7th in HETTY series

Love Me on Purpose



MARTHA SEARS WEST

PREVIEW

CHAPTER ONE

So . . . I Was a Convenience?

Pippa Morganthal sighed with impatience during her last exam. She longed desperately for summer to begin.

Her freshman year of college had been a grand success. The business department was only established in 1977 yet now, two years later, it was considered one of the best in the Midwest.

Still, whenever she was homesick, she was sorry not to have chosen a school closer to the East Coast. Closing her eyes, Pippa tried to imagine the sweet scent of honeysuckle surrounding her home.

At the last minute, she arranged for an earlier flight, and the change caused a mix-up with her luggage. But no problem—her bags would be delivered later.

When at last she was home, Pippa was overjoyed. After paying the cab driver, she scurried through the fragrant rose trellis and up the stone path to the cottage. As if to welcome her home, a family of sparrows chirped from the ivy framing the front door.

Eager to see her parents, she pressed the latch and stepped into the entry. Something in the crock-pot smelled delicious, but Morgan and Hetty were not at home. Though Pippa was famished, she would wait and have dinner with them on

their return. They wouldn't be expecting her until later in the evening anyway.

Meanwhile, she would drive over to see Val. Ever since he was seven and she was nine, Val had been her most fun and interesting friend—the sort of kid she could tell almost anything.

Pippa found the car just outside the picket fence, and the keys were behind the visor. She could drive from the cottage to his place in fewer than ten minutes.

Val's family lived in the gatehouse on the estate of Max and Mimi Morganthal, Pippa's grandparents. Max had the gatehouse built for his lifelong friend and partner Phil, who was Val's grandfather. Three generations of Val's family had lived there since that time. Max and Mimi occupied the immense mansion in the center of the property whenever they were in town.

Val must have been watching for Pippa because as soon as her car passed through the massive gates of her grandparents' estate, the front light went on, and he flung open the door. She was still running up the walkway when he ambled out onto the porch in his stocking feet. Squeezing her tight, he lifted her off her feet.

"I need to breathe!" She laughed and held him away. "Look at you, Val! You're as tall as me, now. Maybe turning sixteen was your magic number." She hugged him again. With a twinge of disappointment, she noted he no longer had the body of a young boy. "Did you get my birthday card?"

Val put his hands in his pockets and grinned. "Yeah, it just came, and it was almost mushy enough."

"Well, it's a special birthday, with you starting to drive. So . . . actually, it should have been a whole lot mushier."

"You mean like the first present you ever gave me?"

Pippa searched the past. What had she given him? "Oh, you mean the tarantula, when you were seven?"

As they laughed together on the porch, Pippa took in his solid frame and the lazy, rumpled look that belied his sharp mind. She resented her time away at college. If they hadn't been apart for so long, maybe he wouldn't seem so changed.

She reached up to smooth his sandy hair. "Can I give you a haircut tomorrow?"

"Why?"

"Because I have a date, and I need you to meet him."

"Are we still doing that?"

"A deal's a deal."

"Sure, but I didn't sign up to be *chaperone for life*."

Pippa laughed, "His name's Dylan. My roommate introduced us. We're going out tomorrow night, and he knows I want you to come along."

"Sorry, but I've got a gig starting at seven. I've got to sub for one of the fiddlers at the Georgetown Restaurant. Besides, your Dylan wouldn't call it a date if you brought along a sidekick."

Pippa didn't try to hide her disappointment.

"So the music teacher is still dragging you around town?"

"Well, Mr. Dudley retired, but we've got a new one now, and he's cool. I call him Dash. Of course, at school he's Mr. Dasher."

Pippa checked her watch, and her face brightened. "Well, what about a quick milkshake at the drive-in?"

When he gave her a thumbs up, she added, "First, could I say hello to your folks, if they're around?" While he looked for his shoes, Pippa stopped before the oil portrait of Phil Wallace and Max Morganthal, both their grandfathers. Pippa was named Philippa in honor of Phil Wallace.

