

A MATCH  
ME UP NOVEL



*Never*  
LET GO

WESTON PARKER

# NEVER LET GO

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A MATCH ME UP NOVEL #3

WESTON PARKER

STAR KEY PRESS

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# FIND WESTON PARKER



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## DESCRIPTION



**The fairytales never warn you how confusing it can be.**

Falling in love, I mean.

Especially when you're as unlucky as I am.

I loved a boy once, but he is the one who got away.

Poof. Gone.

Now I need a date for my friend's wedding.

It's the perfect kick in the butt I need to take a chance on a wild idea.

My friend is marrying the guy she met through a blind-dating service.

Literally. They dated in the dark.

I give it a go.

Dating in the light hasn't worked out for me so far anyway.

Naturally, the one that got away shows back up in my life right when I'm starting to move on.

The best part?

He's a literal billionaire now.

And?

He's. So. Freaking. Hot.

Like, melt your eyeballs out of your head hot.

Now I'm really in trouble.



Dating in the dark is never what it seems.

And my mystery Casanova?

Well, he's not what he seems, and he has his own reasons for dating in the dark.

**Wish me luck.**

## Introduction



Hey! We're missing you over here at the Parker's Insider Group.

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**T**he little rubber ball came flying at my face. I pulled back my arm and hit it with a loud thwack of my racket, returning it to Kane.

It ricocheted off the wall. My best friend's sneakers squeaked on the polished floor and he made a valiant effort, but he missed the ball. I threw my arms up into the air, smirking as I pumped my eyebrows at him.

"Another point to the away team," I said. "Maybe you should find out if they offer racquetball lessons at this fancy new club of yours."

Kane narrowed his blue eyes at me and scoffed. "I don't need lessons. I just need you to shut up."

I laughed. "No can do, buddy. Want to try again?"

He sighed but spun his racket in his hand and nodded. "Let's do it. What time do you have to be back at work?"

Glancing down, I checked my watch and groaned. "Soon. My lunch break is almost over and I still need to grab a shower, but I've got time to give you one last chance to defend your honor."

Kane shoved a lock of brown hair from his forehead and flipped me off with his free hand. "My honor is just fine. Are you meeting with the lawyers today?"

I nodded. "After work, but I'm going to have to leave a bit early, which also means I can't get back to the office too late after lunch."

“I got it,” he said as he bent over and scooped up the ball. “You have to admit that it’s pretty cool the old man left you something, though.”

I shrugged, not really knowing what to think at this point. The old man he was referring to was my maternal grandfather, Foster Chesterfield, who had died a couple of weeks ago.

I hadn’t even known until the people handling his estate had reached out to me about a meeting. Crazy as it was, it seemed I’d been named in his will.

I just really didn’t know why I would’ve been. I hadn’t been at his bedside when he’d blown out his last breath or even attended his funeral.

Hell, I’d barely even met the man.

Maybe a few times when I’d been little, but that was it. A couple of years before I’d been born, he and my mother had fallen out about her relationship with my father. According to him, Dad hadn’t been good enough for Mom, and when she’d refused to break it off, my dear old grandfather had cut her off in turn.

In keeping with her family traditions, however—and probably hoping that her father would come around—Mom had still named me after him, but I couldn’t say that being his namesake had made much of a difference to my life or bought me any kind of relationship with the guy.

I hit the ball Kane sent hurtling my way, but my thoughts threw me off my game and he finally managed to score a point.

After tossing his fists into the air and turning in a victorious circle, he frowned at me. “You okay? You haven’t said a word since I made that comment about your grandfather.”

“I know. I was trying to blow it off, but I guess I got caught up anyway. Besides, we don’t even know if he left me something. All we know is that the estate lawyers requested a meeting.”

“I thought you said you were named in the will?”

I shrugged again. “Apparently, but I’m not getting my hopes up. Mom said he was a real stickler for family traditions, so maybe he left me a pair of cufflinks with the name ‘Foster’ engraved on them. I mean, no one else would be able to use them, right?”

He chuckled. “Nah. Your grandmother could’ve just mailed those to you. It has to be more.”

“Maybe, but again, I’m not getting my hopes up. I’m only going to honor his wishes.”

“Yeah, I know, but it must be nice to have been remembered in the will, at least. Maybe he left you a note explaining why they never tried to build a relationship with you and Porter.”

I scoffed. “We already know why. Our dad wasn’t good enough and neither were we. No mystery there.”

“Well, in that case, I hope he left you more than just cufflinks. The dude didn’t know what he was missing with you two.”

I winked at him. “Aww, thanks. I didn’t know you had a crush on us. How would that work, anyway? Me, you, and Porter? Would Hope be involved as well? She’s pretty attached to him these days. I doubt she’d approve of you stealing her man now that they finally got over themselves and hooked up.”

Kane laughed, but since *Sarcasm* might as well have been his middle name, he didn’t back down. “You wish, man. Seriously, I’d have wined and dined you so hard, you wouldn’t have known what hit you. But no, Hope wouldn’t be happy about it. Porter is head over heels for her, so he wouldn’t have been interested, and you’re not much of a catch. No offense.”

“Fuck you,” I retorted, chuckling as I shook my head at him. “I’m a massive catch. You would’ve been lucky to have me.”

“Maybe that’s true,” he joked. “It’s too bad we’ll never find out. Either way, let me know what the lawyers say. Your grandfather already lost out on having you in his life because

of that grudge he held against your mother. It'd be a real pity if he screwed you over in death as well."

"Honestly? I don't want anything from him," I said. "Whatever he left me is what he left me, and that's it. There's nothing else to it. How's the new job going?"

We left the court side by side, our sneakers padding silently across the thick carpets beneath our feet. Kane grinned. "It's great. If I'd known how much of a pay bump came with a big promotion, I'd have applied ages ago."

"Everyone knows you get a pay bump with a big promotion. How did you miss it?"

"Asshole," he said. "I knew I would be getting an increase. I just didn't know how much it would be. Plus, finally having a whole team of people working under me definitely has its own perks."

"I bet. And the new condo? I still can't believe you left me to fend for myself with Mrs. Scott."

"Ah, Mrs. Scott." He sighed, pretending to be nostalgic for a minute before he let out a loud snort. "You should move, Foster. She's going to be waiting naked in your bed one of these days."

My face scrunched up, but I couldn't argue. Kane had been my neighbor for years, but he'd moved out of our building after he'd gotten his promotion and now Mrs. Scott, our other neighbor, had set her sights firmly on me.

She was harmless, though. Just an older woman who wanted some company at times while her husband was away for work, but still, I was now the only one she could target to get that company—and it really was just to talk.

Contrary to his little joke, she'd never made a move on either of us, much less landed up naked in our beds. I glanced at him when he came to stand at the locker next to mine. "Any chance you're thinking of moving back to slum it with us instead of staying in your fancy new condo?"

He grimaced at me. "Sorry, bro. I like the new place. Besides, you know you're going to move out of that building

soon.”

“Probably,” I agreed, though I didn’t know how soon. The truth of the matter was that it was a nice building. The apartments were decently sized and the amenities weren’t bad, but since both Porter and Kane had now moved, it kind of felt like it was time for me to do the same.

It kind of felt like I was stagnating, and no one wanted to be *that* guy. Kane had gotten his promotion, a better place, and even membership to the exclusive club where we played racquetball a few times a week.

Porter, my brother, had not only moved but had finally pulled his head out of his ass and told his best friend, Hope, that he’d been in love with her for the last decade.

They were now in a serious relationship and it was getting more serious by the day. Soon, they would be starting a family, and meanwhile, I was still completely single. By choice, but maybe it was time to reevaluate that decision.

Despite having gotten a promotion of my own recently, overall, it just felt like it was time for a change. A change I’d have to set in motion later, though. For now, I had to get back to the office and then I had to make it on time for my meeting with the woman settling the estate.

After grabbing a quick shower, I got dressed and said goodbye to my friend, then raced back to the Sight Unseen building and sat down behind my desk not a minute after my break had officially ended. I grinned to myself as I turned toward my computer and logged in, ready to make the next couple of hours count so I could duck out early.

Milena Kress, my boss and the owner of the dating agency I worked for, was pretty lenient on our office hours. She didn’t micromanage and she was happy with us coming and going as we pleased—as long as our work was done before we left.

As Vice President of Operations nowadays, I had even more freedom to do my own thing, but I loved my job and the last thing I wanted was to let anything slip through the cracks.

For the next ninety minutes, I hardly looked away from my computer. A lot of people—my own brother included—thought it was weird that a young, single guy could take his job working at a dating agency so seriously, but I really did love what I did for a living.

As a company, Sight Unseen was amazing to work for. Milena was a savvy businesswoman with a real knack for the industry, and I learned something from her with nearly every single interaction we had. The office environment was relaxed and supportive, the work was fun, and the way I saw it, there was nothing not to love.

After I'd worked my way through a slew of emails, Hope stuck her head into my office and smiled. "Hey. You got a minute?"

I nodded and grinned at the love of my brother's life. "Sure. What's up?"

As it happened, she was also now a rung above me as President of Operations, but I didn't mind working underneath her. If anything, we were a good team and we'd known each other a long time, long enough to know and understand each other's strengths and weaknesses.

"I just wanted to check in," she said. "Porter's coming by any minute and he mentioned you had a meeting with the estate people today? How are you feeling about it?"

I shrugged. "Indifferent. The man meant nothing to me. I have no idea why he'd have left me anything."

"You were his namesake," she said gently as she strode in and took a seat across from my desk. "That means something to that generation."

"If it really meant something, he'd have reached out when he was still alive." I cocked my head at her. "Is Porter really worried, or are you?"

She wrinkled her nose at me, released a heavy breath, and then chuckled. "Fine. It's me. He told me neither of you really give a shit about any of this and to stop worrying."



“He’s right, but thanks for the concern.” As I said it, my office door opened again and my brother walked in, grinning when he saw Hope.

“Hey, look! It’s my two favorite people,” he said in a singsong voice. “My ears were burning. What were you saying about me?”

Hope smirked at him. “That’s for us to know, Mr. Nosy. That being said, I love you. Hi. How was your day?”

He laughed and pulled her into his arms, laying a kiss on her that would’ve made anyone not used to it either blush or get a hard-on. Thankfully, I was more than used to it by now, so I just waited for it to be over before I arched a brow at him when he finally let her go.

“You’re worried about me?”

“Nah. You’re okay. When are you leaving?”

“Soon,” I said, turning to save the document I’d been working on before shutting down the computer.

Hope chewed on her lower lip as she watched me roll my chair away from the desk. “For the record, even if you inherit like, a million dollars, I’m still not allowing you to quit.”

I laughed. “It won’t be that. I still don’t think it’s going to be any money at all, but you know how I feel about this place. You won’t be getting rid of me anytime soon.”

She grinned. “Good. I just thought I should remind you.”

Porter slung an arm around her waist, pulling her into his side as he looked at me. “He doesn’t need a million dollars. He needs to find a good woman. It’s time.”

“And look at that. It’s time for me to leave. I’m out of here, guys. See you later.” I grabbed my phone, wallet, and keys off my desk and left Porter and Hope alone in my office, relieved to have an excuse to get away from the conversation before it’d even really started.

Ever since they’d gotten together, they’d been relentless. Ironic for two people who had known each other for twelve freaking years before they’d so much as kissed, but these days,

they were on a mission and it was all about finding me a girlfriend now that they were in a relationship.

It hadn't bugged me so much at first, but recently, I'd started feeling like they were getting in my head. They were making me want things I'd never wanted before—or at least things that I hadn't even thought about wanting in a long time.

I shrugged it off once I got to my car. Porter and Hope were in the honeymoon phase, and sure, it was lasting a hell of a lot longer than I'd thought it would, but ultimately, they were happy and I knew they wanted me to feel the same way.

The big difference between us was that I didn't need or want a woman to make me happy. I had them, my friends, and my job, and while it was true that I probably had to reevaluate my stance on relationships for myself at some point, I just wasn't quite there yet.

I looked around my new office, nervous but excited for the day. It was my first week working at Harrison and Harrison, and so far, it'd been great. My space was small but well appointed, with a copper chandelier hanging overhead and thick, hunter-green drapes hanging in the windows.

I had a conference table of my very own on one side of the office and my desk on the other. All the furniture was made out of red oak and it was beautiful, making me feel like I was really making something of myself.

The thought made me smile. Working in the estate settlements division of a law firm probably wouldn't be a dream come true for most, but for me, it was pretty exciting. It was a definite step up from my old job as an assistant to the partner managing deceased estates at my previous firm.

I smoothed out the folder on the desk in front of me, anticipation bleeding through my veins at the prospect of finalizing the first estate I'd ever worked on by myself. My first solo mission, and so far, it was going really well.

I only had one family member left to meet with, and then I would be able to put it to bed. The pride I felt over being able to even think that was ridiculous. My heart kicked into a higher gear and I held back an overtly girly squeal.

Under any other circumstances, I wasn't a squealer. Not ever, but here, today, I was so happy and so excited that I just couldn't help it. *Ladies and gentlemen, I have arrived!*

Okay, maybe I hadn't quite arrived, but at least I was finally getting there. *That counts for something.*

As I flipped open the cover of the folder, my office door opened and Mr. Harrison, one of my bosses, walked in. The man was in his late sixties with a head full of thick, silver hair, round glasses perched on the edge of his nose, and a tweed jacket. He was also the one who had hired me, and I loved him for it.

Smiling as I met his firm but sparkling green eyes, I stood up. "Good afternoon, Mr. Harrison. How are you?"

"Fine. Fine." He gave me a slight smile in return, then motioned at the file on my desk. "I just wanted to check in and find out how it's going with the Chesterfield account. It's a big one and I know I promised you something good to cut your teeth on, but you need to tell me if you need any help."

I nodded. "It's going well so far, sir. I know the Chesterfields are important people, but you don't need to worry. I've got it under control, but if I do need something, I'll let you know."

He nodded and moved to the chair across from my desk, gripping the back of it as he looked at me. "You need to do a good job on this one, Ms. Lowe. I can't help but wonder if we should've started you on something smaller."

My heart slammed into my ribs. "No, sir. I'm managing just fine. The account is in good hands with me, I assure you. This may be the first estate I'm handling by myself, but I got tons of exposure at my old firm, and if I do run into any trouble, you'll be the first to know. I'm not too proud to ask for help."

"See to it that's true." He drew in a deep breath and fiddled with his glasses before he refocused on me. "Where are you with it?"

"Well, sir, I've already met with Mrs. Chesterfield as well as most of the other people Mr. Chesterfield left anything to. I've only got one more family member to meet with. The grandson. He'll be here soon."

Mr. Harrison blinked back surprise, then nodded. “Well, you’re certainly proving to be efficient. Let me know how it goes with the grandson. Thank you, Ms. Lowe.”

“Of course, sir.” I waited for him to let go of the chair and leave before I dropped back into my chair and exhaled deeply.

Everything I’d told him was true. I really had met with everyone else and I really did only have one client meeting left to go.

The only thing I hadn’t told him was that the name of the grandson who was inheriting the bulk of the estate was hauntingly familiar to me. *Foster O’Brien*.

Nerves invaded the center of my being and I sucked in another breath. As familiar as the name was to me, I knew it couldn’t be *that* Foster O’Brien. There was no way it was *my* Foster O’Brien.

Not that the guy had ever been mine. A nervous tremble worked its way through me and I breathed out slowly before I inhaled again. I needed to get a grip on myself.

The fact that Mr. Chesterfield’s grandson had the same name as the boy I’d had a crush on back in college couldn’t be the reason why I fumbled the ball this late in the game. It was a mere coincidence. It had to be.

For starters, my Foster didn’t have grandparents. He hadn’t had any family at all, other than his brother and his parents. Or at least, not any other family that I’d known about. And I would’ve known if his grandfather had been Foster fucking Chesterfield. *Everyone* would’ve known if he was a Chesterfield.

They were one of the most affluent families in all of Seattle. I’d watched Foster O’Brien pretty darn closely for the two years we’d been at college together. There was no way I wouldn’t have noticed if he’d been related to one of the richest men in town.

I took yet another deep breath, trying to convince myself that I wasn’t about to come face to face with the one who’d

*gotten away. Okay, okay. He didn't get away. He hardly even knew I existed back then, but still.*

Foster O'Brien had been my white whale. A senior when I'd been a junior, we'd both lived in the honors dorm and I'd been determined to tell him I had feelings for him before he'd graduated, but I never managed to scrape together the courage.

I'd also figured that he'd have asked me out if he'd been interested at all, and he hadn't. Instead, I'd watched from afar as he'd accepted his diploma, and then, with one last, quick, platonic hug, he'd been gone and that had been that.

I sighed. Even platonic was a stretch when it came to Foster. We hadn't really been friends. In fact, I wasn't even completely sure he'd known my name. At most, we'd been dorm mates. Acquaintances who said hello when we'd passed each other in the foyer and hung out in the common areas from time to time.

That had been the reality, but in my dreams, we'd been so much more than that. For two whole years we'd lived in the same dorm, and for all that time, I'd secretly pined for the emerald-eyed god who slept down the hall.

Foster O'Brien had been gorgeous, with rich brown hair and vivid green eyes, an Adonis belt to rival the original, and a pretty darn amazing brain too. He'd been the complete package, and as far as I was concerned, no one else ever had or ever would measure up to him.

It was silly, I knew that, but it was also true. Sadly, I'd met the one who had ruined everyone else for me at the tender age of twenty, nothing had ever happened between us, and then he'd disappeared from my life as if he had never been in it.

"Ms. Lowe?" My secretary's voice yanked me out of my thoughts and I blinked hard, forcing a smile to my lips as I tried to hide just how far down memory lane I had been. "Your next meeting is here."

"Yes. Thank you, Beth. Show him in." I stood up and smoothed my palms over my navy pencil skirt, mentally putting myself back together and getting my head in the game.

An effort that worked rather well until my next meeting walked into my office and it turned out I'd been wrong.

Foster O'Brien, the grandson of Mr. Chesterfield, was in fact the god who had slept down the hall from me back in college. My heart skipped about a hundred times as the man I never thought I'd see again walked into my office, my palms immediately pools of sweat.

*Oh, God. Oh, shit. Fuck. No! How did this happen?* I hadn't even touched up the makeup that I'd applied at seven a.m. this morning. Foster, on the other hand, still looked like he'd walked right off the pages of a sports magazine shoot.

Twelve years had passed since he'd stood on that stage at twenty-one, but the years had made him even hotter. That dark brown hair was just as rich and luxurious as it had been before, but where it used to flop over his forehead to give him a certain boyish charm, it was now styled away from his chiseled face.

Those eyes still shone like precious jewels, but at thirty-three, the faintest of lines were starting to appear around them and it made him look wise. As did the way his features had matured and hardened.

Wearing a slate-gray suit and a sky-blue shirt with the top button undone, he looked every inch the smart, handsome player he used to be—and every inch the multimillionaire he was about to be.

*If he isn't one already.*

I blinked slowly as Beth showed him in, and when she shut the door with a snap behind her, I cleared my throat and reminded myself that I needed to keep this professional. This account was huge for the firm and for me, and I couldn't allow him to derail me.

In that moment, I made a decision and I knew it was probably a little bit immature, but I pretended not to know him. That way, our past wouldn't be able to complicate the settlement of his grandfather's—and one of the firm's biggest—estates.

“Mr. O’Brien,” I said as I smiled and extended my hand toward him. “My name is Shelby Lowe and I’m handling your grandfather’s estate on behalf of Harrison and Harrison. It’s very nice to meet you. Please have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Shelby Lowe.” He repeated my name as he slid his palm into my mine, sending a cascade of fireworks shooting through me at the feel of his firm, dry hand. He canted his head, those green eyes burning as they peered into mine. “Do I know you from somewhere?”



**A**s I stared into Shelby's piercing blue eyes, I knew that I'd seen her somewhere before. The shiny, golden blonde locks framing the delicate, heart-shaped face. Those eyes. I knew her. I knew I did. I just couldn't figure out where I knew her from.

She released my hand and shook her head, a slight furrow appearing between her eyebrows. "Uh. No. I don't believe so."

Taking a step back, she motioned for me to take a seat again and then she turned to walk back around her desk. While she was facing away from me, I saw her shoulders rise and fall on a deep breath, and I frowned, but when she sat down and flashed me a small, sympathetic smile, there was no evidence of nerves or dishonesty on her features.

"Our sincerest condolences for your loss, Mr. O'Brien." She rolled her chair closer to her desk and pushed a thin file toward me before she folded her arms on the desktop in front of her. "I know this is a trying time for your family. That folder contains all the paperwork and contracts that we'll need to review before you sign, but if you'd prefer to take it with you, we can—"

I shook my head to stop her. "No, thank you. I'd like to review it all today. Are you sure we don't know each other?"

"We don't." There was a brief flash of something in her eyes, but then she shook her head again. "Alright, if you'd like to review it all today, we can absolutely do that. We will have to set up another meeting to finalize everything, but we will be

able to get through the preliminary steps in the next hour or so.”

I nodded, wanting to get whatever this was over with, but I also couldn't shake the nagging feeling that I knew this woman. Or had known her.

An annoying voice at the back of my head kept telling me that she'd gotten older, but like a fine wine. Her features were sharper, her gaze steadier, and her hair straighter, but still, there was definitely something familiar about her.

As I nodded, she turned to her computer and pulled up a document before she inclined her head at the folder in front of me. “If you turn to page one, you'll see that you were named as the primary beneficiary of your grandfather's estate.”

The words snapped me right out of my thoughts, my heart and stomach feeling like they were being yanked by chains from behind. I blinked at her. “The primary beneficiary? That can't be right. What about Mrs. Chesterfield? I mean, my grandmother.” I cleared my throat. “Surely, she should be the primary everything.”

Shelby shot me a curious look but didn't pry. Instead, she simply gave her head a light shake. “I'm not at liberty to discuss the remainder of the provisions in your grandfather's will. He specifically stipulated individual meetings and we're honoring his wishes to the word.”

“Of course.” I frowned at her. “Are you sure, though? That I'm the primary beneficiary? That just doesn't seem right.”

“I assure you that there has been no mistake, Mr. O'Brien. Mr. Chesterfield left the bulk of his estate to you. We've already spoken with your grandmother as well as several of your grandfather's closest friends, relatives, and advisors. We've also discussed the matter with his personal lawyer. You *are* the primary beneficiary to his estate.”

Everything in me froze except for my brain, which galloped ahead and spun as I tried to comprehend the words coming out of her mouth. My grandfather hadn't been a

pauper. In fact, the old man had come from old money—generations of it.

When my heart restarted, it was racing too, pumping my blood through my veins so hard I could feel it happening. “Why’d he choose me? I have a brother and a mother. Assuming my grandmother has been taken care of, which I’m pretty sure she has been, what about my mom and my brother? You haven’t called them for any meetings.”

“No, we haven’t,” she said softly, glancing back at her computer and scanning whatever was on her screen for a moment before she turned back to me. “No mention was made in the will of either of them. I’m sorry, sir. I don’t have any answers for you. The only thing I’m privy to is the contents of his last will and testament. We didn’t receive any letters or other personal instructions.”

My mouth dried up and my heart kept going berserk. This made no sense whatsoever, but I supposed she was right. She wouldn’t have the answers to these questions. “Okay. Great. Thanks. Let’s review this, shall we?”

She nodded and started taking me through it slowly, page by page until we got to the paragraph containing the amount of money I was inheriting. At first, I couldn’t breathe. My lungs seized when my gaze caught on the amount of zeroes following the number, and I blinked hard.

*That’s millions. A lot of millions. Holy fuck.*

I was beyond shocked. I hadn’t been expecting this at all, but on the outside, I played it cool. *I need to get this done. I need to get out of here.* “Where do I sign?”

“On the solid line on the last page. You also need to initial each of the pages before that. Are you okay? You seem a little bit pale. Can I get you some water?”

“No. Thanks. I’m fine. Just a trying time for the family, like you said earlier.” I grabbed a pen from her desk and scribbled my initials and signature where she’d told me. Then I pushed my chair back. I really did need to get out of here.

This was all just completely unbelievable and overwhelming, and I needed a drink, a fuck, fresh air, and about a million answers. *Not necessarily in that order.*

*Shit. Shit. Shit. Hundreds of millions of dollars? Because my name is Foster? How the hell is that possible?*

Doing my best not to hyperventilate, I stood up and shook her hand, already reaching into my back pocket with my other hand to grab my phone to call Porter. As my gaze snagged on hers again though, a brief flicker of a memory suddenly appeared in my mind.

“Wait. Did you go to college at Seattle Green Lake? Honors dorm, right?”

Shelby blinked slowly, then sucked in a deep, long breath and nodded curtly. “Yes, I did. Why?”

*Shelby Lowe.* With the name and that brief flicker of a memory, it all came back to me in a rush. Shelby with her hair shining like spun gold as she sipped on a soda in the corner of the rec room, watching us shoot pool. Shelby in the library as she effortlessly helped seniors with assignments that should’ve been way above her but somehow never were.

Those and so many other memories rushed into my head and I smiled at her. “I remember you now. Don’t you remember me?”

She had to fucking remember me, but as she shook her head, it became apparent that I was wrong. “No, I’m afraid I don’t. I’ll see you at our next meeting, Mr. O’Brien. Goodbye.”

I left her office feeling slightly drunk. My head was still spinning and it felt like I was about to fall over. The combination of how stunned I was at the amount of money I was getting and the shock over seeing Shelby again after all these years had hit me like a sledgehammer.

Under the circumstances, driving was not a good idea, so I went to my car and just sat there, suddenly understanding how Porter had felt that day when he’d sold his earbuds. My brother was an inventor and he’d spent years developing these

nifty, auto-translating earpieces that he'd eventually sold the patent to.

On the day he'd made the sale, he'd called me after and he'd sounded breathless. Stunned. I'd never really understood how news like that could feel like it'd knocked the damn air right out of your lungs, but I sure as shit understood it now.

He answered on the first ring when I finally managed to scroll to his number and call him. "Hey, Foster. How'd it go? I was just about to call."

"I, uh, it was fine." I breathed out slowly, closing my eyes as I leaned back against the headrest. "He named me as his primary beneficiary. Can you believe that?"

Parker let out a hoot of laughter. "Fuck, man. That's awesome. That inheritance has got to be at least a few bucks, huh? Congratulations."

"What?"

"What do you mean, *what*? I'm happy for you."

"You are?" I blinked my eyes open and stared at the plain concrete wall of the parking lot in front of me. "You're not pissed that you and Mom weren't even called for a meeting when he left me with a cool, few hundred *million*?"

"Nah." He chuckled. "I've got more money than I can spend in a couple of lifetimes. I don't need any more. Besides, you were his namesake. It makes sense he left it to you."

"Does it?" I groaned. "It doesn't make a lick of sense to me, man."

Porter laughed some more. "Trust me, I know exactly how you feel right now. Go home, but take a cab or something. Do *not* drive. Pour yourself a stiff drink and get in bed. We'll talk in the morning."

He hung up on me after that and I did what he'd said, but my mind was still blown by the time I woke up the next morning. After a night of tossing and turning, drinking more than just one stiff drink, and then finally falling into a fitful

sleep wracked with guilt, I got to the office without having gotten even just one answer.

To make things worse, I was still thinking about Shelby just as much as the money. Back in college, she'd been the quiet, nerdy girl—which was saying something since all of us who had lived in the honors dorm had been nerdy.

I'd always thought she was beautiful, but it'd seemed like I made her uncomfortable, so I'd never asked her out. A few times, I'd gotten close, but in the end, I hadn't had the nerve because I was sure she'd turn me down.

Why I'd made her so uncomfortable, I still didn't know, but I suddenly wanted to find out. Shelby had always felt like a bit of a loose end to me. It wasn't like I'd been hung up on her ever since college, but she was that girl who, when I thought back, I wondered if my life might've worked out very differently if I'd grabbed my balls and gone for it with her.

Hope was waiting for me in my office when I walked in, and she smiled as she reached out to squeeze my bicep. "Jeez, Foster. Are you okay? It looks like you were a million miles away before you saw me standing here."

I shrugged, waving her off. "I'm fine. Just processing. What's up?"

"Porter told me about the money. I thought I should check in and make sure you're doing okay. That's a lot to take in."

I sighed as I walked around my desk and started putting my stuff down. "Thanks, but I really am fine. I just don't know why Chesterfield did it, but I guess I'll never find out."

Hope nodded, a thoughtful gleam entering her eyes as she watched me sit down and start up my computer. "Is there something else going on with you? You seem distracted."

"Of course I'm distracted. My estranged grandfather just left me a few hundred million reasons to be and just as many questions."

Her head lowered to one side as her eyes narrowed. "Yeah, but that's not all there is to it. What's going on, Foster? We've

been working together for years and we've been friends even longer than that. Tell me the truth."

"It's nothing. Where's Porter? I thought he'd be here to back you up."

She glanced down at the delicate silver watch on her wrist. "He'll be here any—"

"Were you guys talking about me?" My brother's voice suddenly boomed from my door and he grinned when I looked up. "How are you feeling today? Any better? It's okay if you're not. It took me a couple of weeks at least."

Hope snorted and rolled her eyes at him. "Make that a couple of months, but potato, potahto."

He laughed and smacked a kiss to her cheek before he turned to me. "You know what helped me? Grounded me?"

I jerked a thumb at Hope. "Her?"

"Exactly." He smirked as he snaked an arm around her waist. "That's what you need. A girlfriend, and since you helped me, I'm going to help you."

My eyes flared wide open and my head shook without me having given it the conscious command to do so. "No."

"Yes," Hope chimed in, smiling excitedly now herself. "You did help us and look at how well that turned out. We're going to return the favor."

"No."

"Yes," Porter insisted before he glanced at Hope. "You have an unfair advantage since you've got access to the Sight Unseen systems, but would you care for a friendly wager?"

"No," I repeated, but my brother didn't even look at me.

His gaze was locked on Hope's, and as I watched, her lips curved into a confident smile. "You're on, lover. Be prepared to lose."

She stuck her hand into his and they shook on it before finally turning back to me. I sighed, but even though it was the

very absolute last thing I thought I'd be agreeing to today, I eventually dipped my head in a nod.

Maybe they were right. Maybe dating would help. Plus, I'd been thinking of doing it anyway and at this point I needed to do something to get Shelby off my mind.

The girl I'd crushed on in college was gone and a beautiful, confident, professional woman had taken her place. A woman who didn't even remember me. If I hadn't thought she'd go out with me then, she definitely wouldn't do it now.

"Fine, I'm in. What's the wager?"

"Winner takes the other on a cruise of their choice," Hope said before Porter could say anything. He grinned, nodding his agreement.

I shook my head at them. "Well, it seems you're going to get more out of this than I am, but sure. Go ahead. I've got work to do anyway."

"We're not getting more out of it than you are," Porter protested as Hope wrapped her arms around his and dragged him out of my office. "We're going to hook you up with the love of your life, man. You'll see—"

She shut the door behind them before he could finish, and I chuckled, my head shaking again. I groaned and leaned back in my chair. I *had* thought that I needed a change, and this? All of it? It was the biggest change I'd ever faced, and I had a feeling things weren't done changing just yet.



I'd never been the type to have a ton of friends. While I wasn't exactly an introvert, I definitely wasn't a social butterfly either. Crowds didn't make me that nervous, but I just wasn't the girl who was going to flit around introducing myself to everybody and making bunches of new friends everywhere I went.

Because of that, I had a small circle of close friends. People I'd known for ages and who knew me inside out. I smiled when I walked into the restaurant where I was meeting the one friend who knew me better than the others.

Ashley Shaw returned my smile, getting up and giving me a tight hug when I joined her at her table. Ash's long red hair was tied into a high ponytail tonight and her full curves were on display in a cheeky black sundress with red, puckered lips printed on it.

I chuckled when she released me, taking a pointed look at it. "Cool dress. Did Chase buy it for you?"

One of the things I loved most about her fiancé, Chase, was how much he loved her exactly the way she was. He was forever encouraging her to embrace those curves and show them off rather than trying to get rid of them.

Ashley smiled at me and shrugged. "Nah, I bought it for myself on this website that markets to sassy, curvy woman. I'll send you the link. Suits us down to a tee, huh?"

I laughed. "Suits *you* down to a tee. I've got the curves, but I'm sorely lacking the sass."

She tutted her tongue and poked me in the ribs before she sat down. “You have the sass. You just like to hide it. I’ll send you the link. You’re going to love this place’s stuff.”

“I’m sure I will,” I said. “I don’t know if I’ll ever have the courage to wear something as bold as that, but it is cool. How are you?”

“I’m so good,” she gushed as I took my seat. “Wedding planning is a beast, but it’s a fun beast. Like a fluffy demon, you know?”

I laughed. “A fluffy demon? Uh, that sounds great. If that’s true, I can’t wait until it’s my turn.”

She grinned. “Neither can I, but you’ll see. It’s exciting. Torture but exciting torture. At least, it’s exciting for me. How are you?”

I shrugged. “Nothing much going on here. Certainly not anything as torturously exciting as the wedding planning. Tell me about it. How can I help?”

Ashley’s eyes lit up as she started talking about her upcoming nuptials. Mentally, I wiped my brow for having successfully diverted her attempt to talk about me. The woman was like a force of nature.

If Ashley so much as caught a whiff of a man being on my mind, she wouldn’t rest until we were planning a wedding for me as well. It had never been a problem in the past, but since I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about Foster, distraction seemed like my best defense tonight.

While I did my best to listen to my friend, I was also *still* thinking about him. Ever since the moment he’d left my office, I’d been second-guessing my decision about pretending not to know or remember him.

It just seemed so much sillier in hindsight than it had in that moment, but we had another meeting coming up soon. Perhaps I’d tell him the truth then. I just couldn’t figure out how to do that without seeming even sillier.

*Around and around I go. Damn it. Why and how do I get myself into these situations?*

I swore, I had chronic foot-in-mouth, uncomfortable duckling disease. *Isn't that supposed to cure itself as we grow older? For fuck's sake.*

“Shel?” Ashley’s voice filtered into my thoughts. When I refocused on her face, she was frowning at me, a worried shimmer in her eyes as she reached across the table to squeeze my forearm. “What’s up with you? I asked about six times if you’d like something to drink.”

As I blinked myself back into reality, I realized there was a waiter standing next to our table and that even he seemed worried. Giggling, I flashed him an apologetic look and didn’t even glance at the menu to check what else was on offer.

“I’ll just have a Coke, please. Thank you.”

“A Coke?” Ashley frowned. “We’re celebrating. I’m having champagne. How about a glass of that with your soda?”

I nodded dutifully. “Yes, of course. Champagne and Coke. Thank you.”

The waiter gave me a weird look, but he shrugged it off and nodded, then left me to my interrogator, who had now definitely caught onto the fact that I was beyond distracted. Ashley gave me a long look and then suddenly grinned from ear to ear.

“Well, I think you’re hiding a man from me.” She arched a knowing eyebrow. “I’ve been around the block a few times. I know what this is all about when a woman has that hopeless look on her face and that sparkle in her eyes. Who is he?”

She practically shouted the question as her eyes grew huge, and she leaned forward so fast, she nearly knocked the whole darn table over. “Why didn’t you tell me? Seriously, answer the question. Who is he? Where did you meet him? When did you meet him? What does he look like, and most importantly, is he going to get along with Chase? Because our men *need* to be friends, Shel. You hear me? They need to get along as well as we do so that we can raise our children together and vacation together at least twice a year.”

I groaned and scrubbed my palms over my face, peeking out at her between my fingers and knowing full well that the jig was up. She knew, and if I didn't give her the details, we would never move on.

"Well, uh, okay. You're right. There is a man, but I didn't tell you about him because there's nothing to tell."

She shook her head firmly. "Nope. That's not it. There is something to tell. What's his name?"

"Foster, but nothing happened between us and it's not going to. He's just a guy I knew back in college who happened to walk into my office yesterday. No big deal."

She pursed her lips, her gaze sweeping across my face before she lifted both eyebrows at me. "No. There's more to it than that. He was your college sweetheart, wasn't he? Perhaps even your first?"

My face burst into flame. "No! It wasn't like that. He wasn't my sweetheart *or* my first."

*God, I'm dying a little bit inside. How can she just ask that kind of thing so casually?* Undeterred by my humiliation, she nodded at me to continue. I groaned softly, but since I already knew there was no getting out of it, getting it over with fast seemed like my best option.

"He was just some guy in my dorm that I had a crush on. A big one, but still. It was nothing." I fanned my face, but she didn't break her intense eye contact with me. "Honestly, he was just a friend. If it was even that. We hung out occasionally, but that's it. He never asked me out. Then he graduated and he was gone. End of story."

"End of story *until* he walked into your office yesterday." She grinned like a cat who had gotten all the cream. "So what happened? Did you confess your ever-lasting love, or did you just grow a pair of lady-balls and finally ask him out?"

"Neither," I admitted, my nose wrinkling because if I had been her, that was exactly what I would've done. Instead, I'd pretended I didn't even know who he was. "It's complicated. He's a client now. I'm handling his grandfather's estate and

it's a huge account for the firm. I had to remain cool, calm, and professional."

She snorted. "Oh, so he's rich now? Please tell me you threw yourself at him. Your college crush who reappears over a decade later, still as hot as ever and loaded? Now that's a wet dream come true."

"Stop," I protested. "How do you know that he's as hot as ever? Or that he was ever hot, for that matter?"

She sniffed before she winked at me. "Girl, I've known you long enough to know you've got good taste. He's hot and I'm betting all that time apart only made him hotter. Are you going to bring him as your date to the wedding?"

I shook my head hard and fast. "No. No way. It's not like that and I just told you that he's a client now. It's a new job. I can't be known as that girl who asked out the primary beneficiary of the first estate she handled. It's unethical."

Ashley let out a long sigh. "It's not, but we'll get you there."

Thankfully, the waiter appeared and saved me from the conversation. He set down our drinks. After he'd taken our food orders, he disappeared again. I asked so many questions about the wedding that Ashley seemed to forget about Foster.

I knew it wouldn't last long, but at least it lasted for the duration of our dinner. When we finally said goodbye, I knew she was going to bring it up again soon, but I was relieved I had dodged the bullet tonight.

On my way home, I called my mom to check in, and I was tempted to tell her about Foster too. Ultimately, however, I decided against it for now. I'd always been close to my mom, but she'd probably recognize the name if I mentioned him, and since nothing worth talking about had happened, it just didn't make sense to even bring it up.

Instead, I chatted to her about Ashley's wedding and how excited we both were for the big day. Mom sighed when she finally got the chance to get a word in. "I still can't believe she met that fiancé of hers through a blind-dating site. It's so

unorthodox. Is she sure she even knows who this man is? I mean, thank God, it's not you. I would've been so worried if you were making such a big commitment after such a whirlwind romance that started without you even being able to see the man."

"Of course, she knows who he is, Mom," I reiterated the same thing I'd told her dozens of times before. "The place is popular and trendy. They've got a great reputation and it's not such a whirlwind."

"It's uncouth," Mom said, and I didn't argue again.

The fact was that Ashley's mom and my own were very uncomfortable with the idea of online dating as a whole. Factor in the whole *blind-dating* aspect of the model offered by Sight Unseen and they simply refused to get it.

I sighed and steered the conversation in a different direction instead, glad now that I hadn't mentioned Foster to her. He was still on my mind, and I was definitely regretting not telling him the truth, but it was best Mom didn't know about him for now.

In fact, I shouldn't have told Ashley about him either. Or maybe I was going about all this completely wrong. Maybe I should be assertive and forward like Ash or brutally honest no matter what like my mom.

I just didn't know, but as I lay in my bed later that night, the one thing I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt was that my crush was back in a big way, and that I had no idea what on earth to do about it.

After they'd made their bet, Hope and Porter had agreed to level the playing field. She'd fed my information into the Sight Unseen system and then she'd provided him with the list of women the computer had made for me.

