prefer to work with my hands. I sketch purely to have my ideas on paper. I’ve almost finished the detailing on the rim when the bell rings. Tossing my sketchpad and pencil back in my bag, I stand and make my way to the back of the room. I’m waiting for

the crowd to thin out when someone jabs me in the side.

"Watch it." I turn to see Derek slinging a backpack over his shoulder.

"Sorry. I didn't see you—"

"Yeah. I'm sure." I move to the door.

"Hey, I wasn't—" He starts to follow me when someone stops him.

"Leave her alone, man. She's crazy."

## Derek

I'm late.

I got stuck at the breakfast table with my dad freaking out about scholarships when I suddenly realized it was ten-til. I'm speeding through the parking lot, pulling into the first available spot, when I have to slam on my breaks to keep from hitting a girl. It's Vanessa Dean.

"What the hell?" Jade jumps off the hood of the car parked next to me as I get out.

"Are you okay?" I walk over to Vanessa who looks close to tears.

"Of course she's not okay, you asshole. You almost killed her!" Jade glares at me.

"He didn't hit me, Jade." Vanessa picks up her bag from the ground and slings it over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see you." I turn back to Vanessa.

"Clearly." She frowns.

"You're sure he didn't graze you?" Jade jumps back in. "You could sue. God knows he could afford it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I frown.

"Ugh. You're kidding, right?" She looks at my car and then at me.

"I'm fine." Vanessa rolls her eyes.

She doesn't look it though. It's hard to miss the tremor in her hand as she tosses her hair over her shoulder.

"Come on. We'll be late." She nods to the building.

Jade pauses a moment to flip me off before following her. When they're gone, I grab my backpack from my car and hurry to class.

At the end of the day, I wait for her in psychology. She comes in after the bell. I'm looking for her, but only because she's my partner. When I walked in, Burton already had the partner assignments on the screen. However, she doesn't look up. Rather, she goes straight to her desk and sits down.

"When you find your name, get with your partner," Burton announces from his desk.

Since she's clearly not coming to me, I get up and walk to the front of the class. She doesn't seem to notice me when I stop next to her desk. Or she's ignoring me. After a few seconds, she glances up at me and then at the screen.

"Crap."

I look away and shift my weight. I mean, what did I expect? When I look back at her, she's rummaging through her bag, her perfect black hair falling in her face. Well, it's almost perfect. She tucks it behind her ear, and I see something caked in it and smudged on her cheek. It looks like mud.

“Where did you just come from?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not any of your business.”

“Well, it’s just, you have something on your face-”

“So?” She glares up at me.

“I thought you might want to know, is all. God.” I turn around and grab the empty desk from behind me, pulling it around in front of hers. When I look at her again, her cheek is clean.

“So this project.” I sit down and lean my elbows on the desk, trying to keep my eyes away from her collarbone. The deep V of her long sleeve t-shirt is...distracting.

“What about it?” She finally drops her bag on the floor, leaving only a notebook and pencil on her desk.

“Do you have any ideas?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Like one of the examples he gave, but more original.”

“You’re gonna have to be more specific.”

“Well, here. These are the examples he gave from past classes.” I slide her the handout and wait while she looks over it.

“So, what? You want us to walk backwards for a week or something?”

“Well, I was thinking something more radical than that.”

“Radical?” She raises her eyebrows.

“Yeah. Something that will really get reactions out of people.”

“Like swearing in class or starting a fight?”

“I was hoping not to get detention or suspension in the process.”

“Well, that’s radical. What do you want from me?”

Clearly she and I have two different definitions of what radical means. Though, her ideas would get reactions out of people.

“What if we wore our clothes inside out-”

“You call that radical?”

“Fine. What if we wore each other’s clothes? Not like underwear or anything, but shirts and coats-”

“You want to wear my clothes? Are you gay or something?”

I cringe, looking over her V-neck again.

“Well, you could wear my clothes, I guess...” I lean back in my chair and run my fingers through my hair.

“Like we’re dating? That’s ridiculous.” She rolls her eyes and crosses her arms.

“Actually...” I think about it for a second. “That’s a great idea.”

## Vanessa

“What?” I stare at him.

“Dating. For our experiment.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!”

“No, think about it. It’s not expected, and it’ll get reactions-”

“You know what, never mind.” I stand up and grab my bag, heading for the door.

“Vanessa, wait!”

I stop when he says my name. The way he says it, it's like some kind of vocal caress. Oh my gosh. I'm losing my mind.

"What?" I frown at him and sit back down.

"Look, I'm not making fun of you or anything. I really think the two of us dating would be a good idea for this project."

"Why? Because I'm an outcast and you're one of the richest and most popular kids on campus?" I clench my jaw.

"Well...yeah, but—"

"You egotistical douche—"

"Please. Just think about it. It practically guarantees us an 'A.'"

I glare at him, and sit back in my chair, twirling a piece of hair around my finger. I have an overwhelming urge to punch him or stab him with my pen. At the same time, I have to admit, the idea would be a good project—sure to get reactions from everyone. Including Jade. Oh my gosh, she'll kill me if she thinks I'm seriously dating him, especially after this morning.

"No. This is a terrible idea." I stand up again.

"Come on, Vanessa. Please. We can keep it at school. We don't have to do anything after the last bell. Just like in the hallways between classes..."

"Why are you so into this all of the sudden? Is this some kind of sick, twisted plan to get me in bed—"

"What? God, no."

I raise my eyebrows at him.

"I'm sorry. That's not what I meant, I just..." He shakes his head, and I can see his cheeks flush. "Look, I need an 'A' in this class, and this is a great idea. You know it is."