Val's parents were sitting in the living room. Joseph Ostler had the same easy charm as his son, and he stood to indicate a seat. When Pippa declined, Katrinka smiled sweetly and stopped painting her nails. She tilted her head as if to show her dimples to best advantage. Her expression seemed to say, *Someday, when my son has a* real *girlfriend, she'll be prettier than you.*

Pippa knew enough to tread carefully around her, as her father, Morgan Morganthal, had a complicated history with Katrinka. They had been engaged, but he left her at the altar and married Hetty instead. So Pippa simply smiled in return and jiggled her car keys. "It's nice to see you both. I promise not to keep him out too late. I haven't forgotten what high school is like."

When Pippa was a senior and Val was a sophomore, they were sent to the principal's office a few times for being late. One morning after first period started, they were still in her car because Pippa was sewing a button on his jacket. It was the one he had to wear on stage during assembly.

That was the same year his chest outgrew most of his shirts. Even though Val never said anything critical of his mother, Pippa assumed Katrinka didn't sew for fear she might chip her nail polish.

On their way to the drive-in, Pippa asked, "When do I get to see your project? I mean the one about bats."

"Soon. I want to get my driver's license first so I can show you the bat caves—with me driving."

"When's your driving test?"

"Maybe next week. I could use more practice with a stick shift first."

"Well, if you want to practice with this car, we could put off the milkshake for now. Did you bring your glasses?" He put them on.

Neither of them felt sure of the law. Pippa asked, "Are you supposed to be accompanied by someone who's twenty-one?"

"They probably mean on public roads."

As they were coming to the Haxton Academy for Girls, they decided to enter the parking lot. It was on private property, with well-marked parking places that might help him practice.

Turning off the car and the headlights, Pippa then handed him the keys. Before they traded places, he said, "I bet you have lots of memories of this place."

"I do. I loved it here at Haxton, but it was more fun going to public school with you. I'm just sorry I skipped a grade when I transferred."

"That was a bummer. We could have hung out three years instead of two. The class of 1979 graduated last week."

"I know. Without me," she said. "Oh, Val, I've missed you so much! It's been too long."

"I agree. And I'll probably be in Australia again next Christmas."

Pippa sighed. "What I've always wanted for Christmas is for you to be home. We'll just have to make the most of our summer." She brightened. "But I do like being in college. My classes were mostly terrific. And my sorority sisters are fun. Even if I don't always relate to them. Nobody talks about building wind turbines except you."

"You've got to be kidding!" He threw up his hands in mock horror. "If not wind turbines, what do they find to talk about?"

Pippa laughed. "Hairdos. Boys. So I have absolutely nothing to contribute." She fingered a puff of pale hair as if to demonstrate how hopeless hers was then rolled her eyes. "And I don't even *know* any boys."

"That makes me what, chopped liver?"

"No, you're the best! But you know what I mean. You're just Val. When I'm with you, it never raises eyebrows. In high school, everybody knew you'd never be more than a friend."

"Yeah."

"I don't care." She folded her arms so he could see that was her final pronouncement. "I didn't care *then*, and I don't care *now*. If anyone asked me out, and I didn't want to go, I could say *no*—that I already had plans with *you*. Or if I wanted to, you'd come with us. "You were . . ."

"A convenience?" he asked. He stared straight ahead as if searching the darkness for an added response. "Did you ever wonder if I felt overused?"

"Really?" Pippa turned to face him. "Seriously, you would have said so, wouldn't you?"

"Just kidding. I suppose a deal's still a deal. That is, unless you've changed your thinking."

"No," she laughed. "I still want to be single forever. The world is too big and exciting. I never want to spend my life darning socks and wearing an apron. You understand, and that's what I love about you. Besides, you were so cute when you promised to fight off any suitors!"

"Cute? Give me a break!" He threw back his head and laughed. "Even at seven, I was a total superhero. I remember you got the idea when we were playing Old Maid under the card table."

"Yes, in your mom's kitchen. We draped it with a blanket to make it like a house."