They would both be selecting women for me to date from that list, and I was very much regretting saying yes to this when I pulled up in front of the restaurant where I'd be having my first date.

Since I'd been working for Sight Unseen for years, I wouldn't have thought that I'd be so uncomfortable about going on one of these dates myself. Hell, I'd set up hundreds of people on blind dates exactly like the one Porter was sending me on tonight, but fuck. My heart was pounding. My palms were sweating and my skin felt too hot. *Maybe I'm sick.*

I blew off the thought as soon as I had it. I would've loved to cancel on account of having come down with something, but that just wasn't me. I didn't cower, hide, or make excuses. So I narrowed my eyes and headed into the restaurant.

In the past, we'd used the private rooms in one or two restaurants for our dates to take place in. Our clients had worn blacked out goggles so they wouldn't see each other during the meal, but it hadn't worked all that well and we'd found that using the date rooms at our offices were much better.

Now, however, we were trying something different again.

After sending out a survey and receiving feedback from our clients, Hope had partnered with a variety of different

venues where the dates could now take place in the dark, like they did at our offices, but without the need for goggles. It allowed us to be more creative when we set these things up, but being on the other side was disconcerting.

For starters, I was having a hard time with the concept of eating in the dark. I'd already chosen what I wanted for dinner in the light when the date had been set and the menu had been forwarded to me, but fuck. How was I supposed to eat when I couldn't see my hand in front of my own face?

*I don't like this.*

"Ah, Mr. Smith," a suited waiter said when I walked into the restaurant. I frowned before I remembered the name I was going by, Tyler Smith.

The frown faded and I nodded. "That's me. Just point me in the right direction."

"That's okay. Let me show you to your table. Your date hasn't arrived yet. We've received word that she's running behind."

"Great," I muttered as I followed him through the dining area to a pitch-black private room at the back. He took my arm and guided me to a chair, then told me he'd be right back with my drink.

I sat down on what felt like a regular, padded seat at any restaurant in the city, but I found myself wondering what the chair looked like. The table. I felt in front of me and my fingers were met with cloth, and I wondered why. *Why bother setting the table when no one is going to be able to see it?*

I heard the door open and my heart ricocheted, but then the waiter spoke again. "Your drink, sir. There's a buzzer right in the center of the table. Press it if you need me. Otherwise, I'll be back to show your date in once she arrives."

"Thanks," I grumbled, wondering how I'd been working for the company for so long and given such little thought to what our clients went through. I knew every inch of every policy and practice behind all this, and yet, I'd have been out



of there in a flash if it wouldn't have made me feel like a coward.

My brother, Hope, her sister, and her husband had all been through this and they'd all come out the other end happy and, more pertinently, alive. While I was feeling like a serial killer could be watching me in the dark, I knew it wasn't true.

*Just relax, Foster. Don't be a wimp.*

I took a deep breath, but the longer I sat there by myself, the more panicked and impatient I became. Finally, the woman came in. A whopping twenty minutes later, according to the waiter who showed her to her seat.

My heart thrashed around in my chest. Neither of us said anything as he helped her into the room. The soft scrape of a chair told me she was sitting down. As soon as she did, I got my first hint about the fact that there really was another person—other than the waiter—in here with me now.

It came in the form of an assault on my nostrils as an overly sweet, fruity scent wafted across the table. It smelled like a pot of strawberry jam had been shoved under my nose. I was a fan of the stuff—strawberry jam—but on my toast, not on my body as a fragrance.

Between her scent and how late she was, I decided Porter had to have been playing a prank on me to set me up with this woman. Then she opened her mouth and I knew he had—or that Hope had pranked him by giving him a list of women I didn't match with at all so she could win their bet.

Her voice was nasally and high-pitched, and more to the point, she did the baby-talk thing. She actively tried to make herself sound like a kid.

Strangely, that was a question on Milena's questionnaire. Our boss prided herself on being as thorough as she could possibly be. It was part of her recipe for success.

Some people liked baby-talk, but since it was a pretty big turn-off for those who didn't, she'd put it right there on the form. I didn't like it. At all and I knew I'd checked the *hell no* option.

“Hello, Tyler.” She giggled. “I’m Dana Dubois. It’s so nice to finally meet you. How are you?”

She dragged out the end of every word, giggled some more, and then I heard her scrape her chair toward the table.

I sighed softly, but we were both here and I knew I had to give it a chance. “Uh, I’m fine. Thanks. How are you?”

More giggling. “So much better now that I’m with you.”

I frowned. *Why? Why would you say something like that to a total and complete stranger that you can’t even see?*

I let it go, though, knowing it would be incredibly rude to pick an argument with her just because I’d been in a bad mood before she’d even walked in. Instead, I exhaled deeply and tried to come up with something to say.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Dana. Tell me about yourself.”

“Well, uh, my name isn’t really Dana,” she whispered in a loud, stage whisper. “I’m not allowed to tell you my real name yet.”

“Uh, yeah. I know. No real names. It’s right there in the rules.”

She giggled. “So Sexy Voice is smart too. That’s just so great. You’re great.”

*I am? No. I’m not. I mean, I am, but you can’t possibly know that yet.* “What do you do for a living, Dana?”

“Oh.” She giggled. “I do charity work. You?”

“I’m a VP at a tech firm.” It was the closest they’d been able to get for a job description for me that was true but didn’t give too much away. “What kind of charity work do you do?”

At least that was something we could talk about. Or so I thought until she responded to the question. “I raise funds for the Society for Right-Handed People Who Support Left-Handed People.”

I blinked hard. *She has to be fucking with me, right?*

“Is that so?”

“Oh, yes!” she exclaimed excitedly, and I wondered if I could hit the buzzer before her drink had even been served. “I also chair monthly meetings for the Inanimate Object Support Group.”

I frowned. I really couldn't tell if she was trying to be funny or if she was actually serious. “The what?”

“The Inanimate Object Support Group,” she repeated, and I heard it in her voice this time that she was completely earnest.

“Uh, I've never heard of that. What do you do there?”

“Silly, Tyler.” She giggled. “We support Inanimate Objects. Like that chair you're sitting on, for example. Did you even think about asking its permission before you sat down? Are you going to thank it when you leave?”

My mouth dropped open, but I couldn't think of a single thing to say for a long minute. “I, uh, how did you get into that line of work?”

“It's not work. It's a calling. I'm not a believer in the concept of work or having a job.”

I frowned. Hard. “You don't believe in the concept of *work*?”

“No.” More giggling. “I believe in finding causes to support and supporting those causes with everything I've got.”

Which was admirable for worthwhile causes. Hers sounded made up, but even so, how did she live? “What did you do before that?”

Surely, she had to have made her money somewhere else, then. But no. “I get by on positive vibes and support from my communities. We're a tight-knit group.”

The door opened again, and mercifully, the scent of food pervaded my nostrils. Plates clicked as they were set down in front of us along with her drink. Then the waiter left us alone again and I tried to eat while also still trying to figure out if she was fucking with me.

She had to be.

“I’m glad you’re part of such supportive communities, but I meant what work did you do before the charity stuff?”

*You can’t eat or pay rent with positive vibes, lady.* “Oh, I’ve never had a job. I told you, I don’t believe in it.”

“Right. Yeah. You did tell me that.” As I tried eating, I was pretty sure I was getting covered in food. After a brief moment of trying, I decided to just grab a burger on the way home. *This isn’t working for me.*

“Tyler?”

“Yep?”

“Do you want to make out a little bit?”

*What?* “We can’t. It’s against the rules, but also, no. I don’t want to. Uh, in fact, I think I’m going to head out.”

I got up, hit the buzzer in the same moment, and then strode to where I was fairly confident the door was located. “Thank you for coming tonight, Dana. I wish you the best of luck with this process going forward, but I’m not the guy you’re looking for.”

Oddly, she started giggling again and I wondered if she was high. Or otherwise intoxicated. Either way, I wasn’t sticking around to find out.

When I got into my car, I glanced down and realized that I didn’t have as much food on me as I’d thought I did, but I ignored the splatters that had fallen and called my brother instead. “What the hell was that?”

“What the hell was *what?*”

“The date, asshole,” I growled as I turned over my engine. “That was awful. After all the help I gave you with—”

“You were a ninety-three-percent match with this woman,” he swore. “Maybe you should’ve given her more time. Your hour isn’t even up yet.”

“And she was twenty minutes late, which should tell you exactly how bad it was.”

Porter sighed. “Don’t bail on her this early, man. Go back and give her another chan—”

“Never. I may not give *you* another chance either. I know Hope is good at her job, but I’m starting to wonder how that’s possible. Do you think she pranked you?”

“Never,” he breathed, but then he ended the call, presumably to track her down to ask.

I tossed the phone down on the passenger seat as I gunned it toward my apartment. It probably wasn’t all Porter’s fault that the date had gone so badly. It wasn’t even Dana’s. Her ideals and beliefs and my own didn’t line up at all, and I knew we definitely hadn’t been a ninety-three-percent match, but over and above all that, when I’d walked into that restaurant, I’d done it with the secret hope that Shelby would be my date.

I’d known it was completely unrealistic, but I’d still hoped. It was a hope I had to vanquish before I went on the next one. *If* I went on another one.

I needed to get that woman out of my mind, but this date seriously hadn’t done it, and I was starting to wonder if any of them would. With Shelby, it felt like there was unfinished business and I didn’t know if I’d be able to walk away again without at least trying to finish it this time.

The dress shop where Ashley was having her fitting was beautiful. The walls had been painted a dusky pink with gray and white accents, fresh flowers filled vases on every countertop and table, and we were surrounded by wedding dresses that hung on rails or had been put on mannequins.

The air was faintly Jasmine scented and we'd all been served a mimosa as we'd come in. A shop assistant swept Ashley into a changing room surrounded by thick white curtains. As her mom, the rest of the bridal party, and I waited for her to emerge, another shop assistant motioned us toward the leather couches clustered around the main changing area.

I sat down on the edge of a white leather sofa, too wired to relax. The others chatted about the wedding around me. The atmosphere was electrifying, the excitement palpable as squeals and laughter rang out and they speculated about what the dress looked like.

"I bet she went for something wild," Anna, one of the bridesmaids, said. "There's no way Ash chose something traditional."

Mrs. Shaw sniffed. "I showed her many suitable options. If she chose any one of them, it's traditional enough and it has a uniquely Ashley twist. She's going to look beautiful. Now, hush."

Anna exchanged a glance with another bridesmaid, and when both of them looked at me, I shrugged. "I don't know

any more than you do. Sorry.”

As they went back to their speculation, I gripped my mimosa and reminded myself that it had too much alcohol in it to gulp it all down at once. For Ashley’s sake, I was trying to stay focused and to pay attention to the fitting and the wedding, but my mind was on work.

Since I was almost done with the Chesterfield estate, Mr. Harrison had given me a couple more important clients and I really wanted to do a good job. Being here instead of at the office, even on a Friday afternoon, was making me nervous.

I had too much to do, but I took a deep breath and a small sip of my mimosa. Mr. Harrison knew I was out for the rest of the day and he was fine with it. Plus, I hadn’t left anything urgent on my desk, so I really had no reason to be so stressed.

Other than the fact that I was still thinking about Foster. I would be seeing him again soon to finalize all the paperwork, but it just didn’t feel like soon was soon enough. Now that I’d seen him again, it felt like every day I didn’t see him was a day too long.

I knew it would sound utterly crazy to anyone else, which was why I was keeping this particular secret to myself. Period. But it was true.

Every day without him seemed to drag. Weird, considering that I’d just gone twelve years straight without seeing him, but ever since he’d walked out of my office, I’d been looking forward to seeing him again.

Foster had always had that kind of effect on me. In a world where people generally made me a little bit uncomfortable, he was like a safe haven. Sure, he made me nervous, but in that stomach-full-of-butterflies way instead of the gut-full-of-trepidation way.

While I hadn’t recently given it much thought as to why, I used to think it was because he had always been kind to me. As a quasi-wallflower, I’d gotten used to being overlooked by most, but not Foster.

He'd always seen me. Flashed me small smiles. Invited me to shoot pool with them or to come join their table in the library. As unlikely as it'd seemed for a boy as good looking as he had been and still was, Foster had a real way of making people feel good about themselves.

It was why I'd fallen for him so hard—and why so many other girls had too. Often back in college, I'd seen the girls leaving his room early in the morning and I'd always been so damn jealous. He'd never gotten serious with any of them, which had given me hope that maybe I still had a shot, but then I'd reminded myself that I didn't stand a chance against those girls.

Some of them had been nerdy, like me, but the others hadn't. They'd been the prom queens, and the cheerleaders, and the sorority girls. The beautiful, graceful ones with legs up to their shoulders and sun-kissed skin.

Me? The sun hated me. With my fair complexion and blonde hair, I had a tendency to look like a lobster if I forgot to put sunscreen on before I just went out to grab a coffee.

An excited cheer went up around me and I blinked myself out of my thoughts to see the curtains had been drawn away to reveal Ashley. Immediately putting my focus where it belonged, I covered my mouth with my hand and my eyes filled with tears as I looked at her where she stood on a small, raised dais in front of the sofas we were on.

“You look gorgeous, honey,” her mother crooned, shooting up and going over to pull her daughter into her arms.

Ashley smiled nervously as her mom let her go. “Do you really think so? It's not too much?”

Her mom seemed lost for words as her gaze swept over her daughter from head to toe and back up again, and when I realized she wasn't going to say anything, I stepped in. Getting up, I grinned at her and accepted the veil the shop assistant was holding.

“Oh, it's way too much, but it's so completely you that it looks like they made it with you in mind. Your mom is right.



You're gorgeous. How do you feel in it? Do you think this is the one?"

Ashley caught her lip between her teeth and nodded, smoothing her hands down her sides before she turned to face the full wall of mirrors in the changing area. The dress was poofy as hell, with a massively full skirt that had a slit coming up almost all the way to her hip. Little black lace flowers had been sewn onto the skirt and the corset that hugged her torso had been drawn tight, lifting her breasts, and putting them right in everyone's face.

The black flower detail continued on the corset, but it was much more subdued, just tiny dots of sparkling gems that had been placed in the vague shape of a flower. I would never have been comfortable in something like it, but this wasn't for me or about me, and for Ash, it really was absolutely perfect.

My best friend liked to make a splash. A statement. She lived her life out in the open and her personality was even larger than her boobs in that dress. The word *simple* didn't exist in her vocabulary, and because of that, she was never going to have picked a plain white dress.

Her mother finally found her words again and took the veil from me just as I stepped up behind our bride-to-be, and I smiled as I moved aside to let her mom and her have this moment. "I'd have liked you in something a touch more traditional, but Shelby is right. This is you and you're beautiful."

Tears glistened in Ashley's eyes and in her mom's as she slid the veil into her daughter's hair, and then the other bridesmaids burst into applause. Someone handed Ashley's mimosa to her and her mom made a tearful toast. Selfies were taken, promises were made not to share anything on social media that would give Chase any hints about the dress, and our drinks were drunk.

By the time we finally left the dress shop, Ashley had stopped crying and was giddy with excitement. We hugged everyone else goodbye outside, but she clung to my arm as they got their cabs.

“Come get a drink with me,” she insisted. “I can’t just go home after that. I’m riding such a high and Chase won’t be home for hours.”

I chuckled. “As your maid of honor, it’s my duty to do whatever you need. Count me in.”

She beamed at me. “There’s a bar right around the corner. Let’s walk.”

“You got it.”

She kept her arm around mine, gushing about how she had felt in the dress as we walked down the street, the late afternoon sun dipping low behind the buildings surrounding us. She stopped when we reached a solid wooden door and then pushed it open, only releasing me as we walked into the bar. It was so much darker inside that I had to blink a few times until my eyes adjusted to the light, and then I smiled.

The place wasn’t packed, the music wasn’t too loud, and it smelled like chicken wings instead of stale beer. Ashley winked when she saw my smile. “I knew you’d like this place. Chase and I come here whenever we need a change of scenery. He has a friend who tends the bar at night.”

“That’s really cool. Sometimes, I feel like Chase knows everyone. I like this song.” I motioned to a speaker on the wall, pretty surprised to hear a nineties’ girl-band hit playing at a bar in the city on a Friday afternoon.

Ashley nodded and led me to the bar, ordering two specialty cocktails before we headed off to grab a table near the empty stage. “They have open-mic nights if you’re interested.”

I snorted. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

“I meant if you were interested in coming to listen to other people sing. You never know. You might meet a musician who tickles your fancy to bring to the wedding.”

Damn it. I’d known that was going to come up again. “I’ll be fine. I always go to weddings alone and it’s never a problem. You have more than enough to think about for your big day. You don’t need to worry about a date for me.”

“I don’t need to, but I want to. The last wedding you went to, you said you were never going solo again. I want you to have a good time that night and I just don’t know if you will if you’re all by yourself while everyone else is coupled up.”

My teeth sank into my lower lip. She wasn’t wrong. At all the recent weddings I’d been to, I’d been the only single friend left. I really didn’t want it to happen again, but I also didn’t know how to just magic up a date.

“What about Sight Unseen?” she asked suddenly.

I frowned. “What about it?”

“Why don’t you sign up?” A light came on in her eyes as she stared across the table at me. “If you really think about it, it’s the perfect setup for you. You can’t be intimidated by a guy you can’t even see. It’s just you and him, in the dark, talking about whatever you want to talk about. You’ll only see him face to face on your fifth date, and by then, you’ll feel like you already know him inside and out.”

I sighed as the bartender brought over our cocktails. “I don’t know, Ash. I think it’s amazing that it worked for you, but I just don’t see myself going on four blind dates with a guy and finding a love of my life.”

“Everyone feels that way until they try it. The concept is bizarre, I’ll grant you that, but it works.” She reached across the table and took my hands, giving them a light squeeze as she looked into my eyes. “I’m not going to pressure you and I’m going to drop it now, but just promise me you’ll at least look into it.”

As I stared back at her, I found myself nodding. “Okay. I’ll look into it, but only if you drop it now.”

She let go of my hands, sat back, and picked up her cocktail. “Consider it dropped. What did you think of the dress? Did you really like it, or were you just saying that because you thought it was what I wanted to hear?”

I pursed my lips at her. “You know I would never do that to you. This is your wedding dress we’re talking about. Trust me, if I didn’t like it, I’d just have kept quiet.”

A slow smile spread on her lips and she nodded, the little bit of tension that had appeared on her face melting away. As we drank our cocktails, we talked more about Chase and how he was keeping the honeymoon destination a secret from her. By the time we left the bar, I was more certain than I'd ever been before that Sight Unseen really had delivered the perfect match for her.

When I got home, I poured myself a glass of water and went to grab my laptop, sitting down on the couch and opening the lid. Once the machine had started, I navigated to the dating agency's website and kept my promise to her by really considering signing up.

The site was tastefully done in black, shades of gray, and purple, and the testimonials were amazing. I clicked the button for the Rules on top of the page, and then I stared at them for a few minutes, wondering if finding my match could really be as easy as signing up and following these four simple rules.

***No real names used (To keep people from looking each other up on social media)***

***No seeing each other until date five (If you make it that far)***

***No touching (To keep things from becoming purely physical)***

***No exchanging of personal information (All contact to occur through the company)***

I read over the rules again and again, wondering whether I should just bite the bullet and sign up. Should I or shouldn't I? That was the question.

Ultimately, however, I closed my laptop again without signing up and decided to sleep on it. My mom had made her feelings about this site abundantly clear, and I wouldn't feel right about joining before I'd spoken to her about it first.

I trusted my mother, and if she didn't think this was the right fit for me, then I guessed I'd just have to find a date to the wedding some other way.

**G**etting ready for my second date—Hope’s pick this time—I was on the phone with Kane, wondering out loud why I was even going on another date. “I mean, date number one was an unmitigated disaster. I really thought Hope had something to do with it, but she blacked out the girl’s real names and any other identifying particulars and then she showed me the results. A ninety-three-percent match. It’s ridiculous.”

“Maybe you did bail too early.”

“Dude, she wanted me to ask the chair’s permission before I sat down on it and she doesn’t believe in the concept of work. I didn’t bail too early. Maybe we had some stuff in common to have gotten such a good score, but the foundations just weren’t there.”

He sighed. “Well, I hope you ordered a sandwich or something this time so that you don’t end up wearing your entree again. That’d already make it easier. Although if you want a date, go to a bar. I really don’t understand why you’re putting yourself through this.”

“I’m putting myself through this because I don’t want to go to a bar to get a date. I want a date with the woman who’s handling my grandfather’s estate, but that’s not going to happen and this is a great distraction. Plus, I think it’ll help my clients if I have a little better insight into their experiences with the program going forward.”

He laughed. “Ask out the girl you want to ask out, and if your clients ever ask if you’ve been through this, you can already say yes. You went on a date, didn’t you?”

I looked at myself in the mirror mounted behind my bedroom door and decided the jeans and black long-sleeved shirt was more than good enough for a woman who wouldn’t even be seeing me. “Okay, well, I’ve got to get going or I’m going to be the one who’s twenty minutes late this time.”

“Good luck.” He chortled. “Hey, you never know. Maybe Hope is better at setting this sort of thing up than Porter. You could be on the way to meet the love of your life right now.”

I laughed dryly. “I doubt it. Most of the matchmaking is the computer anyway, and if Dana Dubois was what the computer spat out for me, then I don’t have much hope. I’ll call you after.”

Kane wished me luck again and I hung up. Groaning, I dropped my eyes back and take a good, long look at the brownish ceiling tile above my head. Over the years that I’d been working for Sight Unseen, I’d seen so many happy couples who wound up tying the knot.

I didn’t know why I was so negative about a process I knew worked, but I just was. Right now, as I stood here, I just didn’t feel like I was ever going to be one half of a happy couple. I’d never been lucky in love, and Milena was a genius, but she wasn’t a magician.

She couldn’t just make the right girl appear out of thin air, and honestly, even if she could, I didn’t know if I’d be able to stop thinking about Shelby for long enough to actually realize that the girl she’d produced was the one.

That blast from the past had knocked me off kilter and things just weren’t righting themselves the way I’d thought they would. Maybe it was because all of this felt too familiar, and maybe that was because I’d been here before.

Not exactly here, but after Shelby had moved into the honor’s dorm and I’d realized I liked her but didn’t stand a chance, I’d tried to distract myself with other women back

then too. I'd figured I had a thing for a junior and that it would pass if I just kept putting myself out there, but it never had.

There was something about her that had always gotten to me in a place no one else had ever quite managed to reach. The thing about Shelby was that she was beautiful, but in that understated, effortless way. She was genuine and soft spoken. She was smart and witty, but she never rubbed it in anyone's face that she'd managed to figure out work that should've been above her level way before they did. She also never made jokes at other people's expense, and while she'd been something of a wallflower at times, she'd never been a shrinking violet.

Shelby had always stood tall and quietly proud, she'd been shy but not painfully so, and it was more like she just hadn't found her people rather than that she wasn't mingling because she felt like she was better than anyone else.

I blew out a heavy breath and shook my head at myself. I was being ridiculous. All of that had been a dozen fucking years ago and I hadn't even really known who she was back then. I sure as shit couldn't claim that I knew who she was now.

More than that, she was in charge of settling my grandfather's estate. She was a professional and that meant that even if she had remembered me, she wouldn't have gone out with me anyway. None of which mattered because she didn't remember me, so it was a moot point.

Determined to give date number two a real chance and to stop obsessively thinking about a woman I'd never even really known, I headed out. The date was at a different restaurant this time, but the setup was much the same.

A pitch-black greenhouse in the garden that smelled like flowers but that I couldn't see anything in. The waiter that took me there grinned when I introduced myself as Tyler Smith. "Your date has just arrived, sir."

I was tempted to ask him if she'd seemed high, but I kept my mouth shut. Not only did I know that everyone who worked for the businesses we'd now entered into partnerships

with had signed agreements not to reveal any information about the dates, but I also didn't want to ruin it for myself.

All things being fair, I was just another client and I couldn't try to use my position at the company to cheat the process. Once I was seated at the table in the greenhouse, the waiter stuck a wine glass in my hand. "Enjoy your drinks. I'll be back with your meal in a few."

As soon as he was gone, a tentative, pleasant voice spoke up from the other side of the table. "Tyler, right? I'm Mindy. Mindy Walker."

"It's nice to meet you, Mindy Walker," I said, relieved that at least she sounded normal. "I'm not going to lie to you, my first date didn't go so well. Have you been on any others?"

She chuckled nervously. "One, but it didn't go so well either. What do you do for a living, Tyler Smith?"

"I'm in tech. You?"

"Tech, huh? Well, that's not going to make it easy to try to look you up after this. I'm in the publishing business."

I smiled. "That's not going to make it easy either, but I guess that's why they keep the jobs and industries we work in vague."

"Precisely," she said. "This is an exceptionally interesting social experiment, don't you think? Since you were honest with me, I won't lie to you either. I do want to meet someone, but a big part of me signed up just to experience this for myself."

As we kept talking, it quickly became clear that Mindy was extremely intelligent, which I liked, but also that she was always, constantly interjecting with obscure facts about everything—and that was a huge turn-off for me.

"A banana is a berry," she said while we were eating our appetizers. "Strawberries, on the other hand, are not. Isn't that interesting?"

While we were waiting for our wine glasses to be refilled, she blurted out, "A group of flamingos is called a



flamboyance.”

“Did you know that in Switzerland, it’s illegal to own only one guinea pig as they don’t want them to get too lonely?” she asked as our mains were being taken away.

I sighed. I got that she was probably just nervous, but it was really difficult to carry on a conversation with someone who kept tossing out random, unrelated facts. At the end of the date when the buzzer sounded to let us know we only had five minutes remaining, I knew she wasn’t the one for me.

“Thanks, Mindy. Have a good one.”

“We still have five minutes,” she said, and I thought she was trying to sound demure but she’d made her voice so deep that I started. “Do I get a kiss goodbye while we wait for the time to run out?”

“Uh, no. I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’m sorry, Mindy. I just don’t think I’m the guy you’re looking for.”

She didn’t say anything as I pressed the button in the center of the table to call the waiter, but I heard a faint goodbye as I was leaving. *Well, at least that went better than the first one.*

Even so, I was really starting to feel like this process wasn’t going to work for me. I’d seen it work myself enough times to know that it really did yield good results, but I was pretty sure I was the problem. My expectations were too high or maybe I just hadn’t been ready to start dating after all.

As I got into my car, I called Kane. “Did you know a group of flamingos is called a flamboyance?”

“What?” He laughed. “Did you get drugged in the dark?”

“No,” I said, then waited for my phone to connect to my car after I’d turned over the engine. “That was just one of the tantalizing facts my date kept throwing out at random intervals during dinner.”

He groaned. “So it was just as awful as the first one?”

I thought it over for a beat before I shook my head. “No, not just as awful. At least I stayed for the whole date this time,

but I don't know. It still wasn't good."

"Maybe you really should just ask out that Shelby girl, bro. It's better than going on date after date with these women you can't even see."

"Nah, I thought about that earlier, but I need to get over it. It was just some stupid throwback to my youth. The fact is that we've both grown up and it's not like we had some serious relationship then that ended without being properly resolved. Besides, I've got to see this thing through for Hope and Porter. I don't want to ruin the bet."

He grunted but didn't argue. "Want to grab a drink?"

"Yeah. Sure. Why not? Where?"

"My place," he said. "I'll see you soon."

"See you soon," I echoed after him, feeling dejected as I hung up and headed to his new place.

I'd debriefed enough clients after the first date to know what people felt like when they'd just met the one, and what I was feeling wasn't it. I honestly didn't know if it was me, if it was because of Shelby, or if I just hadn't been on a date with the right girl yet, but if it hadn't been for Hope and Porter, I'd never have even considered going on another date.

I hummed to myself under my breath as I stirred the pasta sauce on my mom's stove. Mom joined in the tune I was humming as she sliced the chicken she was about to add to the sauce, and I smiled, wondering if I was ever going to grow out of this comfort zone.

Being in my parents' kitchen with my mom, cooking dinner with her before Dad got home was one of the truest, simplest pleasures in my life and it never failed to give me a rare sense of complete peace. Mom suddenly tossed me a grin over her shoulder when I stopped humming.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" she asked, and I looked at her for a moment, marveling at how little she had changed since I'd still lived in this house. With my blonde hair and blue eyes, she easily passed for my sister instead of my mother.

"I'm fine." I smiled. "I'm just still waiting for you to tell me the secret."

"The secret?" She frowned. "What secret?"

"To eternal youth," I said playfully.

Mom chuckled and winked at me before she went back to the chicken. "That's easy, my dear. A good skincare routine and having a child like you."

I laughed and poked at the pasta sauce, deciding it'd gone long enough for now. I turned down the heat. "I guess it's all in the skincare routine, then."

“Most parents get their wrinkles and their gray hair from their kids. You’ve never given us any, so it’s not just the skincare routine. It’s because you’ve got a good head on your shoulders.”

My heart stammered. *Right, now might not be the time to mention that I’m considering signing up for Sight Unseen.*

“How’s work going?” she asked easily. “Are you still happy at the new firm?”

I nodded, leaning against the counter and deciding to talk to her about the dating agency if and when an opportunity presented itself rather than forcing the issue. “Yeah, it’s great. My first account went really well, so I’ve been given a couple more of their bigger estates to settle and I’ve also received a few accounts that are going to be trickier. I’m pretty excited for the challenge.”

She tossed me a grin and then brought the chopping board with the slivers of chicken on it over, scraping them into the waiting pan. I moved out of her way but stayed close enough to keep talking. “You’re going to excel at those tricky accounts. I know it. You’ve always done well when you’re challenged.”

“We’ll see how it goes,” I said. “Ashley had her first dress fitting on Friday. You should see her, Mom. She stayed true to herself with the dress and she’s going to be a radiant bride.”

An amused smile tugged at the corners of my mom’s lips. “I love that girl. Of course, she stayed true to herself. A woman always should. None of this pandering to the man in their lives or making themselves smaller just to accommodate the man’s ego.”

I chuckled. “Ashley would never do any of that. She’s way too confident in who she is.”

Mom hummed her agreement, then glanced at me. “And the fiancé? Is he okay with her being who she is, or is he going to expect her to make herself smaller for him once they’re married?”

“Chase loves her to bits exactly the way she is,” I said, seeing my opening to segue into the Sight Unseen conversation. “The dating agency sure worked for them. I’ve never seen a couple more in love.”

Mom shrugged. “I’m sure Ashley would’ve found him all by herself eventually. If you ask me, all this online dating stuff is a bit silly. The only way to meet people should be the real way. Where you go out into the world and meet people instead of swiping on a profile.”

“Well, I think there’s merit in both,” I reasoned. “Online dating works really well for some people, while others strike it lucky in the real world.”

“It might seem like it works for some people, and don’t get me wrong, I truly hope that it works out for Ash. I just don’t see a manufactured relationship working out in the long term.”

My head slanted as I stared at her. Mom seldom had such strong opinions about things she’d never tried or done herself, and I wondered why she had such a strong opinion about this. “I don’t know, Mom. The company has been around for a few years and their success rate is through the roof. They even did a docuseries following one of their own employees through the process a little while ago. It seemed legit.”

She turned up the heat on the pan and picked up a spatula. “That may be true, but what’s their failure rate? How many people go on dates and never find the loves of their lives? I’d be interested in knowing.”

“The company appears to be quite transparent. I’m pretty sure they published it somewhere, how many people fall out of the process without ever meeting their perfect match.”

Mom shrugged. “Well, good for them. Transparency is always better than the alternative. Why are we talking about this, anyway? You’re not thinking of signing up, are you?”

“Uh, I actually may be thinking about it,” I rushed out. “Just for a date to Ash’s wedding.”

Mom’s shoulders stiffened. She stared at the chicken starting to sizzle for a beat before she cut a stern glance at me.

“You need to be able to look a man in the eyes, Shelby. That’s how you know if he’s feeding you a pack of lies or if he’s the real deal. You won’t find that out by talking to him in the dark.”

I frowned at her. “The dark only lasts for the first four dates. After that, you do look him in the eyes, but from what I’ve heard, you know each other pretty darn well by the fifth date.”

Mom scoffed. “You mean you know everything he wants you to know. Honestly, darling. I don’t know why you’d subject yourself to something like that. It could even be dangerous.”

“It’s not,” I protested. “They have stringent security measures in place.”

“And you’re in total darkness with some person you don’t know for hours at a time. That’s dangerous.”

I sighed as she pursed her lips and gave me another stern look. “You’re an adult, Shelby. I can’t tell you what to do, but I will advise against doing this. For God’s sake, don’t start giving me gray hairs now. My skincare routine will never be able to keep up.”

I laughed. “You’ll be fine, Mom. I’m not saying I’m definitely going to do it. It’s just something I’ve been thinking about. It sucks to be the last single person at every wedding, and I’m Ashley’s maid of honor. I want someone to dance with at my best friend’s wedding. I don’t think that’s so wrong.”

Her gaze softened. “That’s not wrong at all. I just don’t think you need to turn to blind dating to have someone to dance with. In fact, Trevor will be coming to town soon. I could speak to Marge. See if he’d take you.”

My nose wrinkled of its own accord. Marge was a friend of my mom’s and her son, Trevor, was the absolute worst but neither of them seemed to see it. He was a cocky, self-absorbed snob for no good reason and he was always between jobs.

I needed to shut this down real quick. “No, thanks, Mom. I’d rather take my chances on a blind date. That time Trevor took me to dinner still features in my nightmares occasionally.”

She sighed. “He’s a nice boy, Shel. Maybe you should give him another chance.”

I snorted. “I’ll pass, but thank you. Trevor may be nice to other people, but he’s not nice to me. We just don’t get along.”

Mom’s gaze lingered on mine for another moment before she nodded. “Alright, but if you change your mind, I’m sure Marge would talk to him for you.”

“Thanks, but I’m not going to change my mind. I guess I’ll just go back to the drawing board.” As I said it, the front door opened and my dad called out from the foyer.

“I’m home, ladies. How’re you doing, Shel? I didn’t know you were coming over tonight. Best damn surprise of my life when I see your car in the drive when I’m not expecting it.”

I grinned and pushed away from the counter to give my dad a hug when he walked in. Still standing at six and a half feet tall, my father always made me feel like a little girl when he enveloped me in one of his bear hugs, and I melted into him, taking every last ounce of comfort he had to give.

He chuckled and squeezed me once more, then released me and went over to kiss my mom. “How’re you, honey? Good day?”

“It’s always a good day when our baby comes home,” she cooed.

I rolled my eyes even as my chest filled with warmth. “I come home all the time. Both of you are acting like I’m never here when, at this point, I might as well just move back in.”

Dad grinned at me as he loosened his tie. “Now there’s an idea we can discuss. You should move ba—”

“I was kidding, Dad.” I turned my back on him to grab crockery and cutlery so I could set the table while Mom finished up with dinner. “How was work?”

He shrugged, sliding his jacket off and hanging it over the back of a stool. He rolled up his sleeves and helped me carry everything to the dining-room table. “It was work. You know how it goes. I saw a post on social media today about Ashley’s wedding. You went dress shopping with her, I believe?”

I giggled. “I still think it’s weird that you get notifications every time I’m tagged on social media.”

Dad winked at me. “It’s a great way to keep tabs. Besides, I enjoy being able to keep up with old friends. It’s nice to be able to connect.”

Mom sighed as she walked in, oven mitts on her hands. She carried the pot of pasta and another of sauce to the table. “You two and your internet. I’m supposed to be the nosy parent, but I count on our daughter to tell me things instead of stalking her online.”

Dad arched a teasing eyebrow at her. “Oh, yeah? If that’s true, why did you ask me to help you set up your own accounts just a couple of months ago?”

I grinned. “Yeah, Mom. I got all the friend requests and I accepted them. I know you’ve been keeping tabs on me too.”

She smiled and pretended to zip her lips once she’d set the pots down. Then she sat on her chair next to Dad’s and glanced at him. “Shelby is considering signing up for an online, blind-dating service. I bet you’re not so positive about the internet now.”

Dad paled, but then he inhaled deeply through his nostrils. “Don’t do that, honey. There are too many creeps out there. Besides, you’re too young to date seriously.”

“I’m thirty-two, Dad. I’m not too young.”

While Mom dished up and Dad mulled it over, I was back to considering the pros and cons of downloading the app and signing up. *Or maybe Foster will walk into my office for our next meeting and ask me to marry him.*

I nearly snorted out loud at the thought. *Fine. Sight Unseen it is.*



I deftly changed the topic at dinner and left my parents' house a little later. As soon as their front door closed behind me, I sent Ashley a text.

**Me: Any chance you can come over after work tomorrow? I need your help with something.**

My mind was made up, and win or lose, I was following through with this. I refused to be the last single woman standing. Not at Ashley's wedding. Not when it might be as easy as answering a few questions to get a date I might just actually hit it off with.

“**T**he woman’s hands were so sweaty, man,” the client complained as we debriefed about his date the night before.

Since my promotion, I hadn’t been very hands-on with the clients, but part of my job was to manage complaints, and this guy had a whole laundry list of them. “I hate sweat. It’s so unhygienic. This never would’ve happened if you were my case manager.”

I shot him an apologetic smile. “Sorry, Dan. I don’t do that anymore, but how about this? I’ll add a note to your file so that Ange knows not to set you up with anyone who’s got sweaty hands from now on, okay?”

He grumbled under his breath but nodded. “Thanks. I knew you’d be able to sort this out for me. I just don’t want to be grossed out when I’m holding my date’s hand, you know?”

“Of course,” I said, appeasing him by scribbling a note on a post-it and sticking it into his file. “Is there anything else I can help you with while you’re here?”

“No, not if you’re really not managing cases anymore.” He sighed. “You got me some good dates, man. Are you sure I can’t have you back?”

I chuckled. “They can’t have been that good if you’re still here. It’s been thirteen months since you signed up. Maybe it’s time you sit down with Ange and go through your profile again. I’m sure your expectations have changed a lot in the

time you've been with us and a meeting with her might help us narrow it down."

"Nah. I'm just picky. She already suggested that, but my answers haven't changed." He pushed back the chair across from my desk and got up. "I'll check in with her on my way out. She said she might have someone new for me if the last date didn't work out."

I nodded, secretly super relieved that I wasn't Ange. Dan really was a tough nut to crack. In all the time he'd been with us, he'd gone on dates with dozens of women but he always found something to complain about.

As far as I was concerned, the women weren't the problem. He was. Whether he wasn't really ready, was just enjoying the dates too much, or had completely unrealistic expectations, I didn't know, but Dan was never going to make it to the fifth date at this rate.

On the other hand, given my own recent experiences, I was starting to wonder if maybe *I* was the problem too. My third date was just an hour away, and I really wasn't looking forward to it. Since it was in one of the date rooms right here in the building, at least I could keep working until the time came.

After Dan left, Hope came in, smiling as she shut the door behind her. "Dan is still hanging around, huh? I'm starting to think we should get him to talk to a counselor before we send him on any more dates."

"That's not the worst idea you've ever had." I leaned back in my chair and stretched my arms out above my head, moving them first to one side and then to the other. "What's up?"

"Oh, uh, I wanted to find out how your dates are going, but I saw that look on your face when I came in. You're wondering if you're the same as him."

I shrugged, surprised a bit by how quickly and accurately she'd put that together. The thing about Hope was that she was smart and observant, and she'd also been doing this for a long

time. She read people exceptionally well. I just never thought I would be one of them.

“I just feel like I’ve been with the company long enough that I shouldn’t have to deal with people like him anymore.”

She chuckled as she crossed the room and sat down across from me. “You and me both, but we do have to deal with them. Even Milena does, and stop trying to dodge my question. Are you comparing yourself to him?”

“I’ve been on two dates and they were both kind of disastrous. It makes a guy think.”

Hope’s eyes locked on mine, shining with sincerity and regret. “Have they really been that bad?”

