



## Never Too Late (Flirt)

*By A. Destiny, Rhonda Helms*

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Can acting in love lead to the real thing? This standalone addition to the Flirt series is sweet, fresh, and clean.

Abbey couldn't be more excited. The end of the school year is coming, as is the annual sophomore class renaissance faire...and the headlining theatrical performance, where Abbey will be starring as a lead. There's only one problem: her costar, Jason Hardy.

Everyone else might think Jason is perfect, but Abbey knows the truth. She remembers what he did at the school dance, and she knows he's a total jerk.

But during the daily rehearsals, Abbey starts to see a side to Jason she hadn't noticed before...and he might not be as bad as she thought. Each day she's falling for him just a little bit more, and she thinks maybe Jason feels the same.

Or maybe he's a better actor than Abbey could have guessed.

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## **Never Too Late (Flirt) By A. Destiny, Rhonda Helms Bibliography**

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## Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

Each year, the sophomore class at Abby's high school puts together a Renaissance Faire. It's quite a big deal, with the sophomores under heavy pressure to best their upperclassmen counterparts with their presentation. Abby is elated when she is cast in the lead role in the Faire's play, a romantic comedy about a girl who loves one boy but is betrothed to his brother. Unfortunately, Abby's nemesis, Jason, is cast as her character's object of affection. As their stage characters bicker their way to romance, Abby makes sure she avoids real-life Jason, on whom her best friend, Olivia, has a crush. As her blood boils each time Olivia flirts with Jason, Abby discovers over time that she may not totally despise her cast mate after all. The story of smoldering love disguised by animosity has been told many times, and this volume in the Flirt series (*Lessons in Love*, 2014, is also available), is feathery light in plot. But readers searching for a breezy romance free of sex will find a great match here. Grades 6-9. --Diane Colson

### About the Author

A. Destiny is the coauthor of the Flirt series. She spends her time reading, writing, and watching sweet romance movies. She will always remember her first kiss.

Rhonda Helms is the author of *Promposal*, *Struck*, *Never Too Late*, and *Portrait of Us*. She lives in Northeast Ohio with her husband, two kids, and three dogs. Visit her at [RhondaHelmsBooks.com](http://RhondaHelmsBooks.com).

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*Never Too Late*

## Chapter One

Fourteen-fifty was a notable year for not only Europe, but for world history. Gutenberg's printing press is considered to be one of the most important inventions ever. If it weren't for that, you wouldn't have these books sitting on your desks." Mrs. Gregory paused. "Now, make sure to write all of this down, folks—there will be a quiz on it next week." She swiped her chalk-dusted hand across the black pants on her slim upper thigh and continued scrawling important dates about historical European events across the chalkboard.

I cast a sideways glance at Olivia, who shook her head and rolled her eyes. We were both thinking the same thing. Mrs. Gregory always threatened us with quizzes, but inside that tall, superthin body was a woman with a heart of melted butter. She went easier on us than most of our other teachers did, letting us pair up to study before tests and such.

Still, I took notes. Couldn't take a chance on looking like a slacker right now, not with everything riding on the line.

My big chance.

My stomach flipped and I shoved that thought aside. Focus. Surely we'd find out soon enough who got assigned to what positions in the sophomore class's end-of-year Renaissance faire. It was supposed to be today, from all the rumors I'd heard earlier at lunch.

“Mrs. Gregory,” Karen said from her seat in the front of the class, thrusting her arm straight into the air. Her hair cascaded like a bright-red waterfall down her back, perfectly flat-ironed and one of my great envies. Sigh. What I’d give to not have boring brown hair. “When are we going to find out our parts for the faire? Isn’t that supposed to be today?”

Apparently I wasn’t the only one distracted during class.

Mrs. Gregory made a big show of glancing up at the clock over the doorway. She pursed her pale-pink lips and tapped her chin. “Hmm. I’m supposed to wait another twenty minutes to release you to the theater. The results will be posted on the double doors.” She paused. “But if you’re willing to work hard, maybe we can bend that a bit and I’ll let class go a few minutes early.”

My heart rate picked up to double time, and I nodded as the rest of the class buzzed in excitement around me. The response was unsurprising—most school activities were a little on the lame side, but the sophomore Renaissance faire was the highlight of the end of the year for the whole school, including the upperclassmen.

Even our teachers enjoyed it. Especially the way it brought out the students’ competitive sides and made us work together to raise the most money we could for our school. It was tradition for the students to try to trump the year before, and our class was no exception.

