

A BRADFORD SISTERS ROMANCE

# True to You



BECKY WADE



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Becky Wade, True to You  
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For Chris.

You're my husband, my best friend,  
and the one who makes me laugh every day.

I love you.

## CHAPTER

# One

Finding oneself at the mercy of a crazed gunman isn't all fun and games.

*Nope*, thought Nora Bradford. *Not at all*. Not even when said gunman was an actor toting a fake gun and you'd volunteered your time to play the role of hostage for noble reasons.

According to her sister Britt, Lawson Training Incorporated staged emergency situations just like the one they were in the midst of as the culminating exercise of every course they offered. Today's trainees were civil workers from the town of Centralia. Directly beyond the wall of the room where Nora and Britt had been stashed, the civil workers were attempting to respond strategically to a faux enemy trying to take over this faux office building.

Given the current state of the world, Nora certainly believed in the value of emergency preparedness and response training. In fact, Nora had agreed to come along with Britt today because Britt had framed this outing as something proactive the two of them could do to further the cause of world peace. Nora wanted world peace! It was just that, with every passing minute, she was growing more and more certain of her unsuitability for the role of hostage. Her decades-long love of reading had instilled in her a *very* vivid imagination.

To her ears, the agitated shouting of the gunman sounded all too terrifyingly real.

Tension had been mounting steadily within her, tightening her shoulder muscles and causing her stomach to constrict with unease, ever since the “attack” had begun. She should have opted to further the cause of world peace by volunteering in her church’s soup kitchen. The soup kitchen was more her speed.

Angry yelling carried through the wall, followed by a few shrieks of fear.

Nora swallowed. *Shrieks of fear?* She could only hope that the volunteers who’d been cast as office workers were taking artistic license.

Britt, of course, seemed oblivious to the ominous commotion. She was four years younger than Nora, the baby of their family, and the bravest of them all.

Britt curled her fingertips around the bottom edge of the room’s lone window and tugged. “I think we should try to escape.” She smiled at Nora the same way she’d smiled at Nora whenever she’d suggested mischievous childhood adventures. Her eyebrows ticked upward delightedly.

“No,” Nora answered firmly. “The gentleman who assigned us to this room told us all we’d have to do is wait.” She infused her words with a calm she didn’t feel. “Once we’re discovered, we’re supposed to react to the situation we encounter however we’d react in real life.”

“I *am* reacting to this situation the way I’d react in real life. Which is to view it as a challenge. You know, like those Escape the Room games that are gaining in popularity.”

“This is not an Escape the Room game. We’re here to help provide an object lesson for the trainees. This isn’t about us.”

Britt gave the sash a few more hard tugs before stepping back and setting her hands on her hips. Slowly she turned, scrutinizing their environment. It held nothing but a desk and the chair Nora occupied.

Britt’s attention stopped on an air vent mounted into the wall near the ceiling.

Nora narrowed one eye to a slit. “There’s no way we’ll be able to escape through an air vent. People crawl through them in movies, but they’re not roomy enough for that in real life. Are they? More to the point, *we were instructed to wait*. We’re not trying to get an A+ as fake hostages.”

“Speak for yourself.” Britt made shooing motions as she approached. “Scoot.”

“Britt—”

“Scoot!”

Nora exited the chair.

Britt dragged it beneath the vent, stood on it, and peered into the duct.

Just as Nora lowered onto the carpet to sit, a heavy crash reverberated from the other side of the wall, sounding like a huge piece of furniture falling.

Was there any chance that this training exercise had been hijacked by a real attacker?

No. Even so, Nora felt the way she did when sitting inside an airplane as it hurtled down the runway for takeoff. Intellectually, she knew she was safe. Emotionally, she knew planes sometimes crashed.

She longed for the soup kitchen.

“Is the vent conveniently large enough to crawl through?” Nora asked.

“No.”

“Well, we could always break apart the desk and use splintered pieces of wood to chisel a tunnel through the wall.”

Britt hopped from the chair and gave a businesslike nod. “Okay. I’m game.”

“I was kidding!”

“It might work.”

“It’ll never work. Also, we can’t damage Lawson Training’s property.” Nora frowned and straightened the brown bandana she’d tied around her head to decorate her Rosie the Riveter updo. “Stop eying the desk in that hungry way, Britt.”

Her sister returned to the window, her features holding a faint resemblance to those of a young Sophia Loren. This morning, Britt had woven her long walnut-brown hair into a messy side braid that totally worked for her. She wore skinny jeans under a loose silver top. If laid flat, Britt's top would look like a rectangle with sleeves. On the twenty-five-year-old Britt, however, it looked easy and sexy and trendy. Britt didn't care that much about clothes, but the feeling wasn't mutual. Clothes never failed to complement her.