I groaned in response.

She let out a long sigh. “Porter and I will do better. I promise.”

“Honestly, the last girl wasn’t so bad. She just wasn’t what I’m looking for, but that’s not her fault. Also, do all our clients try to break the rules by asking if the other person wants to make out?”

Hope’s eyes widened, and she doubled over laughing. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think so. It never happened to me, at least, but I guess that might’ve only been because it was Porter in the dark with me all along.”

I winced. “True. Sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

She waved me off. “It’s water under the bridge. I know you were only trying to help, but now might be the time to help yourself. If those women weren’t what you’re looking for, tell me what you are looking for.”

An image of Shelby flashed in my mind and I bit into the inside of my cheek. Hope couldn’t match me up with her even if she was in our system, which I doubted, if the computer didn’t spit her out as an option for me.

There was a manual override, but there was a reason we didn’t use it unless the software glitched. Ultimately, our

algorithm worked to match us up with people we matched with, not who we wanted to match with.

That was why the program worked so well. Often, on the person-to-person dating scene, we skipped past the people we might actually match well with because of snap decisions. *Nose is too big, hair is the wrong color...*

Milena's process eliminated that risk and the algorithm gave us people who might just work well together because of who they were, what they wanted in life, and not because of what they looked like. Even when I'd matched Porter with Hope, the two had been a ninety-something-percent match.

I'd used the manual override to do it, but they had been a match.

"Foster?" Her voice invaded my thoughts. "What is it?"

"It's just, uh, I think I *am* the problem, like Dan, but not because I keep finding problems with my dates, which I have done, but because they're not the woman I want them to be."

Her eyebrows inched up. "Who's the woman you want them to be?"

I shook my head. "A woman who's not an option. I doubt she's signed up with us or anything like that, but her name is Shelby. We went to college together and she always just seemed so damn perfect. I didn't know her well enough to know for sure, but she still got to me. It turns out she's also handling my grandfather's estate."

"Why don't you just ask her out then?" Hope swept a hand out ahead of her like she was motioning for me to just go do it already. "You know you're not confined to dating only within Sight Unseen, right?"

"Yeah, but there's no point. Like I said, she's settling my grandfather's estate. There's no way she'll go out with me if I ask her now, and the college thing was just a crush. In all the time we were there together, I don't think I saw her go on one date. She was, like, the one girl I couldn't have, you know? I think that's all it is."

“I doubt it, but I won’t pressure you. God knows, it’s not like Porter or I can judge you for having had feelings for a girl for so long and not owning up to them.” She checked her watch. “You should get going. Your date is starting soon.”

I stood as well, rolling my eyes when she looked at me again. “For the record, I haven’t had feelings for her for so long. I had feelings for her then and I can’t get her out of my head now. It hasn’t been a dozen years of torturing myself over her. I’m not Porter and she’s not you.”

Hope lowered her chin and gave me a pointed look. Then she shook her head and strode to the door. “Come on, lover boy. You don’t want to be late. Porter picked a good one for you tonight.”

As it turned out, Hope wasn’t wrong. Porter had picked a good one for me.

At least, that was what I thought once we were both seated and we started talking.

“I’m Krissy,” the girl said softly from the other side of the room. “Krissy Lawrence.”

“Tyler Smith,” I said, the name rolling off my tongue so much easier now that it was the third time I was using it. “What do you do for a living, Krissy?”

“I’m a model,” she replied almost shyly. “How about you?”

“Tech.” I leaned back against the sofa in the date room, spreading my arms out on the backrest and getting comfortable.

This building was my domain, and it helped a lot that I had a mental picture of what this room looked like. I knew every inch of it and I found it much easier to relax when I knew the sofa was red and the rug had a geometric print. Why that was true, I didn’t know.

*Maybe I’m too much of a control freak.*

Shrugging to myself at the thought, I rolled my head back and decided to at least try with Krissy. Her voice was normal.

She hadn't started spouting random facts yet. I still wanted her to be Shelby, but I very much doubted she was in the room with me.

"Where are you from, Krissy?"

"Montana," she said. "You?"

"Seattle. I guess I was never adventurous enough to try and make it work elsewhere."

She chuckled. "In my case, it wasn't adventure that brought me here. It was an offer. I don't think I would've ever left home if anyone there had matched the offer I got here."

"How long have you been in town?"

"Uh, about three years," she said. "It took me a while to settle in, but now that I have, I doubt I'll move again. How about you? Any aspirations about trying to make it work somewhere else eventually?"

I chuckled. "Nah, I love the job I have and my family is here. So are my friends. I'm pretty happy exactly where I am."

"I like that," she said sweetly. "Too many people I've met recently have ants in their pants. They're never happy in any one place. They're always on the move or wanting to get on a plane to go try their luck somewhere else. I'm more of a homebody. A comfort-zone person. Once I find my place, I prefer to stay there."

"I've never thought about it like that, but I guess I'm the same." I smiled. "Our food should be coming any minute. Have you been on one of these dinner-time dates before?"

"No, but I'm really nervous about eating in the dark. Have you?"

"Yeah, and you're right to be nervous about it. It's not easy. What did you order?"

"A burger and fries," she said. "I figured it'd be easier to eat than noodles. You?"

"Same." I laughed, finally feeling like Hope and Porter might've just come through for me. So far, the conversation

was really great and I was having a good time, but as soon as our food came and she started talking to hers in a baby voice, I was out.

*Fuck. What is it with the damn baby voice?*

“Uh, Krissy. I just remembered that I have a work emergency that I need to tend to.” I grabbed the bag of takeout that had just been brought in and got up. “It was nice to meet you, though. Good luck with the process. I hope you find what you’re looking for, but it’s not me.”

“You’re leaving?” She sounded genuinely surprised. “Hey, don’t go. I thought this was going well. Do you want to make out a bit until you’re more relaxed?”

*What the actual fuck?* “No, I do not. Goodbye, Krissy.”

Since I knew the room so well, I knew exactly how to get to the door and I made a beeline for it, leaving without looking back. I knew that I might be making a rash decision, but the baby voice thing really just didn’t do it for me at all.

If I kept things going with this woman despite that, I already knew it would drive me nuts and we’d never last in the long run. It was kinder to both of us to just cut our losses now. Besides, Krissy was pretty great otherwise.

She deserved to find a man who would fall in love with her for who she was—baby voice and all—and that man just wasn’t me.





SHELBY

**A**shley grinned at me when I opened the door for her. “Are you ready for a night of pizza and vicarious crime fighting?”

I nodded, stepping aside to let her in. “I’ve already ordered the pizza and the show is lined up on TV. All we need to do is hit play.”

“Excellent.” She brushed past me and set the bottle of wine she’d brought along on the kitchen counter. “This was a really good idea, Shel. A girls’ night in is exactly what I need right now.”

“Same here.” I shut the door and walked into my kitchen, taking two glasses out of the cabinet while she opened the wine. “Are you sure Chase is okay with you being here tonight?”

She chuckled. “Okay with it? He practically ushered me out the door. The man can’t wait for a night off from wedding planning. Frankly, neither can I. It’s intense, girl. Super intense and getting more and more so as the day comes closer.”

I pushed the glasses across the counter. “Well, then fill those up and let’s forget you’re getting married.”

She did what I’d said, filling both glasses to the brim before she brought her free hand to her chest. “A woman so close to my heart. This is why I love you. You get it. You get me. Anyone else would’ve asked if Chase and I are okay or if we were getting cold feet, but you know that we both just need a damn break.”

I laughed. “You’d have told me if you guys weren’t okay or if you were getting cold feet. Besides, everyone needs a break from time to time. You guys have been so full throttle with the planning that it makes complete sense to me that you’re running out of steam.”

“Thank you.” She picked up her glass and walked to my TV room.

Her red hair was pulled up into a messy bun on top of her head and she was wearing jeans and a sweater rather than any of her bold outfits. In Ashley-speak, that meant that she was exhausted. Following her to the sofa, I sat down next to her and hit play on our favorite TV show, figuring that we could both just relax and eat our pizza before I asked for her help with the site.

One forty-minute episode later of watching an awesome detective and an author solve a crime together, our food came. Ashley cheered when she saw I’d ordered her the extra meaty pizza, and after we’d gotten settled with our boxes on our laps and more wine in our hands, we watched another episode while we ate.

Once that episode was done and our pizzas were gone, she turned to look at me, her golden-brown eyes curious on mine. “I think it’s about time you told me why you asked me to come over here tonight. Don’t get me wrong, I’m so damn grateful that you did, but you mentioned needing my help with something?”

“Uh, yeah.” I swiped my tongue across my lips and took a big gulp of the sweet pink wine. “I’m ready to sign up to Sight Unseen.”

Her eyes flared wide open, and her lips parted in surprise. Then they spread into a massive smile, and she started bouncing as she leaned forward to throw her arms around my neck. “Oh, Shelby! Why didn’t you say so? I’m so happy! This is going to be amazing. Where’s your computer? Let’s do this.”

“I’ve downloaded the app,” I said. “Can we just do it on my phone?”

She finally let go of me and I dragged in a deep breath of air now that she wasn't squeezing me so tight. "We can, but it'll be easier for us to do it together if we use your computer."

"Right." I set my glass down on the coffee table and got up, walked over to my laptop, and brought it back to the sofa, but I felt like I was moving in a haze.

This wasn't like me at all. I'd never done anything even remotely like signing up to a dating agency, much less a *blind-dating* agency, but desperate times called for desperate measures. After I opened my laptop, navigated to the site, and logged in, Ashley scooted over to sit right up against my side.

She pointed at the *Get Started* button. "The first thing we'll need to do is fill out the questionnaire that pops up. It's pretty comprehensive, though. It's also really important to think about your answers and to be honest."

I nodded dutifully. "I can do that, but, uh, how comprehensive?"

Ash gave me a sideways smile. "Have you ever answered questions about your turn-ons in the bedroom? Because you're about to."

My heart skipped and my cheeks flushed. "What? Are you serious? Why?"

She chuckled and gave my shoulders a squeeze. "It's fine, hon. It's not all sexual. It covers everything from your family background to where you see yourself ten years from now, but sex is an important part of every adult relationship, and compatibility doesn't just depend on whether you like the same food."

I groaned. "Maybe my mom was right and this is a mistake."

"It's not a mistake." She motioned back to my laptop screen where the questionnaire had now loaded. "If it'll make it easier for you, I won't look while you answer those questions, okay? I'll still be right here and you can ask me anything, but I won't read those answers. Just relax and let's start with the easy stuff."

Chewing on my lower lip, I nodded and began to fill in my details. As she'd told me, the questionnaire started with the basic stuff. My personal particulars, employment, likes and dislikes in general and in a man, and then it moved onto more detailed information.

“Why do they need to know what my dream house looks like? No one actually ends up living in their damn dream house.”

She shrugged. “That may be true, but it does say a lot about you. Like, for example, Chase and I both said that our dream house would be a chalet in a mountainous region. That means that our personalities are more similar to each other's than to someone who chooses the Beverly Hills Mansion option. See, there's a dropdown and a block where you can elaborate.”

I took a deep breath and clicked on the drop menu, immediately seeing what she'd meant. The options available were varied and many, ranging from a shack on the beach to a palace overlooking a bay, from a chalet in the mountains to a cabin in the woods, and from a suburban home in a densely populated area to a mansion in Beverly Hills, surrounded by A-listers.

As I studied every option and tried to envision which one I might choose if I could have anything, I chewed on my lower lip. “How am I supposed to choose? I love the chalet in the mountains, but I'd also like to live on the beach in the summer, and once I have kids, a suburban home would be great.”

“Then that's what you type in that block. It's what it's there for. Choose the one you'd like to move into now, tonight, if you got a call to say you've won the lottery, and then elaborate in the block.”

I glanced outside, watching the sleet rain lash against the windows. “Well, when you put it like that...” As I trailed off, I clicked the shack on the beach option and then quickly typed the rest into the space provided to do it. Ash frowned at me. “You're choosing the shack over the palace? That's interesting.”

I shrugged. “I don’t want the pressure that goes along with living in a palace, and I also don’t want the staff. That would mean having people around all the time, and I’m sure most wouldn’t mind that, but I would.”

She chuckled. “I get it. Okay, next up is the family section. How many kids do you want?”

I blinked a few times in rapid succession. “Uh, I don’t know? At least one, but I guess that depends on the father, money, where we live—”

“This isn’t about the father, Shel. Or about the money or about the school district you live in. In an ideal world where the father is great and as hands-on as you are and money isn’t an issue, how many children would you *like* to have?”

“Two,” I said, before pursing my lips. “Unless I stop working, in which case I’d have time to pay attention to more.”

Ashley sighed. “You’re not answering the question, honey. How many would you like? The question isn’t about how many kids you think you’d be able to pay attention to. This is all about what you want, and again, it doesn’t mean you’re going to get it. It just tells them a lot about you. If you say none or if you say a dozen, it says something about your personality.”

“Not a dozen,” I blurted as I typed in that I wanted four kids. “I would have more, but I think four sounds like a good number.”

She nodded. “Four it is.”

Ashley kept guiding me through the questions, reining me in when I started overthinking the answers and then dutifully moving to the other sofa when the time came for me to answer the sexual stuff. Even though she wasn’t reading my answers over my shoulder, I still blushed simply because she knew which questions I was answering right now.

This set was as comprehensive as the rest of the questionnaire had been, and with my very limited experience, I really didn’t know how to answer most of them. *What are my*

*preferences? What are my turn-offs? Do I have any kinks? What are they?*

Ashley must've seen the confusion on my face as I studied them, not knowing what I was supposed to click on. "Look on the right side of the screen. You can answer yes or no to whether you like it or not, but underneath that, there's a section where you can say whether it's something you'd be interested in trying or not. You can use those instead of typing out your answers in the boxes provided."

More heat exploded across my cheeks, but I nodded my thanks and took her suggestions, letting the questions themselves guide me to what I might be open to trying instead of just blurting it all out in a box. The truth was that I didn't even have enough experience to be able to blurt anything out. If it hadn't been for the pointed questions about whether I would like to try things like bondage, I never would have known what to say.

When that part was done, I answered a few more questions about the future and then I clicked on submit, seriously relieved that it was over.

Ashley grinned at me. "Okay, so now that they've got your questionnaire, they're going to do their best to match you as soon as they can. It might take a few days, but they'll send an email once they've found a match. You can then choose whether to accept the first date or not."

My heart flip-flopped in my chest and my skin felt unnaturally sweaty after all that. "Yeah, uh, okay. Thanks for all your help."

"No problem. I'd like to talk you off the ledge I know you're on right now, but Chase will be waiting and it's already getting late. I should get going, but Shelby?"

I kept staring at the banner on the screen that said *Thank you, your answers have been successfully submitted.* "Yeah?"

"You didn't make a mistake," she said firmly as she got up and gathered her things. "Don't freak out, okay? What you just

did is a good thing, whether your mother understands it or not.”

I dragged in a deep breath before I got up to walk her to the door. “We’ll see, but thanks again for coming over and for your help. I really appreciate it.”

“You got it.” She hugged me tight and left, and as soon as I locked the door behind her, I raced back to my laptop to see if there was any way to undo the submission of the questionnaire.

With my heart pounding and my head racing, I furiously checked every nook and cranny of the website, but I couldn’t find a way to withdraw my submission. Groaning as I finally collapsed on the sofa next to my laptop, I sent up a little prayer that they just didn’t find a match for me.

On the other hand, it was only about finding a date to the wedding. Nothing more. *Seriously, Shelby. It’s going to be okay. What’s the worst that can happen?*





**A**fter the baby-model date, I was done. I strode into the office a couple of days later and didn't stop until I reached Hope's door. I rapped my knuckles across it, but since it was never closed, I strode in at the same time that I knocked, then looked her in the eyes and made my announcement.

"I'm out, Hope," I said, making sure to enunciate each word. "Thank you, but no thank you. I'm just going to die alone and I'll be perfectly happy doing it as long as it means I don't have to go on another one of these dates."

Hope froze, clicked on something on her computer screen, and turned it away from me even though I hadn't been able to see it in the first place. She cleared her throat nervously when her gaze came back to mine.

"Uh, why? Porter had high hopes for the last one. Didn't it go well?"

"It did, until she started speaking to her food in a baby voice, which I'm sure you know by now is a huge turn-off for me, considering you have seen my answers to the questionnaire."

She blinked hard a few times, then swallowed audibly. "Yeah, uh, I do know that, but I knew it before your questionnaire. You've only told us, like, a hundred times how much it annoys you when fully grown adults speak like children to other fully grown adults."

“Exactly. If two out of three of the women I went on a date with spoke like that, I’d really rather just die alone.”

“You’re not going to die alone, Foster. I won’t allow it.” She dragged in a deep breath and glanced at her screen again. “Hey, uh, that woman you were talking to me about the other day. What was her name again?”

“Shelby?” I frowned. “What about her?”

“No, nothing. I was just wondering if you’d asked her out yet.”

I shook my head and blew out a sharp breath. “No, and I’m not going to. I told you that she’d turn me down, and besides, I really don’t want to seem like the creepy stalker type who didn’t stop thinking about her for twelve fucking years after the last time he saw her.”

She scoffed. “Porter and I aren’t the creepy stalker types and we never stopped thinking about each other.”

“Sure, but you were also best friends for all that time. It makes sense you never stopped thinking about each other because you never stopped seeing each other either. I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again, Shelby and I aren’t you and Porter. Let it go, Hope. I’m going to.”

She cocked her head at me. “Are you? Because I think you’re quitting the program because you’re hung up on her.”

“No, I’m quitting the program because it’s not for me.” I sat down heavily in the chair across from her desk. “Look, Hope, I know that Milena’s model works, but at the end of the day, it’s just not the silver bullet. It doesn’t work for everyone, and it’s not going to work for me. I realize that it means I’m likely going to have to do some introspection before I try dating any other way, but if that’s what I need to do, then that’s what I need to do.”

“Don’t quit yet.” Hope made her eyes big at me and I saw the pleading in them. “Tell me about this Shelby of yours.”

Irritation flared through me. “She’s not mine and why do you want to know about her?”

Hope paused for a moment before she shrugged. “Porter had two tries to set you up and I’d like two as well. I set you up with Mindy and that almost went well, right? So give me another chance.”

I frowned. “Why do you need to know about Shelby if I’m going to give you another chance?”

“Uh.” She hesitated, her gaze looking faraway before she refocused on me and shrugged. “You said you always thought she was perfect for you. I’d like to know more about her so that I can try to find someone else you might think is perfect for you.”

“You’re acting weird.”

“No, I’m not,” she said quickly, then cleared her throat again and leaned forward across her desk. “Just tell me about her and give me one last chance. Please? It’s not fair that Porter had two and I’ve only had one. Let’s just make it even, and then, if your next date isn’t great, you can call it quits.”

I groaned. “If you want to go on a cruise with my brother so bad, book a damn cruise.”

She pouted at me. “It’s not the same as winning. We can book a cruise any day, but this way, we’d have earned it. It’s different.”

“You’re working and therefore you’re earning the money to pay for the cruise. Either way, you’ve earned it. You don’t need me to go on a date to be able to go on your cruise.”

Hope sighed heavily, her gaze imploring as she fixed it on mine. “Please, Foster? Pretty please with a cherry on top. Just one more date. I promise you that if this one doesn’t work out, Porter and I will leave it alone.”

I arched an eyebrow at her, seeing an opportunity here. “Fine, but if I agree to this, both of you leave it alone completely. I’m not talking about you not trying to find me dates through Sight Unseen anymore. I’m saying that if I go on this date and it doesn’t work out, you leave my love life alone from now on. No more telling me I need to get a girlfriend or anything like that.”

She crossed her heart with her fingers. “I promise. As soon as you leave, I’ll call Porter and tell him that he needs to promise too.”

“Okay,” I said reluctantly. “In that case, I’ll do it. One more date.”

She nodded happily, a smile on her lips as she reached for her phone. “I’m calling Porter now. One more date. Thank you, Foster. You won’t regret this.”

I snorted. “I’m going to regret it, but if it gets you both to shut up about whether or not I’m dating, it’s a regret I’m willing to take on. Set it up, and then shut down my profile.”

“If it doesn’t work out, I’ll shut it down,” she said. “Until you tell me it didn’t work out, I’m keeping it active in case we need to set up a second date.”

“You won’t need to, but fine. I guess you can’t shut it down when you’ve got an active account, but as soon as the first date is over, you’re shutting it down.”

She nodded dutifully. “If it doesn’t go well.”

I groaned. “Your optimism is cute, but you’re going to be disappointed, Hope. Just be ready to shut it down, okay?”

“Okay,” she said as I got up. Then she frowned at me. “You haven’t told me about Shelby yet.”

I rolled my eyes at her and didn’t sit down again, but I gave her the highlights. “She’s beautiful, smart, funny, and a little bit shy. She was in the honors dorm with me at Green Lake. Pre-law, if I remember correctly.”

Hope nodded, her gaze a little unfocused as if she was making mental notes. “Okay, let’s start with the first thing you said. Beautiful. What does that mean to you? What does she look like?”

“Long blonde hair down to her waist. These huge blue eyes that are somehow both innocent and intelligent at the same time. Really curvy. She never wore much makeup and I don’t think I ever saw her all dressed up. She’s more of a jeans-and-sneakers kind of girl.”

“Pre-law, huh?”

“Yep.”

“From Seattle?”

“Yeah, I think so. All I know for sure is that she went to college here, but I think I remember something about her parents not living too far away from campus. What is this about?”

“Nothing, I’ve got it from here.” Hope gave me a surprisingly wide grin. “I think I have the perfect girl for you. Be ready to go on a date tonight, Foster. I’m going to set it up as soon as I’ve told your brother about the promise we’ve made.”

I frowned but nodded. “Yeah, okay. Are you sure you’re okay? You really do seem kind of weird today.”

“No, I’m fine. Just excited and a little bit distracted with work.” As I turned to walk to her door, she stopped me. “Just promise me one thing, Foster.”

“What’s that?” I groaned. “I already promised I’d go on the damn date.”

“Yeah, but this is an extension of that,” she said, waiting until I looked at her over my shoulder before she carried on. “Promise me that when you walk into that date tonight, you’ll do it with an open mind.”

I grimaced. “What?”

She gave me a stern look. “I mean it. You can’t decide before you even walk in there that it’s not going to work out, and it sounds like you’ve already done that. So promise me that you’ll give the woman I’m setting you up with a fair chance.”

“Fine.” I exhaled through my nostrils. “I’ll try to go in there not annoyed and not already looking for an out.”

She smiled. “Thank you, and try to enjoy it, okay? I really think this girl could be the one. Tonight might just be the last first date you ever go on, Foster O’Brien.”

“I doubt it,” I grumbled before pasting a fake grin on my lips. “I mean, sure. Of course it could be.”

Hope laughed and waved me out of her office as she picked up her phone to call my brother, and I shook my head as I left and walked down the hall to my own office. I had no idea what had been going on with her back there, but something had definitely been up.

With Hope and Porter though, anything was possible. They were dating now and it was going great, but they were also still best friends and they had been for a long time. That meant that a certain amount of shenanigans was to be expected from them and they always delivered. Inside jokes, side bets, pranks, the list went on and on, so I shook off the suspicion and unease, chalking her behavior up to missing something between the two of them.

As she had promised, I got the notification later that afternoon about the date tonight. It was at another restaurant, and as I looked at the menu she had forwarded, I decided to go with Kane’s advice and ordered a sandwich.

At least that would be easier to eat than the chicken I’d ordered on that first date. Irritation bubbled through me as I clicked on the gourmet grilled sandwich I probably wasn’t even going to eat and confirmed that I would be attending the date.

I knew this was going to be a waste of time, but I’d said I would go and so I would go, but going in with an open mind was a promise I just didn’t know if I’d be able to keep.





When my phone chimed with a notification alert tone I didn't recognize, my heart leaped into my throat. I sat behind my desk without moving for a moment, wondering whether I could just pretend I'd never gotten it.

Eventually, though, curiosity got the better of me and I picked up my phone. As I'd suspected, the alert had come from the Sight Unseen app and it said that they'd found a match for me. If I accepted, I would be going on my first date as soon as tonight.

It felt like a thousand bees were buzzing through my veins as I stared at the notification, knowing that Ashley would be horrendously disappointed if I didn't go. I knew I could just neglect to tell her that they'd contacted me yet, but I also already knew I'd never do that.

Besides, I still needed a date to her wedding and I wouldn't get one while hiding in my office and pretending to never have received the notification. I brought my thumb to the accept button, then slammed my eyes closed as I tapped it.

*There. It's done.*

I set my phone down, pushing it away from me so I wouldn't be tempted to check it ten million times for the rest of the day. The reality was that there wasn't going to be another notification from them. I wasn't going to get any more information about the man.

The alert tone chimed again and my heart nearly exploded. I grabbed my phone, but it turned out that I'd been right. It

wasn't a message about the man I was going out with, but rather a notification with the time and place of the date, as well as a menu that I had to choose a meal from to have during the date.

I blinked at the options, wondering how I was supposed to eat a steak dinner in the dark. Eventually, after scrolling past the roast chicken and seafood dishes as well as the salads, I was down to a pizza, grilled sandwiches, and the hamburgers.

All of those things seemed manageable in the dark, but since the pizza and the hamburgers could get quite messy themselves if you couldn't see a single thing, I opted for a grilled sandwich. It wasn't the most out-there option, but grilled cheese was comfort food.

I'd never otherwise order one on a date, but it wasn't like he'd be able to see what I was eating anyway, and if I was going on a blind date in a pitch dark room, then I'd take every ounce of comfort I could get. After making my selection, I put the phone down and tried to focus on work, but I couldn't. I had so much trouble concentrating that eventually I settled for doing admin.

At least that way, I couldn't make a huge mistake on a client account. The rest of my work hours raced by much too fast for my liking, and by the time I went home to get dressed, I was still just as nervous as I had been when I'd gotten the notification.

If not more so.

My hands were shaking when I arrived at the restaurant, mentally reciting the information I'd been given. Since we couldn't use our real names, I'd been sent a fake name to use for the process and a fake job too.

It seemed clients at Sight Unseen could either choose to say that they did a job close to what they actually did, but not so close so as to make it possible to use it to track each other down. Or you could choose a job that you knew a little bit about but that wasn't anything close to what you actually did for a living.

I'd chosen the latter option. Tonight, I was in marketing, which was what Ashley did, so I knew enough about it to make it seem passable—not that I knew whether I'd need to.

A waiter approached me as soon as I walked through the doors. “Amanda Ripple?”

“No, I'm—” I cut myself off right on time. “I mean, yes. That's me.”

“Wonderful.” He smiled and motioned for me to follow him. “Your date has just arrived. I got done seating him only about a minute ago.”

My heart picked up its pace, galloping ahead like it was trying to win a race as my face flushed. “Oh, uh, okay. Um, how does this work, exactly?”

The waiter's smile turned understanding. “It's okay to be nervous, but there's no reason to be. The date will be taking place in one of our private dining areas. The lights are off and the room has been blacked out by heavy drapes and a tint on the glass that will keep any of the light out here from filtering in. However, it's set up as any private room in any restaurant is, with the exception that there's a buzzer right in the middle of the table. If you need us for any reason, all you have to do is press it.”

I nodded stiffly. He made it sound so simple and normal, but this was anything but. As soon as he led me down a dark corridor to the private room, my lungs constricted and the nerves became so much that it was hard to breathe.

He opened the door and led me in, his hand on my back as he guided me to my chair and then told me to sit down. My stomach flip-flopped and I still couldn't breathe properly, but I thanked him and gripped the table, holding it tight in an attempt to center myself.

“Are you... hyperventilating?” A warm, deep male voice asked once the waiter was gone. “Seriously, are you in trouble over there?”

My face got hot. “Uh, no. No trouble. Thank you. Just nervous.”

“Shit.” I found the voice strangely calming. He sounded normal enough, at least. “Okay, I get that. Just breathe. You’re okay. You’re safe. It’s going to be fine. We can leave if you want to.”

“No,” I squeaked, then dragged in a deep breath and smoothed my hands over the table to try to get a mental picture of what this place looked like. “I’ll be fine. Just, uh, keep talking. Distract me.”

A low, rumbling chuckle sounded. “Yeah, okay. I can do that. So, uh, my name is Tyler Smith. I work in finance, except that I don’t. They seem to have changed my profession tonight, which I guess is fine. I’m from Seattle and I’ve been thinking about getting a dog.”

I frowned. “A dog? I love dogs, but why are you just thinking about it? Why haven’t you gotten one yet if you want one?”

“Well, uh, because I’d have to move before I’d be able to get one. I don’t have a garden or any kind of outdoor space right now.”

“Okay, but you can take it for walks.”

“Sure, but I work all day, and it wouldn’t be fair to leave it locked up inside with no one around and having to wait for me before it can get some fresh air.”

“I guess.” I breathed in through my nostrils and out through my mouth. “For what it’s worth, I agree that it wouldn’t be fair. Are you able to move?”

“Are you asking if I make enough money to get a different place?” he asked, sounding amused.

I flushed. “No, I, uh, I just...”

“Relax. I was kidding.” He chuckled again. “What name are you using tonight?”

“Oh, uh, right. Amanda. Amanda Ripple. In marketing.”

“Is that close to what you really do or random?”

“Random,” I said honestly. “How are you so relaxed?”

“I’m not.” Another low chuckle rumbled out of him, and this time, I smiled at the sound of it. “Honestly, I wasn’t even sure if I should try this again, but I’m kind of glad right now that I did. First time?”

“Yep.”

“Yeah, that’s not easy. This is my fourth date and the prospect of eating in the dark still gets me every time.”

“I ordered a sandwich,” I volunteered. “It seemed like the least difficult thing to eat without being able to see.”

“Smart,” he said. “So did I, but I have made the wrong choice three times before. You seem to have figured it out much faster than I did.”

My smile widened. “Thank you. I’m glad you ordered the same thing if you’re a veteran at this. It means I won’t make a complete ass out of myself while I’m trying to eat.”

“Even if you did, I wouldn’t know about it. I wonder if anyone has ever made the mistake of ordering soup.”

I cringed. “I hope not. That would’ve been terrible for them.”

“For them, yes. For the people who had to clean up after, it would be even worse.” He sighed. “Are you feeling better yet?”

I dragged in a deep breath and felt my lungs expand normally. “I actually am. Thanks. I freaked out a little bit when I realized this was really happening.”

“Yeah, I know the feeling. It’s pretty intimidating. Much more so than I thought it would be.”

“Right?” I agreed. “I read all the testimonials on the website and no one mentioned how completely freaky it was when you’re led to a pitch black room to go on a date with a person you wouldn’t be able to see.”

He laughed. “It is very freaky. Someone should mention it in the testimonials, but I think by the time people write those, they’re so caught up in whoever they met that they’re not thinking about how they felt before.”

“You’re insightful,” I said. “Probably right, too. How about you, though? You said this is your fourth date but you’re obviously not too caught up in the women you met before, are you?”

He let out a long breath, not overly loud but not so quiet that I couldn’t hear it. “No, I’m not caught up in them at all. Is there someone else waiting for you out there?”

An image of Foster walking into my office that day flashed in my mind, but I shook my head. “No, there’s no one else. It’s just you, Tyler. I suppose you might as well tell me more about yourself. How does a guy like you end up in a place like this?”

He chuckled. “A guy like me?”

I shrugged. “You sound...” *Hot*. But since I couldn’t say that, I went with the next best thing. “You sound normal. I’m not really sure what I was expecting you to sound like, but it wasn’t that.”

“Wow. High praise,” he teased. “Thanks. You sound pretty normal yourself. What do you want to know?”

“Well, how you ended up here, I guess. I’ll even go first. I signed up because my best friend recently met her fiancé through this program and she convinced me it was a good idea.”

“You don’t sound very convinced,” he commented. “Strangely, I’m here for much the same reason. My brother and his fiancée went through this not too long ago, and since they won’t shut up about how I need to get a girlfriend, I agreed to give it a shot.”

“I’d raise my glass for a toast if I had a glass,” I said. “And if I could see where to hold it.”

Another one of those sexy chuckles rang out and I had to admit, a tingle ran through me at the sound. “Well, at least we know we’ve got one thing in common. Tell me about yourself.”

“I just asked you to do that.”

“And I told you what you wanted to know.”

Despite the dark, I smiled. “Fair enough. What do you want to know?”

“Why don’t you just tell me about your life? You don’t have to give me details that give too much away, but just in general, what makes you tick? What do you enjoy doing? What do you hate?”

I chuckled but settled in, then gave him random snippets that, all by themselves, wouldn’t tell him much about my identity but that would clue him in to who I was. “My parents have been married almost forty years. Happily so. I’m really close to them and I value their opinions even if I’m well into adulthood by now. I love my job and my few close friends. I’m not an extrovert and the worst thing anyone could do is to throw me a surprise party.”

He let the words sink in for a moment before he replied. “I’m close to my family too. I also value their opinions, but my own tend to be pretty strong and I’m not easily swayed. To a certain extent, I’m an extrovert. I enjoy people and crowds, but I don’t need them. Like, I don’t feed off the mutual energy or anything like that.”

A tiny part of me deep down inside that had remained tense relaxed. This date really wasn’t too bad and Tyler seemed like someone I had known for a while. It was just easy to talk to him. Maybe he would make for a good wedding date.

Our drinks were served as we kept talking about random things and our sandwiches came next. By the time a red light came on in the corner, I couldn’t believe our first hour was almost up.

“So, Amanda,” he said. “This is the part of the night where we have to decide whether we want to keep this going. What do you say, would you like to go out with me again?”

Taken aback by his directness but feeling a flare of excitement shooting through me at the same time, I nodded. “I’d like that very much, Tyler.”

We said our goodbyes shortly after and I went home on cloud nine, thinking that the date was exactly how I’d always

imagined my first date with Foster would be. I knew Tyler wasn't him, but it'd been so easy to connect with him that he was the first guy since Foster that had made me feel hope. Like there could be something between us that might just go the distance. If not all the way, then at least to the wedding—and that was all I needed it to be.





The little rubber ball came flying at my face again and I swung my racket, connecting with a soft thwack and sending it back to Kane. My friend started forward, arm flying in a wide arc before he hit it, and it came back to me.

“You’re getting better.” I returned the ball and glanced at him. “Did you take my advice and get some lessons?”

He smirked and flipped me off. “Those are fighting words for a guy whose brother has been setting him up on dates.”

I shook my head at him and lurched forward to hit the ball. “Nothing you say is going to bring me down today, man. It was Hope who set me up with this girl, though. Not Porter.”

“How is that better?” He laughed. “Your brother’s fiancée has possibly found you the love of your life.”

“I’m okay with it.” I swung and missed this time. “Fuck. That was a good game. I wish I had time for one more.”

“You have to head out?” he asked as he bent over to scoop up the ball. “I want to hear more about the girl before you leave. All you’ve really said is that it was a great date.”

“It *was* a great date.” I tossed him a grin before resting my elbows on my knees and trying to catch my breath. “This Amanda girl is amazing. I’ve got to give it to Hope. She said she would do better, and she really did. She brought her A-game and that makes me a very happy client.”

He chuckled. “No baby voice?”

“Nope.”

“Random facts?”

I shook my head. “Nothing out of place.”

He arched his sandy eyebrows at me. “Did she ask if you wanted to make out?”

“No, but I might’ve said yes if she did.” I straightened up and wiped my brow, unable to stop the stupid grin that spread on my face whenever I thought about last night. “It’s not just that, though. I’m sure she has her own little quirks just like those other women did. The difference is that with her, I want to find out what they are.”

“Why?” He frowned. “Shouldn’t you be hoping that she’s quirk-free?”

I scoffed. “No one is quirk-free.”

“I’m quirk-free.” A smug smile appeared on his lips. “Maybe I should sign up to Sight Unseen and see if I can find my perfect match faster than you did.”

I laughed. “You’re quirk-free, huh? What about the sarcasm? The competitiveness?”

“Those aren’t quirks,” he retorted and lifted his arm to flex his bicep like Popeye. “They’re strengths. I’ve got a lot of those, which is why I’d find my perfect match faster.”

“Have at it, bro.” I motioned toward the door. “Come back to the office with me right now and I’ll get you all signed up and have you on your first date by tonight.”

Kane’s face scrunched up, eyes dark with disapproval. “Now why would I want to do that when I’m not actually looking for my perfect match?”

“What, are you scared?”

He scoffed. “Scared of finding *the one*? You bet I am, Foster. You might be happy about finding your elusive *one*, but not all of us are ready to settle down.”

*The one?* I threw my hands up ahead of me and shook my head. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I’ve only had one date

with this girl and we got along well, but that doesn't mean she's the one."

His brow furrowed as he gave me a disbelieving look. "Do you want her to be the one? I thought that was the point of all this."

"If she is the one, then fine. All I'm saying is not to get ahead of ourselves. She's nice, is all. A great girl, but the point of all this is for me to date. That's it. I'm not looking to get married by the weekend."

He shook his head and pointed at my chest. "You better figure that out and be honest with your great girl about it. Women don't join programs like that one for a good time. That's what bars are for."

I laughed but inclined my head. I did need to figure it out, but I wasn't going to let it freak me out. At this juncture, I knew a lot of guys who would've had a mini-meltdown and headed out to sow their wild oats just to prove they still could, but I wasn't one of them.

While I'd never admit it to Kane in as many words, I was ready to see where this went. I didn't know if she was the one and I didn't know if I was ready for that kind of intensity in a relationship, but my understanding after working with soulmates for so long was that when it hit you, you not only knew, but you wanted it to be that way.

One date wasn't enough to make that call, but I wasn't going to let fear of it working out keep me from playing the game. Instead, I grabbed a shower, said goodbye to Kane, went back to work, and strode directly to Hope's office.

I hadn't seen her this morning because she'd had back-to-back meetings, but she'd texted me to come by to fill her in, and she'd added a bunch of *please* emojis, so I couldn't really ignore her. Plus, I didn't want to.

Hope had come through for me with Amanda in a big way, and I owed it to her to tell her that. As I pushed open her door, I heard her voice and it sounded like she was on the phone, but

as soon as she saw me, her eyes went wide with excitement and she motioned me in.

“Uh huh. Okay. Yes, I’ll come check it out, but we require all our partners to be able to guarantee us complete darkness from beginning to end. There has to be no chance of the clients seeing each other either coming or going, during the date or after.”

I shared an exasperated grin with her as I sat down across from her desk, relieved as hell that I didn’t have to deal with all the businesses who suddenly wanted to partner with us. After Hope and Porter’s documentary had aired, *Sight Unseen* had been getting more hits and clients than ever.

When she put word out that we were looking for establishments to outsource the dates to when our previous network had proven to be insufficient to keep up with the influx, she’d been inundated by requests.

I got it. Everyone wanted to catch some of the shine the company was still emitting, but they needed to be realistic, and often, they just weren’t. We’d been contacted by a waterpark once, for heaven’s sake. How our clients were supposed to be safe in a pitch-black waterpark, only the guy who called us knew.

Hope nodded a few more times, made a couple of notes, and then hung up. As she did, her gaze snapped to mine and she grinned. “Well? How was it?”

I shrugged, wanting to play it cool rather than gushing like a damn schoolboy. “It was fine. It went really well.”

“It did? That’s great.” She shot forward in her chair and clapped, eyes still shining with excitement, but unless I was very much mistaken, there was a healthy dose of apprehension there as well. “How was she? Did she seem familiar to you?”

“Familiar?” I frowned. “Familiar how?”

“Like, you know, in that way when you start talking to someone and it feels like you’ve known them forever.”

I flicked my gaze from one of her green eyes to the other. “Uh, sure? The conversation happened easily enough, if that’s

what you mean. It didn't feel forced."

"That's good." She nodded slowly, but once again, she was acting just a little bit weird. "Do you think she's a good match?"