"It was a fort. And I posed a serious danger to the enemy."

Pippa poked a finger into his ribs. "It was a house."

Opening the door, he grinned over his shoulder. "A fort." As Pippa moved to the passenger seat, hunger pangs made her

feel lightheaded. She hadn't eaten all day, what with packing and last-minute farewells.

Val didn't need much practice using the stick shift, and Pippa wasn't surprised. His abundant confidence was nothing new to her. Many things came easily to him.

Before long he said, "I suppose we should call it a day. I've got a chemistry exam in the morning." He turned off the car, doused the headlights, and got out to change places with her again.

Pippa was sliding over when, without warning, a pair of searchlights glared at them. Blinding lights from nowhere suddenly flashed in her eyes, and a siren screamed. Someone held Val pinned against the car and was checking his pockets. Confused, Pippa wasn't sure if it was a policeman.

When a black-gloved hand tapped on the window, she could see no face. Only the glare of a flashlight. Then his badge, a confusion of licenses, and proof of registration. His radio blared out information about a stolen vehicle. Searching the car, he found a sack of plastic squirt guns under the passenger seat. "What are these for?"

Val said, "For squirting water, Officer."

"I'm supposed to believe that?"

"Yes, sir. We played capture the flag with them last summer."

"I think not," he growled. "You stole this vehicle, and you're an underage driver. You thought you could fool me. I watched you trade places."

Pippa opened her mouth to deny it. She was ready to say, *oh no, we would never do that! Did it look that way to you, Officer?*

Just in time, she remembered Val had said her fibs would get her in trouble someday. He insisted on honesty at all times.

The officer pointed the flashlight in Pippa's face. Breathless, Pippa gripped the steering wheel to keep her hands steady.

"Out!" he barked.

Pippa tried to read Val's face. Her eyes weren't used to the light, but when he nodded, she got out and stood beside him.

Suddenly, her knees felt weak and wobbly. The world spun in crazy circles, and the pavement heaved upward. The white painted stripes underfoot came closer until they seemed to become prison bars. Falling and spinning, she reached for help.

The policeman said, "I got her."

"No, don't touch her." It was Val's voice. He lifted her and placed her on the back seat of the car.

"I'm not letting anyone touch you."

The Locket Mystery

The policeman disappeared, and Pippa was alone with Val. He opened her hand as if to kiss her palm. Instead, he pressed into it a small, heart-shaped locket on a gold chain. The word *Someday* was engraved on the back. He closed her fingers around it.

Was that what happened? Maybe it was a dream. Pippa seemed to remember getting a glimpse of it. And wasn't there a picture in the locket? She felt almost desperate to see it again in a good light.

"You can look at it when you feel better," he whispered.

Now Val was next to her in the driver's seat, watching her. She had the faintest memory of his strength and the way he had carried her.

"Better?" he asked. "Was it hunger?"

Pippa breathed deeply, to dispel the confusion. "Thanks. Yes, I do feel better," she said, "and I'm ready to look at it now." She opened her tightly clasped hand, but the locket wasn't there.

Val said, "Okay, here it is." He turned on the overhead light and unfolded some ominous-looking paperwork. "And it's a huge fine. But at least the officer was helpful after we figured out the misunderstanding. Your parents didn't know you were the one who took the car, so they reported it stolen. He called them, and they're on the way here."

He added. "In case you haven't eaten, I suggested your mom could bring you a sandwich."

Pippa's mind wandered back to the locket.

"Tell me something, Val . . . was there a picture of us together?"

"Hmm?" Oh no, don't worry. No photographers came. No publicity." He laughed. "Can't you just picture the headlines? *Beautiful Heiress Steals Car with Juvenile Delinquent*."

Pippa shook her head to clear the gray fog in her thinking. "I'm really sorry about all this," she said. "I'm sure your parents are watching the time. They'll never trust me again."

"Of course they will."

"Well, whether they do or not, I could pick you up for school in the morning. You know, for old times' sake—so you don't have to take the school bus."