As Mrs. Gregory turned back to the board to write faster, mumbling other important Renaissance dates out loud and scrawling key phrases beside them, Olivia slipped me a note. I unfolded it as quietly as I could—Olivia liked to twist and crunch them into the smallest pieces of paper possible—and read quickly.

Are you totally nervous?

“Nervous” wasn’t quite the right word to describe my emotions. More like terrifyingly excited. Since waking up this morning, the results of the end-of-faire play auditions were all I could think about. I’d picked my way through breakfast and lunch, trudged from class to class as each minute painfully clicked by.

I just hope I got a good part, I wrote back, crumpling it in a ball and tossing it in her lap. Luckily, Mrs. Gregory didn’t really care if we passed notes, so long as we kept it subtle and it didn’t distract anyone else. I wouldn’t dare try it in another class.

Our teacher talked on and on, continuing to alternate between writing and patting the back of her low bun. I wrote notes without listening while stealing peeks at the people around me. A few were goofing around—mostly guys whispering and elbowing each other. One girl, Liana, was completely asleep in the back, her face buried in the crook of her arm on her desk. Nothing new there—I doubt she’d been awake for the majority of the year. Then my attention caught on Jason Hardy’s shrewd brown eyes where he sat in a desk two rows to my left.

He raised one eyebrow at me.

I tore my gaze away, a hot flush crawling up my cheeks. Jason—the bane of my existence. A big pile of arrogance mixed with just enough cuteness to let him get away with treating people like dirt.

Olivia tossed me another note. He’s soooo cute. Obviously, she’d seen me giving Jason the hairy eye.

Only if you like them tall, dark, and totally obnoxious. I tossed it back to her.

She read it and pursed her lips, shooting me The Look. The one she'd given me since last year that indicated she thought I was judging him too harshly. Frankly, due to what we'd both heard about him, plus my own personal run-in with His Royal Majesty, I felt like I wasn't judging him harshly enough.

Still, I shoved aside my irritation and turned my attention back to my sparse notes. Jason didn't matter right now. I had bigger fish to fry, and I knew that because Olivia had an unrequited crush on him, it was a sensitive area in our friendship. One I'd been careful to respect by avoiding the topic whenever possible.

Mrs. Gregory stepped away from the board and moved to the front of her desk, jumping up to sit on the corner. "Okay, notebooks away. Hurry it up," she added, urgently waving her hands at us. She gave a minute for people to get packed up and finish talking then continued. "As you know, the sophomore Renaissance faire is one of the shining highlights of our school year. We get news coverage from a local station, and even a reporter from the paper comes by. The entire sophomore class participates in this mandatory function, including decorating the gym. No one job is more important than anyone else's. All the teachers have consulted with each other and worked together to assign your positions."

A few of the guys in the back groaned, but most of us were engaged and quiet, waiting to hear more.

"Mrs. Gregory," Timothy said from two seats behind me in his slow, easy country drawl—he'd moved to Cleveland in elementary school from Georgia but still hadn't shaken the accent. "What if we don't like what we're assigned to do?"

She gave him a small smile. "Learn to like it." Turning her attention back to the class, she swept her gaze over all of us. "You are being graded on full participation, enthusiasm, and creativity for both days of the faire. You must bring your historical and literary knowledge into your projects or assignments. We expect you to do your best. And, of course, helping the school fund-raise is an added bonus."

I fought the urge to squirm in my seat. Playing it cool was key right now. Fake it till you make it was something my mom always said. The decision had already been made, and soon enough I'd be finding out if my audition merited a role in the pinnacle of the faire—our student play.

"Okay, then." Mrs. Gregory gave a big smile and stood. "You're all dismissed. Go straight to the theater to find out your assigned roles. And don't try to skip out," she added loudly above the sudden noise of twenty-five students scrambling for the door. "I'm going there too and will be watching you."

I grabbed my books and tucked them into the crook of my arm. My heart was pounding so hard I could barely think straight. It was silly, getting so nervous about a play. And yet, this could be my chance.

Olivia squeezed my hand, a huge smile on her face. "I'm so excited for you! Let's go!" She practically dragged me into the hallway, her blond curls bouncing with each step. There were clumps of sophomores streaming by us. Apparently other teachers had the same idea as Mrs. Gregory.

The theater felt a thousand miles away, and it didn't help that when we arrived, the place was far too packed for us to reach the doors. Rows upon rows of students were clustered tightly together, and nearly all of them were taller than my barely five-foot height. No way could I get through this crowd or see overtop of it. The pains of being short, I thought with a sigh.

"I can't see a thing," I said to Olivia, standing on tiptoes in the futile effort of eyeing the door.