I shrugged, still frowning at her. I studied her wide eyes and slightly furrowed brow. "What else have you and Porter got riding on this?"

"What?" She blinked hard. "Nothing. The cruise, but you know about that and it's not even about that anyway. It's about you being happy."

"I am happy, but I want to know what else there is to this for you." I propped my elbows on my knees and leaned forward to arch a brow at her. "You've been acting weird about it for the last couple of days."

"I'm not weird. I'm just excited." She gave me a soft smile. "Forget about me. The girl we should be talking about is Amanda. Did you ask her if she'd go on a second date with you?"

I studied her for another minute before I let it go. I honestly didn't know what was going on with her, but it wasn't impossible that it'd been nerves about finding me a good date before and that it was excitement now. Hope could be a bit of an oddball at times. A very lovable oddball, but Porter was the only person who really understood how her brain worked.

"I did ask and she said yes." I sat back in the chair, jerking my head at her computer. "Set it up, maestro. As soon as possible."

"As soon as possible, huh?" She chuckled as she turned to her computer. "Let's see what I can do. Is tomorrow night too soon?"

"It's too late," I said honestly, flashing her a sheepish grin when she lifted an eyebrow at me. "What can I say? I really like this one. She was a breath of fresh air after the first three."

Something strange passed across Hope's features, but it was gone before I could identify it and then her brow puckered

in concentration as she logged into the system. “Okay. Let’s see here. Amanda and Tyler. Date two. Any preferences for a location?”

“Nah. Do your thing. I trust your judgment and I don’t want to interfere anyway. As it is, I’m probably going to have some explaining to do when she finds out I work here. I don’t want her thinking I manipulated the process.”

Hope’s fingers sped across the keys. “Well, to be fair, we are making the dates happen a lot faster for you.”

“Yeah, but it’s not because of me. It’s just because it’s easier to have one of the parties sitting in your office rather than to have to go back and forth with emails and notifications.”

She chuckled. “It does have a little bit to do with you, but I get it. Back when Porter was still Parker, I used to watch my phone like a hawk but I couldn’t rush anything because of the documentary.”

I rocked my head from side to side as I considered. “In my defense, I did try to set it all up as fast as I could. If I remember correctly, you also needed some time to... debrief with Porter in between your dates with Parker.”

Her cheeks turned a rosy pink and she deliberately avoided my gaze. “Do you know how it sucks that *everyone* knows about that?”

I shrugged. “If it helps, you’re the only one who cares. No one else did. Especially not Porter.”

“Foster!” She shot me an exasperated look and pretended that she was about to pick up her stapler to chuck it at my head.

I knew she wouldn’t follow through, but I dodged anyway, chuckling as I lifted my palms in surrender. “What? All I’m saying is that it was the best damn night of his life at that stage. If he hadn’t already been completely head over heels for you, he sure would’ve been after that.”

“Let’s just focus on the girl you’re head over heels for, shall we?” She groaned and the keyboard clacked a few more

times before a notification about the date came up on my phone.

As it did, her mention of the girl I was head over heels for brought an image of Shelby to mind, but I shook it off. Shelby was my past, but this Amanda girl was my present and she might very well be my future. That was what I had to focus on—the future.

Not some unreciprocated crush I had on a junior twelve darn years ago.





SHELBY

**A**shley shoved a wine red dress at me, a pinched look on her face when I shook my head. “Why not? It’s perfect. Just wear it.”

“What’s the point?” I asked, looking at the scrap of material up and down. “He’s not going to see me anyway and that thing is tiny. It’s not my style at all.”

“The point is that when you look good, you feel good. It’s a real thing. A scientific freaking fact. Wear it, but you’re not doing it for him. You’re doing it for yourself.”

I eyed the dress some more. “You’re just going to blow right past the fact that it’s not my style, huh?”

She shrugged, wagging her brows at me, and she shoved the dress at my chest again. “Admit it. You love this dress and you want to wear it. You’re just usually too self-conscious to wear anything that hits above your knee, but that’s the beauty of it. He won’t even know. You just get to look and feel sexy without having to worry about anything at all.”

I sighed, but she had a point. It was a beautiful dress, way more risqué than my regular outfits, but definitely sexy. Tyler also really wouldn’t be seeing it, so she was right about that too. With a heavy sigh, I took the dress from her.

“Fine, but if my boobs fall out and he somehow senses it, I’m going to die of humiliation and then come back to haunt you.”

She laughed. “I’m willing to take the risk. Go on and get dressed. You don’t want to be late.”

I clutched the dress and nodded, rushing into my adjoining bathroom to change before coming back out and grabbing my purse. Ashley was sitting at the edge of my bed and she beamed at me when I turned to face her.

“You look stunning.” She got up, put her hands on my shoulders, and smiled. “Knock ‘em dead, honey. Be safe and have fun, okay?”

I dragged in a deep breath and nodded. “I won’t knock him dead, but I will have fun and you assured me this whole process was safe.”

She giggled and rolled her eyes. “Smarty pants. Just have fun. I can’t wait to hear more about Tyler when you get home, so call me?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Seeing me off with an indulgent smile, she walked to her car, I went to mine, and we parted ways. Tonight’s date had been set up at a dessert restaurant, so it was a little different than what we’d done before, but I was also stressed about eating desserts in the dark—wearing Ashley’s dress.

On the other hand, I was so excited about seeing—or not seeing—Tyler again so soon, that I’d wear a sundae with pride *and* replace her dress if I had to. As it turned out, however, Sight Unseen had thought about everything.

“Everything will be served in bite-sized chunks,” the waiter explained as he walked me to the private room. “It’s mostly cakes and pastries, so you won’t have to worry about forks, spoons, or anything too sloppy.”

I nodded, my heartrate speeding up more with every step I took that carried me closer to Tyler. These last couple of days since our first date, he’d been on my mind constantly. Even more so than Foster had.

I’d chalked up the resurgence of my crush to the unexpected surprise of seeing him again after so long, but I

refused to let it get in the way of having a good time with a guy who certainly seemed to be interested in me as well.

When the waiter showed me inside, Tyler spoke and I heard the smile in his voice. “Hey, Amanda. Is it weird that I’ve been looking forward to not seeing you again so much that I got here a few minutes early?”

A girly giggle tore out of me and the waiter led me to a seat, but it didn’t seem to be at a table. Instead, it felt like a comfortable, padded armchair, and once the waiter was gone, Tyler filled me in. “All cards on the table, I looked this place up to get a lay of the land after I got the notification with the location of the date. All the private rooms are set up like lounges. There’s a coffee table in front of us with the first platters already laid out and there should also be a glass of wine to your left.”

“How do you know that part? Was it on the internet?”

He chuckled. “No, I asked the waiter to let me be the one to tell you. I wanted to sound knowledgeable and impressive.”

A strange, fluttery warmth invaded my chest. “You wanted to impress me?”

“Yes, I did.” He paused for a beat. “How’s your anxiety?”

“Better,” I said sincerely. “I wasn’t actually nervous tonight at all. I mean, obviously I was nervous about going on another date with you, but it wasn’t that same panicky feeling from before.”

“You were nervous about going on another date with me? Why?”

My eyebrows rose even though he couldn’t see it. “Why? Uh, maybe because it’s only our second date and you... excite me.”

“I like the sound of that,” he said. I heard the amusement in his voice, but unless I was imagining things, there was also an edge of heat. Lust.

Another giggle tore out of me as I shook my head at myself. I had to be imagining things. There was no way he

was lusting after me after only one date and when he didn't even know what I looked like.

“Should we try the desserts? I looked the place up too, but I didn't think to check what it looked like. I just took a peek at their menu and the reviews. People rave about the cakes.”

“Let's find out if they're worth the fuss.”

I leaned forward, and as I reached out blindly, hoping to find one of the promised platters in the dark, my fingers suddenly met his, grazing over long, warm, slender-feeling fingers. My face exploded with heat and sparks flew through me.

“Uh, sorry. I'm sorry. I...”

He chuckled, moving his fingers forward to twine around mine for a moment. “What are you apologizing for? I know it was an accident, but I think it's a happy one. You have very soft hands.”

“You have very strong hands,” I blurted out as my heart raced. “They're dry too. Mine are clammy, aren't they?”

“No, they're not.” He scoffed and chuckled. “Besides, I'd have taken it as a compliment if they were.”

With surprisingly confident movements, he guided my hand slightly to the right and then down, and I touched something squishy with the side of my hand. “How did you know where the cakes were?”

“I should probably tell you that it's because I know everything, but it's not that. I asked the waiter and then had a feel around just before you got here.”

I laughed. “Thanks for the honesty.”

Reluctantly letting go of his hand, I closed my fingers around a little square of cake and brought it to my mouth, almost moaning out loud as the soft, buttery goodness melted in my mouth. “Oh, my god. That's amazing.”

“What did you get?” he asked a second later. “I got something lemony and it was pretty good too.”

“I got vanilla, but now I’m curious about the lemony one.” As luck would have it, that was what I got next. He was right. It really was good.

“My favorite so far is the dark chocolate,” he said after a few moments. “That’s, like, wow. I’m definitely coming back here for that one. Want to come with me?”

I chuckled around a square of the same dark chocolate, having to admit that it really was like a mouth-gasm. “For sure, but you’re assuming we’re going to make it to the fifth date and then come back here after, right? Or did you mean you were going to request that our next date be here as well?”

“Both,” he said after a beat. “Wow, that’s really fucking good. Okay, but enough about the cakes. How was your day?”

“Fine,” I said. “It kind of went slow because I was looking forward to this so much, but nothing really exciting happened. You?”

“Same,” he said, sounding a little surprised for some reason. “We covered the basics last time, so let’s dig a little bit deeper tonight.”

“I’m up for it if you are. What do you want to know?”

He hummed softly before he spoke again. “Have you ever baked a cake?”

I laughed. “That’s digging deeper?”

“Sure it is. We’re at the dessert restaurant, and so far, we have the same favorites. I’m usually not a fan of desserts, but if my mom makes them, I’m there for it.”

“Your mom bakes?” I smiled in the dark, my chest feeling all aflutter again. “So does mine, and I have baked a cake. With her, actually. You?”

“Same, but after we tried it once, she told me to leave the baking to her and to help her with the cooking instead if I wanted to be in the kitchen.”

I groaned. “What happened?”

“I, uh, I may have misread the recipe. In my defense, I was twelve at the time, but I mixed up the measurements for salt and sugar and I may also have added eight cups of oil because I lost count and started over again.”

“Eight cups of oil?” I blinked hard before I laughed again. “That must’ve been a terrible cake.”

“It was, but my mom said we couldn’t call it a cake.” He chuckled. “I’m assuming your attempt with your mom went better?”

“Well, yeah, but she was really patient with me. She still is. Every time I go over there, we cook dinner together and I’m still learning.”

“I like that. I’m still learning too, but I think my mom is close to the point of giving up. The only reason she’s still trying is because she says I can’t live on takeout.”

“She’s probably right. Don’t get me wrong. I love takeout as much as the next person, but there’s nothing like a homecooked meal. It’s definitely better for your heart, too.”

“Depends on what you order,” he reasoned. “I try to stick to the healthier options, but I’m a real sucker for a pizza.”

“Me too.” I groaned. “Before I signed up for this, I practically inhaled a large pizza all on my own.”

“I like that,” he said frankly. “At least you actually eat. It sucks to be out with someone and feel like you’re pigging out because you’re just eating the plate of food you’re paying for.”

I chuckled. “You’ll never have that problem with me. If I order food, I eat it. I don’t play with it and I won’t waste it. My mom always told me wasting food should be a crime.”

“I feel the same way,” he said. “Your mom sounds a lot like mine, actually. She made my brother and I sit at the dinner table until we’d eaten every last scrap. She always said that she hadn’t dished up or made too much and that she knew we had space. We just needed to eat our food and then not ask for a snack later on.”

I smiled. “Our moms really are similar, then. That must be why we get along so well.”

“Must be,” he agreed easily, and my heart started racing all over again. My palms were definitely clammy now.

While I’d heard a lot about *having chemistry* with another person, I’d never actually experienced it for myself until now. Not even really with Foster, but perhaps that was just because I’d never gotten close enough to him.

With Tyler, however, it was like my body and mind both longed for more of him. Part of me just wanted to get up, go over there, and go sit in his lap. Not to break the rules or anything, but just to be closer to him.

“Hey, Amanda,” he said suddenly.

“Hmm?”

“Do you want to make out?”

I laughed, blushing all the way to my hairline. “How did you know that was what I was thinking about?”

“Maybe because I was thinking about the same thing. I know it’s against the rules, but what the hell, right?”

“Right.” My heart stammered in my chest, going absolutely wild when it restarted again. “This is so unlike me, but yes. Yes, I do want to make out.”

He groaned. “Hold on. I’m coming to get you.”

I heard the faint rustling of clothes and it took him a beat to find my chair, but then large hands landed gently on my shoulders and ran down the lengths of my bare arms before they wrapped around mine.

“Come here,” he murmured huskily and I found myself standing up without even having decided to do it.

I couldn’t see him, obviously, but that somehow only made it hotter. My other senses were in overdrive and I felt him there, right in front of me, probably at least half a head taller than I was and smelling like a sexy male cologne commercial. The scent of him was all leather and smoke, and I practically



melted into him when he wrapped an arm around my waist, pressing me into his body.

His surprisingly hard body, at that.

The arms around me were strong and toned, and even through his shirt, I could feel the ridges of muscles in his abdomen pressing up against the softness of my own. For a moment, I worried that he'd be turned off now that he could feel that I had a few extra pounds on me, but instead, I got the opposite reaction.

A low growl came out of him and he cupped my face, his thumbs trailing across my lips before his mouth descended on mine, hard, hot, and hungry. I moaned into the kiss, wondering if it was really happening or if I was dreaming, but it was so hot, I just didn't care.

The chemistry was definitely there and I found myself wanting more, my fingers tightening on his shoulders. I pressed my chest into his. We got a bit carried away, and I wasn't sure what had happened, but the next thing I knew, we started tumbling.

"Fuck," he muttered as he grabbed hold of me, laughing softly as he righted us. "I was trying to move us to the sofa, but I forgot about the table."

He said the words against my lips, and I joined in with his laughter. The buzzer went off and a red light came on. "Shit. Only five minutes left. Will you go out with me again, Amanda?"

"Yes," I breathed into his mouth, inhaling deeply before releasing him. "I'm already looking forward to it."

"So am I, but it'll be a few days. I've got something to take care of, but as soon as it's done, I'm all yours."

I nodded, but I couldn't help but wonder if the something he had to take care of was someone else. A man who felt, smelled, and sounded as good as he did couldn't possibly be completely single, but he'd assured me that he was.

Either way, our time was up and I just had to trust that we'd be going on another date just as soon as he took care of

whatever it was he needed to take care of. Even so, after we said our goodbyes and the waiter came to get me, I hoped like hell that this didn't feel too good to be true simply because it really was.



## FOSTER

**H**ope and Porter were both in my office when I arrived the morning after the second date. I rolled my eyes at both of them when I pushed the door open to find them sitting across from my desk, coffees in hand with Hope on my brother's lap.

“Seriously, you couldn't just call?” I asked playfully, in too good a mood to be brought down by their nosiness.

Porter gave me a wide-eyed, expectant look. “No, we couldn't. We had to see your face while you talked about the date. Hope thinks she's going to win the bet and I needed to see it for myself to believe it.”

“Right now, Hope is definitely the frontrunner.” I strode in and emptied my pockets before sitting down. Gratefully accepting the coffee she handed me, I grinned and leaned back in my chair. “The date went well. Really well.”

She squealed and turned to stick her tongue out at my brother. In return, he groaned and then grabbed her so fast that even I didn't see it coming. He sucked her tongue into his mouth, kissing her hard and fast before breaking it off just as abruptly.

“Smug looks so sexy on you,” he murmured as his gaze darkened on hers.

I cleared my throat. “If that's where this is going, please leave my office. Hope has her own, you know? Go have your fun there. I definitely don't want to see it happening. I know way too much about you guys as it is.”

Hope blushed and wrinkled her nose at Porter before she got up and sat down on her own chair. “We want to hear more about the date.”

I stared back at her for a beat, then smirked. “Did you guys ever break the rules?”

“What? No,” she said emphatically. “Grace did, though. In a big way. Milena found out and it was awful. Why? Did you?”

I shrugged, the smirk still on my lips. Porter broke out into a wide grin. “I knew you weren’t going to stick to the damn rules. Even *after* you lectured me about them so much. How was it?”

“Good. Really good.” I shook my head. “The best, actually. Shit, we only kissed, but if we’d started earlier...”

Hope sighed. “We don’t need you to finish that sentence. The pertinent point here is that I’m absolutely certain I’m going to win the bet. Pack your bags, O’Brien. We’re going on a cruise.”

Porter rolled his eyes at her, but I saw the grin he was trying to hide. “Not so fast, babe. What’s their compatibility score? The way I see it, it ain’t over till it’s over and I might still get another chance.”

“I don’t think you’re going to,” I said. “What is our score, though? I’m also curious.”

Hope looked from Porter to me and then back again. “Fine, I’ll tell you, but only if both of you promise not to ever tell another living soul.”

“I promise,” I said, too eager to find out to give a damn.

Porter, however, just shrugged. “That’s not really necessary. Clients are given that information if they ask for it.”

“Not at this point, but fine. It’s ninety-seven percent, but that’s not really important. What’s important is that we now know that I can spot a winner when I see one.”

I groaned and glanced at my brother. “She’s never going to let you live this down. You know that, right?”

“I do.” He huffed out a breath but then winked at her. “I already landed you, so that makes me the biggest winner of them all. Besides, am I supposed to be sad about going on a cruise with you?”

“No, but I will be rubbing this in your face for the rest of our lives. Just so you know.”

He laughed. “Bring it on, baby. At least that means I get to spend the rest of my life with you.”

She flashed him her left hand. “That ring over there says you were already going to spend the rest of your life with me.”

As I watched them, I chuckled and shook my head, but I really was happy that they’d finally gotten together. Sure, they were a little silly sometimes but that was part of their charm. After being best friends for so long, even I had been a little bit worried that they wouldn’t be able to hang onto that dynamic once they started dating, but they had.

In fact, they were even better together than any of us would’ve been able to dream they would be. Their friendship made them an incredible couple who always looked like they were having the time of their lives together.

Sure, there had been a few hiccups back in the beginning. Hope had freaked out about seeing two guys, even though she was really only seeing one. None of us had told her the truth at first, and then she’d been exceptionally pissed off when she’d found out.

Ultimately, however, I’d done a good deed when I’d agreed to match Porter with her. Milena was still a little bit angry about it, but she’d mostly forgiven me. She’d even promoted me since then, but I’d learned my lesson.

I wouldn’t be doing anything like that ever again. Milena knew I’d signed up for the program and she was all for it, but she’d made me swear that I wouldn’t try to look up any of my dates on the system.

I had to admit that I’d been tempted to see if I could find out who Amanda really was in the last few days. Her real identity as well as all of her answers to the questionnaire were

right there at my fingertips every time I switched on my computer, but I'd already decided I wouldn't do it.

I loved my job too much to risk it, and besides, the program was working exactly the way it was supposed to. If I looked her up, I'd be ruining everything and I desperately didn't want to do that. Grace, Hope's identical twin sister, had almost lost the man she was married to now after Hope had told her that he also happened to be the guy who was her arch enemy at the time, Danny Sharp.

After seeing all of them go through everything they had, I had no desire to go through something similar. So outside of hopefully making out with her again, I was planning on playing by the rules.

"How's everything going with the Chesterfield estate?" Porter asked when he finally stopped making eyes at his fiancée. "You got the money yet?"

My smile faded and my mood plummeted a little. "No, not yet. I'm signing the final paperwork tomorrow and I should have the money after that, but I'm still not sure I really believe it. A few hundred million just landing in my bank account? It sounds like bullshit to me."

"It's not bullshit," Hope said gently. "It's the least he can do for you, to be honest."

I glanced at Porter, still wondering if he was ever going to get angry or jealous about the fact that I was inheriting so much and he wasn't getting a dime, but there was no indication of either as he looked back at me. "Let me know when you've got the money. I'll hook you up with the investment company I'm using. They're good. They'll make sure you're set for life and then some."

"Thanks," I said. "You're sure you're okay with this, though? I could split it with you."

He arched both eyebrows at me and shook his head. "No, you're not doing that. He left it to you, and besides, I've already told you that I've got more money than I know what to do with. Hope and I are set, and so are our children and theirs.

If my investments keep going the way they are right now, none of our descendants will ever have to work a day in their lives if they don't want to."

Hope nodded as she glanced at me. "It's true. Porter's doing really well and we've spoken about it a bit. He's really not angry."

"I'm happy for you, man," he reiterated before he gave me a slight smirk. "Besides, this way, I can stop feeling guilty about my money and just enjoy it."

I snorted. "You never had to feel guilty about it to begin with."

"I know, but it still took its toll on me."

As I looked at him, I realized that he was being completely honest. He had been feeling guilty about having made as much as he had, and I'd never even realized the extent of it. Shaking my head at him, I looked back at Hope.

"You know how you told me that you don't care how much I inherit, I'm not allowed to quit?"

She nodded. "What about it?"

"Well, you're not allowed to quit either," I said. "Not even if your fiancé is bringing home all the bacon in the world."

"You got it." She laughed. "Do you think you're going to move to a different place once you get the money? There's a place for sale down the road from us."

"Maybe I will move, but I'm definitely not going to start spending the money before I have it. If that place is meant to be mine, it'll still be on the market by the time I've gotten used to having so much money and I'm ready to spend some of it."

She nodded and got up. "Well, we'll leave you to it. I'm glad you found a nice girl, Foster. Really. I hope it works out."

I inclined my head in a brief nod and smiled at her. "Yeah, so do I. I'll let you know when I've gotten everything taken care of with the estate, but as soon as it's done, I want date number three, okay?"



She nodded. "I'll be ready as soon as you are."

As she and Porter left, I finally switched on my computer and got to work, once again tempted to look Amanda up but not doing it. If I was being completely honest with myself, the mystery was making this more exciting and I'd be seeing her soon enough.

I could wait just two more dates to be able to do it.



## SHELBY

**M**y heart was in my throat as I stood behind my desk and watched my office door opening. Foster was coming to sign the final paperwork today and my assistant had already announced his arrival.

When that door was all the way open, I would be seeing my old crush again and I had no idea what to expect. As he walked in, though, I realized that my heartbeat remained completely even. My date with Tyler was still at the forefront of my mind.

Foster was still gorgeous, of course, with thick brown hair, vibrant green eyes, and his tall, fit frame, but I just didn't react to him the way I had before. It hit me then that I was finally over him, and it felt incredible.

A wide smile spread on my lips as I extended my hand toward him. "It's nice to see you again, Foster."

He gave me a slight grin as he shook with me. "Yeah, you too, Shelby. Remember me yet?"

The question was asked lightly. Playfully instead of flirtatiously, and while I hadn't been sure if I would, I found myself blurting out the truth. "I do, actually. In fact, I remembered you before you even walked in for our last meeting."

He chuckled as he released my hand. "I'm glad to hear it. I was a little worried about being that forgettable. We did live together for two years."

I laughed, waving him into a seat as I took my own. “You were never forgettable. It’s just that this is a new job and I wanted to do well. Telling the grandson of the man whose estate was my first account that I used to have a huge crush on him back in college didn’t seem like a great way to be professional.”

Foster blinked hard, his lips parting in surprise before he swallowed and blinked again. “You had a crush on me?”

My nose wrinkled and I nodded, flushing all the way to my hairline, but at least the truth was out there now. “Not just a crush. The biggest crush ever. I’m sorry I pretended not to remember you. I was just trying not to make a fool of myself.”

Those vivid greens swept across my face before he shook his head, a soft smile lifting the corners of his lips. “You know, I wish I’d known how you felt about me.”

I frowned, knowing we should get to business but too curious to leave this alone just yet. “What? Why?”

“Because I felt the same way,” he said. “I had such a thing for you, but I didn’t think you’d say yes if I asked you out, so I didn’t. It’s too bad, really.”

The shock filtering through my system floored me, and for a long minute, all I could do was stare back at him, so surprised that I was utterly speechless. Foster laughed. “What? You don’t believe me?”

I blinked a few times fast. “No, it’s not... I mean, I don’t think you’re lying or anything. It’s just hard to believe that you had a crush on me back then. You were a freaking superstar and I was just the weird nerd in the corner.”

He leaned forward slightly like he was about to share a secret with me, eyes shining with amusement. He shrugged. “We were all the weird nerds in the corner, and if anyone was the superstar, it was you. There was nothing you couldn’t do, Shelby. Everyone knew if they had a problem with any of their coursework, you were the one to go to. It was pretty damn impressive.”

I turned red, but then I took a deep breath and shook my head. “Thanks, but I always felt like you were the impressive one. Either way, it’s ancient history now, right?”

He gave me a long look before he finally nodded. “Yeah, I guess it is. This kind of makes me wish I could go back in time and ask you out, but I’m afraid I can’t do it now. I’m seeing someone pretty great and I don’t want to jeopardize it.”

“No, of course not,” I rushed out. “I’m seeing someone amazing. I didn’t tell you the truth because I was trying to make a move on you. I just felt silly for not telling you that I even remembered you last time and it felt like the right thing to do to be honest with you now.”

“I’m happy for you, Shelby,” he said sincerely. “I hope your amazing someone turns out well.”

“Thanks. I hope the same for you.” I exhaled deeply and smiled. “Right. Let’s get this paperwork signed, shall we? Did you have an independent lawyer look it over between now and our last meeting?”

“I did. He assures me it’s all on the up-and-up. I signed next to all your color-coded tabs, so thanks for those. What’s next?”

“Not much, actually. If you’re satisfied with the paperwork and you’ve already signed it, all you need to do is designate an account for the money to be transferred to and it’ll all be over. We’ll take care of all the legalities from our end and you get to go out and celebrate.”

His eyes grew huge. “It’s that simple?”

I shrugged. “It’s that simple. Your inheritance is straightforward, Foster. There’s nothing to worry about. Mr. Chesterfield had all his i’s dotted and his t’s crossed before he passed, and that helps a lot. You’re a beneficiary and that isn’t any work at all if your loved one had everything in order like your grandfather did.”

Foster seemed stunned, nodding absently before he let out a deep sigh. “Okay, well, let’s get it done, then. How do I designate an account?”

I passed over the forms I'd already printed and watched as he filled them. Then we shook hands again and he was gone. All without any muss, fuss, or regrets. It was incredible to think that after all this time, in just two dates, Tyler had made me forget about my feelings for Foster completely.

When I went home later that afternoon, I felt lighter than air, thinking only of Tyler and the sweet taste of him and not even caring a little bit that Foster had so much money now. Some things were better than money, and the chemistry I felt with Tyler was one of those things.

With him, I felt the kind of hope I'd never felt before. I felt comfortable and heard. Understood and more than a little bit turned on. The guy checked all my boxes in every way, and not even my former crush had changed that.

The knowledge made me grin. I called Ashley once I got home, curling up on the sofa with a cup of tea as it started raining outside.

She picked up on the first ring. "What happened to calling me immediately after your date? You didn't only get home now, did you? It's been days!"

I chuckled. "I didn't only get home now. You know the rules. Even if I wanted to stay with him for days, I wouldn't have been allowed to."

Although spending a few days with Tyler sounded like heaven to me right now. Ashley sighed.

"So how was it? Are you only calling me now because it went so well, or because it went so poorly?"

"Don't worry, it didn't go poorly. It was amazing," I gushed. "I just didn't call you when I got home that night because my head was in the clouds and I got so caught up thinking about him that by the time I realized I was supposed to have called you, it was after midnight."

"Ah, I remember that feeling so well. Head in the clouds. Hand in the panties. The good old days."

I blushed so hard, I was pretty sure my skin got swollen. "Ash!"

“What?” she asked innocently. “I was talking about myself. Not about you. Unless—”

“I’m not talking to you about that.”

She laughed. “So your hand was in your panties then, huh? It’s okay, Shel. You don’t have to be so shy about it. Jeez. Everyone does it, and when you’ve got that kind of chemistry with someone and you can’t touch them, it’s like a survival instinct.”

I groaned, burying my face in my free hand, and it was as hot as the tea in the other. “Not everything is about sex, you know.”

“Not everything,” she agreed easily. “Dating, especially in the early stages, is mostly about sex, though. More especially so because you can’t actually have it. Although Chase and I did kiss a couple of times in the dark. It was hot as hell.”

My heart jumped. “You did?”

“Of course, we did.” She giggled. “By the end of the second date, neither of us was very interested in keeping our hands to ourselves anymore. Why?”

“Because, uh...”

“The dress worked!” she squealed. “You felt so good about yourself and so confident that you kissed him, didn’t you? I knew it would work.”

“Ash,” I groaned, finally lifting my face out of my hand. “I’m feeling guilty enough about it already. The rules are there for a reason and—”

“Oh, who cares about the rules? You finally met a guy who made you break them. That’s amazing news, Shelby. It’s huge news, actually. How was it? Did he leave you all hot and bothered?”

I thought back to the ache that had remained in my body long after I’d gotten home and nodded. “Yeah, he did. Very much hot and very much bothered. Like, abnormally so. It was just a kiss, but damn.”

She chuckled. "It's not abnormal. It's amazing, is what it is. Are you going to see him again?"

"I hope so, but he said he had something to do, so it would take a few days before he'd be able to go on another date."

"Did he tell you what he had to do that was so important he couldn't go on a damn date? I had high hopes for this guy, but now I'm not so sure."

"He didn't say and I didn't ask, but it's weird how much I trust him. For a minute there, I hoped that he wasn't seeing someone else and that what he had to do had something to do with her, but the more I think about it, the more I don't think that's it. I think it's just life stuff, you know?"

"Okay," she said hesitantly. "I won't doubt him if you're not. Do you think you're going to bring him to the wedding?"

"I hope so, but I won't be able to say until closer to the time. Is that okay?"

"Are you kidding me? Of course, it's okay." An excited giggle came out of her. "Only two more blind dates until the big reveal at date number five! I'm going to help you get ready for it."

I smiled. "You're going to have to. If we make it that far."

"Don't be a hater," she said excitedly. "If it's still going so well two dates in, you're going to make it that far. I've got to go, but I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay," I agreed, hanging up. A thrill ran through me at the prospect of seeing him on our fifth date.

I hadn't given much thought to what he looked like. Our chemistry was intense enough that I didn't think it would matter. After we'd kissed, he knew I was no stick figure, so I wasn't too worried about that either.

After I hung up my phone, I checked the app but there wasn't a notification waiting and I sighed. All I wanted was to get to our next date, but I'd told him I'd wait and now there was nothing else to do. Getting up, I washed the last of my tea



down the drain and headed to my bedroom, fully intent on thinking some more about him once I climbed into my bed.



FOSTER

Porter, Kane, and I each held our own bottle of champagne. As the wind howled around us where we stood on my balcony, we aimed the corks away from each other's faces before I counted us down to popping them.

"Three, two, one..."

"Happy Inheritance Day," Porter cheered as he stuck his thumbs under the cork and popped it, immediately bringing the bottle to his lips before it could spray out more than just a few drops.

Kane was right there with him, cheering and then sucking down a healthy amount of the champagne before he grinned at me. "You're rich, bro! What are you going to buy first?"

I chuckled around the sip I'd just taken, shaking my head at him. I swallowed and turned to look at the sun setting over the city. It was cloudy but not so much that I couldn't see the telltale glow of that orange ball as it sank lower.

Touching rooftops and treetops, it just kept going down regardless of what we were doing or if we were ready for the day to end. I sighed. I wasn't ready for this day to end just yet.

Just a few hours ago, I'd gotten the notification that my bank account had grown significantly and I'd invited the guys over to celebrate, but it still felt surreal. It had me questioning things I'd never questioned before.

*Like how much does a skyscraper really cost and is it a good investment?*

Mild nausea simmered in my stomach, the physical shock still making it hard to really believe it was happening. “Foster?”

At the sound of my brother’s voice, I turned back to him. “Hmm?”

Porter’s eyebrows were slightly drawn together as his eyes searched mine. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Fine.” I released a deep breath and dragged my free hand through my hair while lifting the champagne to my mouth with the other. I took a long sip, focusing on the burn of the bubbles in my throat to ground me to reality. “Did you feel sick? After you sold the patent, I mean.”

His head canted as understanding dawned in his eyes, and he nodded. “Yeah, I did. I also felt, like, untethered. Like my head had been detached from my body and was floating above me. It’ll pass, though. As the shock wears off, it’ll all go back to normal.”

Kane snorted. “Some of us wouldn’t mind feeling that way if it means we just got that amount of money deposited into our accounts. Just saying. Enjoy even the shock, Foster. You’re fucking lucky to be feeling it.”

A bark of laughter tore out of me. “That’s one way of looking at it.”

He smirked. “No, it’s the right way of looking at it. You’ll get used to being stupid rich soon enough, and then the shock will wear off and the fun will start.”

I glanced at the orange glow behind the clouds again. “That’s the problem. I’m not sure I want the fun to start. I don’t want to get to a point where I’m just spending money willy-nilly, but in my head, I keep wondering what to do with it. What’s a good investment? I just feel like I have no fucking idea what to do now.”

Porter chuckled and swallowed another sip of his champagne before he shivered and jerked his head at the sliding door. “Let’s talk about this inside. The champagne is

open. We don't need to worry about it spraying all over your furniture anymore and I'm freezing my balls off."

Kane peeled off to follow Porter when he started walking and I hung back for a minute, looking out at the city and wondering if it'd changed overnight or if it was just me. Shaking my head at myself as I dragged in a deep breath, I took another gulp out of the bottle before I went inside with them.

Porter slid the door closed behind me, then reached out to pat me on the back as I passed him. "All of this is normal. Everyone wants millions unexpectedly deposited into their account, but it's not like anyone actually expects it to happen. When it does, it's disconcerting and that's okay."

I swallowed hard, forcing myself out of my weird state of mind and grinning at him instead. "Okay, Dr. Porter. When did you become a shrink?"

The hand that had been patting my back curled into a fist and he punched my shoulder. "Don't be an asshole. Jeez. You rich guys are such pricks."

Kane laughed and dropped down on my sofa, kicking his feet up on the coffee table and reclining as he nursed his champagne. "You rich guys really are pricks. If it'll help, I'm more than willing to take all that money off your hands and you can both just go back to being mere mortals."

Porter smirked at him as he took a seat on an armchair next to the sofa. "Stop pretending like you're hurting. We know you're not. You just got that fancy new promotion. It's not like you don't have more than enough to get by."

"Getting by isn't alcohol baron money," he joked, grinning. I knocked his feet off the coffee table to move past him. "What are you going to buy first, then? You still haven't told me."

"That's because I don't know," I said honestly as I dropped down on the sofa and kicked my own feet up. When he gave me an incredulous look, I rolled my eyes. "I really don't know."

Like I said, I don't just want to spend it for the sake of spending it. If I start doing that, I won't stop."

"There's got to be something you want, though?" he argued. "Something you can buy to mark the occasion. A beach house or an airline, perhaps?"

I chuckled. "Nah. I don't want a beach house or an airline, but I was kind of thinking I might get Amanda a gift."

He frowned. "Who?"

Porter arched a brow at him. "Amanda. The Sight Unseen girl."

Kane's eyes went wide. "Oh, right. Her. Haven't you only been on two dates with this girl?"

"Yep, but I like her. There's just something about her, you know."

He shook his head. "No, I don't know. Have you told her that you're a multi-millionaire now?"

"Not a chance." I stared at him with my chin almost all the way to my chest and my brows high. "It's not exactly something that comes up in regular conversation, and besides, we're still just getting to know each other."

"Sure, but you want to buy her something? You've gotten this sudden, unexpected windfall, and buying her a gift is all you want to do with the money?"

I shrugged. "It's not all I want to do, but it is the first thing that comes to mind. The money isn't going anywhere. I've got time to think about what I want to get for myself, but I'd like to get her something to show her how much I've been enjoying our time together."

Porter nodded slowly, understanding clear in his eyes. "It's intense, that whole being alone together in the dark thing. It makes things seem like a lot more than they would've after only two dates on the outside."

"How would you know?" Kane grinned at him. "You knew who you were in there with all along. It's not really the same thing."

Porter flipped him off. “It’s the same damn experience. All I’m saying is that you won’t know if you haven’t been through it, so go through it, and then we’ll talk again.”

“Can we get back to the subject at hand?” I asked before glancing at Porter. “Kane isn’t going to be goaded into signing up. I’ve already tried.”

My brother sighed. “Your loss, bro. But okay, what’s the subject at hand?”

“What to get for Amanda.”

Kane snapped his fingers. “Jewelry. It’s always going to be jewelry, but make it special. Like something that has symbolic meaning.”

Porter nodded approvingly, then adjusted his grip on the bottle again and took another sip. “Jewelry with symbolic meaning. That’s deep coming from the single guy in the room. You sure you don’t want to sign up?”

“Dead sure. Leave the recruiting to Hope, would you?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I guess I can. So jewelry then, huh?”

I nodded. “Jewelry. I’m sure I’ll find something that has some kind of connection to our conversations.”

“You will,” he said confidently before he suddenly frowned. “Hey, so Hope was telling me you had a real thing for the girl who settled Grandpa’s estate?”

“Shelby,” I said her name softly. “I did back in college, yeah, but you knew about this. We just haven’t talked about it for a while.”

“I thought the name rang a bell,” he mused before he refocused on me. “Anything happening on that front?”

I shook my head. “No, she’s great, but now that I’ve met Amanda, I’m not hung up on her. She’s seeing someone anyway, so we wished each other well and went our separate ways.”

“How boring,” Kane complained, letting out a deep sigh. “No estate settlement sex, then?”

My features contorted. “I don’t think estate settlement sex is a thing.”

“It should be,” he said confidently. “Everything sex should be a thing. Come on, we’re alive. We should celebrate that every day.”

“And we do,” I said. “We just don’t always do it by having sex.”

“That’s the real tragedy in the world,” he replied sadly. His head shook as he brought his bottle back to his lips.

Porter frowned at him, but then let it go, turning back to me instead. “It’s all settled now? It’s kind of hard to believe that he’s gone and that Mom will never get the chance to make up with him. I know she’s always wanted to.”

“She did?” Kane’s eyebrows pinched together. “Why? He wrote her out of his will because of who she married. That’s not exactly the actions of a loving father.”

I nodded. “We know, but she’s still sad about them cutting her off. Good or not, he was still her dad.”

I glanced back at my brother. “Do you think we should reach out to Grandma now that he’s gone?”

“She could’ve called years ago,” he said after thinking it over for a beat. “There’s nothing stopping her from calling now, either. I think it’s probably best to just leave the whole mess alone. The last thing we want is to dig up Mom’s old grudges for no reason.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “You’re probably right. I’m letting it go. We’ll see how it plays out, but I won’t reach out to her randomly.”

Porter grimaced at me. “Sorry, bro. I realize you must feel weird about it, but you didn’t ask him to leave you this money, and Shelby would’ve cleared it with the illustrious Mrs. Chesterfield. I really think it’s better to just let sleeping dogs lie.”

“Yeah. No. I’m with you.”



He was right, though. I did feel weird about it, especially because he and our mother hadn't been left anything. Between Porter and me, we'd been taking care of our parents for a while though and we'd keep doing that. Mom was definitely going to benefit from my inheritance in a big way, but still, it didn't feel quite right that she hadn't been left anything directly.

On the other hand, it was better I felt weird about it than her feeling like she had to. If she wanted to reach out to her mother, then I supposed she would've done it. The best move was to just take things as they came and to support our mother any way we could, whenever we could.

With that thought in mind, I dropped the subject. Kane, Porter, and I shot the breeze for a while before they finished their drinks and left. For the next eighteen or so hours, I wondered if jewelry was the right thing to get for Amanda or if I should just leave that too, but I really didn't want to.