"Thanks, I'll take you up on it. I can sleep an extra hour that way."

Pippa needed a good sleep too.

She thought of the locket. Was it only a dream? The impression felt too real. All the same, she wouldn't mention it to Val for fear of sounding foolish.

Tomorrow she would search the back seat.

I'll Make You a Nice Mud Pie

That night, Pippa sat on the floor of her parents' bedroom, wrapped in her mother's flannel robe. She was perfectly capable of brushing her own hair, but she nestled against Hetty's knees and enjoyed every minute of being pampered. Like her mother's, Pippa's hair was pale, and soft as down.

Her father propped one elbow on his pillow, watching the routine as if he had never seen it before. Pippa remembered the chimpanzees that used to form an act in the Morganthal Circus. He might be thinking of how they would eat fleas while grooming each other.

"Dad, about Hubbard House, I thought we could do some fundraising and entertain the residents at the same time. You and I could juggle on stilts if they have high enough ceilings."

"Good idea. I'll check the height of their dining hall. Even if we do have some shorter pairs, the tall stilts have more appeal."

"Val's going to help out."

"Oh? What does he plan to do?"

"Well . . . technically, he doesn't know about it yet."

Pippa knew why her mother stopped brushing her hair. Her parents must be exchanging glances.

Morgan said, "You might consider *asking* rather than telling him."

Pippa laughed. "It's all right. Val always does what I tell him." From the open window, a forest breeze cooled her cheeks, and an owl called to remind her it was past midnight.

Hetty set her brush down on the nightstand.

"Pippa, he isn't a little boy anymore. Val has more demands on his time now. Don't you think that approach might test your friendship?"

"Oh, no!" Pippa stood. She was determined their relationship would always be just fine. They had big plans. Well, at least *she* did, though she wasn't quite sure what they were.

Since getting home, Pippa couldn't get enough of her parents, so she was prepared to discuss more about that or any other subject. Hetty indicated the narrow space beside her in the bed and squeezed next to Morgan to make room for one more.

"Your mother's right. Val has a lot going on. He's tutoring for the math teacher, and now that he's an Eagle Scout, he's helping the others get their survival merit badges."

"I know. He told me last summer when I drove him to meet with his merit badge counselors." Pippa was glad Val had needed her, so she could learn along with him.

Morgan yawned. "I know his father appreciated your help. This summer, Joseph may be more involved."

Pippa closed her eyes and let their conversation wash over her in waves of warm and pleasant words. Then they spoke of tomorrow and maybe about her luggage. Or was it the policeman and the fines? And Val . . . could he still be an Eagle Scout if he was accused of automobile theft? She was sorry to cause her parents so much trouble.

Maybe she could concentrate on such things better after a good sleep.

She heard the owl again, and this time Pippa knew it was calling for her. The moon was shining through the trees; its silvery beams played in her fingers and rippled across the sheets. The call of the owl was closer this time, and it came from a young, sandy-haired boy just outside the window.

She knew right away it was Val, as he was quick and agile the way he hopped over the windowsill. And he smelled like the same hot, sweaty kid she used to race from the oak tree to the lemonade stand. Once in a while she let him win, but not very often.

In one hand he held a sprig of ivy that had broken off as he climbed. In the other was a length of rope, which Pippa inspected. "Excellent knot," she said, "however, may I suggest two half hitches and a bowline next time?"

"Wow! When I get big like you, I hope I'll be just as smart. You're cool, for a girl." Val puffed out his cheeks for emphasis then grinned. "Guess what else I brought." He tugged on the rope, and a card table magically appeared, complete with blankets.

"It's our fort!" he said. He laughed so hard he fell over on his back and pounded the floorboards with his fists. The moonlight played in his hair and across his face.

"Val, you've got a black eye!"

"Yeah. The other guy was a cop named Dylan."

"Dylan? A policeman?"

"Sure, your boyfriend. I beat him up. That's why we need the fort."