On this first day of May, the Pacific Northwest forecast called for a peak temperature of sixty-two. Nora had dressed in her trusty cable-knit sweater. It was three years old and it, too, looked like a rectangle when you laid it flat. Unfortunately, it continued to resemble a rectangle while on Nora's body.

God, who must have diagnosed her to be very longsuffering indeed, had seen fit to give her two beautiful sisters. One older. One younger. Nora's genes had labeled her as the dotty spinster of the trio long before her ill-fated love life ever had.

She checked her watch. Five till noon. "We've been in here for almost forty-five minutes. How much longer do you think it's going to be? I'm craving my iPhone."

"You need a technology detox." More window wrestling.

If Nora had her phone, she could distract herself by checking her messages and social media platforms for communication from Duncan. Shutting her into this room without her phone was akin to shoving Linus into the world without his blanket.

Another booming thud rumbled the air. Two men shouted muffled threats.

Nora closed her eyes and scrolled down a mental list of all the things she'd planned to do on this Saturday. She'd planned to read book six in the Silverstone Chronicles. Design pinnable images for Merryweather's Summer Antique Fair. Make a batch of apple cinnamon soap from a recipe her great-great-grandmother had handwritten in 1888. If there'd been additional time, she'd hoped to do what she always did with leftover time on the weekends: rewatch episodes of *Northamptonshire*.

It had taken Britt and her thirty minutes to drive here, to the town of Shore Pine. Once they stopped at Mr. Hartnett's on the way home so that Nora could deliver the latest in a long string of bribery gifts, then continued on to their hometown of Merryweather, there'd definitely not be time left in the day to indulge in *Northamptonshire*.

A scent like that of burning chemicals mixed with sugar wafted to Nora. She glanced to the side in time to see smoke slide into the room from beneath the door. Smoke! "Um." She gestured to it.

"Huh," Britt said. "Cool effect."

Nora carefully drew in breath, making sure the smoke didn't smell like an actual fire. It didn't.

Commanding voices and the clatter of a scuffle drew closer to their location. Like a sewing machine needle increasing in speed, Nora's heart picked up its pace.

"Oooh," Britt said. "I'm liking this."

A grinding sound came from above. The sprinklers that had been embedded in the ceiling descended. "No!" Nora called out.

In the next instant, cold water hit her in the face. Squealing, she drew herself into a ball, tucking her head between her upraised knees and wrapping her arms around her shins. Across the room, Britt hissed with disgust.

"Thank you so much for inviting me to partake in this fun experience," Nora said to her sister, though the words went little further than her ancient clogs. "Next time I feel overly content and dry and warm, perhaps I can come again."

The door to their room banged open. Nora angled her face toward the entranceway just as a man filled the opening. A big man. Square-jawed. His grave gaze swept the square footage in a millisecond. He seemed not to notice the falling raindrops, though they peppered his wet, spiky brown hair and drizzled down his stubbled face. He radiated complete and total competency.

The force of his presence careened into Nora like a hundred-mile-an-hour wind. In response, she could do nothing but hold her ground and blink.



Deep within the building, an alarm began to blare.

A much smaller and more human-looking guy wearing a drenched business suit slipped into the room. The smaller one waved Britt forward. "Follow me, please. I'll lead you out." He moved off and Britt loped out of sight behind him.

Faint displeasure crimped the edge of the big one's lips as the full weight of his attention settled on Nora. The smaller one had been in training, she figured. This one must be the instructor, and he was irritated because his trainee hadn't noticed her in her huddled spot. The trainee had escorted out only the hostage who'd been standing directly in front of him, impossible to miss.

He slanted his body so that she had plenty of room to exit. "This way."

Nora spent a great deal of her time journeying to eras long past and places entirely fictional. Thanks to that and the nervousness she really *had* been feeling, it wasn't a stretch to imagine that this fantastical person was her real rescuer.

His hair was thick and well cut. It stuck up slightly in the front. She couldn't make out the shade of his eyes. Hazel? Subtle horizontal lines marked his forehead. How old was he? Thirty? Thirty-five? No trace of softness clung to his face. It looked like a face hardened by both experience and fitness. The same went for his tall, strong body.

He'd dressed in a black sweater, brown cargo pants, and worn-in leather Red Wing work boots. "Ma'am?" He regarded her with professional courtesy stretched thin with impatience.

Still staring at him, Nora used her fingertips to smooth water from her eyes in hopes of seeing him better. To be honest, he seemed a little too good to be true.