So during my lunch break, I headed down to a jewelry store around the corner from the Sight Unseen offices and checked out my options. I wanted to get her something that signified our connection, but I didn't see it right away.

Eventually, as my gaze skipped over the contents of all the glass boxes, I spotted a silver charm bracelet with cooking themes and I grinned. "I'd like that, please."

The shop assistant nodded and went about packaging it up for me and I took a deep breath. With the change and upheaval in my life right now, it was nice to have her to think about. Honestly, it was the only thing keeping me sane.

Well that, and the prospect of seeing her again as soon as I got my head back in the game.



SHELBY

Mom and I tried to have lunch together at least once a month. We took turns picking a local café and we met there, just to catch up and stay in touch.

As I walked in to meet her at a trendy new place not far from my work, I smiled, nervous but excited to tell her about Tyler. After our last date, I'd decided it was time to let her know what was going on, but I was still scared about how she was going to react.

I wouldn't spring it on her right out of the gate, but I did want her to know about him. She was my best friend and my most trusted advisor. I knew she wasn't a fan of dating this way, but ultimately, I was happy and he was starting to mean something to me, which meant that I didn't want to keep it from her.

Mom looked up and grinned, waving me over when she saw me making my way across the dining room. She stood up when I approached the table, then opened her arms and pulled me into a big hug.

"Hi, baby," she said happily, rubbing my back before she released me and smiled, the lines around her blue eyes crinkling from the force of it. "It's so good to see you. You've been quiet these last couple of weeks. What's going on?"

I shrugged, chuckling. I sat down when she did the same. "I've just been busy. Work is picking up and Mr. Harrison is passing me more and more estates. It's been fun and really

rewarding, but it's taking a lot of time to get into the swing of things."

She smiled indulgently. "That's to be expected, Shel. It always takes a beat to get used to a new job. Don't be too hard on yourself."

"Thanks, but I'll still try to be better about calling," I promised as I slung my purse over the back of my chair. "What's new with you and Dad?"

"We're going on a cruise next month," she said excitedly, her eyes twinkling as she inhaled. "It's been on our bucket list for years and we've just never gotten around to doing it, so when I saw a discounted price advertised the other day, we snapped it up."

I gawked at her. "Are you serious? That's amazing. I'm so happy you guys are finally doing it."

"So am I," she agreed, her head tilting slightly to one side as she held my gaze. "Our nest is empty now and we need to find a way to make peace with that. You're getting busier and busier with your own life and that's fine, but it's time Dad and I faced the truth. You're a real grownup now."

I laughed. "I have been for a while, Mom. I didn't go off to college last week."

"I know, but this new job is going to take you places. We can see how much you love it and we want you to do well without worrying about us."

"Well, a cruise is a good way to get me not to worry about you," I teased. "In fact, I might just come with you so I don't have to miss out."

She giggled and shook her head at me. "You don't want to do that. Besides, it's only for a few days and we'll send you plenty of pictures."

I sighed. "Fine. Fine. I get it."

Lifting a hand, she waved me off and laughed some more. "Trust me, honey. I wish we could still drag you everywhere we go, but you don't want to come on a cruise with us when

you could be here, working hard right in the action. You never know, you could meet the man of your dreams any day.”

*And there it is. The opening.*

I swallowed hard, grateful for the brief interruption when a waitress came by to drop off our menus and take our drink orders. Once she was gone, Mom was still staring at me with that twinkle in her eyes and I knew I couldn't chicken out.

Tyler was real and there was a genuine attraction between us. A connection I couldn't describe but that I felt when I was alone in the dark with him. Maybe it was just because I didn't have to worry about being awkward when he couldn't even see me and that allowed me to just be myself, but I had a feeling it had little to do with me and more to do with *us*.

Tyler and I gelled. We just got along, understood each other on some level I hadn't realized it was possible for two people to connect on. It was almost starting to feel like I knew what he was going to say before he said it.

Crazy, considering that we'd only had two dates, but some people felt it so deeply that they got engaged at the reveal date. In the past, I hadn't understood at all how people with only four dates under their belts were so sure about each other that they'd agree to get married, but I was starting to understand it much better now.

Not that I was planning on getting engaged to Tyler anytime soon, but the point was that what we had was real. Unconventional but genuine. Under the circumstances, continuing to keep it from my mother felt like I was being dishonest. Since I didn't lie to her, ever, it was time to come clean.

“Actually, Mom, I've already met someone,” I said, tying in with her last comment instead of starting the conversation by telling her how we'd met.

Surprise widened her eyes and lifted her brow, but then she grinned and leaned forward. “You're seeing someone? Wow, baby. I'm so happy for you. Give me the details. How long has this been going on? When did you meet him? Who is he?”

Mentally steadying myself, I decided to focus on the important stuff first. “It’s really new. We’ve only been on a couple of dates, but I like him a lot. He’s a great guy.”

“He would have to be if you’re interested in him,” she said. “Tell me more. Give me a name, for heaven’s sake. What is he like? What does he do for a living? He’s not some freeloader looking for a successful girlfriend, is he?”

“No.” I laughed. “I’m not successful enough to be used for my money, Mom. Besides, he’s not a freeloader. He’s got a job, and more importantly, he gets me. He makes me laugh. He makes my heart race. Isn’t that what really matters?”

She looked back at me from across her table, her brow puckering slightly. She rolled her lips into her mouth. “Are you deliberately being cagey on giving me details about this, or is there a reason for it? Oh, my god. He’s not in prison, is he?”

“What?” I laughed. “No, of course not. I’m not being cagey. I just don’t have all the details.”

“Excuse me?” She frowned. “You’ve been on a couple of dates with this guy and you’re telling me that he’s great. That you really like him. How is it that you can really like him and not be able to give me the basic details like his name and his job?”

“Well, I know him as Tyler who works in finance, but that’s not his real name or his real job,” I admitted, speaking fast so I could get it all out. “I met him through Sight Unseen, that blind-dating agency? They don’t allow clients to give each other information that could lead to you finding out who the other person is before the reveal. I’m learning all about who he is and what makes him tick, but I can’t tell you his real name, his job, or what he looks like.”

For a long moment, Mom just sat there, staring back at me with her mouth open and anxiety building behind her eyes. “You signed up for that? That’s absurd, honey. You can’t possibly trust anything this man says. You’re not learning anything about what he’s like. All you’re finding out is what he wants you to know.”

“That’s not true, Mom. He’s not feeding me a pack of lies. Trust me. I’m the one who’s been on these dates with him and he’s being honest.”

She tutted her tongue, annoyance flashing in her gaze, and she shook her head. “You don’t know that, honey. What kind of creep signs on to date only people who can’t see him? You’ll never find a real, lasting relationship this way. Never. You don’t want to waste time on him, Shelby. Life is too short.”

Irritation rippled through me, but I did my best to stay kind and patient instead of giving her yet another reason not to like Tyler if I snapped at her because of him. “I’m not wasting time and I’m not saying that we’re going to last forever, but I do like him and I’m enjoying our dates, so I’m going to keep going on them.”

Mom’s eyes cooled, but she jerked her head in a nod and used the waitress’s interruption to deliver our drinks and to take our food order as an excuse not to look at me. The rest of our lunch was strained, and we didn’t talk more about Sight Unseen or Tyler.

She avoided the topic like the plague and didn’t say another word about it even as we were saying our goodbyes. I hated being on the other side of this with her, but I wouldn’t let that stop me from seeing him.

I couldn’t.

As she’d repeatedly pointed out to me, today and before, I was all grown up now. I had to make these decisions for myself and my decision was to keep taking a chance on Tyler. If I ended up regretting it, then it was what it was.

At least I would know it had been my call, my risk, and that I’d taken it.

After I got back to the office, I called Ashley and vented about my mother, but my friend remained calm, comforting me when I finally ran out of steam. “This is exactly how I met Chase, Shel. Your mom is wrong. She just doesn’t understand,

but she will. Eventually. Just give it time and don't give up, okay?"

I nodded, closing my eyes. I groaned and leaned back in my chair. "Thanks. I just hope this is worth all the drama, you know? You and Chase are perfect for each other and you're getting your happy ending, but that doesn't mean it's going to happen the same way for me."

That was the real worry. It was my decision, and sure, I'd made it, but if Mom got to say *I told you so* every day for the rest our lives, I just wasn't sure the regret was going to be worth living with.





## FOSTER

**A**t home after work, I popped the top off a beer and settled in to watch the game. After my brief freak out on the day the money had been deposited, I'd finally realized that nothing had really changed.

Sure, I had money now, but that didn't mean I had to go out there and spend it like I was on some game show to see how fast I could blow through it all. I could stay right where I was, live exactly as I was, and be the same guy.

The truth of the realization had been so obvious that I didn't know why it had taken me some time to fully comprehend it. Ultimately, I'd chalked it all up to how unexpected this had all been and I'd forgiven myself.

I was back on track, no longer worrying about a decision I hadn't made. My grandfather had made it, and Mom and Porter weren't pissed. That was what I'd chosen to focus on.

As I leaned back on my sofa, I drank my beer and watched as two college teams faced off on the football field. Since I didn't have any loyalty to either of them, it was relaxing to be able to just watch them play rather than being stressed about the score.

My phone rang about thirty minutes in and I reached for it absently, trying to decide if the player who had just scored a touchdown was good or if he'd just been lucky. I was about to press the phone to my ear without even checking who it was when I realized the call was from a number I didn't have or recognize.

Immediately, football, the touchdown, and my mellow state of distracted relaxation vanished and I sat bolt upright. *Maybe it's Amanda.*

I didn't know how she'd have gotten hold of my number and the notion was crazy, but the call was local so it wasn't impossible that it was her. I pressed the device to my ear, my heart racing.

"Hello?"

"Foster?" The voice that came over the line was feminine, but it didn't belong to Amanda. It had that thready, almost breathy quality to it that made it seem older and I frowned.

"Yeah, that's me. Who is this?"

"Well, it's, uh, my name is Priscilla Chesterfield. I'm not sure if you'll remember me, but I'm your—"

"Grandmother." I nearly dropped the damn phone. Clearing my throat after cutting her off, I dragged in a deep breath. "Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you, but I know who you are."

There was a pause on her end. "Oh, well, I suppose that's a positive thing. How are you, Foster? It's been a long time since we've talked."

My eyebrows lifted. "Yeah. Probably about twenty-five years or so? Give or take. I'm, uh, I'm good, though. How are you? I'm sorry about Mr. Chesterfield."

She let out a quiet sigh. "Thank you. I appreciate that. He'd been rather ill for some time and we expected it was coming, but that doesn't make it easier now."

"I can imagine." I felt an unexpected stab of sympathy for her. She was a stranger to me, but shit. She'd recently lost the man she'd been married to for longer than I'd been alive. It didn't matter whether I knew her or not. I was still sorry for her. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I... no." She fell silent for another moment, but I didn't push her.

Whatever she'd called me to say, she was clearly working up to it and I could give her time. Hell, I could give her anything she wanted. She had signed off on giving me hundreds of millions of dollars just last week.

The least I could do was let the woman speak. "Foster, I'm sorry that your grandfather and I weren't around to see you grow up."

*Well, fuck me sideways.* "Thanks, but I think this might be a conversation you should be having with my mother."

"I've tried calling her as well, but I haven't had any luck reaching her, so I thought I'd try you."

"Oh."

Another soft sigh. "I should've been there for you and your brother when you were growing up. Every parent looks forward to the privilege of being a grandparent one day, or at least, I looked forward to it. As soon as your mother started getting older, I knew that was the next step, you know? She'd always been clear about the fact that she wanted children, so I just—" Her voice broke and she took an audible breath. "I suppose that I just wanted you to know that I've always regretted not being there. Will you please tell your brother that as well? I received the documentation back from Harrison and Harrison and your telephone number was noted on it, but I've no way of getting in touch with Porter."

"I can send you his number if you'd like?" I offered, not really knowing what else to say. "If you don't mind me asking though, where is all of this coming from now? I mean, the last time I saw you I was about seven."

"Yes, it was the week after your seventh birthday. I remember it so clearly." She went quiet for a moment again. "Porter wasn't even five yet and he kept talking about his birthday coming up. I cherish those memories."

One of my eyebrows dipped while the other remained high. "You do?"

"Yes, I do. I know you might find it difficult to believe, but I was glad for the times when I got to see you. I've never

stopped thinking about them, and if I could do things differently, I would.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.” Another brief pause. “I can’t go back in time, Foster. The best I can do now is to apologize and to hope that you’ll forgive an old lady her sins. I’m not asking for a relationship. I would love to reconnect with you and with your brother, but I realize that I might’ve missed my chance. It’s just that I don’t want to die without you knowing how sorry I am.”

“Are you dying?” My heart jumped into my throat.

She chuckled. “Aren’t we all? I’m as healthy as a horse and I won’t be meeting my maker too soon as far as I’m aware, but I’m well over seventy. It seems these days, it’s better for me to do things than to leave them until tomorrow.”

Another pang of pity shot through me. “I am sorry about your husband, and thank you for the apology. It means a lot. I’ll be sure to tell Porter.”

“Yes, well, I should let you go. Thank you, Foster. Good night—”

“Wait.” The word shot out of me, but when silence met my ears instead of the dull beep of her hanging up, I knew she was still there. “Why didn’t you reach out before? Why only call now when our grandfather is already gone and you’ve already missed our childhoods?”

“That’s a fair question,” she commented quietly. “I don’t want to speak ill of the dead, Foster. I suppose I could’ve gone against his wishes. I still don’t know if I did the right thing, but he was my husband and I loved him. I always thought that with time, he’d change his mind. When he let me see you when you were kids and came to the visits with me, I thought...”

Her voice became shaky and she dragged in another deep breath. “Your grandfather didn’t want me making peace with your mother. He forbade me from contacting you. I think he

was waiting for your mother to apologize first, but she never did.”

“A game of paternal chicken kept us from knowing you?” My eyes narrowed. “No offense, ma’am, but that seems ridiculous.”

“It does now, doesn’t it? It didn’t seem so bad when it was happening.” She sighed. “Neither of us thought this feud would outlast anyone’s life, but it dragged on and on. Before we knew it, we were old and you were grown, and we still didn’t know you.”

I didn’t know how I felt about her explanation, but she sounded like she was telling the truth. Her voice was soft and honest, sincerity ringing from it clear as a bell. It didn’t matter that I thought it was bullshit that he forbade her from speaking to her own daughter and grandkids. The truth was that he had and that she’d obeyed him.

I sighed. “Okay. Thanks for calling, Mrs.—”

“Priscilla, please,” she said softly. “You could also call me Grandma, but I guess that ship has sailed. Could I give you one piece of advice before I let you go, Foster?”

“Uh, okay?”

I heard her inhale deeply. “Don’t be like your grandfather. Don’t let this money he left you change who you are. That’s what all this was about, you know. The money. The fact that we had it and your father didn’t. The irony of it all is that when I met your grandfather, he wasn’t like that. That only happened later, after his own father passed away. Don’t let the same thing happen to you.”

“I won’t,” I promised. “Thanks.”

“Alright. Well, good night, Foster.”

“Good night... Priscilla.” I’d dug deep for the word *grandma* there, but it had gotten stuck on my tongue. Honestly, even as a kid I hadn’t known what to call her. That hadn’t changed.

After she'd hung up, I frowned at my phone and then called Porter, quickly telling him about the conversation I'd just had. Once I was done, he let out a low whistle under his breath. "Holy shit. It took her twenty-five years just to tell you that?"

"Yeah, I guess she figured she had to wait until he was dead. It's pretty heartbreaking, really. You should've heard her voice, man. It wasn't an easy thing for her to say."

"It hasn't been an easy thing for Mom to live with either," he said, always fast to leap to Mom's defense.

"Look, I get it, okay. I'm just passing on the message. I don't know how I feel about any of it either, but I promised her I'd convey her apologies. I've done that now."

My brother exhaled heavily. "Are you going to forgive her?"

"I don't know," I said. "Probably. She's just an old lady now, Porter. The only thing she did wrong was to do what her husband told her. It couldn't have been an easy decision to cut ties with your own kid on your husband's say-so. Should she have done things differently? I don't know, but I do feel sorry for her."

"I think you just answered my question, then," he said slowly. "You are going to forgive her."

"Yeah, I think I might," I mused, thinking out loud. "I'll talk to Mom about all this, but I don't know. It may be worth our while to get to know Priscilla. She is our grandmother and it's not too late just yet."

"You might be right, but I don't know. Let me think about this, okay?"

"Sure thing. I'll be doing the same."

"Yeah, okay. Good night."

"Night, Porter."

I tossed the phone down next to me after he hung up, realizing that the game on TV had heated up and I'd missed them scoring a bunch of points without even realizing it. My

beer had also gone warm, but I drank it anyway, trying to find that same mellowness from before, but it kept evading me.

I had a feeling it was going to stay like that until I'd wrapped my head around the conversation I'd just had. Ultimately, I had to admit that I was happy she'd reached out, and in time, Porter would be too. Growing up, our mother had told us so much about her mom and we'd both always wanted to know her.

Now, we had a chance to do just that and it felt pretty good. Especially because it meant we might be able to give our mother the one thing all of mine and Porter's money combined couldn't buy—her own mother back.





**F**or my third date with Tyler, the company was mixing things up a little. We were going blind dancing, and when I'd first received the email asking if I'd be willing to give one of their new business partners a try, I'd nearly fallen out of my seat.

Blind dancing seemed like a sure way to snap an ankle, but in the end, I'd agreed. It meant I'd be pressed up against Tyler's body for the whole hour we'd be together. That was a definite win in my book.

We'd also be having food and drinks, but it would all be happening in a dancing studio that had apparently recently joined as one of Sight Unseen's affiliates. When I arrived at the studio, I was met at the front entrance by a stunning, dark-haired man who grinned at me and stuck out his hand.

"Ms. Ripple? I'm Ricardo. I'm going to be your instructor this evening."

I blinked at him. "You are?"

He chuckled and inclined his head, and he squeezed my hand when I slid it into his. "Don't worry. The lesson isn't included in the time for the date. They did ask you to make yourself available a little longer this evening, didn't they?"

"Uh, yes. They did." I withdrew my hand when he let go. "I guess I just thought we'd have more time together."

"You will," he assured me. "The lesson is only for the first twenty minutes. You'll be spending the other one hundred

minutes with your date, who has already arrived and is in with my colleague, Tess.”

“Tess?”

He chuckled. “You have nothing to worry about. She’s my colleague, but she’s also my wife. She won’t make any moves on your man.”

My eyes grew wide and I wanted to tell him he’d misunderstood, but the truth was that he hadn’t. As soon as I’d found out that Tyler was with another woman, I’d been jealous. My cheeks flushed and I ducked my face behind my hair, following my instructor into the studio.

Soft lights were on in the ballroom he led me to, and I was glad I was at least going to be learning in a place where I could see. After I set down my purse, he swept me right into his arms and I soon found out that the tango was an even more sensual dance when you were doing it than it looked when you saw it on TV.

My heart was racing at the prospect of getting to do this with Tyler real soon. Alone and in the dark. My breath even caught a little as I thought about it, my body growing achy in all kinds of places. By the time Ricardo led me to a ballroom across the hall, I had to admit that my body was much too eager for this.

I swallowed it down, though. Distracting myself by trying to find my bearings after Ricardo left me alone in the dark, I focused on my breathing. “Hello?”

“Amanda?” His deep voice rang out and my heart skipped. “That is you, right?”

“It’s me,” I confirmed softly, putting my hands out ahead of me and wondering just how the hell we were supposed to find each other. “Are you okay? It’s, uh, it’s been a few days.”

“I know.” A low chuckle rumbled out of him and it made me smile. “I’m sorry. That stuff I had to take care of just ended up taking a little longer. How are you? Just keep talking. I’ll use your voice to find you.”

“Just don’t fall over something.”

He chuckled again. “I won’t. Tess has assured me there’s nothing on the floor to fall over or in our way. They’ll be bringing in takeout a little later, so for now, it’s just us and the open dance floor. How was your lesson?”

“Strangely exhilarating. Yours?”

“Exhilarating? Do I need to be worried about you and Tess’s husband?” I could hear he was teasing, but I wanted to set his mind at ease anyway.

“Definitely not. I’ll admit that I might’ve been thinking too much about getting to do this with you. I wasn’t really paying much attention to him.”

“Same here. Have you ever done that before?”

“The tango? No, I haven’t. You.”

“Me either,” he said, his voice much closer to me now. The next thing I knew, his fingertips brushed against my waist and an involuntary shiver passed through me. “There you are. Hi, Amanda.”

“Hi, Tyler,” I murmured, looping my arms around his broad shoulders before I slid them to his neck. “Is it weird that I’ve missed you?”

“Nah. I’ve missed you too.” His arms snaked around my hips and he tugged me into him, letting me feel the strong chest I’d only barely touched before in that moment when we’d kissed. The scent of him was becoming familiar, feeling like a comfortable, masculine embrace as it enveloped me.

I smiled as I rested my head against his chest, half just hugging him and half dancing as he started swaying while he held me. “Is this weird? Are we weird for missing each other when we don’t even know what the other looks like?”

He chuckled, his chest vibrating against me as he tightened his grip on my hips. “Maybe we are. The better question is whether you care. Because I don’t. It is what it is. I missed you, I’ve told my friends and family about you, and I really don’t give a shit if anyone thinks that’s weird.”

“Really? I’d love to say I don’t care either, but I, uh, I told my mom about you and she wasn’t too happy.”

“What? Why not? Is it about me, or because of Sight Unseen?”

“Sight Unseen,” I admitted. “I don’t know. I guess it’s just too foreign a concept for her. What did your mom say?”

He chuckled, pausing for a long beat before he shrugged. “You know, it took her some time to get used to it, but now that she is, she’s a fan. She’s been keeping an eye on the company and she’s seen the results.”

“She’s been keeping an eye on the company?” I frowned. “Why?”

“Because I got involved with it,” he said after another brief pause. “Tell me something about yourself.”

“Like what?”

I felt him shrug against me. “Anything.”

I cocked my head, thinking it over before I looked up at where his face should’ve been. “Do you want to stay like this, or should we sit down on the floor?”

“Nah, I like holding you. Let’s stay like this.”

“I like being held by you,” I admitted shyly. After pausing for a beat, I blurted out, “If I could watch only one genre of TV show for the rest of my life, it would be medical drama. I love crime and mystery, and other stuff to, but there’s something about a good, compelling medical drama that can’t be beat.”

He chuckled. “I better watch some medical dramas, then. I’ve never really followed any of them.”

I sucked in an exaggerated gasp. “What are we supposed to watch together after this?”

“You can watch anything. I’ll be watching you.”

My heart warmed, but I smacked his arm playfully anyway. “That’s only going to last so long. Once you get tired of watching me, what are we going to watch?”

“I’m a fan of supernatural mysteries and crime dramas too. I’m sure we’ll find something, and if not, we’ll buy a second TV.”

My teeth sank into the inside of my cheek. “We could, but I would like to watch stuff with you. Spend some time together after work, you know? Even when both of us are too tired to talk and we just want to laze around.”

His grip on me tightened. “I would like that too, and don’t worry. We will find something. Do you like to read?”

“Love it,” I said enthusiastically. “I read almost every night before I go to bed.”

“So do I. If we can’t find something to watch, maybe we could read together. What do you like to read?”

“Anything. Romance. Fantasy. Mystery. Give me a good, well-written book and I’ll read it.”

“Same, so that’s settled then. If we can’t find something we both want to watch, we’ll read the same books.”

I thought of some of the spicy scenes in the book I was reading at the moment and I flushed all the way to the tips of my ears. “Or maybe we could just read our own books and not talk about them.”

“What? Why?” He chuckled. “That defeats the purpose, doesn’t it?”

“Well, no. We’d still be reading together. We just wouldn’t be reading the same book. Or talking about what’s happening in them.”

I felt his shoulders when they started shaking with silent laughter. “What are you trying to hide, Amanda?”

“Nothing.”

A brief pause. “Nope. Not buying it. What book are you reading that you don’t want to talk about?”

“It’s, uh, it’s nothing really. Just a love story about two people who used to hate each other, but they wind up having to work together and there are lots of sparks.”

“Ah.” He chuckled again. “I get it. You’re reading lady-porn and you’re embarrassed about it. Don’t be. I think it’s hot.”

“It’s not lady-porn.” I groaned and dropped my head forward to rest my forehead against his chest. “Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.”

“I have tried it,” he said, surprising the heck out of me. “I’ve even read a few that I really liked. Again, I think it’s hot. You have nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“I’m not embarrassed about reading the book. I’m embarrassed about you thinking it’s lady-porn. It’s not. It’s just a love story, and those kinds of scenes are part of love stories.”

“Agreed.” He moved closer to me, his body now pressed tightly to mine. I felt him pull his head back as his hand found my arm and slid along the length of it. “Shall we try this tango?”

My heartrate spiked again. “Let’s try it.”

“Okay,” he murmured, his fingertips dragging against my skin until his hand slid into mine. He held it in a tight, dry grip, sending sparks through me all over again when he pressed me tighter to him, his other hand around my back.

Music had started playing some time ago, but we’d ignored it until now. As the sultry beat played, Tyler took charge, obviously having learned a thing or two in his lesson. I couldn’t remember anything Ricardo had told me, my body suddenly on high alert, aware only of the way Tyler’s felt against it and how much I wanted to stay in his arms.

My heart was hammering, skipping, and jumping, parts of my body I wasn’t usually so aware of feeling heavy and wanting. No one had ever affected me this way. It wasn’t just some errant thought. It was the complete and total truth.

I wasn’t one of those girls who had ever given into or even explored my baser instincts much. For most of my life, I’d even considered my hormones an inconvenience. Sure, I got horny occasionally just like everyone else, but I’d never particularly enjoyed it and I certainly didn’t usually indulge it.

With Tyler though, it was different. I had a good time with him when we were talking, but I also really enjoyed all these other emotions he evoked. It wasn't an inconvenience with him. In fact, it felt almost like a necessity.

A giggle escaped at the thought and I stiffened when I heard it. Tyler smiled, his cheek so close to mine that I felt it happen. "What was that all about?"

"It's just, uh." I chewed the inside of my cheek, trying to decide what to tell him. "This is turning me on."

"You don't say," he mused, sliding his thigh more firmly between mine. I sucked in a sharp gasp, suddenly feeling that he was hard under fabric that felt like jeans against the bare skin of my legs. The dress I'd worn was short and thin enough that I suddenly felt almost naked.

Tyler groaned when he heard my gasp. "You're killing me here, but it's against the rules."

"I know." I kept moving with him as he commanded the dance, confident in his movements even though he'd said he'd never done this before.

"Is it sad that doing this with you in the dark is one of the most erotic experiences I've ever had?"

He chuckled, his breath feathering across the heated skin of my face as he shook his head. "I think that's kind of why the company signed up with them. It's meant to be an erotic experience to explore a different kind of connection without breaking the rules."

"You really think so?" My heart was slamming against my ribs, my panties so damp that I felt the wetness on my thighs. "Well, I suppose it does make me feel better."

"Besides," he said quietly, his lips now moving against my temple. "I've been turned on for most of the time we've spent together. You do things to me, Amanda. I can't explain it, but \_\_\_"

"You don't have to try. I know exactly what you're talking about." I turned my head a little, knowing that his face now had to be only inches away from mine. I moved it forward



until I felt his nose against the bridge of my own and then I tipped my head back, stroking my fingers into his hair. His mouth touched mine.

I moaned immediately, overwhelmed by the sensations of having him pressed so tight against me, his lips moving with mine and his tongue delving between them to stroke my own. It felt like I'd been electrified, my hairs standing on end as I lost myself in the musky taste of a man I'd never even seen before.

We kissed and kissed, completely ignoring the rules as he swept me across the dance floor, but then the door opened and Ricardo's voice rang out. "Food is here. I've rolled it in on a table by the door. There are two chairs here as well. Have fun."

Tyler and I reluctantly broke apart, but he kept hold of my hand as he led me across the space and even helped me into my chair. Once I was seated, I heard the soft scrape of him taking his seat and I giggled.

"We need to stop doing that," I said. "We're going to get kicked out for breaking the rules."

"If we do, I'll find you," he promised. "We won't be, though. Don't worry. No one is watching us while we're in here. I asked."

"You did?" I squeaked. "Why? God, I'm blushing so hard right now."

"I can't wait to see you blush, but I asked because I had a feeling dancing might lead to kissing. Or more. I'm pretty sure the company knows that too, and that's why they've got Ricardo coming in to deliver our food and stuff."

I laughed. "You can't wait to see me blush?"

"I really can't, but I don't want to make assumptions. Will you go on another date with me after this, Amanda?"

"I will," I said. "I'd love to."

We spoke some more about our families and our lives while we ate. Then we shared another kiss to say good night

when the red light came on. All I'd wanted when I'd started this was a date to a wedding, but I'd found Tyler instead. As I left, I wondered if perhaps, sometime soon, other people would be looking for dates to our wedding.



I couldn't stop humming the tango song from the date. I also couldn't wipe away the grin it'd left on my face.

Over the years, I'd done a bit of dating. It'd never been anything serious and I'd always been clear that I was all about the fun, but I'd also never felt like this. Maybe if I had, I would've been married by now.

On the other hand, maybe that was because I'd always been meant to end up with Amanda. Whoever she was in real life.

I didn't know, but I also wasn't questioning it. Weirdly, I'd gone from being completely disenchanted with Milena's process to being a hardcore fan in just three dates. I was going with it, trusting her wisdom instead of trying to control everything.

In this instance, letting go felt good. Probably because doing it was bringing me closer to Amanda. One more date to go, and at the one after that, I'd finally get to see what I was now convinced was a beautiful face.

Holy shit. I already knew for a fact that she was built like one of my dirty fantasies come to life. Feeling her soft, full body against mine for over an hour in total darkness last night had nearly driven me insane. When I'd finally gotten home, I'd still been hard, and with her scent clinging to my clothes and memories of her curves against me, it hadn't taken me long to do something about it.

Then I'd done something about it again before I went to work this morning after I woke up from a dream about her. The girl was on my mind constantly, and I wasn't even trying to fight it. Awake or asleep, I was thinking about her. As I was walking into Kane's condo to watch the game, I was still thinking about her and still grinning.

"What's with your face?" he asked when he let me in. "Wait. Let me guess. The date went well, huh?"

"Yep." I smirked at him as we walked to the kitchen. "I'm getting addicted to this girl, bro. Big time."

He frowned and then made a pained face at me. "Another one bites the dust?"

I thought it over and then shrugged. "Yeah, maybe. We'll see how it goes."

He smacked me in the shoulder. "I fucking told you, man. I told you that day she was the one."

"I'm still not getting ahead of myself, but it's going well. That's the best anyone can ask for after only three dates, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. Except the way you guys rave over these Sight Unseen dates, three dates with them is not equal to three dates on the outside. How's the money treating you?"

"Well. I haven't spent any of it, but it's happy right where it is."

He groaned. "You didn't buy a yacht?"

"No."

"A jet?"

I frowned. "No. Why would I buy a jet? My job is here so I never have to travel for work."

"It's called traveling for pleasure, Foster. There is such a thing as just traveling without it being for work."

"Asshole." I shook my head at him. "I know that, but I don't need my own jet to be able to travel for pleasure. It doesn't make any sense to me."

“Then you’re the asshole.” He chuckled. We walked into the open-concept kitchen and I put the beers I’d brought in the fridge after grabbing one. “Anyway, I think you know all the other guys who are here. Do you remember Avery, the realtor?”

I hit a blank for a moment, then searched through my memories of the time before Amanda and finally landed on a faint recollection of a dark-haired guy who talked about property a lot. “Oh. Yes, I do. I remember him. He’s still a realtor?”

“Yep, and I told him that you might be looking. He’s got a place he says any guy would go nuts over. It’s an apartment with an attic that’s been turned into, like, a Batcave.”

I laughed. “A Batcave, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s what he said. It’s got the ultimate man cave and it’s completely out of the way, so even if you and this girl of yours get married next month and start a family, you wouldn’t have to gut it.”

“No one is getting married, Kane. Calm down.” I smirked as I walked past him. “Unless you’re thinking about tying the knot? Who’s the lucky girl?”

He sighed as he cast a glance past his TV room to the floor-to-ceiling windows beyond. “She’s somewhere out there, but she’s going to have to keep waiting for now.”

“Don’t keep her waiting forever,” I warned until I realized I was starting to sound like Porter after he’d started dating Hope. “You know what? Fuck that, keep her waiting until you’re ready.”

“I was planning on it,” he said easily.

We strode out to join the other guys. They’d already taken their seats for the game, and for the first hour, we just watched. Beer was drunk, insults against the ref were hurled at the TV, and chips were inhaled. After that, when it was finally over, Avery came up to me.

“I heard you were in the market for a new place.”

I shrugged. “To be honest, Kane might’ve jumped the gun on that. I inherited some money recently, but I haven’t decided what I want to spend it on.”

The dark-haired, blue-eyed guy arched a brow at me. “You can never go wrong with property, but I’m sure you know that. I didn’t come to talk to you to pressure you, though. I thought I was doing you a favor because Kane said you were looking, but if you’re not—”

“Does it really have a Batcave?” I asked.

He chuckled and dipped his chin in a nod. “Yeah, it really does. The current owner has four kids, so he created a sanctuary for himself in the surprisingly spacious attic. It’s got windows though, so it’s not really a cave, but it does have amazing views. Just like the rest of the apartment.”

“He’s got four kids living there?”

Avery grinned. “It’s a really spacious place. Five bedrooms, six baths. Views for days and they renovated it about two years ago, so it’s nice and modern too.”

“Garden?”

He nodded. “Communal, but yes. Said garden also has a playground in it, just in case you’re thinking about that kind of thing.”

“I’m not, but it’s good to know.” I drew in a deep breath. “Okay, you talked me into it. I’d like to see the place. You got time this week?”

“I do.” He reached into his back pocket, pulled out his wallet, and handed over a business card. “Call me tomorrow and we’ll set it up.”

“Sure thing.”

After tucking his card into my wallet, I went to check on Kane. He was grilling hamburgers outside and his beer seemed empty from where I was standing. “Can I get you another one?”

He turned his head to look at me, nodding gratefully as he held out the empty. “Yeah, but before you go, tell me about the

date. You didn't get around to it before."

"Right," I said slowly. "There's not much to say. We did the tango in the dark and it was pretty fucking amazing. A lot more amazing than it sounds."

Kane stared at me for another beat. "I'm happy for you, Foster. You deserve everything that's happening for you right now."

"Thanks." I slanted my head as I looked back at him. "Are you okay?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, I'm fine. I'm just, uh, I've been thinking a lot and it's not good for me."

I frowned before I put it all together. He was interested in how the Sight Unseen process was going for me and was asking about the dates. I'd had a suspicion for a while now that my friend was feeling a little lonely and was checking out the process, but he seemed so against it that I'd convinced myself I was imagining things.

"You could sign up, you know," I said quietly enough that nobody inside would hear me. "We wouldn't need to tell anyone about it."

"I'm not embarrassed, Foster," he said as he started flipping the burgers. "I'm interested, but I'm just not ready. Not right now."

"Why not?" I asked curiously. "It's not like you're hung up on anybody or anything like that."

He chuckled. "Nah, it's nothing like that. I just don't feel like I'm ready to start looking for something serious and it wouldn't be fair to sign up if I'm not sure what I want."

"Fair enough," I agreed. "When you're ready, let me know and I'll set you up, okay? I'll make it as painless a process as possible for you and I'll only hook you up with the best the system has to offer."

"Sounds good," he said, not looking at me again. He focused on the burgers instead. I left him and went back inside



to grab him that beer, but I couldn't shake the feeling that he was stalling for some reason.

In the end, I decided to leave it alone. I refused to become Porter in all of this. I needed to give Kane time. He'd come to me when he was ready. If he was ready. And if he didn't, then that was his loss. Putting it all to the side, I went back into the TV room and hunted down Avery to ask more questions about that apartment.

A sense of satisfaction rolled through me as I spoke to him. It felt like everything was coming together for me. Slowly but surely, I was getting everything I'd ever wanted. The promotion. Porter's happiness. Mom standing a chance of patching things up with Priscilla. A woman I wanted to be with more than anything.

It felt so damn good that I was grinning again, and not because I was loving everything that Avery was telling me about the place I was going to see. It was because, if it all kept going well, I'd finally be able to start living the life I'd been telling myself I didn't want for much too long.



## SHELBY

**A**t the final fitting for my maid of honor dress, I felt like a princess. I blinked at myself in the reflection of the mirror in front of me, surprised by the difference it made that the fabric fit like a glove.

With my full figure, I tended to shy away from form-fitting clothes but this dress didn't show bulges and rolls. It showcased my curves in a way that made me look like a full hourglass, which was pretty cool. I'd never looked like that before.

Better yet, since it was baby blue, it made my eyes pop and my hair shine like gold. It made me itchy to be seen in this dress. By Tyler, preferably, but that meant I had to talk to him about the wedding.

After our date, I was still in my little rose-colored bubble about him perhaps being the guy that I was going to end up marrying. Between our chemistry and the ease of our connection, I just couldn't shake the feeling that my soul knew his. I knew him—even if I didn't *know him* know him.

It was just this weird doubt somewhere deep down inside, like maybe I'd known him in a previous life. I refocused on my reflection, smiling as I ran my eyes up and down and imagined how Tyler might react if he saw me in it.

Since I didn't know what he looked like, it was tricky imagining a facial expression but I went with what I did know about him. I hadn't felt any facial hair any of the times we'd kissed, so I knew he was clean shaven. I also knew from

having touched his face that it was lean and strong, with no extra softness to it that spoke of fuller, rounder features.

While I had no way of telling the exact color of his hair, I knew that it was thick and long enough to run my fingers through, but not so long that it touched his collar or covered his ears. Using those details, I created a fuzzy outline in my mind of the man I was developing feelings for, a thrill traveling down my spine at the thought of his grip tightening on my hips when he saw me in this dress—just like it had while we'd been dancing.

Ashley came up behind me and grinned, her red hair glowing like a fire in the distance under the soft light in the changing room. “You look amazing. Do you like it?”

“I love it.”

She arched an eyebrow at me, her eyes boring into mine. “Are you sure? I know people are always telling brides how much they love the dresses, but then behind our backs, we get mocked for choosing something awful.”

“It's not awful. I'd even wear this again.” When she rolled her eyes at me, I pursed my lips. “I'm serious. I am going to wear it again. I don't have anything even remotely like this in my closet, it fits exceptionally well, and I'm even excited for my date to see me in it.”

“The date you don't have yet?” she asked playfully. “Or have you spoken to him in the meantime?”

“Not yet.” I stepped away from the mirror and reached for the conveniently situated zipper along my side. “I'm going to do it, though. Are we still on for dinner after this?”

“Yep. Chase is meeting us there. Pizza and beer are what he lives for. He's pretty excited that we feel the same way.”

I chuckled. “Most people feel the same way, even if they won't admit it.”

Her eyes sparkled with laughter. She nodded and backed out of the changing room so I could get dressed. While I did, I heard her chatting to the bridesmaid in the room next to mine

and I smiled when the other girl gave the same assurances I had about loving the dress.

I loved mine so much, in fact, that I felt a pang of sadness taking it off. It'd made me feel so good about myself, so sexy and desirable, that I even felt a little bit frumpy in the jeans and white cardigan I'd worn to come here.

I sighed. Between Tyler and Ashley, I was discovering all kinds of new things about myself in the run-up to the wedding. I also had a newfound confidence in my personal life that used to exist only professionally.