"Fine." I exhale.

"Great."

The bell rings, and I reach down to grab my bag.

"Do you want to run it by Burton before we leave?"

"Yeah. I guess."

He heads to the front of the room, and I follow him.

## Derek

"Well, it's original. I'll give you that." Mr. Burton leans back in his chair after we finish explaining our idea after class. Well, I finish. Vanessa hasn't opened her mouth once. She's just sort of standing next to me, twisting her hair around her finger.

"So can we do it?" I shift my backpack on my shoulder.

"Well, are you certain this is what you want to do?"

"I don't know. I mean, I guess so." I glance at Vanessa who is staring at the floor. "It's a good idea, right?" I look back at him.

"Oh, I think it's a great idea. I just also think it's a risky one. But you thought it through?"

"Yes."

I suppose. I'm actually trying not to think about the details. Like what my

friends will say. And my parents.

“And you still want to do it?”

“Yes.”

“Both of you?” He looks over at Vanessa, and I follow his gaze.

“Yeah. Sure.” She shrugs, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “I mean, if it gets me an ‘A.’”

“Alright then.” Burton turns back to me. “I’ll give my approval.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“I expect a fantastic result.”

“Are we done?” Vanessa mutters to me.

“Yeah.”

“Great. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She turns around and leaves without another word.

“Bye, Mr. Burton.”

“Have a good afternoon.”

## Vanessa

I avoid him for the rest of the week. Now that we’ve actually committed to this fake-dating thing, I’m not really sure what to do. How is this supposed to work exactly? It doesn’t help that I’ve never actually dated anyone, much less pretended to.

On Friday, however, stuff starts happening. We’re sitting on the hood of her car, as we usually do, before the bell rings. Jade is smoking, and I’m reading through a book on Renaissance sculpture. Everything’s normal. And then Derek speeds by.

“That douche bag shouldn’t be allowed to drive.” Jade leans back against the Honda’s windshield and crosses her ankles, planting one black combat boot firmly on top of the other.

“As you’ve said,” I mutter.

“Hey.” She turns to me. “Aren’t you supposed to be dating him?”

“Well, sort of.” I frown at her. “But, I’m not exactly sure-”

“You should go talk to him.” She lets out a stream of smoke.

“What? Jade-”

“It’s a starting place. Besides, no one’s ever gonna believe you’re dating him if you never talk to him.”

“Jade, how are you saying this? You hate him-”

“Yeah, I do, which is why I’m not dating him. You are.” She looks over at me.

“Well, I don’t necessarily like him-”

“Then, why did you agree to do this stupid experiment?”

“I told you, because-”

The first bell rings, and people start heading for the building.

“Go talk to him.” She nods to his car, which is now parked a couple rows ahead of us. “You still have like ten minutes.” She hops off her hood and goes around to the trunk to get her bag.

“But-”

“Go!” She yells at me.

“Fine!” I jump off the hood and sling my satchel over my shoulder. Before I

know what I'm doing, I'm at Derek's Porsche, and he's getting a backpack out of the backseat.

"Hey."

"What the-" He spins around, almost hitting me with the bag. Fortunately, I step back in time.

"Watch it." I frown.

"Sorry. God, Vanessa. You scared me to death."

"Too bad you're still alive," I mutter.

He frowns.

"Sorry." I shrug.

"What did you want?" He closes the door to his Porsche with his elbow and starts toward the front of the school.

"Well..." I walk with him. "I don't know. We're supposed to be working on this project..."

"Oh, so now you want to work on it." He frowns at me. "I've been trying to talk to you for three days-"

"I know, alright. Leave me alone."

He sighs.

"Fine. How do you want to do this?"

"Don't look at me. I've never done this before."

"And I have?"

"Oh, please." I stop and cross my arms. "Like you've never flirted with a girl before."

"And no guy has ever flirted with you?"

I feel the heat rise in my cheeks.

"That's none of your business."

"And yet, it's your business when it's me. Nice double standard." He begins walking again.

"Okay. I'm sorry. But we still have to start doing-"

"Fortunately, I've actually been thinking about this, and I have a few ideas," he cuts me off as we step onto the sidewalk.

"Okay. What are they?"

"What do you have now?" He glances at his watch.

"Um...English. Mr. Perelli. But, I thought we were talking about-"

"Awesome."

"What's awesome?"

I am so lost right now.

"That you have English with Perelli now."

"Okay...Why exactly is that awesome?"

"Because," he looks over at me as he opens to door, "I'm walking you to class."

Before I can react, he takes my hand and pulls me into the crowded hallway.

## Derek

Her hand is cold. It's all I can focus on as I maneuver my way through the hall. People are staring, whispering. I pass Jace, and I cringe. It's not like I planned to hold

her hand. I just wanted to surprise her out of spite. And walking her to class was a good idea. I think. When we get to Perelli's room, she pulls her hand away, but she doesn't say anything.

"So..." I shift my weight awkwardly, trying not to stand in the way of the door.

"Yeah." She adjusts her bag.

"Vanessa." I stop her as she starts to turn away. "I didn't mean to..."

"Start something?" She volunteers. "It's a bit late for that." She glances down the hall, where people are still staring.

"Yeah. I should've-"

"Warned me?" Something flashes across her face, but then it's gone.

"Well, we had to start somewhere," I mutter. "Besides, at least now we have something to go on."

"Right."

"So, I'll see you in psychology?"

"Yeah. See you then." She nods and then disappears into her class, and I head off to Carter's before I'm late. Again.