Then again, she was twenty-nine and single, and she'd purposely filled her life with things other than romance for three years straight. For the most part, she came into contact either with residents of Merryweather she'd known all her life or elderly people. In her regular life, she *never* met or even caught glimpses of men like this—

He strode to her.

She may have tarried too long. He probably thought her mute or so obstinate that she was playing the part of recalcitrant hostage on purpose.

Nora began to lever herself up, but he swept her into his arms before she could get any momentum. Her lips popped open. Her hand automatically rose to latch around one wide shoulder.

He walked from the room, through the fog-filled space beyond. Water continued to tumble from overhead.

She was being carried by him! Despite her additional weight, he walked with easy fluidity. Rescuing damsels from distress just might be an everyday occurrence for him. “B—” she began, then realized she had no idea what she’d been about to say. She, who was never at a loss for words.

A delicious masculine scent rose from his skin. He’d braced an arm behind her back and one beneath her bent knees. Her side was pressed against a male torso that had about as much give as a fir tree.

This was . . . incredibly intimate. Her hip was up against the abs of a man she hadn’t even spoken one word to. Her palm was gripping his wet shoulder. And all she’d managed so far was “b.” She needed to say something. . . .

Nora cleared her throat. “S-sorry about my slow response time back there. I was sort of stunned by,” *you*, “the unexpected dousing.”

He kept his attention focused ahead. His expression remained inscrutable.

“This is my first fake hostage experience. I’m a hostage rookie.” Her limbs had begun to shake a bit from the cold and the wet.

No response.

“I probably would have been able to walk out under my own steam. Eventually.”

They arrived at the top of a stairwell. Eep! Stairs. “If you’ll let me—”

He carried her down.

A short foyer slid past, then they exited the building through sliding glass doors. The rest of the people who'd been a part of the exercise waited behind a temporary partition.

A small cheer went up at the sight of them. Nora spotted Britt right away. Her sister's eyes rounded with surprise. Or maybe hilarity.

Her rescuer set her on her feet, then met her gaze directly. "I apologize about the sprinklers. They don't usually go off when we deploy the smoke."

"Not a problem. I'm sure that deploying smoke is a tricky business." What was she saying? That wasn't witty. That just sounded inane.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Thank you for volunteering today." He nodded and moved to walk away—

"I'm Nora. Bradford."

He paused and faced her again. "John Lawson."

Intrepidly, she extended her hand. He gave it a firm shake.

"I live in Merryweather," she hurried to say, unwilling to let him go so soon. "I run the historical village downtown."

His chin dipped half an inch.

"I'm the director of the Library on the Green Museum." Mortification caused her cheeks to heat. Why was she rattling off her résumé as if trying to impress a prospective employer?

No reply. He wasn't exactly giving her a lot of conversational response to work with.

"I'm a genealogist and a historian. Anyway." She straightened and smiled brightly. "If I can be of assistance with . . ." She gestured vaguely toward the building. The distant alarm finally went silent. ". . . what you're doing here, let me know." Because genealogists were so famously helpful at staging crises.

His eyebrows drew together infinitesimally. "Did you say you're a genealogist?"

"Yes." Her pulse and her hope thrummed.

“I may give you a call about something.”

“Great!”

Then he was gone, making his purposeful way toward a knot of people she assumed to be his coworkers. She didn’t have her business cards on her. They and her phone were stashed in the purse she’d been asked to check in when they’d arrived. However, if John did decide to call her about the mysterious “something,” it wouldn’t be hard to locate the library’s phone number. An Internet search for “Library on the Green” would pull it up in seconds.

A middle-aged man with ramrod military bearing stepped onto a crate and raised his voice to thank the volunteers for their time. He directed them toward a row of tables and invited them to help themselves to the pre-packaged sandwiches, chips, fruit, and bottled waters that waited there.

Everyone broke toward the free food, talking amongst themselves. Nora made her way back to Britt.

“What in the world just happened?” Britt asked.

“Well, when John arrived—”

“John? You’re on a first name basis?”

“He carried me *in his arms*. That’s the most intimate I’ve been with a man in years, so I thought it prudent that we exchange names.”

“Why did he carry you?”

“I think I gaped at him a little too long when he arrived to rescue us.”

“What do you mean, ‘you gaped’?”

“I mean that I literally gaped at him. For a while there I was frozen. I think he got impatient. So he picked me up and carried me out.”

Britt gave a disbelieving chuckle.

Nora raised her palms. “Is he or is he not one of the most striking men you’ve ever seen?”

“He’s striking.”

“He’s mine, since I’m the one he carried and since you have a boyfriend.”

“I broke up with Carson.”

“What! When did this happen?”