As I hung the dress back on the hanger and left it on the hook in the changing room, as I'd been instructed, I gave it one last, longing look. *I'll be seeing you soon, my pretty. Hopefully with a date who will appreciate you as much as I do.*

I turned my back on it deliberately before I decided to steal it and take it home with me today. I strode out to meet Ash and the other girls who were already finished and waiting at the sofas outside the changing area. Ashley handed over the glass of champagne I hadn't finished before we went to try on our dresses, and I sipped it as they finished theirs but stuck to the sidelines.

The bridesmaids were mostly Ashley's friends from work and college, and I didn't really know them too well. I'd spoken to them and they were nice, but when we were all together, I mostly let them do their thing with Ash without getting in the way.

When all our glasses were empty and our goodbyes were said, Ashley and I headed over to the restaurant where we were meeting Chase for dinner. It was a small, authentic Italian place around the corner from the dress shop, with framed landscapes of Positano and the Adriatic Coast against the walls, checkered tablecloths, and breadsticks on the tables.

Chase was already waiting for us when we arrived, and he grinned when he saw us walk in, rising to his feet and opening his arms to pull Ashley into them. She broke into a run to get

to him and giggled when she slammed into his chest and enveloped him in a bear hug.

I laughed softly, making my way at a normal, much slower pace across the room. As I did, I watched the two of them together, trying to imagine what their dates in the dark had been like and what their thoughts were when they'd finally seen each other for the first time.

Ashley was gorgeous, but she wasn't every man's cup of tea. Between the full figure, the red hair, and the outspoken personality, it was always going to take a strong, self-assured man to make her happy, and he was it.

Chase himself wasn't bad looking either, with rich, dark brown hair and eyes that were like pools of glittering onyx gems. His skin was on the pale side, features chiseled but not too much. At around six and a half feet, he towered over Ash, dwarfing her, but she said she loved it.

Ultimately, neither of them were supermodels, billionaires, or rock stars. They were just regular people who had found each other through the same process I was going through now, and that was comforting.

It meant that Tyler and I, regular people ourselves, stood a chance of being just like them. The thought made me smile. Chase noticed it when I finally reached them. He gave me a lopsided grin of his own in return and then released Ashley to give me a quick hug.

“Was that smile about the dress or the guy?”

I squeezed him before letting go. “What?”

He chuckled, took Ashley's hand, and pulled her into the seat next to him. I sat down across the table. “Come on,” he said. “I know you've been dating through Sight Unseen, so tell me about that smile. Was it because you love the dress so much, or because you know you met the guy the same way we met and you're hoping this is your future?”

My cheeks flushed and I averted my gaze, fiddled with my fingers in my lap, and let out a long sigh. Ashley and Chase were similar this way, direct and never pulling their punches.

It was something I loved about her, and while it always caught me off guard coming from a guy I'd only met a few months ago, I supposed it was something I needed to get used to from him.

“A little bit of both,” I admitted before lifting my eyes back to his. “Do you know anything about the dresses, or are we keeping it all a secret?”

He chuckled and glanced at Ash. “I saw some of the contenders, but I don't know which one was the final choice.”

I nodded and mimed zipping my lips as I winked at my friend. “Okay, so let's skip past dress details. All I'll say is that they're gorgeous, but not nearly as spectacular as your future wife's.”

Ashley gave me a conspiratorial smile. “Way to hype it all up for the big day. I like it.” She turned to him. “You're just going to have to wait and see, so let's move this conversation along, shall we? Make her tell you about the guy.”

I groaned. “Your wedding is coming up. Let's talk about that.”

This time, Chase was the one who groaned as he shook his head. “Let's not. That's all I've been talking about for months. Besides, Ash and I have just navigated this process. Maybe we'll be able to help you. You've had three dates already, right?”

“Yep.”

“So the next one is the last date in the dark,” he mused before he grinned at me. “Not everyone gets this far, you know. It's a good sign. How are you feeling about it?”

I stared back at him for a long moment, drinking in the sincerity in his eyes and wondering if it might be worth getting a guy's take on this whole thing. “I'm feeling pretty confident. It's obviously all still very new, but it feels right when I'm with him.”

“Right?” Chase let out a dramatic sigh. “You're going to have to give me more than that to work with.”

My lips hooked up into a hard smile. “You’re not going to let me get away with being vague at all, are you?”

He shook his head at me. “That’s not my style. Give it to me straight, other than just that it feels *right*. Why does it feel right? What feels right about it?”

“Aren’t you in finance?” I teased. “You’re sounding more and more like a shrink.”

“I missed my calling.” He leaned forward and picked up the beer the waiter had just dropped off. “Why are you trying to avoid my questions? It won’t work. It’s just making me more curious.”

“I’m not avoiding anything. I’m just curious myself, but if you must know, it feels right because I can talk to him as easily as I talk to Ash. Like, this, talking to you, is much more difficult than talking to some guy I’ve never laid eyes on before. That says something.”

“Sure does,” he agreed and he motioned for me to continue.

I dragged in a deep breath. “Okay, so aside from that, he makes me laugh, but he also sets me at ease. He also makes me feel confident about myself, which is much easier said than done. So far, I haven’t even really been nervous about what he’s going to think when he sees me because he’s touched me, so he—”

Chase’s eyes widened and he glanced at Ash. “She’s broken the rules? *Shelby* has broken the rules?”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” I said playfully. “I do know how to break rules and I can do it. I just don’t always like to. Besides, nothing major has happened.”

“They’ve been kissing,” Ashley informed him with a smug grin on her face. “Just like we did, so you can’t give her any crap about it.”

“I wasn’t going to. I was just surprised.” He slung an arm around the back of her chair, casually stroking his thumb along the side of her shoulder, and he turned back to me. “Do you have chemistry with him?”



“Lots.” My cheeks burned up again, but I was sure Ash would’ve told him anyway. “So, uh, yeah. He knows I’m no stick figure and he’s hanging around, which makes me a lot less nervous than I thought I’d be about the reveal.”

Chase nodded slowly. “I think I’m going to like this guy. What about your parents? Are they cool with all this? My mom hated every second of it. She tried to get me to quit more times than I can count.”

“She did?” I flashed him an understanding smile. “Mine is the same. She doesn’t get any of this at all, and I’m worried that even if it goes well with us, her hostility toward the program is going to make it impossible for me to keep seeing him at some point.”

“She’ll get over it,” Chase said confidently. “Mine did. We just made sure that she and Ash spent a lot of time together to get to know each other after the reveal. Ashley sat her down and explained why she signed up for Sight Unseen, gave me a bunch of compliments, and won my mom over. She loves Ashley now.”

As they shared one of those dopey, loving, it-all-worked-out-in-the-end looks, I smiled and tried to take comfort in his words. Mom wasn’t on board now, but maybe Tyler and I would be able to win her over one day.

Chase and Ashley started talking about the wedding and the plans for their honeymoon again after that, obviously having been inspired by thinking back to how far they’d already come. I listened, and I couldn’t help but daydream about that being me eventually. Once Tyler and I had proven to Mom and all the other doubters in our lives—of which I was sure many would crawl out of the woodwork if we got together for real—that we were meant to be.

Because we were.

I was ninety-nine percent sure of it.



## FOSTER

I went to check out the apartment I'd heard about at Kane's place. Before I'd even walked in, I loved it. Since I'd scheduled a viewing, a parking spot had been reserved for me in a surprisingly light and airy parking lot beside the building. Even that made me fall in love with it a little bit.

Once I got into the actual building, it only kept getting better. The light and airy feeling of the parking lot continued with lots of huge windows to let in natural light, potted greenery, and a really fast elevator.

It deposited me on the top floor, letting me out into a wider and lighter than usual hallway. I strode to the open door right at the end. When my friends and coworkers had done their house-hunting in the past, they'd always told me that you just get a feeling about some places.

I'd thought it was bullshit. I'd chosen my current place based on price and proximity to the Sight Unseen office building, and I'd been perfectly happy there for years now, but this was different. As soon as I'd driven into the parking lot, I'd been able to see myself arriving home to it every day. With every step I took, I only got more and more certain.

Kane's friend, Avery, met me at the door, grinning as he waved me in. "You have that look on your face. I don't need to sell you on this place, do I?"

"No, not really," I admitted, not too worried about it since the guy was Kane's friend. "It's doing a pretty great job of selling itself so far."

He chuckled. “It does that. Come on in and take a look around, but if you really do like it, I’m going to need an answer from you soon.”

“Is there a lot of interest?”

He lifted both eyebrows and nodded firmly. “I’ve had six calls to arrange viewings so far just today and I’m not the only realtor on the place. When I arrived, someone else was here with another client. I’m not telling you this to pressure you, but to warn you. If you want it, you’re going to have to act fast.”

“Okay, let’s take a look around then.” I strode around him into the apartment, immediately struck by the amount of space it offered.

The ceilings were high and there were no unnecessary walls, creating almost cavernous living areas that were all open to one another but were somehow still warm and inviting. With slightly off-white paint on the solid walls and windows making up all the rest, the place seemed huge.

The kitchen was modern and functional, with everything exactly where I’d have put it if I’d done it myself. A center island with the stove in it made for a great place to hang out without being isolated while cooking. The two fireplaces—one wood and one not—added to the overall homey feel of the place, and it was a theme that continued throughout.

The rooms were large. The spaciousness continued as Avery gave me the tour. I’d been expecting it to end somewhere, but it didn’t. Every room also had amazing views of the water, the ferries, and the city, and it kind of felt like a modern, luxurious, huge treehouse, which I loved.

“And the best part,” Avery said as he led me up a flight of stairs and into the attic. “The Batcave.”

I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the light, and then I grinned. The place was like an adult male playground, with a built-in solid-wood bar, a pool table, some arcade games, and glass display cases showing sports paraphernalia like signed baseballs and collector’s cards. Flags for a variety of Seattle-

based teams hung from the exposed rafters, and judging by the size of the speakers, the sound system was great.

Avery nodded as his gaze followed mine around the room. “The rest of this place is amazing, but this is what really sells it for me. I mean, the apartment will grow with you. Parties, marriage, kids, working from home, it can accommodate whatever you need it to. Plus, it’s really centrally located, so the commute to anywhere isn’t too bad, but this? This is what makes it special. This is what differentiates it from the other places in this price range.”

“I’m with you. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it, but what’s the catch? Why are these people moving out?”

He grimaced. “It’s a pretty sad story. The current owner’s dad owns a farm in Arkansas. About three months ago, the old man got real sick. Passed a couple of weeks later. My client inherited the farm and he and his family are moving there.”

“Oh. Wow. That is sad.” I looked around and wondered how hard it had to be to leave this place behind. “It’s got nothing to do with the apartment, then?”

Avery chuckled. “Nope. In fact, they’re quite hesitant about selling it. They said they’d have had to be carried out of here feet first if this hadn’t happened, but they’ve got to do what they’ve got to do.”

“They’re not thinking about keeping it and staying here whenever they’re in town?”

He shook his head. “They want to make a clean break. The farm has been in the family for generations, so they don’t want to sell it and he wants to work the land himself instead of hiring someone to do it for him. Plus, his mom still lives on the property, so they’re worried about her. If you’re concerned that you’re going to make an offer and they’re going to reject it because they’re withdrawing the place from the market, don’t be. It’s not going to happen.”

“Sad as the story is, the place couldn’t have come on the market at a better time for me. I’d like to make an offer.”

A wave of dizziness swept through me when I said the words. I wasn't usually an impulsive guy and buying a multimillion-dollar property wasn't even something I'd have been able to consider a month ago, but I could afford it now just on the interest I'd be making from the inheritance money I'd invested.

Avery clapped me on the back and chuckled. "Good man. I'm going to expect to be invited to watch the games here a lot."

"You got it." I shoved down the nerves making my skin feel like there were bees living right underneath it.

I wanted this place, I could afford it, and if anything happened with the money, I could always back out of the offer within the next ten days. My next meeting with Shelby to sign off on everything was tomorrow, so I'd know in time if some kind of mistake had been made.

Avery extended his hand toward me when we reached the front door. "I'll have paperwork drawn up and email it to you. If you have any questions, just call me."

"I'll do that." I shook with him and left, feeling a little lightheaded again. *I just made a verbal offer to purchase an upmarket property and I didn't even flinch.*

This was all back to being just super fucking surreal. Porter and I hadn't grown up rich. Our parents had been lower-middle class, at best, and while we'd gotten by just fine, this was a whole different ballgame.

My mother's tales of her life when she had been growing up had always seemed like just that to me, tales. Fairy tales I couldn't imagine having been her life, but now, it was mine and I couldn't just wrap my head around it and move on.

After I got into my car, I waited until my phone connected to it and then called Porter. "I might've just bought an apartment."

There was silence at the other end of the line, which wasn't surprising. I hadn't even greeted him yet, just blurting it out. "Okay. Where is it?"

“Belltown.”

“Wow.” He let out a low whistle and then chuckled. “Congratulations. That’s great. Just one question, though. Why don’t you sound excited?”

“This thing costs more money than I’ve ever made. Like, in my entire life of working every day since I graduated college and most days before that, I haven’t made anything close to the amount this place is priced at.”

“Sure, but you don’t need to have made it to be able to afford it. You spoke to my investment guy, right? Do you even know how much you’re going to be earning only in interest?”

“Yeah, I have and I do, but shit, Porter. This is a lot of money, but I walked in, loved the place, and told the realtor I’d make an offer. This isn’t my life, man.”

He chuckled. “It wasn’t mine either, but things change. Eventually, you’ll get used to it. Are you still meeting Mom for lunch?”

“Yep.”

“Great, do you think you could talk to her about this? I’m just about to run into a meeting.”

I sighed. “A meeting? For what?”

“I’m considering signing on to give a few lectures to freshman engineering students,” he said cheerfully. “Pass on the knowledge, you know?”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “I mean, I don’t know how much knowledge you’ve got to pass on, but at least you’re trying.”

“Asshole.” He laughed. “Talk to you later?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Send my love to Mom.” He hung up just as I was parking in front of the little café where my mom and I were having lunch.

We didn’t do this nearly often enough, but I wanted to talk to her about Priscilla’s phone call and it felt like the right thing

to do it in person. I grabbed a table when I walked in to find she wasn't there yet. Then I ordered us each a coffee and settled in for the wait, constantly turning over the mental images of that apartment in my head.

When Mom arrived and dropped into the seat across from me, her hair windblown and her smile wide but frantic, her brow furrowed immediately when she saw whatever look was on my face. "Uh oh. What happened?"

"Am I that obvious?"

She reached for her coffee and dropped her chin slightly, peering at me from between the long lashes Porter and I had inherited. "I'm your mother. I changed your diapers. After growing you in my uterus for nine months. Yes, you are that obvious."

A sideways smile tugged at the corner of my lips. "Thanks for that. I feel so much better about myself now."

She chuckled and rolled her eyes at me as she took a sip of her coffee. "So what's up? Is this still about Grandpa's money?"

"How did you know?"

"I've been around the block a few times, kiddo. Especially with him and that money of his."

I looked into her eyes from across the table, wondering if I should even mention Priscilla's phone call now. "Did you ever forgive them?"

Mom's gaze clouded over, and she shook her head. "I'm their daughter. Their only child. The only thing parents really have to do is to love their kids. Obviously, children also need their parents a little more when they're younger, but it all comes down to love. They didn't love me enough to allow me or my children to be in their lives and all because they didn't like the man I chose for myself, so no. I don't think I have forgiven them."

*Shit. Yep, not mentioning Priscilla.* I did talk to her about the money, though. And the apartment. Dating Amanda. Everything except for Priscilla's phone call.



Rethinking my idea to reconnect with the older lady, I put that conversation on ice and decided to talk to Amanda about it on our next date. It was only two days away and it was the second to last one. I had to make it count, and maybe it was better to be focusing on that than on my grandmother and my mom anyway.



## SHELBY

**N**erves barreled into me ahead of my meeting with Foster. I carried the coffee I'd just made myself back to my office, finding it difficult not to spill any because my hand had started shaking so much. In less than fifteen minutes, I would be seeing my old crush again and I didn't know if I was ready.

Not because I still had any of those feelings for him that had lingered at our first meeting and not because I was afraid they would resurface. It was just that he was a reminder of the past. A reminder of what I'd wanted so desperately those days and had never gotten.

Besides, anyone would want to impress the person they'd had such a big thing for back in the day if they suddenly saw them again twelve years later. It was human nature.

"Shelby?" Mr. Harrison's voice yanked me out of my thoughts and I blinked the hallway back into focus, finding him walking toward me with a kind smile on his lips.

"Mr. Harrison. Hi. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you for asking. How are things going with the Chesterfield account? Almost all wrapped up, I hope?"

"Absolutely, sir," I said honestly. "I'm actually on my way to meet with the primary beneficiary right now. He'll be here in a few minutes."

"Marvelous." He beamed at me, reaching out to pat the side of my arm in a decidedly grandfatherly way, all warm,

and comforting, and supportive. “That has been a job well done. You’re exactly the sort of person we needed around here.”

Pride surged through me, my shoulders a little wider and my chest a little puffier, but it only lasted until I realized that my meeting with Foster was now two minutes sooner than it’d been before.

I rushed back to my office, cursing under my breath when some hot coffee splashed out and ran over my fingers, but I didn’t slow down. I needed to be ready for this, mentally and physically. After spending the rest of the time I had making sure all the papers were in order, I smoothed out my pencil skirt and then reminded myself that I had Tyler now.

This wasn’t a big deal.

My door opened, and as Foster walked in, it sure felt like a big deal. With those big green eyes, that thick hair, and the casual jeans with a button-up shirt he was wearing, he was still as attractive as ever. He didn’t make my heart race anymore, but he was a good-looking man and I had eyes. I couldn’t deny that I still thought he was hot.

“Hey, Shelby,” he said easily, reaching out to give my hand a quick, friendly shake. “How are you?”

“Good, thanks. I’d ask how you are, but I’m going to go ahead and just assume that you’re doing incredibly well after that deposit was made.”

He chuckled, shrugging one of his broad shoulders, and he took a seat. “You’d think so, but to tell you the truth, it’s been a bit of an adjustment.”

“A bit?”

He paused for a beat, then laughed and shook his head. “No, not a bit. A lot. A huge fucking adjustment that I can’t seem to get used to at all. Every time I think about that money, I get lightheaded. It doesn’t sound very macho to admit that, but it’s true. My inheritance is giving me health issues.”

“I bet.” I smiled and leaned back in my chair instead of passing over the paperwork right away. “Do you want to talk

about it?”

Those brilliantly green eyes hovered on mine for a beat. “Do I want to? Not really and yet strangely, whenever I get half a chance, I do end up talking about it. It’s weird.”

“It’s not weird, Foster. One day, you were living your life, and the next, you became one of the richest men around. I think it’s okay if that takes a minute to sink in.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, maybe. So what have you got for me today? You’re taking it all back, are you?”

“No one told you?” I joked with wide eyes before I laughed and pushed the folder toward him. “We’re not taking it back, but we need you to sign for receipt of the funds that were transferred and a few other documents.”

“I didn’t realize I’d have to sign so many things,” he mused, grinning at me. He put his fingertips on the folder and pulled it the rest of the way toward him. “How many pens do you go through to give people money?”

“A lot.” I handed one over to him. “I’m sorry if these meetings are an inconvenience, though.”

“They’re not. At all.” He lifted his gaze away from the paperwork to meet mine, and I felt a familiar little tug in my heart when he did.

Internally berating the silly organ, I reminded myself that Foster hadn’t wanted me and that Tyler did. The two men were a lot alike actually. They were both intelligent, well spoken, and funny. The difference, however, was that I refused to pine for someone who didn’t want me when there was someone wonderful out there who did.

“It’s just that I thought our last meeting would be the last one,” he said. “I don’t mind coming in here and I definitely don’t mind getting to see you when I do, but I am surprised at how many meetings it takes to get from point A to point B.”

I nodded, an understanding smile spreading on my lips. “I know. Our last meeting was the last one we needed to have before we could arrange for the deposit to be made, but

unfortunately, there are still t's to be crossed and i's to be dotted. The law is never simple."

"But it is the law." A moment passed between us before his gaze dropped back to the paperwork and he scanned it over before signing it. I felt a strange sense of sadness sinking in at the realization that we were both moving on.

"What exactly do you do now?" I asked, realizing I didn't even know what he did for a living. "Are you some big-shot businessman?"

He glanced up at me with a playful smile on his face. "I work at a dating agency, if you'd believe it. Funny, since I never even asked you out, huh?"

Surprise trickled through me. "Am I allowed to know which agency?"

He waggled his eyebrows and shook his head. "If I told you, I'd have to kill you. How about you? Do you enjoy working here?"

"I do." I grinned at him and then tried to drag the name of the agency out of him, but he stubbornly refused to tell me. Eventually, I let it go. I supposed it didn't matter. Even if he worked for Sight Unseen, which would've been way too much of a coincidence, I was using a fake name there and the last thing I wanted was for him to find out I had met the guy I was seeing through a blind-dating site.

Anyone else could know, but not him. Not Foster. I just wasn't ready for that.

The more we talked these days, the more comfortable I was with him, though, and the sadder I became about the fact that there was no possibility of us ever solving the answer to that what-if. I was excited about Tyler and the possibilities with him and I was still glad that Foster and I had talked about it that last time we'd seen each other, but I just didn't know.

It wasn't just about him, either. It was more a general kind of nostalgia about how things were going. Ashley was getting married. I was going from strength to strength in this job. I

found myself thinking about marriage a lot more often these days and what that would look like.

I'd never felt like more of an adult, and it was as scary as it was exciting.

"Are you okay?" Foster asked.

I nodded, clearing my throat. I tried to shake that sense of nostalgia. "I'm fine. I was just thinking about how long we've known each other and how strange it is that life brought us together again after all these years, and like this."

He chuckled. "The universe sure knew what it was doing when you became the person who gave me this news and guided me through all of this. You made it smooth and easy, so thanks for that."

"You're very welcome." I leaned over and pressed a finger against the papers. "We're going to need you to initial here, and then again there."

I pointed out all the parts where I needed his initials and his signature, and then it was done. Foster smiled, those eyes warming and crinkling a bit at the corners. "Thanks for all your hard work, Shelby. I appreciate it."

"It was no problem. You and your family made it easy." I got up when he did and walked him to the door, staying put before I opened it because I got the sense that he hadn't said everything yet that he wanted to say.

There was this faraway look in his eyes and he kept opening his mouth and then closing it again. After a few moments, he chuckled and shook his head. "Sorry. I'm not usually this indecisive about things, but these days, I'm second-guessing everything."

I frowned. "What are you second-guessing now?"

"Whether I should tell you how sorry I am that things never worked out between us." He flashed me a sheepish grin. "I am, you know. Sorry. I think we could've made it work."

"So do I, but we missed our time," I said softly, lifting my gaze to his and sticking out my hand again. "See you, Foster."

If you ever need to talk, give me a call. Just because we're not together doesn't mean we can't be friends."

He nodded, shook my hand, and left, and I stayed at the door for a minute after closing it behind him. All of this about seeing him was just so damn bittersweet, but it also felt like I was finally getting the closure I needed to start my love life over with a lot less baggage.

And that? That was a pretty freaking good thing.





I left Shelby's office with a clear understanding of why I'd liked her so much. She and I clicked. We saw the world in a very similar way and we'd always been able to talk easily.

At the same time though, I didn't have any real feelings for her anymore, now that I was so wrapped up in Amanda. I would just always have a special place for Shelby somewhere deep down inside, I guessed.

It didn't detract in any way from what I had—or could have—with Amanda, but Shelby still made me feel like I was twenty-one years old and thought I had it all figured out. A much simpler version of myself than this guy, who was constantly overwhelmed by his own damn bank account.

On my way to have coffee with Porter before I went to the office, I wondered when that would stop. Everyone kept telling me that this was normal, but jeez. Porter had worked for his money. He'd taken years to design his earbuds and then to develop them.

Me? I hadn't done anything. My grandfather—*our* grandfather—had died. Our *estranged* grandfather with whom I'd never spoken more than a few sentences.

Maybe that was what was making this so difficult to process. I'd been included in his will in a big way and my mother and brother hadn't been. Not only that, but I hadn't even fucking known the man. I just didn't know how I was

supposed to simply accept that he'd left me all this money for no reason other than my name.

Something I hadn't even chosen.

Once I'd parked, I shook myself out of it and tried to focus on the business ahead. Porter was already in the café, nursing a giant cup of pitch black coffee and looking thoughtful until he spotted me and grinned. I sat down after putting in an order at the counter.

"How's it going?" he asked. "You get everything signed?"

I shrugged. "I think so. Everything I had to sign today, anyway."

"How's your head? Still feeling like you're floating?"

"Yep." I scrubbed my hands over the sides of my face and inhaled deeply. "I need to get over it, though. I can't keep feeling this way. It's throwing me off with fucking everything and making me think like a wimp."

Porter looked back at me, a smirk starting on his lips before he wiped it clear and shook his head. "I just realized this isn't a good moment to joke about it. Look, I get it. The inheritance was sudden and unexpected, you've always had a hang-up about earning your keep and working hard, and to add insult to injury, you can't ask the old man why he did what he did."

"It's not a hang-up," I protested. "There's nothing wrong with being determined to get stuff done and to make your own way in the world. It's also known as independence, which is what pretty much everyone wants these days."

"Sure, but you refused to accept my money even when I had so much of it that sharing wouldn't have hurt at all. You even used to do my chores when I wasn't getting through them fast enough. It's a hang-up. Probably some kind of control issue, but the point is that if you want to get over this, you need to just accept it for what it is."

"And exactly what is it?"

“Our grandfather was an asshole. A snob who had his own hang-ups about control and took it so far that he died before he admitted he was wrong to cast Mom aside over Dad. Don’t be like him, Foster. Take the money that you would’ve gotten even if he had been in our lives and accept that there’s nothing you can do to change the past.”

Porter was the second person in as many weeks to warn me against being like my grandfather, and I was starting to think there was a reason for it. Ultimately, I didn’t think I was like him at all, but clearly, I had inherited some of his traits.

“So what you’re saying is that I have to stop being stubborn and questioning everything, and just accept it?”

He grinned. “Exactly. Control is great in some parts of our lives. The bedroom, for example, is an excellent place to exercise it if the girl is into it as well—”

“I didn’t need to know that about you.”

He rolled his eyes and chuckled. “Stop pretending you didn’t know already and that you’re not the same way. I know you are, but that’s beside the point. The point is that even if you give the money back, Priscilla is old as well. It’s only a matter of time until she passes, and then it’ll come right back to you. You can’t control that, Foster. None of us can. We’re all going to get old, we’re all going to die, and when we do, we leave everything we’ve got to whoever we choose. He chose you. Let it go.”

My phone rang and I glanced at the screen, seeing Avery’s name staring back at me. “I’ve got to take this. It’s the realtor.”

He inclined his head at me. “Buying an awesome apartment is a great way to accept what’s happening.”

“I agree.” I slid my thumb across the screen and pressed the phone to my ear. “What’s up, Avery?”

“You got the apartment,” he said happily. “Congratulations. We should celebrate. What are you up to tonight?”

“Celebrating, apparently.” I decided on the spot and shot a meaningful look at Porter. “We’ll meet at Crabhead’s at nine.”

“Nine?” he said disbelievingly. “Crabhead’s happy hour ends at eight.”

“Yeah, but I have to work late tonight to make up for the time I missed this morning.”

“Just tell your boss you’ll make it up tomorrow,” he said.

“I can’t tomorrow. Look, I’ll meet you at Crabhead’s at nine. Thanks for letting me know about the apartment.”

As I hung up, Porter arched an eyebrow at me. “You know Hope doesn’t care if you make it up tonight, right? Neither does Milena and they’re the only two people above you at the company.”

“I know, but I care. There’s a lot of stuff I need to get done and I’m going to get it done instead of being one of those guys who suddenly becomes rich and then blows off his responsibilities.”

Porter chuckled. “Yep. It’s a hang-up. Okay, Foster. You do your chores and the rest of us will meet at Crabhead’s for happy hour. You know it ends at eight, right?”

“Why are you guys so obsessed with happy hour? It’s not like either of you need the discount.”

He scoffed. “I’m not one of those guys who suddenly became rich and then stopped caring about saving money.”

I laughed. “Says the guy who bought a military-grade drone for no reason.”

“Hey, I had a reason.” He pumped his eyebrows at me. “I wanted it.”

I rolled my eyes at him, but then my coffee was up and I went to get it before settling in to discuss investment strategies with him. Porter had made something of a study of them after he’d sold his patent and the advice he had was invaluable.

Once we were done, I headed to the office and got to work, burying myself in everything I should’ve done this morning in an attempt to catch up and still make it to happy hour. While I was reviewing the profiles of clients who were struggling to find their perfect match, the box to enter the fake name people

used for the dates in order to locate their real profiles was *right there*.

I was even using it to check who my struggling clients had gone out with so far to see if I could determine what was going wrong. As I typed in yet another name, my fingers itched to delete it and type Amanda's instead.

All I had to do was type Amanda Ripple into that little box and I'd not only find out her real name, but I'd have access to her entire profile. Her answers to the questionnaire. Feedback she'd provided after the dates we'd had. Everything.

It was beyond tempting, but I resisted. It took everything I had, but by the time I packed up my stuff to meet the guys at the bar, I still hadn't looked. I sighed heavily as I shut down my computer, knowing that I was doing the right thing but so curious that I almost couldn't help myself.

Deliberately shoving my chair away from my desk before I caved, I got up and left, not sure if I was being stupid for not just looking. Either way, I could wrestle with it again tomorrow.

For now, I had the ass end of happy hour to catch.

When I got to Crabheads's, a Scottish-themed whiskey and cocktail bar where the servers wore kilts and there were bagpipes mounted on the walls, Avery, Kane, Porter, and some of our other friends were already there.

Kane started a slow clap when I approached their table. Grinning, he put his hands together and nudged Avery in the ribs to do the same. Porter soon joined in too, and then so did the others. I laughed and shook my head at them, but I still dipped into a low bow and put my hand up behind me.

Porter hooted with laughter. Avery chuckled. Kane stepped forward and extended his hand, giving mine a firm squeeze when I smacked it into his. "Congrats, man. I can't wait to see this place. After everything Avery told me and then finding out that you made an offer on the spot, I'm really fucking curious."

I shook his hand and then wagged my eyebrows at him. “You’ll have to wait and see, but I’ll tell you this much in advance. I’m not looking for a roommate. You’re not moving in with me.”

“I wasn’t going to ask.”

“Not yet, but when you see that place, you will.” I let go of his hand to greet the other guys, then ordered a double whiskey on the rocks. Then I sat down and told them some more about the apartment.

Avery kept interjecting with realtor-like facts. Square footage, the prime location, the pool, gym, spa, and playground as part of the amenities.

Eventually, Kane smacked the back of his head. “You’ve already sold the damn place. When are you booting out the old owners?”

“I don’t boot them out,” he said with a slight frown and a glance at me. “That’s not how it works, but they’re already not living there anymore. They’re not even coming back to pack up their own stuff. A moving company is doing it for them next week.”

Kane’s brows lifted as he turned to me and grinned. “Housewarming next weekend?”

I chuckled. “I won’t have moved in by then. Once we know the place is in my name, then we can talk about a housewarming.”

“It’s not like the bank has to approve a loan,” he said, but then sighed and backed down. “Fine, but we’re watching the game at your place from now on once you move in.”

“Way to stick me with the clean-up.”

Porter laughed. “That’s the cost of having a Batcave, bro. Sorry, not sorry.”

My head shook but the truth was that I didn’t really mind hosting. In fact, it was probably a good way of pulling myself out of this weird slump I was in.

Everything was looking up and coming up Foster. I just had to do what Porter had said and accept what had happened, but I had a feeling I would only be able to do that once I'd spoken to Amanda about it. Which I was planning on doing on our date tomorrow night.

I didn't know why it felt like I needed her input on this, but it did. Our brains worked in similar ways and I was hoping she would be able to give me a perspective I hadn't thought of just yet, but one that would make sense to me.

For the rest of the night, I tried to focus only on where I was and who I was, and I had fun with the guys. After our first few drinks, we made our way to the pool tables toward the back of the bar and I kicked ass, which helped with the having fun bit—until a striking, redheaded beauty came up and put her hand on my shoulder.

I messed up the shot I'd been taking, sinking the black prematurely and losing my first game of the night. *Shit.*

“You wanna buy me a drink?”

I turned to frown at the pretty girl with the sultry voice. “No, I don't. Thanks for the offer, but I'm seeing someone.”

Kane and Avery shot me looks that said they thought I'd lost my mind, but I hadn't. I just wasn't interested at all. The only woman I wanted right now was Amanda.

Porter, however, nodded his approval at me when the girl shrugged and went up to Avery next, and he grinned as he came to stand beside me. “It's a good feeling, right?”

“What?”

“Feeling like you've found the love of your life.”

My brows shot up, but I didn't disagree. I wouldn't say that I knew for sure that she was the love of my life, but feeling like I *might've* found just that? It was a good feeling. One I didn't plan on ruining over a possible one-night stand with a smoking-hot woman I didn't want right now anyway.





**A**shley was helping me get ready for our fourth date, the last one before the big reveal. As she braided my hair, my friend coached me for what was known as the run-through for the next time when he'd actually see me.

"Talk to him about it," she said wisely. "Be open and honest about your fears and your expectations, and don't shy away from the hard stuff. If there's anything you're worried about, tell him."

Since I couldn't nod while her fingers plucked at my hair, I simply lifted my gaze to meet hers in the mirror. "I'm not particularly worried about what he looks like. I already know he doesn't smell bad and that he takes care of himself. I mean, he shaves and his hair feels neat enough, so I don't think he's going to wind up looking like a vampire who's been living underground for the last hundred years, but I'm a little bit nervous about what he's going to think of me."

"That's fair," she said patiently. "Nerves are natural for this situation, though. Just don't let them hold you back. Do you know that I've heard many of these dating in the dark relationships almost fall apart because people decline the fifth date simply for being too afraid to reveal themselves?"

"Wow. I guess the people who work there must have their hands full with everyone's insecurities, but I won't let mine stop me. I'm just nervous."

She finished tying my hair and then dipped down so her cheek was pressed to mine as she stared at me in the reflection.

“You are gorgeous. If he doesn’t see that, then he never deserved you anyway. Remember that.”

I nodded, leaning into her for a moment. I took a deep breath and then scooted forward. “Am I done?”

She smiled at me. “You are. Have fun tonight, Shel. There’s something magical about this last blind date before you’ll get to see each other. It’s the one you’re going to look back on most and with the fondest memories. Make every minute count.”

I slid my purse off the dresser, nodding at her. I turned to give her a hug goodbye. After leaving her house, I headed over to an ice-cream shop this time, already knowing we were both going to be complete messes by the time we left.

In order to guarantee utter darkness, the front of the parlor had been blocked out with heavy drapes in the windows and all the lights were off inside. I was shown in by an employee, then told they’d be serving our sundaes in a few as I got settled in my seat.

It was still disconcerting not to be able to see even my hand in front of my eyes, but I somehow sensed that Tyler was already here even before he said anything. “I’ve been looking forward to this. How are you, Amanda?”

“I’m okay. A little bit nervous, but otherwise okay. You?”

A deep chuckle filled the air around me, and I shivered, still completely surprised by the physical effect this man had on me. “I’m good. No cold feet yet. Anything interesting happen to you these last few days?”

I shrugged. “Not really. I did have some courage talked into me by those friends of mine who have been through this, though. You?”

“A few things,” he said. “Some that I’ve been meaning to talk to you about, actually, but we’ll get to that later.”

“No, it’s fine. Let’s get to it now. I’m too curious to wait. What’s going on?”

I heard a soft sigh from him and there was a moment of silence before he spoke again. “I’ve recently had some big changes in my life and I’m stuck in this weird funk even though I should be overjoyed.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, frowning as my head tilted in thought. “What’s keeping you from being overjoyed about it?”

“I just don’t feel like I’ve earned it.”

Immediately, I understood exactly where he was coming from. “I know you can’t give me any specific details, but just from that, I think I know why you feel the way you do. I’m the same way. I don’t mind working hard, but I want whatever I have to be mine. To have been earned.”

“Exactly that,” he said. “I had a feeling you’d understand.”

“I do.” I thought it over for another minute. “Do you feel like someone else has earned whatever this is? Like it’s similar to a promotion that someone else who is more deserving has been passed over for, or is it more of a victimless crime kind of situation?”

“Well, when you put it like that, it’s more victimless crime. There are repercussions to others, but I’m taking care of that.”

“If you’re taking care of the other people who have been affected, then I think it’s okay not to have earned it. I mean, I’m like you. As I said, I want to be able to claim ownership of my life and what I made of it, but at the same time, when opportunity comes knocking, we can’t be too stubborn to take it.”

He chuckled. “Too many people have told me that I’m being stubborn, so I guess it has to be true. The thing is that I have taken it, though. The opportunity. I’ve taken it and I’m not going to give it back. I’m just having a tough time coming to terms with having taken it.”

“Do you really want my advice?”

“Yep.”

“Then take ownership,” I said easily. “At this point, I don’t feel like it’s about whether you’ve earned it as much as it is

about you giving yourself a hard time about it. Just take ownership. You got this thing. You took it. It's yours. End of story. As long as you didn't steal it or hurt anyone by taking it, then I don't see why it should be a problem."

There was a beat of silence before he started laughing. "Take ownership. I like that. It's similar to what my brother suggested, but with different reasoning. I think I'm finally starting to get it."

"Good," I said. "Can we talk about my thing now?"

"Of course. I didn't realize you had a thing, or I would've said we should start with that." A door creaked open somewhere and I shot up straight, but it turned out it was just the server bringing our sundaes.

I still didn't know how the people who worked at all of these places managed serving us in the dark, but I was imagining night vision goggles or something. After hearing the soft clicks of glass and spoons being set out, there were more padded footsteps and then the door closed again.

"No, it's okay that we started with yours," I said. "In fact, I wasn't sure how to talk to you about this before we talked about your thing. Ultimately, though, I suppose it's just about being honest and making ourselves vulnerable. So here goes."

He remained quiet, giving me a second to compose myself before I came out with it. "On our next date, we'll be seeing each other for the first time."

"Yeah, I'm pumped about it. Aren't you?"

"Well, I am. I'm really looking forward to finally seeing you, but here's the thing. I don't care about what you look like. You could be a bridge troll and I'd still be interested in finding out where this could go, but I'm nervous about what you're going to think of me. It's gotten me thinking that I don't know the first thing about what the girls look like that you usually go for."

"It didn't work out with any of the girls I usually go for," he said frankly. "Can I be honest here?"

"Please."

“I don’t give a shit what you look like.” I blinked at the force of his words. “I already know enough about you to know that you’re beautiful to me. I also know how much I want you and I don’t see that changing. What is it that’s got you worried?”

“I’m... bigger.” I took a deep breath, and when he didn’t say anything, I decided to just get it over with. “I know I’m pretty, but in a girl-next-door way. I’m not a bombshell and I’m not the girl who turns heads when she walks into the room.”

After keeping quiet for another moment, he let out a big breath. “Last night, I went out with some friends.”

I frowned, a little thrown by the change of subject when I’d just bared my fears to him. “Okay?”

“You’ll understand where I’m going with this in a minute,” he said. “So I’m out with my friends and we’re shooting pool, and this girl comes up and hits on me.”

My stomach tightened. “Tyler, I don’t—”

“No, let me finish, please?” he asked gently. “There’s a reason I’m even telling you about this and it’s not because I’m boasting about being hit on. It’s because the woman who hit on me had a body like you’d find on the cover of a fashion magazine.”

“This isn’t making me feel any better,” I mumbled.

He chuckled. “It will, just bear with me. So this woman leans into me and you know what I thought?”

“What?”

“*She’s so hard.*”

“Excuse me?”

“That’s what I thought. That she’s so hard. Having her pressed up to me felt like I was hugging my brother. I already know that you’ve got curves, Amanda, but that’s one of the things that turns me on about you. I like that you’re soft. To me, it’s feminine. It’s sexy.”