“I have an idea. Stay here.” Olivia slipped between two people in front of me and disappeared.

The noise got louder as people talked over each other in excitement, with a few frustrated groans popping in and out of conversations. I overheard snippets, smothering more than a laugh or two behind my hand.

“—wanted to wear a pretty gown, but I have to dress like a serf—”

“Your armor is going to look awesome! Wait until—”

“—hate the recorder . . . I haven’t played it since fourth grade.”

“Abbey!” a voice called out, ringing overtop of everyone else in Olivia’s typical commanding fashion. “Oh my God!” Then I saw her push back through the crowd toward me, a huge smile splitting her face. Her brown eyes shone in excitement. “Oh my God,” she breathed, “you got it! You got it!”

“What did I get?” I asked, trying to speak past the sudden lump in my throat. “Am I in the play?”

Olivia grabbed my arm and dragged me a few feet away from the crowd. “Okay.” Her grin grew crooked. “First off, I saw that I’m in charge of the puppet show. How funny is that?” She shook her head. “I barely know how to work a puppet, much less write a show, then make the full cast and create a set. Still, at least it’s more fun than peddling turkey legs—sorry, legges—to the crowds.”

“I’ll be happy to help you with the puppet stuff,” I replied, giving her a big smile. “It’ll be great.”

“But that’s not the coolest part.” She paused, gripping my hand. “You got the lead, Abbey. You’re the female star of the play. In addition to now helping me with the puppets, of course,” she added with a wink.

A big squeal bubbled out of me before I could stop it. “Oh, wow!” I reached over to hug her. “This is the best day ever!” In my gut I’d felt my audition was good enough to warrant me a speaking part . . . but never could I have dreamed I’d get the lead. That was reserved for the upper clique, people like Karen, who achieved every accolade possible in school.

The play was a Renaissance-era romantic comedy, pitting two brothers against each other as they tried to win the hand of their childhood friend Rosalyn.

My character. The lead female.

The realization was overwhelming, thrilling, and I squeezed Olivia harder.

Olivia pulled back, her smile wobbling a little. She put her hands on my shoulders, glancing down then flicking her gaze back up to me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Um, there’s one other thing. I think it’s great news, but you might not be so thrilled.” She swallowed. “Don’t shoot the messenger, okay?”

Somehow I knew what she was going to tell me; something in my gut had a nasty feeling. Still, I had to hear it from her to confirm. “What is it?”

“Well . . . Jason Hardy got the part of the male lead.”

Leave it to him to ruin the happiest moment of my entire sophomore year. I heaved a large sigh, the wind sapped from my sails.

Olivia dropped her arms, her face going flat in an instant. “Come on, now. Don’t be like that.”

“I don’t want to get into this right now,” I said as quietly as I could. Which was hard, considering the surge of irritation boiling in me. “Let’s get out of here.”

We made our way to our lockers then met at the back door of the school a few minutes later. The early May air was balmy and warm, a refreshing change from being trapped in our stale school and the typical Cleveland-area rainy spring. Buds erupted and blossomed into bold-colored flowers on the green-leafed trees lining our path to my house. Birds chirped and danced along the sidewalk, bouncing on tiny feet and pecking at spots on the ground.

A gorgeous afternoon . . . but it wasn’t enough to make me feel better.

I shouldered my bag higher.

“I can tell you’re not happy,” Olivia said, her footsteps in perfect rhythm with mine—an old habit we’d started in middle school when walking back and forth every day. “But you should be. Even if you don’t like Jason, this will force you to give him a chance and see him in a new light.”

“But I don’t want to.” I crossed the street, knowing I sounded petulant but unable to resist adding, “And actually, I did give him the benefit of the doubt before—this is where it got me.”

“I can’t believe you’re still upset over that. It was last year.” Olivia sighed. “He’s different. Yes, I know he was a jerk before, but he’s not like that anymore.” Her voice took a soft edge that drilled back into my head about how big her crush was growing.

It was that crush that kept me from spouting off about all the ways Jason was awful. The many, many, many ways. Instead, I bit my tongue, for the sake of my best friend, and we made our way back to my house.

Why am I letting him steal my moment? That sudden thought jarred me. I straightened my spine as I keyed the lock to my house. Jason might put a damper on this moment, but I deserved to celebrate my success. I wasn’t going to let him take that from me.

“We need ice cream,” I declared, heading right into the kitchen as she dumped her bag on our living room sofa. “To celebrate the start of a successful Renaissance faire.”

I was determined to make this the best play, the best faire, the school had ever seen.

## **Users Review**

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