“A couple of days ago,” Britt said dismissively. “He was getting on my nerves.”

“You were so happy.”

“I fell out of happiness with him. He was more trouble than he was worth.”

Britt’s frequent romances always took off like rockets propelled by promise and power and star-crossed destiny. Then, a few months in, they all fizzled like a Tesla fifty miles from the nearest charging station.

The sisters retrieved their purses. No Facebook messages, tweets, emails, or text messages had come in except an automated text from Merryweather’s smoothie shop letting Nora know about a weekend sale.

They took their places at the end of the food table line. As they inched forward, Nora kept trying to catch glimpses of John through the crowd. No luck. “So. About John . . .” She set a plastic-wrapped triangle of ham sandwich on the recyclable tray she’d been given.

“Still thinking about John?”

“You’re kidding, right? I’ll be thinking of nothing but John for months.”

“If you’re that into him, you should ask him out before we leave.”

Nora selected a bag of kettle chips. “You don’t actually think that I have the moxie to ask out a man I just met. Do you?”

“Asking John out might actually result in a date. Daydreaming about him won’t.”

Nora made a scoffing sound. “Does the name John Lawson ring a bell?”

“Well, this is Lawson Training Incorporated’s event.”

“Yes, but beyond that?”

Britt cocked her head to consider the question. She added two cookies and a bottle of water to her tray. “You know . . . it does ring a bell. A little.”

“For me, too.”

They decided to eat their lunch inside Nora’s parked car, because there they could get heat flowing over their damp, clingy clothing. Once they’d closed themselves inside, Britt went to work on her food. Nora typed *John Lawson* into Wikipedia on her phone. A picture of John dressed in a naval uniform emerged. He looked younger in the photo than he did now, but exactly as compelling and serious and unflinching.

*John Truman Lawson*

*Born: Seattle, Washington*

*Allegiance: United States of America*

*Service/Branch: United States Navy*

*Years of Service: Six*

*Unit: United States Navy SEALs*

*Awards: Medal of Honor*

Nora sat back against the driver’s seat. She’d just been rescued from a pretend emergency by a real Medal of Honor recipient. That explained why his name had seemed familiar—she’d caught some of the media coverage about his Medal of Honor a few years back. Everyone in the state of Washington had been filled with pride when the president had awarded the prestigious distinction to their own native son.

“Find out anything?” Britt asked.

“He’s a former Navy SEAL and a Medal of Honor recipient. Good grief. Isn’t the Medal of Honor the highest honor?”

“I think so.”

Nora read through the rest of the information listed. “He was involved in a mission that resulted in the rescue of American and Canadian hostages. He saved a team member at risk to his own life, then held off the opposition until reinforcements arrived. The book *Uncommon Courage* and the movie of the same name are about him.”

“Wow.”

“It says that he lives here in Shore Pine and that he’s the owner and CEO of Lawson Training Incorporated.” The Wikipedia profile didn’t provide nearly enough details to satisfy her. With a few quick taps, she ordered both the print and movie versions of *Uncommon Courage*.

Nora stared out the front windshield at a stand of aspen trees. The bright lime-green of their spring leaves contrasted boldly with their slender white trunks. Her sister crunched potato chips. Her car’s heater whirred. Her own lunch waited untouched.

It had been years since she’d been attracted to anyone who wasn’t fictional . . . or who wasn’t an actor who played a fictional character. She was capable and scholarly and disinclined to gamble ever again on romance. Yet, something in John called out to something in her. It was unexplainable. Foolhardy, even.

And yet. Just thinking about him, just remembering the interaction she’d shared with him, caused warmth to curl deep within her.

• • •

*Typed by John Lawson into the Reminders app on his phone:*

- Have building’s sprinklers turned off. Can that be done and still be up to fire code?
- Contact Nora Bradford at Library on the Green.

• • •

*Facebook message from Duncan Bartholomew to Nora Bradford:*

**DUNCAN:** How was your day, Librarian Extraordinaire?

**NORA:** Far better than average. I was a hostage in an emergency situation staged for training purposes. (I didn’t particularly enjoy that part.) I ended up being rescued by a Navy SEAL. (I did particularly enjoy that part.)

**DUNCAN:** Just so long as you don’t develop a crush on the Navy SEAL. Adolphus is prone to jealousy where Miss Lucy Lawrence is concerned.

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**NORA:** Adolphus hasn't yet noticed the existence of Miss Lucy Lawrence. Much to my everlasting chagrin.

**DUNCAN:** But when he does notice Lucy's existence I do believe he'll be prone to jealousy.

**NORA:** When (and if) Adolphus finally notices Lucy's existence, she will be his. Heart and soul. Always and forever.