A smile spread slowly on my lips. “Really?”

“Yep. I’m hard enough for the both of us. Don’t worry about that.”

“You don’t mean—”

He laughed. “No, I didn’t mean that. Not right now anyway. You could probably change that pretty fast if you decided to come sit next to me, though.”

I flushed all the way to the roots of my hair. “We should probably eat some ice cream before it melts.”

“Fine, but if you spill some on yourself, just point me in the right direction and I’ll lick it off.”

My insides started bubbling with heat again and my trembling hands didn’t help when I started on the sundae. I ended up dripping some down the front of my top and on my chest, and when I squealed as the ice cold blobs melted, I suddenly became aware of his presence next to me.

“Here,” he murmured as he scooted in beside me. “I’ll lick it off. I was hoping this would happen. Reach for my head and put it where the ice cream is.”

Moving in a bit of a daze, I did what he’d said, slowly reaching out until my fingertips grazed his cheeks. I slid my fingers into his thick hair, guiding his head forward and down before I dropped my head back and let him lick me clean.

It was unlike anything I’d ever done before and so brazen I couldn’t believe I was doing it now, but as soon as his soft lips touched my collarbone, I decided that I should be brazen more often. His tongue darted out, feathering across my skin and making me moan as my hands tightened in his hair.

Before we could take it any further though, that infernal red light came on and I sighed. “Damn it.”

“Next time,” he murmured against my skin before finding my lips with his own and giving me a heated, hard kiss goodbye. “I’ll see you soon, Amanda.”

“See you soon.”

After I left the dining area of the parlor and stepped back into the light, I darted into the bathroom to see chocolate syrup smeared all over my neck and even in my hair. *So much for looking good!*

I couldn't bring myself to care, though. I could still feel his kisses on my skin and that was more than enough to make another shower worth it once I got home.





FOSTER

**H**ope slid into my office the next day at work and shut my door behind her. Her hands behind her butt, she leaned back against the door and gave me a wide smile. “So, date number four. How did it go?”

I laughed and motioned for her to come in. “It was amazing. Why are you acting like a kid who got caught doing something naughty, though?”

She scoffed. “I’m not! I just wasn’t sure if you’d welcome my prying. Porter said to ease up on you. According to him, your feelings are real and we need to give you space to work through them.”

“Of course he wants to give me space now,” I joked. “Feelings are involved. God forbid we have to talk about those.”

She chuckled and nodded hard as she crossed the room and dropped into the chair opposite mine. “You’re telling me. The guy is allergic to talking about those. I mean, I thought we’d made some strides when we were dating in the dark and then after, when we were going through that rough patch, but nope. He’s back to preferring showing over telling.”

I grimaced. “You two really need to stop giving me so much information.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t be such a prude. We fell in love with the world watching. People ask us these questions all the time now and you don’t even need to ask.”

“Probably because I watched you fall in love long before the world did,” I said. “I also need to see you guys every day, which the rest of the world doesn’t, so spare me the details.”

She sighed like she was super disappointed in me, but then she smiled. “Fine. I thought it might make you feel more comfortable to give me details if I gave them first, but just because you don’t want details doesn’t mean I don’t want them. You’ve got to give me more than just that the date was amazing.”

I saved the document I’d been working on and leaned back in my chair. My eyebrow cocked as I looked at her. “What do you want to know?”

“How did it go? The fourth date is a big one. I’m sure you had the talk about seeing each other at the next one. Everyone does. So how did it go?”

I shrugged. “It went fine. She was a little bit nervous about the reveal, but I think I managed to make her feel better about it.”

“And you?” she asked. “Are you nervous?”

I snorted. “Why should I be? I’m hot.”

Hope laughed. “Well, at least we know you don’t have any confidence issues, but seriously. Are you nervous?”

“No.” My heart sped up a little and I scowled. “Well, I wasn’t, but I think I might be getting nervous now, so thanks for that.”

She lowered her head closer to her shoulder and pursed her lips at me. “This isn’t about what I think. It’s all about you and I didn’t mean whether you’re nervous about your looks or hers. I meant whether you’re nervous about finally being able to get to know her when she’s right in front of you. What if you’re surprised by her?”

“Why would I be surprised by her?” I groaned. “What’s going on, Hope? You’ve been acting weird all along and you’re doing it again.”

“I’m not doing anything,” she protested. “I just want you to be prepared. It’s a big moment.”

It hit me then. “You’re still not over finding out it was Porter all along, are you? That’s what this is really about.”

She held my gaze for a long moment before she let out a deep breath. “All I’m saying is that the reveal is a big moment. You need to be prepared for any eventuality.”

“I don’t care what she looks like,” I said, thinking back to the sweet taste of her skin and full swells of her breasts under my lips. “Trust me, I’m into her. Very much so.”

“I believe you, but what about Shelby?”

I frowned, banishing the memories of last night for now. “What about her?”

“You and I haven’t had a chance to talk about her, and I know you had a crush on her before. You’ve also seen her a couple more times now, so are you over her? Do you still have a crush on her?”

“I don’t,” I said honestly. I considered my next words carefully before I said them. “I really did like her and I wish her all the best, but as much as I think part of me will always wonder what things would’ve been like with her, I don’t have a crush on her anymore.”

A strange flicker of apprehension sparked behind Hope’s eyes. “You don’t?”

“No, I don’t. Look, to tell you the truth, what I have with Amanda is a lot like what I used to think life with Shelby would be like if we were dating. We have a lot of similar qualities and they’re both sweet, intelligent women, but I’m with Amanda now and that means that I’ve had to stop thinking about Shelby that way.”

The weird look on her face intensified. “I really liked Parker before I found out he was Porter, but I still had dreams about Porter. You can’t tell me you’ve managed to just get over a woman you’ve had a crush on for so long.”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you.” I leaned forward and slid my elbows onto my desk. “There’s a big difference between you and Porter and me and Shelby. She and I never became friends, let alone best friends. We haven’t stayed in touch or talked at all since I graduated. I haven’t had a crush on her all this time. I had a crush on her then, it went away, and when she unexpectedly reappeared in my life in the last place I thought I’d see her, it caught me off guard for a minute, but that’s where it ends.”

“Okay,” she said slowly and unconvincingly as she got up. “Good luck with your next date, Foster. I hope it goes well.”

Before I could ask her again what the hell was going on with her, she fled from my office like her butt was on fire. I sighed, shaking my head, and turned back to my computer. Hope would tell me what was going on with her sooner or later. I was sure of it.

I suspected her apprehension was simply because of her own experience and I couldn’t exactly judge her for that. Not when I’d had such a big role to play in her confusion and eventual heartbreak before I’d helped him make it right.

As I got to work, I was more tempted than ever to look up Amanda’s information on the system, though. Something about that conversation with Hope had left me feeling unsettled, and my fingers hovered above the keyboard to type in her name.

Just as I was about to give in and do it, my door burst open and Layla came rushing in, looking like she was close to tears. I frowned at our latest client manager, waving her into the seat Hope had vacated.

“What’s up, Layla? Just breathe. Whatever you did, I’m sure we can fix it.”

She swung her teary gaze to mine. “I think I might’ve set up a client with his stepsister.”

I sighed. *So much for looking up my own date.*

“Okay. Why don’t you take a deep breath and start at the beginning? Everything is fine, Layla. You’ve only been here

for a few weeks and you've been doing a great job. Even if what you think is true, I'll contact the clients and we'll explain. Just talk me through it, okay?"

I spent the rest of the day with her, eventually finding out that her suspicion was untrue, but then I walked her through the system again so that we could avoid her making that very mistake in the future. By the time I got to my own work, I was so pressed for time that I couldn't make any to look up Amanda, but I was still thinking about it when I left for the day.

That night, I started packing up my apartment. A couple of days ago, I'd given my notice to my landlord and then, just as I was on my way home earlier, he let me know he was letting me out of my lease at the end of the month.

It turned out that he'd already found a new tenant and that he could charge this guy more than I was paying. After putting in a call to Avery, my move was now set to happen in just a couple of weeks.

Although I'd been uncertain if it was the right move before, I'd taken my mother, Porter, and Amanda's words to heart and I'd decided to let go of my insecurities about the inheritance.

It was time to just accept what had happened. To take ownership of my new life unapologetically and to make the best of it. The fact of the matter was that everything in my life was changing, but it was for the better.

I had been the only one fretting about the inheritance coming only to me instead of it being split three ways between my mother, brother, and me. I had also been the only one with issues about spending the money I hadn't earned.

After taking all of these opinions on board and having a talk with my finance guy, that investment manager Porter had suggested, I'd decided it was time I start embracing all this instead of fighting it. Apparently, even if I made a string of bad decisions, I'd still be financially stable for the rest of this life and the next.

The investment guy had talked me through how he'd set up my finances and the reality was that I was good. All that was left now was for me to start enjoying it.

As I packed, I considered the best way to do that. Other than moving, I was also thinking about finally doing some traveling.

Perhaps taking a trip to Paris to celebrate everything that had happened. If I did though, I'd want to at least invite Amanda. It wouldn't be the same without her, and once our next date was done, I was hoping she was going to be a permanent fixture in my life anyway.

*I wonder if I could give Hope money to buy a plane ticket on my behalf in Amanda's real name.* That way, I'd have the ticket ready to surprise her with and I wouldn't be breaking any rules to do it, but in the end, I decided that was a bad idea.

Amanda was too much like me in that respect. If I simply bought her a ticket she didn't feel like she'd earned or might've wanted to pay for herself, there was every chance that she'd simply tear it up right in my face.

I chuckled, shelving the idea of taking her to Paris until after I'd had the opportunity to talk to her about it. As I kept packing though, I daydreamed about kissing her in front of the Eiffel Tower and I ended up having to have a cold shower because of it.

The images in my head were beautiful, though. Beautiful and hot as hell. The only problem? In my mind right now, Amanda looked a lot like Shelby and I had to get a handle on that before it could go any further.





SHELBY

Ashley's wedding shower was going off without a hitch. I looked around the bright red and yellow gerberas and the patterned rugs that had been laid out on the greenhouse floor. A long table stretched from one side of the greenhouse to the other. The cheerful flowers surrounded us and others hung in baskets from the ceiling.

An armchair was placed at the head of the table, a throne for the bride-to-be within easy reach of the table of gifts off to one side. Punk rock from the early two-thousands flowed from the speakers, and I smiled as I took it all in, watching as she drank a cup of punch and laughed with a group of her guests.

"Shelby, the punch bowl is looking a little low. Will you refill it before we sit down for lunch and the game?"

I blinked hard as I spun to face Ashley's mom. "Of course. Have you checked with the kitchen about the food, or should I pop in there when I'm done with the punch?"

"Alice is on her way to the kitchen," she assured me. "One of the perks of being a co-host and not *the* host is that you don't have to do everything yourself, rushing from one thing to the next. Don't worry, honey. If you'll get the punch, Alice will make sure the food will be served when it's supposed to."

I nodded and returned her smile before heading to the back room attached to the greenhouse. Since they rented this place out for all kinds of events, the back room was set up as an offsite kitchen and storeroom with a fridge, all kinds of cutlery and crockery, and in our case, jugs filled with extra punch.

After grabbing one, I spotted a bag of pretzels lying open on the counter beside it and took that too, figuring that I might as well refill the snack bowls while I was at it. This was my first time hosting a wedding shower, and even as a co-host with Ashley's mom and sister, I was still super busy.

My mind was on ten things at any one time, checking and rechecking my mental checklist to make sure that we weren't forgetting anything. Everyone wanted this day to be perfect for her, and no one more than me.

Even in the midst of all that though, I kept finding myself thinking about Tyler. In just a few days, I would be meeting him in person and that seemed to be the only thing I could really focus on. We would've done it sooner, but he was moving and I had this wedding, which meant we had to wait.

It made sense and there was nothing wrong with it, but I was just about *obsessing* over the reveal date, how long it was taking to get there, and how it was going to go. So much so that when I reached the punch bowl, I caught myself a second before I poured the pretzels into the punch bowl and the punch into the pretzel dish.

Stopping short, I inhaled deeply, swapped the two so that they went into the correct containers, and then glanced up to check that no one had seen how obviously distracted I was. As I looked up, I found myself meeting Ashley's questioning gaze. I sighed, shrugged at her, and then shot her a thumbs-up.

She arched a brow at me from across the greenhouse and I smiled, shaking my head to show her there was nothing to worry about. Ashley frowned before she turned back to her friends and I mentally wiped my forehead.

*Whew. That was a close call.*

"Alright, everyone," Alice said, squeezing her hands together in front of her chest. She smiled and approached the table. "If you'll take your seats, lunch will be served shortly, and while we're waiting, we're going to play a little game."

Some of the women groaned while others grinned. Ashley had wanted the shower to be as showery as a shower could be.

We'd dressed her up and had toilet paper and aluminum foil on hand to *design* a wedding dress on her later. She had a bright pink sash on that said *This Bride Kicks Ass*. We'd planned a whole bunch of games, and the music and punch gave it all a nice relaxed atmosphere.

I moved toward the table with the others just as Alice started explaining the game. "We're starting with a game called 'Don't Say Bride.' For those who haven't played the game before, the aim is to have wedding-related conversations but without using the word *bride*."

As I sat down, I tried my best to focus on what she was saying, but my mind kept wandering back to Tyler. The women around me settled in, and since most of them had been talking about weddings anyway, the conversation and laughter kept flowing, but I was too distracted to pay much attention to what was being said.

"Shelby." Ashley's quiet voice pulled me out of my thoughts. I smiled, glancing at her where she was sitting in her armchair on my right. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." I lifted a hand to wave it at her, forcing my smile to become even wider. "Just trying to keep on top of everything."

She nodded, but the slight narrowing of her eyes told me that she knew there was more to it. Around us, girls started squealing and pointing at one of the other bridesmaids, and the girl blushed bright red as she drank the rest of the punch.

"Okay, so our first player is out," Alice announced. "Maryann lasted all of three minutes before she said the word. Let's go, ladies. I wonder who's going to be next."

The conversation started up again, with everyone trying to lead each other to saying the forbidden word. It was hilarious watching them trying to dodge it, but even though I knew exactly what they were doing, I was so distracted that I still ended up slipping as soon as Alice turned to me.

"Shelby, tell my mom about those sashes we're going to be wearing on the day," she said. "What do they say again?"

I frowned. “Team Bride?”

Her blue eyes widened and she cheered, laughing. The girls started squealing and pointing at me this time. My cheeks caught fire and I chugged the rest of my punch in an attempt to get them to stop looking at me.

“You walked right into that one,” Ashley murmured at my side, her expression puzzled and curious. She turned to face me while the others kept playing the game. “What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing.” I shrugged, but she arched a steep brow at me and shook her head.

“You need to get your head in the game, my friend. There are a lot more games coming up and you’re going to lose all of them if you can’t stay focused. Is this about the reveal date with Tyler?”

I hesitated for a moment before I nodded. “I’m nervous, but we don’t have to talk about it right now. Let’s just enjoy today. *Your* day. We’ll worry about me again tomorrow.”

She chuckled. “I am enjoying today, but that doesn’t mean I’m the only person I want to talk about. It’s exhausting when no one wants to talk to you about anything else, so tell me what’s up. What are you so nervous about?”

“Meeting him,” I admitted. “He made me feel a lot better about it during our last date, but now the time is finally approaching, and I’m all jittery about it.”

“Don’t be,” she said firmly. “Some nerves are natural, but you need to remember that he loves you exactly the way you are. He’s not going to be disappointed and he’s not going to turn around and walk away.”

“Love is a strong word.” I stared back at her, wondering if she was right. “I know he likes me, but I’m not sure about *love*.”

She snorted. “You wouldn’t have gotten this far into the process if he wasn’t at least a little bit in love with you. That’s just how it works. By the time you get to the reveal, your feelings for each other have evolved to the point where it’s no

longer just mild interest or like. It's love, even if it's not such a deep love that you can't live without each other just yet."

As she finished, her mom called her name, grabbing her attention as the food was served. We'd opted for grilled chicken and avocado wraps with a side salad, and her mom wanted her to make a speech while the plates were being carried in.

Ashley stood up, made a few jokes, and thanked everyone for coming, and I retreated back into my brain, still thinking about Tyler and wondering if he was a little bit in love with me. In the end, I decided to trust Ashley.

I didn't know if he was in love with me, but I did know that he really liked me, and that was enough. I smiled, determined to put him out of my head for the rest of the shower. One by one, the girls fell out of the game while we ate, and by the time our plates were collected, Alice had been declared the winner and she announced the next game.

I lasted a bit longer in that one, then blushed profusely when a lady peddling adult toys came to visit. Thankfully, her demonstration of vibrators against people's hands and making the women taste different flavors of lube went down well.

Ashley loved it, and there was lots of laughter to go around. Once the sex lady left, we wrapped the toilet paper and foil around our bride, took a ton of pictures, played another game, and then watched as she opened her gifts.

I helped her mom and sister carry them to her mom's car after, and by the time we went home, I was pooped. Ashley hugged me tight before we climbed into our cars, murmuring against my hair as she squeezed me.

"Thanks for everything today, Shel. Stop stressing about Tyler, okay? He's going to love you if he doesn't already because you're the best."

I hugged her back. "You're welcome. I hope it was everything you wanted it to be and that your mom isn't too traumatized by all those toys."

She chuckled. “Traumatized? I doubt it. In fact, I’m pretty sure she’s going to put in an order with her tonight. I sure am.”

I laughed, cringing a little as I imagined what it’d be like to put in an order and then have to accept delivery. “Better you than me.”

She smacked my shoulder, still chuckling as she let go of me. “You should order something for yourself too. It’ll take the edge off your nerves.”

“So will preparing myself and knowing I have something to wear.”

Ashley sighed but nodded and gave me one last hug. “Call me if you need help.”

With that, she released me again and got into her mom’s car. I waved until they were out of the parking lot before heading home myself. When I got there, I didn’t waste any time getting to my closet and surveying my options.

I was exhausted, but I knew I’d keep being too nervous to really relax if I couldn’t figure out what I was going to wear. All my life, I’d done better if I’d felt properly prepared, and this was no exception.

As I stood in front of my open closet though, I realized I had exactly nothing that felt appropriate. I sighed. I wanted to look my best, but I didn’t have anything that made me feel the way I did in my maid of honor dress, and that was what I was after.

That confidence I’d felt in the dress shop that day.

Eventually, after double-checking that I really didn’t have anything that made me feel remotely like that, I glanced at my phone and debated calling Ashley. After the day she’d had though, I didn’t want to bother her with a phone call, so I sent a text instead.

**Me: I need to go shopping before the reveal.**

She replied almost immediately, and I grinned at my screen, thankful for a friend that always made time for me. Even now.

**Ash: I'm in. Tomorrow. I'll meet you at the mall at noon. NO WEDDING TALK!!!**

I laughed at the final sentence, vowing that I'd give her the break she so obviously wanted. It was the least I could do, and besides, a girls' shopping trip would be good for us both at this point. Even if she was going to choose something for me to wear that I'd never even have considered otherwise, but at the end of the day, that was why I was happy she'd volunteered to come with me.





## FOSTER

**M**y grandmother's house was enormous. As I crawled up her paved driveway, I marveled at the palace she lived in, unable to picture my mother or any other kid growing up here.

The expansive front lawns and gardens were manicured and landscaped to the extent that there wasn't even a leaf out of place on the grass. Three stories of house loomed ahead, with some greenery on the walls. It was a damn impressive place, but even from the driveway, it seemed too big. Too cold. I definitely couldn't imagine a ball or a swing set on these lawns, let alone kids running around at a birthday party.

Once again wondering why I'd accepted her invitation for coffee, I sighed and pushed my car into park in front of the garages. Ducking down, I peered at the house through my windshield, shaking my head at myself at the thought that this entire place was currently occupied by only one person.

*She could house an entire school in there.*

I'd been worried about her when I'd found out I was the primary beneficiary of his estate, but obviously, Shelby hadn't been kidding when she'd said my grandmother had been taken care of. At least when it came to her, I now knew I had nothing to feel guilty about. The money I had inherited must only have been the tip of the iceberg.

I drew in a deep breath and opened my door, ready to get this over with. I had no idea what to expect and after that conversation I'd had with my mom, I didn't even know if I

should be here. All I knew was that when Priscilla had called, sounding all frail and sad, I hadn't been able to turn her down.

The wide front doors swung open—both of them—and a suited man stepped out before she appeared. My grandmother was dressed in black from head to toe. She folded her hands in front of her as she smiled faintly and waited for me to ascend the stairs.

I did, returning her smile but feeling so awkward that I didn't really know what the hell to do with my hands or eyes. The tiles beneath my feet had elaborate blue and orange designs on them, and from what I could see of the foyer, I'd have been able to fit my entire old apartment in there.

The suited man waited beside my grandmother, but I took a quick glance at her instead of wondering too much about him for the moment. I remembered meeting her years ago, but it'd been a long time and it showed.

The woman I remembered was not the woman standing at the top of the stairs waiting for me now. I slowed my pace to give myself some extra time before I'd have to speak to her. Deep lines were etched into pale, thin-looking skin, her green eyes haunted and sad.

Her body was tiny and sheathed in black. It looked even smaller than it probably really was. Even the smile she was holding on her face was tiny, and seeing it—all of it—made a profound sense of sadness wash over me.

This woman had hurt my mother deeply, but I couldn't hold it against her. Not right now anyway. Especially since I saw her fidgeting with her hands, her eyes tightening with nerves as I approached her.

“Hello, Foster. Thank you for coming. Would you like to come inside?”

I nodded, so taken aback by how her voice seemed even weaker now than it had on the phone that it took me a moment to find my own. “Of course. Thank you for inviting me.”

She nodded and turned, sweeping a hand out ahead of her as she motioned for me to follow. The suited man closed the

doors behind us once I'd gone in with my grandmother, and he nearly bumped into my ass since I'd slammed to a stop as soon as I'd walked in.

The place had seemed massive from the outside, but from in here, it was even bigger. The space was cavernous and old-school elegant, with golden chandeliers hanging from the ceilings and thick drapes in the windows.

A soft sigh from my side made me glance at my grandmother, and I was surprised to see her smiling a little wider now. "It feels like walking into a mausoleum, doesn't it?"

I blinked and cleared my throat, my head shaking even though I didn't disagree with her. "No, uh, it's nice. It's really nice."

She chuckled and canted her head, her eyes seemingly all-knowing as they rested firmly on mine. "Once upon a time, it was nice. Now, it's too quiet. Too outdated. I've been thinking about modernizing, but Ruben here thinks it's a bad idea."

I glanced at the suited man—Ruben—who didn't say anything in his own defense. Didn't even look at her, in fact. Priscilla rolled her eyes, smiled at me, and jerked her chin at one of the many doors leading off the entrance hall.

"Let's go sit down. Ruben will tell Martha that you're here and they'll bring us a pot of coffee." She started walking to the door and I realized then that although she gave off that sense of haunted sadness, her gait was confident, her chin held high, and her voice sure.

Clearly, my grandmother was pretty bad ass. Sad and grieving, but very much in charge. The queen of her very own mausoleum. *I mean, castle.*

Curious about this woman who had raised my mother, I followed her into what appeared to be a TV room, and again, surprise washed over me. I'd expected to have coffee in some kind of stiff, formal lounge but this space was comfortable.

Lived in, even.

There was a little knitted blanket next to the armchair she took a seat on. The TV was on but muted and broadcasting a well-known British drama series. Priscilla sat down, covered herself in the blanket, and took a sip of the glass of water that had been standing on the coffee table next to her.

“So,” she said once she’d swallowed, those green eyes swinging back to mine. “You must be wondering why I asked you to come here today.”

I nodded, taking a seat on the sofa across from her. I leaned forward with my elbows propped on my knees. “Yeah, uh, I’m glad to be here, but I am a bit confused.”

She inclined her head, sat back in the armchair, and folded her hands on her lap. “Foster didn’t want to renovate, but it’s mine now. I think it’s time.”

My gaze dropped away from the chandeliers and the dark art on the walls to settle on hers again. “You want to renovate?”

“I do.” She motioned around the room, her eyes growing sad again, but she powered through. “Out with the old and in with the new, I say. Besides, I’ll be gone eventually and then this place will belong to you, your mother, and your brother. The last thing I want is to leave you with a house that won’t sell because it looks like it was last updated in the twenties.”

I frowned at her. “Is that why you asked me to come here today? To discuss your own estate?”

“No.” She glanced at the closed door and took a deep breath before she looked up at me. “I invited you here today because I thought coffee and cookies would be a good excuse for a nice chat.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “You just want to talk?”

She paused for a beat before she nodded. “It gets lonely here these days, and not only since your grandfather passed. This just felt like the right time to finally have one of our grandchildren here. God knows, it’s been a long time since we’ve had a child in this house. Over thirty years since even our own visited.”

“Yeah, I talked to my mom about you.”

The corners of my grandmother’s mouth turned down. “Did you happen to mention to her how sorry I am?”

“I, uh, I just told her that we spoke. I wouldn’t mind mentioning it to her, but I’m sure she’d rather hear it from you.”

A faraway look crept into her eyes and her teeth sank into her bottom lip. “Has she told you that we used to be close, her and I?”

“Uh, no? Not really, but I got the sense that it was hard for her to talk about it.”

A sad smile lifted the corners of her lips again as she refocused on me. “It’s not easy for me either. We’ve both made our mistakes, but it’s true. We used to be so close. When she was little, she was my best friend and I was hers. We did everything together.”

“Wow.” My heart broke a little just imagining it.

Mom and I were close, and so were she and Porter. If we were all suddenly just out of each other’s lives, it would fucking suck. “I’m sure she misses you.”

My grandmother let out a quiet, long breath and shook her head. “I’m not so sure about that anymore, but I do miss her. Your grandfather used to travel a lot when your mom was growing up, and whenever he wasn’t home, it was just her and I. Sometimes when I walk past her room, I still peek in to check on her and it hits me all over again that she hasn’t been home in half a lifetime.”

My head lowered slowly to one side. Pity and sympathy mingled in the center of my soul. “That’s horrible.”

She chuckled. “I see you’re just as honest as she has always been, and yes. It is horrible.”

“So why didn’t you do something about it?” I asked without even trying to stop myself. “I mean, I get that your husband had a problem with her, but you obviously didn’t.

Why didn't you see her away from the house or come visit us at our place?"

"I should have," she conceded without hesitating at all. "Unfortunately, I'm only realizing now that he's gone how big my many mistakes were. At the time, I thought the most important thing I could do was to support my husband."

"What about your daughter?"

Her eyes grew watery as she stared at me, looking almost hopeless as she lifted one of her narrow shoulders in a shrug. "I should've supported her, but Foster was proud. I really thought that eventually, he would miss her too and we would reach out to her, but it just never happened."

"All because of his pride?" I scoffed, not wanting to make her feel even worse than she clearly already was. "All this pain was caused by nothing more than that? No offense, but that seems ridiculous to me."

"I don't blame you, but I'm glad to see that you're not the same way. From where I'm sitting, your mother did an excellent job raising you not to fall into that particular trap."

I spread my hands on my thighs and rubbed them up and down to keep from saying something that would achieve nothing more than to hurt a grieving old woman more than she already was. "Was he always so proud?"

"No." That faraway look came back into her eyes and she smiled. "Believe it or not, he was a wonderful man when I met him. I know you might not feel the same way, but he was still a wonderful man when he died. He simply didn't always show it."

I definitely didn't feel the same way, but I also didn't feel the need to confirm it for her. Instead, I kept quiet and let her talk. "When his father passed away, he inherited a lot of money. It was so important to him to take it seriously, to build a business that would become an empire and to become a real pillar of the community."

"So the money went to his head?" I wanted to scoff again, but I didn't. "Isn't that a story for the ages?"

She brought her gaze back to mine and nodded slowly. “The money was important to him, but so were social standing and appearances. When your mother chose your father, he couldn’t handle the embarrassment of her seeing someone outside of our social circle. Unfortunately, that embarrassment only got worse when people found out she had chosen him over us.”

“Do you blame her for it?” I asked curiously, needing to know whether I should just leave. At this point, it felt like maybe that would be the right thing to do, but when she shook her head and the look in her eyes became honest and serious, I settled back in again.

“I regret not standing up for my daughter, Foster. I also regret not standing up to my husband. It broke my heart to lose not only her, but also the opportunity to know you. Ever since the day you were born, all I’ve wanted was to be there for all of you. It’s the greatest regret of my life to know that I wasn’t.”

As I stared back at her, I took a deep breath and realized again that this was a conversation she should be having with my mom. While I knew that I was probably an easier “in” than Mom herself, I had no business being in the middle.

Instead of responding to her, I inclined my head at the phone on the table next to her. “Why don’t you call her?”

Priscilla blinked at me, her cheeks flushing. She shook her head. “I doubt she’d take my call, Foster.”

“She will, but you’ll have to be honest with her. You’d have to talk about the hard stuff and not shy away from it if she becomes emotional.”

After a few more minutes of back and forth, I watched as she picked up the phone and then I stood. “I’ll leave you to speak to her in private. Thanks for the invitation. I hope I’ll see you again soon.”

She seemed surprised, but then she gave me a small smile. “Thank you for encouraging me to do this. You’re right, of course. She is the one I should be speaking to, but it’s been

lovely speaking to you as well, Foster. Do you think your brother might come for coffee sometime?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll ask.”

She nodded. “Ruben will see you out.”

As if he’d been summoned, he appeared in the door, but I hung around until my mom picked up the phone. Although the few snippets of the conversation I heard as I left were tense, I hoped this was the first of many conversations they would have.

It was clear to me that they both had strong feelings about what had happened, but right now, the cause of everything bad was dead and they still had a chance to repair their relationship. Once I got into my car, I called Porter to give him a heads-up about what I had just facilitated.

At first, he seemed shocked that Mom had answered the call, but then I heard the smile in his voice. “Let’s hope they make up. It’d be nice for us to have more family in our lives and it’d be pretty cool if our future kids had a great-grandmother who was actually involved, don’t you think?”

I chuckled. “Yeah, it would be, but all of that is a long way off, unless you’ve got something you need to tell me.”

“Nah, but soon, I hope,” he said. “What about you? Think you’ll have kids with this Amanda girl?”

“I hope so. She’d be an amazing mother, but I haven’t even met her yet, so let’s not get our hopes up too much, okay?”

He laughed. “You’re meeting her soon and my hopes are sky high, brother. Just don’t fuck it up.”

I groaned. “I wasn’t going to, but now, I just might. Did you have to say that?”

I turned over my engine and drove away from my grandmother’s house while speaking to Porter over my car’s Bluetooth system. Worry nagged at my gut as I left though, wondering if I should’ve stayed to help Ruben with damage control if the conversation didn’t go as well as Porter and I were hoping it would.



But then I remembered that thought I'd had earlier about how she was so much stronger than she looked and I knew I'd done the right thing. So instead, I turned my attention back to my own conversation with my brother and wondered if I was ever going to get the opportunity to find out if Amanda was going to be the best mom ever.



SHELBY

I met Ashley at the mall near her house at noon, and she beamed at me, holding out a coffee she must've grabbed on her way. "Sustenance so you can't complain that you need it within the next ten minutes."

I chuckled. "You know me too well, but I really do hate shopping. Do you want to grab some lunch before we get started?"

"Nope. We're diving into this right away," she said stubbornly. "We're on a schedule, and besides, if we eat before we find you a dress, you'll claim that you look bloated in everything."

"True." I sighed and accepted the coffee, then looped my arm around hers. "Lead the way then, maestro. I'm in your capable hands."

She perked up. "I was hoping you'd say that. First things first, we need to find a dress, but once we have, we're also getting a bag and shoes that go with it."

I grimaced. "Is that really necessary? I'm sure this bag would go with whatever we end up buying."

She eyed the large, tattered, brown leather handbag I'd had since college. "I love that thing, girl. It's gorgeous and timeless, but it's not the right accessory for the big reveal."

"Fine." I sighed. "I trust you, but we're on a budget, okay? I'm not spending every penny I've saved on this."

“Of course not.” She laughed. “I’m a master at shopping for bargains. Don’t worry, okay? I’ve got you covered.”

I nodded, but I also resolved to watch my wallet. Ashley had great taste, but it wasn’t always cheap, and I didn’t even know how this reveal was going to go. There was no way I was splurging and spending as much as my rent for a month on an outfit for a guy that could bolt as soon as he saw me.

As we walked, she started chatting and it distracted me, but I was grateful for it. “It’s so hard to find the right guy these days, but aren’t you glad your search might be over? Fuck knows, the day before my reveal date with Chase, that was all I could think about. That I might never have to dip my toes into the dating pool again.”

I chuckled. “I’d prefer not to have to either, but I’m too much of a skeptic to believe it might actually be true for me.”

“Why?” She frowned. “Tyler is great. At least, he sounds great.”

“He is pretty great,” I mused. “Nothing ever goes right for me when it comes to dating, though. I’m definitely not going to put all my hopes on a man I’ve never seen.”

“What are you talking about?” She hip checked me. “You can’t be doubting him already.”

“I’m not doubting him. It’s just that I thought I found the perfect guy in Foster, but he never asked me out. Then there was Paxton, but it turned out that he was planning on getting married to his job.”

“Both of those guys went to college with you,” she protested. “That was like, a lifetime ago.”

My eyebrows swept up. “Fine. Andrew was after college, and he was so controlling that he would’ve told me when I was allowed to use the bathroom if I’d kept dating him even just a week longer.”

She chuckled. “Okay, yes. I agree. He was horrible, but you only went on a few dates with him.”

“It doesn’t matter. Most of my experience with men has been only a few dates, and it’s been enough that I know better than to get my hopes up now.”

“God, do you remember Bradley?” She laughed. “He was so concerned about his looks that he spent forty minutes in the bathroom at that club we went to.”

I cringed. “Exactly, and Ricky was so horrible with money that he kept asking me to borrow some. Which is why I’ve been single ever since.”

She sighed. “Well, Tyler isn’t like all of them. Everything is going to be fine, and besides, you know him by now, don’t you? What could possibly go wrong?”

I groaned and punched her in the shoulder. “Did you have to jinx it?”

“I didn’t jinx it.” She winked at me and released my arm. “You just need to relax about it, Shel. Seriously.”

She shot me a look over her shoulder as we walked into the first boutique, but as soon as I saw the price tags, I grabbed her arm and dragged her to the next one. She sighed but followed my lead. We ended up finding a deep purple dress on sale that she insisted would look great on me.

It was knee-length with pretty, scalloped sleeves and a low back with a slit so high, the thought of wearing it gave me heart palpitations, but Ashley wouldn’t hear it. “Just go try it on. It’s going to look fabulous. Trust me.”

“I’ll try it, but if I flash my panties just walking out of the change room, we’re putting it back and we’re done with it.”

She held out her hand to shake with me, and I chuckled, took the hanger, and shook her hand to make the deal. As it turned out, however, she had been right.

The material clung to my curves in a similar way that the bridesmaid dress did and my boobs looked awesome. The low back also made my butt look great and the sleeves hid the worst of the cellulite on my upper arms.

I grinned as I walked out, spreading my arms to my sides and turning in a slow circle. “I don’t know how you do it, but you’ve done it again. What do you think?”

She smiled radiantly and held up her hand for a high-five. “I think it’s perfect. How does it make you feel?”

“Sexy,” I admitted softly.

Her smile suddenly stretched from ear to ear. “Good, because I found something else for you.” When I frowned, she held up her finger to show me she needed a minute, then darted back to the table she had been browsing.

She spun to face me again, holding up scraps of the fabric that took me a minute to realize was supposed to be underwear. “No. Nope. Those are tiny.”

She shot me an exasperated look. “For that dress, they need to be. Check it out, the bra sticks to your boobs so you won’t be able to see it from behind.”

“I can’t wear a damn sticker. I have actual boobs that need an actual bra.”

“It’s not a sticker.” She thrust the items at me. “You have to trust me, Shel. My boobs are bigger than yours and these will work. Just take them.”

I took them, but I wasn’t sure I’d ever actually wear either the bra or the panties. The color matched the dress perfectly, though. It wasn’t a stretch to imagine what I would look like in them if Tyler peeled the dress off, and it was that thought that made me decide to buy them.

After that, she dragged me to a shoe shop—where we also found a gorgeous silver clutch—and then she led me down a corridor I hadn’t been down before. I frowned at her. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise,” she said easily, taking my arm again and hugging me to her. “I want to say thank you for all your help with the wedding and this felt like the right way to do it.”

She used her free hand to motion at the salon we’d come to a standstill in front of. “Chase and I are treating you to a glow-

up before the big date.”

I stared at her. “A what?”

“A glow-up,” she said excitedly. “We’re getting the full package. Hair, makeup, and nails. You’re going to feel like a princess by the time they’re through with you.”

My jaw slackened. “Ashley! Why? That must’ve cost a ton.”

She shrugged. “Not nearly as much as you’ve spent on the wedding. Now just relax and let’s get it done, okay?”

I dragged in a deep breath and looked into the salon. A smile crept onto my lips as Ashley led me inside. The next couple of hours were absolute bliss. We were both pampered, plucked, and filed until we were glowing. By the time they were done with me, I really did feel like a princess.

I stared at myself in the mirror, unable to believe the transformation. I still looked like me, which I loved, but my eyes had been done up to be smokey and mysterious, and my lips popped with a pale pink glossy lipstick that I’d never have bought for myself.

My hair had been put into a French braid, but some of the strands had deliberately been left out of it to frame my face. I looked whimsically beautiful. *Like I’ve just stepped off the pages of a fairy tale book.*

Ashley’s words from earlier filtered back in my brain and I sighed happily, not wanting to punch her so much anymore. *She was right. What can possibly go wrong?*

I smiled and shook my hands out at my sides. Nervousness and excitement did a perfectly synchronized dance deep within me. If everything went according to plan, this princess was about to meet her Prince Charming. If everything went well with that, then it might just be the start of my happily ever after.

Part of me wanted to dismiss the thought outright, but another part wanted nothing more than to believe it. All I could do now was wait and find out which part was right.





FOSTER

**S**tanding in my bedroom in my new apartment, I stared out at the view I still couldn't believe I would be waking up to every morning from now on. Ferries dotted the water in the distance. The whole city was bathed in a light mist with heavy gray clouds hanging overhead.

*I wonder if that's a sign about how the date is going to go.*

But then I remembered that this was Seattle. If I took this kind of weather as an omen, I'd be living in a constant state of dread.

I finished tying the knot in my tie, adjusting it until it felt right and shaking my hands out at my sides when I was done. This was it.

The big reveal date.

In less than an hour from now, I'd be meeting the woman I'd spent the last few weeks talking to in the dark. Nerves ricocheted through my insides at the thought, but I gritted my teeth and forced them down.

I was in a nice, expensive new suit and I knew I looked pretty good. We were meeting at a venue Sight Unseen had an arrangement with for the reveal dates. I knew it pretty well, having sent hundreds of my own clients there over the years.

It was a great little café set in a garden with a transparent roof that allowed diners to feel like they were still outside while being protected from the elements. The place had dim, romantic lighting, always had bunches of fresh white flowers

in vases on every surface, and played only soft, instrumental versions of modern pop songs.

Sight Unseen had a standing reservation for a table in an alcove that provided some privacy, but the place was never jam-packed anyway. I bounced on the balls of my feet and lifted my hands to give my face a few light smacks.

It was time to go, and I had to be ready for anything. After I grabbed my wallet and keys, I practically ran out of my apartment, eager to see her now that the time had come. I couldn't wait to finally have a face to put with the voice that haunted my dreams. These last couple of days, I'd realized that I was hoping she was the girl I was going to marry.

My phone rang as I was climbing into my car. I frowned when I saw Hope's name on the screen. My heart stuttered in my chest, and I took a deep, calming breath, praying to every god out there she wasn't calling to say Amanda had canceled our date.