"It's a house."

Pippa heard her father snore himself awake. Raising his head from the pillow, he waved. "Val! What a nice surprise. Good to see you, my man!"

Val stood tall and flexed his mighty muscles. "Don't let me disturb you." His voice was deep and resonant. "Just checking on our girl here, Morgan." Pippa felt grateful for his protection.

Morgan pulled Hetty close. "Thank you, Val. I know you will protect us all." His breath made Hetty's soft hair float like sea foam.

Suddenly, Val opened his eyes wide, and his voice squeaked, "Uh oh! Maybe I shouldn't have driven over here. I mean are little kids allowed to drive?"

"Dad," Pippa whispered, "see? Val is still just a little boy." But Morgan was fast asleep.

She watched as dark forces gathered the moonlight from the billows of sheets, extruding waves of molten silver from all corners of the room into one beam of a blinding flashlight. All else went black.

Squinting, they felt their way into the little house with not a moment to spare. Val closed the gap between the blankets. His little fist gripped some sort of treasure attached to a gold chain. Hiding it in his pocket, he stood guard at the gap.

Pippa laid her pillow on the floor and whispered, "Put your head down. In the morning I'll find some berries and make you a nice mud pie for breakfast."

"I'm watching for the enemy, Pippa."

Smoothing back his hair, she sang the lullaby Morgan used to sing to her. "Found a peanut, found a peanut, found a peanut just now . . ."

But Val stayed at his post.

Pippa awakened at the sound of her mother's voice. "Look, Morgan," she whispered, "we've pushed her out onto the floor. Pippa dear, I'm so sorry! Let us help you to your own bed."

She's Not Your Type

By morning light, Pippa found no evidence of the locket Val had given her, so she said nothing about it when she picked him up.

They drove up to the front door of the school, with ten minutes to spare. Val stacked his books and opened the car door. "Thanks. See you around."

A familiar-looking girl with bouncy auburn curls winked at him and said, "Hey, there!" The way she swung her hips irritated Pippa. Well, maybe she didn't really swing them, but she was probably the type who would.

Pippa was annoyed at her own feelings and gripped the steering wheel. "Good luck with your test." As Val swung a leg outside the car, she smiled and said, "Some sisterly advice: don't fall for every girl who winks at you."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because that girl winked at you."

"I know."

"So, why did she? I mean, you didn't wink at *her*." She waited briefly for an answer. "Did you?"

He flashed a smile. "No, I didn't have to. Now, did I?"

"She's not your type."

He stood outside the car. "And what's my type?"

Pippa was thinking, *someone more independent, like me*. But she couldn't say so and remained stumped for a reasonable answer. Pippa knew the girl's name was Deedee, and she might not be as whiny and dependent as she appeared.

Shaking her head, Pippa attempted to infuse her next pronouncement with profound affection. "You're an impossible man!"

Why had she called him a man? It was an unfortunate slip of the tongue, and it made her blush.

Mostly she wanted to know why Val had said *See you around*. In the past, such a statement was unnecessary. They always met at the treehouse with or without making plans. Confused, she found herself fighting back tears.

He got back in the car and pulled the door closed. "What's the matter?"

She didn't know for sure. "It's just that we made a promise," she said. "I'm only thinking in terms of our deal."

"And whose idea was that?"

She didn't want to acknowledge it was hers, so she gave a nervous laugh. "Oh well, at least you don't let the girls swoon over you. Do you?"

"What do you mean by *let*?" His voice was deeper than she remembered.

Suddenly Pippa realized—if she had to be entirely objective about it—some girls might find him irresistible, and maybe it wasn't his fault if they did. Should she warn him about it?

He leaned in with one arm on the seat. "So, Pippa, I guess you expect me to be unattached all my life." He said it with a smile, but was something changing between them?

Looking away, Pippa said, "This conversation is a bit strange—don't you think?" She blinked to make sure her tears were gone. "I mean you're only sixteen."

Val cracked his knuckles. "And for how long might that be?"