"Hello?" I said once my phone had connected to my car. "Hope? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said quickly. "Nothing is wrong. I just wanted to wish you luck before the big date. How are you feeling?"

"Uh, nervous as shit but excited. Thanks for choosing *Outside* as the venue, by the way. It's always been one of my favorites."

She chuckled, suddenly sounding pretty nervous herself. "You're welcome. It's one of my favorites too. I hope it brings you luck, Foster."

"Thanks. Are you okay? Your voice is kind of squeaky."

"I'm fine." She cleared her throat, but it didn't help much. "I just wanted to wish you luck and to remind you that no matter what she looks like or what her real name is, she's the girl you've had all these dates with."

I frowned again as I drove out of the parking lot. "Yeah, I know that. Is this a pep talk you give all your clients before the reveal?"

“Uh, no, but I appreciate you and I love you like a brother. I just want you to know that and to remember it. No matter what, okay?”

I sighed, my grip on the steering wheel tightening as I merged with the traffic outside. “You’re being weird again.”

“I’m not being weird. I’m just excited for your date and I don’t want you to blow by it by making snap decisions as soon as you see her.”

“Snap decisions?” I scoffed. “I’ve spent hours with this girl. I know who she is and I have a fair idea about what she looks like. At least, I know how she’s built. I also know she smells like a lavender-vanilla scented dream and that she wants a lot of the same things I do out of life. It’s not a snap decision, Hope.”

“Yeah, I know all about that part. I’m just saying that you shouldn’t make snap decisions when you *see* her. Sit her down, talk, and work through everything that may come up when you’re face to face, okay?”

“Are you projecting again?” I sighed and leaned back against the headrest. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Porter before, Hope, but it all worked out, didn’t it? I did try to get him to tell you, but he was scared and it wasn’t my place. This isn’t that.”

“Not exactly, no, but it sort of is.” She paused. “Look, Foster, I know you think this is all about my experience, but it’s not. I just don’t want you to be angry at me if this doesn’t work out. I’m the one who made the match, so—”

“So thank you for finding me a girl worth getting to the reveal with,” I said firmly. “No offense, but you’re kind of killing my energy with this conversation, so I’m hanging up now. I’ll call you after.”

“Okay,” she said in an uncharacteristically small voice. “Good luck. We can’t wait to hear how it goes.”

“I’ll call you,” I reiterated the promise and then hit the red phone on my steering wheel, glad to be done with that call.

Hope had been weird about me dating Amanda since the first time she'd set us up, and I really didn't know what it was about. I wasn't juvenile enough to think it was because she wanted me to herself or anything like that.

She and Porter were head over heels in love and there'd never been so much as the beginning of a spark between us. When she said she loved me like a brother, I knew she meant it. Ever since the day we'd met, it'd been like that with us.

But that meant something else was going on with her now, and it was frustrating as fuck not knowing what was up. For my money, it had to be that her own experiences with dating Porter and then finding out that he'd been Parker all along were back to haunting her.

She seemed unreasonably nervous about my date and that was the only thing that made sense. Thankfully, that meant it wasn't my problem.

My brother had made that particular bed. Now he had to sleep in it, fuck in it, and wake up in it. He had to deal with her remembered hurt, not me. I'd apologized enough and I knew she had forgiven me for the part I'd played.

As I drove into the parking lot outside the café, I exhaled a shaky breath and found a spot, but I stayed in my car for a few minutes to clear my head before I climbed out. I couldn't be distracted by Hope and her weirdness.

Not tonight.

Tomorrow morning, I'd talk to her and Porter about it and maybe buy them breakfast so we could finally put all that behind us once and for all, but tonight was Amanda and me. Amanda with the sweet voice and the lyrical laugh. The girl with the sharp mind and the way of making me think about the conversations we'd had even days after we'd had them. The girl with the soft curves that drove me mad every time we touched.

I smiled into the dusky darkness in my car and reached for the door handle, pumped to get date five done with so we could start dating outside of Sight Unseen. The process had

been great, but I was also ready to leave it behind and start seeing her in the real world.

Milena had made a good call with the four dates and then the reveal rule. It was just enough time to get to know somebody and not enough to get bored with the whole “being in the dark” the concept.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins as I climbed out of my car and slammed the door behind me, my heart racing and my skin feeling weirdly electrified. A cobblestone pathway led from the parking lot through a well-tended garden with a canopy of trees overhead to the café, and I slid my hands into my pockets as I walked.

Whistling under my breath, I only stopped when I reached the door and saw a server waiting with a white rose in his hand. That was for me.

Amanda would get one too, which would allow us to identify each other and avoid the embarrassment of mistaking someone else for our dates. Back in the early days of Sight Unseen, that kind of thing had happened a time or two too many.

Eventually, Milena had decided on white roses. Red was too common for people meeting each other for dinner. Too many people had a bouquet of red roses, waiting for their own dates, and too many restaurants had them on the tables.

She’d tried that exactly once before she’d realized it wouldn’t work well enough to eliminate the possibility of confusion. So white it was.

I strode right up to the server, holding out my hand for the rose. “That’s mine tonight, Adam. Thanks. She here yet?”

He blinked at me, obviously surprised. “It’s yours? I didn’t know you were in the program. And no, she’s not here yet. Good luck, Foster. See ya.”

“See you.” I took the rose and showed myself to the table I knew we were going to be seated at.

It had a good view of the door, which meant I saw Adam produce another white rose from behind the hostess stand and

I watched closely as more people approached the door. First came a couple, striding in hand and in hand.

Not her.

Next was another guy. Also not her.

But then a shapely leg came into view from around the bend in the garden and my heart leaped into my throat. *That's probably her.*

At the end of the leg was a dainty, dark purple heel and the calf was shaven smooth, her skin creamy and pale. My palms got sweaty and I moved them to my thighs, wiping them. I inched forward on my chair, chest thudding, and dragged my gaze up from her legs.

I moved it deliberately slowly, cataloguing every moment of this first time I was seeing her—hoping it was her and that I wasn't checking out the girlfriend of the other guy who had just arrived. This girl wore a dress that matched the heels, the deep color making that pale skin seem like porcelain.

The hem of the dress hit just below her knees, but a slit up the side gave me mouthwatering glimpses of the rest of her leg as she moved. Further up, my gaze snagged on her wide hips that curved into a narrower waist and then cleavage I wanted to bury my face in.

My dick reacted to the thought, but I flexed my thighs and fought it off, knowing that the last thing I needed when I stood up to greet her was a tent in my pants. Abruptly yanking my gaze away from that rack, I finally found myself looking at her face and an audible breath rushed out of me.

*Shelby? What the fuck?*

My heart stuttered, confusion sinking in as I watched her walking up to Adam. She looked stunning, and since I knew she was seeing someone, I assumed she was here for that other guy. *Well, if this isn't the mother of all coincidences—*

My thought was cut off when I saw Adam hand over the other white rose he'd been holding. For a moment, I didn't know what to think. Then it dawned on me.

I'd told Hope about Shelby, and just after that, she'd set me up with Amanda. *So this is what she's been up to.*

She hadn't been projecting after all. She'd been trying to warn me that I was about to get the breath knocked out of me much the same way as she had, but unlike her, I wasn't pissed about it. In fact, this felt right.

It was serendipity, and I was one hundred percent okay with that.





SHELBY

I couldn't wait to meet Tyler. I was so excited as I walked down the path to the café that my hands were shaking and my heart was racing. In just a couple more minutes, I'd be seeing the face that belonged to the man of my dreams.

While some of the nervousness lingered, I was mostly just eager to get it over with now. This date, tonight, was what it'd all been leading to, and I was ready to move on to the next chapter with him.

*Hopefully.*

I caught my lower lip between my teeth and dragged in a deep breath, pausing just before I rounded the last corner that would put me in full view of the café. I didn't know if he was here yet or if he'd be watching the path, but I needed to compose myself before I went any further.

I shook my hands out in front of me, my fingers spread. I dipped my head back, closed my eyes, and kept my palms facing my chest as I tried to work out the last of the nervousness. My lungs weren't working properly, but I filled them with as much air as I could and then I blew it out slowly before I lowered my chin again.

*You're ready, Shel. Go get him.*

Forcing my feet to move, I strode around the corner with my head held high and my shoulders square. Almost as soon as I stepped around the bend, the hairs on the back of my neck told me that there were eyes on me.

Those tiny hairs rose and I knew someone was watching me, but the interior of the café was too dark to see much detail from all the way over here. I kept focusing on my breathing instead, putting one foot in front of the other and praying that I wouldn't fall flat on my face if Tyler was the one who was watching.

I walked slowly and carefully, finally making it to the server, or maybe he was the host—I didn't know—standing in front of the doors. I might've skipped past him if I hadn't seen the rose, but I'd been told to be on the lookout for a staff member holding a white rose.

That was what I was supposed to collect on my way in to make myself identifiable as Amanda. The server smiled when he saw me approaching, but even as he held out the rose, he shot a quick glance into the interior of the café.

I could've sworn I saw him *wink* at whoever was in there, but I shook it off, not needing to psych myself out or to let my nerves get the better of me again. I looked good. I felt good. Everything was good.

I just had to stay out of my own head, and I'd be golden.

My fingers brushed against the stem of the rose as I took it. In instinct, I winced but then I realized I hadn't actually touched a thorn. It made me realize that I needed to snap out of my daze and get my head in the game, though.

After all of the hours I'd spent with this man and then the countless more I'd wasted thinking about him, I was finally about to see his face. That warranted being present in the moment.

I dragged in one last calming, deep breath and then pasted a big smile on my face. I gripped the rose and headed inside. It took my eyes a brief moment to adjust to the soft lighting in the room, but as they did, the first thing I saw made my heart nearly give out.

Foster O'Brien was here, sitting at a table not far from the door and partially hidden by an alcove, but it was definitely

him alright. His strong, chiseled, handsome features and his surprised smile with his slightly raised, dark eyebrows.

My brow furrowed and I stopped walking, eyes darting from one side of the café to the other. There was one other single guy in here, but he wasn't carrying a white rose. Then again, neither was Foster.

Foster stood up and that was when I saw it—the white rose on the table in front of him. I blinked hard a few times, wondering if my mind was playing tricks on me. But when I looked at his face again, I could tell by his expression that there was something going on.

In that moment, a thousand emotions flooded me. The first was pure, absolute joy and complete and utter disbelief that things had worked out this way.

The guy I'd had such a crush on and the only one who had made me doubt my feelings for Tyler for even just a moment was my perfect match. It was amazing. Incredible.

All these years, I'd thought I'd had exceptionally poor taste in men, yet he was living proof that I didn't. I'd pegged him as the guy for me a dozen years ago when I'd been barely more than a kid, and obviously, Sight Unseen's algorithm agreed with me.

But that was when it hit me.

As soon as I thought of the agency's name, I realized that this wasn't fate. It wasn't the universe or my great taste that had made this match.

It had been him.

Back in my office, he'd told me he worked for a dating agency but he hadn't told me which one. I hadn't pressed the issue because I hadn't wanted to admit that I'd signed up for Sight Unseen and that the guy I'd told him about was a stranger. That I didn't even know what his face looked like.

But now?

*Shit.*

Foster had been the guy I'd told him about, and I had obviously been the girl he'd said he was seeing. Unless he was just using his position at the agency to score himself dates with god only knew how many innocent, unsuspecting women.

I didn't know if that last part was true, but as I stood there staring at him, I knew this had been a setup. He'd known all along and he'd pretended to be someone else just to mess with me. Probably because I'd admitted to having had a crush on him all those years ago. Or maybe he'd known all along and he just got off on screwing around with women.

I'd seen enough of them leaving his room back in the day to know he certainly enjoyed screwing them, but screwing *with* them? I'd never have thought he was capable of something like that.

The why of it all completely evaded me, but this had obviously been nothing more than a big joke. A lie. A way to mess with the nerd who had never gotten over the hot guy from college.

Tears burned the backs of my eyes and I choked on my next breath. Then I spun around right where I was and rushed out. I fought to hold back the sobs that threatened to overwhelm me. *What a fool he must think I am.*

What a fool I had been, believing that it'd all been real and that a man like *Tyler* would be interested in me.

I didn't want to cause a scene, so I ran out instead of breaking down in the center of the quiet, fancy, romantic little café he'd chosen to stage the final act of his deception. A dull ache started up in my chest when I thought of that wink the server had tossed him.

He must've been in on it, or at the very least, he must've known that Foster was up to something tonight. Hell, I didn't even have a car here to make a quick getaway in.

Since we'd had such incredibly—and obviously manufactured—chemistry during our dates, I'd stupidly come here in a cab, thinking that if he offered me a ride home, I'd get to spend more time with him.

And okay, I'd been hoping that maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't be driving me to my apartment, but to his instead. *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid!*

I'd really put myself out there for this guy. Really believed in my heart of hearts that he might just be the one.

I hugged my arms around my midsection and rushed down the path, praying that perhaps the cab that'd dropped me off was still hanging out in the parking lot. Never before had I felt this stupid, and to make matters even worse, as I rushed away from him and the complete humiliation I'd felt in that café, it started to rain.

The heavens opened up and dumped buckets of icy water over me, ruining my pretty, perfect hair and my gorgeous makeup. Things Ashley and Chase had *paid* for to thank me and to help make this evening everything I'd never even dreamed of having—and now this.

I supposed it was only right that the rain that had been threatening all day was suddenly pouring down now, putting the shitty, rotten cherry on top of the most horrible, embarrassing moment of my life.

“Shelby! Wait!” Foster called from behind me, but I didn't stop. I didn't turn around. I didn't want to know what he had to say for himself.

I didn't care.

All I wanted was to get out of there.

I didn't want or need his pity.

So what if I'd had a crush on him in fucking college? He'd admitted to having had one on me too—although that had probably been a lie.

It still hadn't given him the right to mess with me now. I honestly didn't even know why he would've wasted all this time with me. How much of a kick could he really have gotten out of it?

Tears blinded me. I hit the street, looking around wildly, but there were no cabs in the parking lot and, unfortunately, no

taxi heading my way either. Absently turning left, I just kept rushing. I didn't know where I was going or if it would've been better to go right, but I still needed to get away and I could still hear his heavy footsteps on the path behind me.

"Shelby, please? I can explain. Just wait up."

"No!" I yelled into the pouring rain, then stopped abruptly and whirled around to face him. My arms were still around my waist and my entire body shivered with rain and cold. "You're nothing but a liar and a fraud, Foster O'Brien. Stay away from me!"

His face fell before it contorted in hurt and confusion. The next thing I knew, his hands were coming up and he was holding them out to me like I was some kind of deer he was afraid of scaring away. "It's not what you think, Shelby."

I snorted. "It's not? How do you know? You have no idea what I'm thinking. How could you do this to me? You are the worst kind of person and I never want to see you again, Foster. Stay. Away. From. Me."

After those words vehemently shot out of my mouth, I spun away from him again and started crying even harder. Then I saw a cab coming toward me. My hand shot into the air and relief barreled through me when the cabbie stopped to pick me up.

I yanked open the back door and dropped into a shivering, sobbing heap on the backseat. Foster stood in the rain with his hair slicked down and that weird, contorted expression still on his face.

He looked crushed, but it couldn't be that. Maybe he was just disappointed that I hadn't stuck around for him to rub it in. To really make me a laughingstock.

Another sob tore through me and I wrenched my gaze away from his, lifting it to meet the cabdriver's compassionate eyes in the rearview mirror. "There's a towel back there you can use. Where are we going, ma'am?"

I pulled myself together enough to give him my address. Then I reached for the neatly folded towel on the seat beside

me and wrapped it around my shoulders. For the rest of the drive home, I stared out the window miserably and tried to keep myself from bawling my eyes out in front of the kind driver.

As soon as he dropped me off though, the tears started coming hot and heavy again. I stripped out of the dress as soon as I was in my apartment, and I headed directly for the shower and stayed under the hot spray until I finally stopped shivering.

After I got out, I wrapped myself in a towel, quickly dried off, and changed into a pair of threadbare, comfortable pajamas, and then I wrapped myself in a blanket on the sofa with some ice cream. The sobs came back. I pressed play on the first sad movie I came across and felt sorry for myself.

The truth was that I should've known it was all too good to be true. Girls like me didn't get the knight in shining armor appearing out of the dark to save us from the single ladies' song at our best friends' weddings.

Girls like me were the oddballs, the perpetually single ladies who pretended to be proud of it and who went back to work after the wedding, raving about how one day, when it was our turn, we wouldn't torture our friends with that dang song.

At least, that was the way I felt right now. Like the oddball. The perpetually single lady who would be going to yet another wedding alone and pretend like it wasn't the loneliest feeling in the world to watch yet another couple that I loved get married without having anyone beside me whose hand I could hold.





**A**fter the reveal, I hadn't known what to think. I'd been as shocked to realize that Shelby was Amanda as she seemed to have been when she'd seen me, but the difference was that she appeared to have jumped to some horrible conclusions about everything.

Why? I didn't know. I'd never given her any reason to think I was a liar or a fraud, and I certainly didn't know why she'd called me a horrible person. It didn't make any sense whatsoever. So after she'd jumped in that cab and raced away, I'd done what rational people in my situation did.

I'd gone home and drank too much on my balcony, and then I'd stumbled to bed and fallen into a dreamless sleep. Back at work now, I was still stunned and so confused that I didn't know my ass from my elbow.

Somewhere in my whiskey-soaked brain, I'd come up with the only thing I could think had caused her reaction. She thought that I'd somehow set her up. That none of it had been real and that I'd been fucking with her.

It had to be that, but I didn't understand it. At all. It made so little sense to me that I had to wonder if I'd missed something. If there was another reason for her reaction that I just wasn't getting.

I sighed and rubbed my temples as I stared at my computer, still tasting whiskey on my tongue even though I'd brushed my teeth four times this morning. My head felt like

it'd been filled with a wad of cotton wool and I couldn't focus for shit.

The only thing I could think of was Amanda—Shelby—and how I was going to make her understand that I hadn't done whatever she thought I had. Even if things didn't end up working out between us, she needed to know that I'd never do anything intentionally to hurt her and that I thought she was an amazing person.

I'd had the best time with her and I didn't want to lose her, but it seemed I already had. All that remained now was to make sure she knew I'd never meant to hurt her, even if I obviously had done it anyway.

My eyes stung. I blinked and shook my head at myself. Dehydration and a hangover were the last things I needed to deal with today, and yet, here I was, dehydrated and hungover. I reached for the bottle of water on my desk and swigged down the remaining half of it, desperately trying to give my body whatever it needed to feel better.

I was still moping about an hour later when Hope popped into my office with Porter in tow. They were both smiley and happy, and Hope's weirdness seemed to have morphed into, well, hope. "How did it go? What did she do when she realized it was you? Tell us everything."

They were halfway into my office when she seemed to realize that, unlike them, I wasn't a shiny, happy person this morning. The grin melted off her lips and she collapsed on the chair across from me. "Oh no. What happened?"

Porter dropped into the chair beside hers, glancing back and forth between us until his gaze settled on Hope. She had started chewing her lip and the look in her eyes made her seem guilty as hell. "I think the better question here is, what did you do?" Porter asked.

She looked at him before her gaze darted back to mine. She stared at me with regret shining clear as day from her eyes, and she sighed. "I set him up with the one who got away."

Porter grunted. “Excuse me? There was a one who got away? When? How?”

I turned to him and arched an eyebrow. “You really didn’t know about this?”

“Didn’t know about *what?*” His features scrunched up as he shook his head at me. “What have you two done?”

I snorted. “I didn’t do anything. This one is all on her.”

“Uh oh.” He shifted in his seat to face her. “Out with it, baby. I knew there was something going on with you. You’ve been acting so damn weird about Foster’s dates. What did you do?”

“I just told you,” she mumbled unhappily, slumping in her chair without her eyes ever leaving mine. “There was this girl who went to college with him. Shelby.”

“Shelby?” Porter said the name slowly, then suddenly straightened up. “Wait. Hang on. I think I know who you’re talking about now. That nerd you had such a crush on?”

“All of us were nerds,” I pointed out and pursed my lips. “You two still are, but yeah. That’s the one.”

“After Foster told me about her, her profile popped up on the system. She signed up with Sight Unseen and they were a good match, so I set them up.”

Porter whistled between his teeth. “Without telling anyone?”

Her chin dipped in a nod, and her eyes were clouding over with disappointment as much as regret now. “Without telling anyone. *I* did this. *I* am responsible and I didn’t want to drag either of you into it.”

“Hope,” Porter groaned. “You should’ve told him.”

“Why?” She spun to face him, flames flickering in her eyes. Her features tightened and she shook her head. “I told Grace about Sharp and she nearly lost him because of it. You and Foster knew who I was all along. So no. I shouldn’t have told him. I thought this gave him a better shot at making it work without almost losing her when she found out.”

She turned back to me. “Obviously, that’s not what happened. So what happened?”

I shrugged, my lips pinching in at the corners. “Honestly? I don’t know. I think she suspects that I set her up as a prank or something, but she didn’t exactly stop to explain herself while she was running away from me in the pouring rain.”

Hope’s nose scrunched up. “Did you go after her?”

“Of course, I went after her.” I scoffed. “It didn’t help. All she did was scream at me that I was a liar and a horrible person. Oh, and to stay away from her.”

Porter sighed, another groan rumbling out of him. He scrubbed his palms over his face. “I guess it’s time to buckle up, then. Put on those boxing gloves and fight for your girl. Good luck. It’s not fun.”

Hope rolled her eyes at him. “That’s why you boys should just stop messing up. It’s not that we want to run, but you do stuff that makes us have to. If fighting is what you need to do to prove yourselves, then I don’t have much sympathy.”

“That would’ve been fine if it’d been true in this case,” I said. “You did this though, not me. I didn’t mess up.”

She cocked her head at me. “Didn’t you? I know I have to take responsibility for setting you up with her in the first place, but you were a ninety-seven-percent match. The system would’ve set you up anyway. I just saw Shelby Lowe’s application come through, and since I knew she was the girl you used to have a crush on, I helped things move along a little bit faster.”

“A ninety-seven-percent match,” I repeated after her. “That’s not bad.”

“Exactly.” She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. “Look, I’m sorry that this happened, but you had to have messed up somehow for her to have reacted the way she did. What did she say when you told her it wasn’t you? When you admitted that you hadn’t known who she was either?”

I shut up, and Hope's lips parted as she gawked at me. "Foster? What did she say when you explained to her that it must've been your meddling sister-in-law's fault?"

I rolled my lips into my mouth and shrugged again. Porter let out a burst of incredulous laughter. "She didn't say anything because he didn't explain any of this to her. You just shut up and let her think whatever she wanted, didn't you?"

"I was in shock," I protested. "First at seeing her and then at her storming out on me. I didn't see any of that coming. You can't blame me for having been caught off guard."

Hope's eyes narrowed slightly. "No, we can't blame you for that, but something else must've happened to have made her think you were messing with her."

I started shaking my head, but then I blinked a few times when I realized she might just be onto something.

Porter's eyes widened. "So you did do something. What was it?"

I groaned loudly, dragging my hands through my hair repeatedly. I wondered if I'd finally figured it out. "I, uh, there might've been an *incident* back at college."

"An incident?" Hope made her eyes big at me. "You could've mentioned a damn incident when you told me about her."

"Look, it wasn't such a big deal. I haven't even thought about it again until right now, when you mentioned that something else must've made her think that."

"What was the incident, Foster?" Porter asked, getting serious for once in his damn life. "If you want us to help you find a way out of this, you have to tell us and you'd better do it sooner rather than later."



SHELBY

**A**t Ashley's apartment the next day, I couldn't stop crying. I'd managed to make it through work this morning, but then I'd taken the rest of the day off. The estates I was working on were too important and too delicate to screw up just because I couldn't focus and Mr. Harrison had thought I was coming down with something, so he'd readily agreed to let me leave when he'd seen my swollen eyes and puffy face.

Ashley stroked her fingers through my hair, holding me to her as I sobbed. "It's okay, Shel. It's all going to be alright. Why don't you tell me what happened, hmm? Do you think you're ready to do that?"

The buzzer at the door went off, and she sighed but withdrew her arms around me and stood up. "That should be the food. Chinese. Guaranteed to make you feel better. Give me a minute. I'll be back."

While she went to get the door, I swiped my fingers under my eyes and wiped away the tears, dragging in a deep breath in the hopes that they would stay away this time. After I'd wiped my cheeks, chin, and even under my jaw as well, Ash came back into the room carrying containers of steaming chow mein, dumplings, a tray of condiments, and a bottle of wine.

She was balancing it all precariously and I reached out to help her, inhaling the comforting scent of the food. I felt a touch more settled as I dug in. With my first few bites, I

finally managed to speak without becoming a blubbering mess instead.

I shared the whole sordid tale, telling her how I'd felt at first when I'd seen it was him and how quickly it'd all changed. Ashley listened patiently, but once I was done, the firm set of her jaw told me that I wasn't going to like what she had to say.

"I'm sorry, Shelby, but I think you might've run out too fast."

"What?"

Her gaze was gentle and sincere on mine. "I think you should've let him explain. For starters, you don't even know that Sight Unseen is the dating agency he works for, and even if it is, why does that automatically mean that he was messing with you?"

"Hot, funny, smart guys who have just practically become billionaires don't need to do blind dating to get dates, Ash. Him messing with me is the only thing that makes sense."

"It doesn't make sense, though. In fact, I totally get why he'd sign up if he's just practically become a billionaire. Do you have any idea how many gold-diggers are out there? Dating someone without them knowing who you are is pretty much the only guarantee you could have that someone isn't dating you only for your money."

"We started dating before he got the money, though. I mean, I know when the deposit was made because I'm the one who gave the instructions for it to be transferred."

"Fine. That's fair, but he knew the money was coming when you started dating? And didn't you say Tyler had been on so many horrible dates before he met you? If that was true, then Foster's been doing this for a while. It's highly unlikely that he joined up and went through the entire process with you as a prank."

My insides churned, my voice softer than before when I spoke again. "Okay, I get where you're coming from, but what



would you say if I told you this wasn't the first time he did something like this?"

Her eyes widened. "He's done it before?"

I lifted one shoulder in a halfhearted shrug. "Well, not exactly this, but it was similar enough. He set me up back in college, too."

"Oh no," she muttered. "How?"

I hung my head, thinking back to the previous time when I'd thought that we were such a perfect match and that we were finally going to be together. "One night, he asked me to meet him at Mountain View."

She gave me a blank stare. "What's Mountain View?"

"It's this hill on campus with a great view of the mountains. What can I say? College kids aren't exactly creative in naming things."

She chuckled, but I could already see the sympathy softening her eyes. "This was a make-out spot for you guys?"

I nodded. "Sort of. Make-out spot. Perfect-date spot. It's romantic, you know? It's dark on that part of campus at night with only the moon and stars above, but anyway, I got all excited. The whole week before that, he'd been asking me about my dream date. Every time he saw me, he had another question. Locations. Drinks. Food. Even flowers."

Ashley grimaced. "You assumed he was planning a date for you?"

My cheeks flushed as I nodded. "Yeah, I did. When he asked me to meet him there that night, I got ready, like, two hours before we were supposed to meet even though it was only a fifteen-minute walk from our dorm."

"Oh, honey. I'm so sorry." She slung an arm around my shoulders, setting down the cardboard food container to comfort me instead. "What happened?"

"I got there, but it turned out that the date wasn't for me. He'd planned the whole thing for some other girl and he

wanted me to check it out before she got there to make sure he'd gotten it right."

She groaned and hugged me tighter. "You felt like an idiot for arriving all starry-eyed and dressed up?"

"I really did. He even noticed. His eyes got all big and he asked me if I thought this was all for me. I lied and said no, but I think he knew."

"So you think this was him fooling you again?" she asked quietly.

I nodded. "That night, he laughed and pretended to wipe his brow like he was all relieved that there hadn't been a misunderstanding, but he thought it was so freaking funny. Like it was the best joke in the world that I'd think he was asking me out."

Ashley sighed and hugged me some more, only releasing me when we both went back to our food for a few minutes. Eventually, once we'd eaten way too much, she looked back at me and shot me an apologetic smile.

"Okay, look, I know you're feeling like this was some continuation of that joke. I also know now why you felt like a fool, but what did he really do wrong this time? He didn't lead you on again, although I have to admit it sounds like he did just that before."

"Yeah, he really did. He explained it after by saying that I was his only female friend and that he'd needed feminine advice, but it just hadn't felt like that to me."

"So maybe he's a bit of an idiot himself." She reached out and squeezed my hand. "Guys can be so damn blind like that sometimes, but you two obviously like each other and you have to be a good match if Sight Unseen set you up."

"We don't know if Sight Unseen set us up, though." I paused and then motioned to her phone. "Pull up their website. I checked. That is the company he works for. He knew it was me all along."

"That's the thing, Shelby. We don't know that he did. Maybe he was just another single guy in Seattle who signed up

looking for love. In fact, if he works there, it makes even more sense why he'd choose them to sign up with. He's obviously seen how successful they are for himself."

"No," I said firmly. "I don't believe that. He lied to me."

"Did he though?" she asked gently. "Honestly, the whole Sight Unseen model is based on deception to a certain extent, isn't it? People use fake names. Fake jobs. The only thing we know for sure is that he works there. We don't know that he knew it was you or that he set out to fool you again."

"According to him, he didn't set out to fool me before either," I said miserably, shaking my head. "If he wanted to go out with me, why didn't he just ask me out in real life? Why pretend to be Tyler?"

"That's my point exactly, though. If he wanted to make a fool out of you, it would've been easier to just ask you in real life and set up a similar situation to before. He didn't do that, though. He dated you in the dark for weeks. Did he ever make it sound like he knew who you were?"

"No."

"Exactly. I don't think he did know, babe. I think he works there. He's just inherited a shit ton of money, and he was looking for love but didn't want to have to question whether the woman wanted him for him or for his bank account."

I didn't have a response to any of that. All I knew was that I was still upset and that all of this had brought back too many hurtful memories from before. I wasn't that hopeful, naïve college girl anymore, but I felt like her right then.

I felt like all the emotional growth and maturity that I'd gained over the years had been wiped away, sending me tumbling back to a time in my life I wasn't particularly fond of. That night had made me so wary of men's intentions that I'd made a fool of myself a bunch of times after by constantly questioning whether I understood them correctly.

*Oh, are you asking me out on a date? That will be a date, right? Is this just, like, a coffee thing, or is it supposed to be a date?*

Cue all the blank stares I'd gotten as a result of my questions. Now, I knew that far more horrible things had happened to other people, but to me, that had been pretty bad. It'd been my first real taste of romantic disappointment. Of heartbreak, even.

I hadn't even really been his friend. Why he'd asked for my help, I still didn't know, and his explanation still didn't make much sense. I was his only female friend? Bullshit. I wasn't really his friend. We'd hung out a few times. That was it.

If I had been his friend for real, he'd never have bought that I hadn't remembered him when he walked into my office. All of which was just confirmation that Foster O'Brien could not be trusted.

A fact that only got drilled home by my mother when she called later on. After hearing that I'd been crying, she pushed until I told the truth, and then went off on another rant about it.

"I told you this was going to happen, honey. You cannot trust a man when you can't see his face while you're speaking to him. It's just not possible. If people are hiding in the dark, it's for a reason."

I sighed and she must've heard from my breathing that I was about to start crying again because she suddenly became soothing and reassuring. "I'm sorry this happened to you, baby, but it will all work out in the end. I promise. You will be stronger because of this, even if you don't feel that way right now."

I wasn't so sure, but since I didn't want to spend the rest of the night debating the issue, I just agreed until she finally hung up. Sitting with my phone in my hand, I wondered if Ashley might've had a point about letting him explain.

I had jumped to conclusions, but I also couldn't call him and ask. I'd been humiliated enough as it was. At this point, the best thing I could do for my own self-preservation was to leave it—and him—alone.

Foster and I weren't going to happen. Not as ourselves and not as Tyler and Amanda, and it was about time I accepted that.



“**Y**ou tricked her?” Hope frowned at me after I’d finished sharing the highlights of the mistake I’d made back in college. “Foster! That’s a terrible thing to have done.”

“I didn’t mean to trick her,” I protested on a loud groan. “The truth is that I *was* sussing her out when I asked for her opinions on everything, but she didn’t seem to be interested at all. She got all shy, gave me an answer, and then she’d just walk away.”

“Because she was a college girl with a crush on the hot senior,” Hope said emphatically, her eyes wide as she shook her head back and forth. “Her getting all shy and walking away should’ve told you that she was interested.”

“How was I supposed to know that?” I shot back at her. “The girl wouldn’t even look me in the eyes, Hope. Eventually, I realized it was a lost cause and I asked a girl from my economics class instead.”

“To the date you planned for Shelby?”

I shrugged. “Well, I’d already bought everything. It seemed stupid to let it go to waste.”

Porter groaned. “Not because I’m sleeping with her, but I’m with Hope on this one. That was pretty mean of you, bro.”

“It wasn’t mean.” I scowled at them both. “Look, I really thought she wasn’t interested. The other day when she told me

she'd had a crush on me was the first time I realized it may not have been quite as unreciprocated as I thought."

Hope sighed loudly, like I was the most hopeless case she'd ever even heard of. "Why did you ask her to meet you there?"

"I was nervous," I said. "That girl from my economics class was hot and I thought she might be the one who would get me over my feelings for Shelby. I wanted her to feel special, so I asked Shelby to come to make sure I hadn't missed anything."

I said those words out loud for the first time since I'd said them to her that night on the hill, and I winced. "Okay, you might be right. I might've been a bit of an asshole, but I didn't mean to be. I was just..."

"Immature?" Hope said. "Blind? Selfish? Stupid?"

Porter's hand shot out and he clamped it over her mouth. "Okay, he gets it. Now you're the one who's being mean."

Hope wrenched his hand away and rolled her eyes at him. "But I wasn't trying to be mean. By your logic, I'm off the hook then, right?"

I shook my head at her. "You've made your point. I get it. I owe her an apology for that, but it still doesn't fix what happened last night."

"No, it doesn't." Porter turned back to me with a thoughtful expression on his face. "Have you tried calling her to explain?"

"She told me to stay away from her and that she never wanted to see me again, so no. I haven't tried calling her. I didn't think it would be very well received if I did."

"Well, it's time to think again," Hope said and then checked her watch. "Crap. You've got a meeting with Dan. Porter and I will be back when you're done."

I groaned. "Dan? What does he want?"

She chuckled. "Apparently, one of his basic requirements was disregarded by his case manager. He escalated the



complaint to me, and I kicked it to you because he doesn't listen to me at all. You stand a better chance at getting through to him than I do."

"Who's Dan?" Porter asked, frowning. "Why does it sound like he doesn't respect you?"

"Oh, it's nothing. He's one of our frequent flyers around here, but he loves complaining and he has—" She stopped speaking abruptly when there was a knock on my door.

Dan popped his head in.

Porter stood up immediately, smirking at us as he headed to the door. "I'll give you guys a few minutes."

He nodded at Dan on his way out, and Hope and I stood to shake hands with another of our more problematic clients. He grinned approvingly as he greeted us. "Wow. Both of you, huh? It's good to know the company is taking this so seriously."

"Always," I said after shaking his hand.

Hope motioned for him to take a seat. "Why don't you tell us what's been going on, Dan? My assistant tells me you're feeling like we're not listening to you."

He sat down in the seat Porter had vacated, and even though my brother hadn't exactly been on my side, I'd still rather have been going back and forth with him than to deal with yet another of Dan's bizarre requests, but I was at work.

I had to do my job.

Even if I was still feeling like shit. Physically and emotionally.

Dan looked between the two of us and sighed. "I've realized that I can only seriously date a woman who smells like gardenia. Can you help with that?"

Hope blinked at him. "Gardenia?"

Instead of telling him to go do some soul-searching and decide if he really wanted to put any more women through dates he was only going to find something to complain about, I

stared back at him. “We don’t have questions that specific on the application and I’m not sure we’ve got any scents on file, but we’ll do our best.”

Hope nodded her agreement with me. “Perhaps if you gave us some alternative scents as well, we could—”

“It has to be gardenia,” he reiterated as he got up. “Can you help me with that or not?”

I offered him a tight smile. “Like I said, we’ll do our best. Thanks for coming in today, Dan.”

“Thanks for meeting with me,” he said as he walked back to the door. “I really hope you can find me the right woman. I’m starting to think Sight Unseen may not be the right company for me.”

“You and me both, bud,” Hope muttered once he was gone.

Porter came striding back in, giving us each a questioning look in turn. “That was fast.”

I sighed. “Yeah, he was just hoping that we could find him the right-scented woman.”

“What?”

“Yep,” Hope said. “Apparently, it’s gardenia or nothing, but anyway. Where were we?”

Porter nodded. “We were talking about how Foster is an idiot who needs to call Shelby and make his case.”

“I’m not sure calling is the right thing to do anymore,” she mused. “You know, I was updating your case file earlier and I noticed she was a referral client from Ashley.”

“Ashley?” I frowned. “That girl you were so proud about matching up with her one true love a few months ago?”

“Yeah, her.” She glanced at Porter. “Chase and Ashley were each other’s first Sight Unseen dates and they hit it off immediately. It was a home run for me. They’re getting married soon.”

I sighed. “Okay, so what about it?”

She suddenly grinned at me. “So I think we should reach out to Ashley. She might help us.”

“Help us with what?” I asked skeptically.

“Your grand gesture,” she said.

I frowned. “That’s not really my style.”

“Maybe that’s exactly why you need to do it.” She took Porter’s hand and stood. “We should get going, but think about it. Let me know, okay? You’ve got two strikes with this woman. One more and you’re out. So if I was you, I’d think carefully before I swing again, Foster. Well, either that, or you could give up completely. Your choice.”

As they left, I realized that giving up wasn’t my style either. Between that and a grand gesture, I didn’t think there was much of a choice at all.



**B**eing the maid of honor at a wedding when dealing with fresh heartbreak was a cruel and unusual method of torture. Every single thing I saw—from the staging of the pictures to the flowers—reminded me of where I was.

And that this was probably never going to happen for me.

Trying hard to focus on Ashley and the festivities, I forced a smile and mentally cussed at Foster for ruining a day that was so very special to my friend. Ash looked beautiful, but she was clearly worried about me, constantly glancing my way with concern furrowing her brow and clouding her eyes.

I sighed, picking up the hem of my dress, and I moved across the room to her. The makeup artist had just finished with me and was readying her supplies to start on Ash, but she'd popped into the bathroom, leaving my friend and I alone to have a quick conversation.

“This is your big day,” I said firmly, bringing my hands up to rest on her shoulders as I stood in front of her. She was already sitting on the stool the makeup artist had brought with her, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip as she looked at me with all that worry in her eyes. “Stop fretting about me. I’m fine. What happened sucked, but it’s over and I’m moving on. Don’t let it tarnish your memories of today, Ash. Please?”

“It won’t tarnish my memories.” She scoffed, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “Who even uses that word anyway?”

“I do because it was the perfect word for the point I was trying to convey.” I lifted my eyebrows a little, trying to let her see how serious I was. “This is your wedding day, Ashley Shaw. In less than two hours, you’ll be married to the love of your life and your happily ever after will begin. I love you and I’m not going to be the pouty maid of honor in the pictures. I also won’t allow you to be the worried bride.”

She sighed, her eyes moving slowly from one of mine to the other. “Okay, fine. I’ll stop worrying soon, but there’s something I need to say to you first.”

“Shoot.”

“I know you’re angry at him and I know you’re hurt, but true love can’t be squashed by misunderstandings, Shelby.” When I opened my mouth to protest the true-love assertion, she gave me a look that shut me right up. “Love will always find a way. You just need to open your heart and stop letting your fear of the past get in your way.”

Tears were suddenly pricking at the backs of my eyes. “Thank you. Can we go back to celebrating *your* love now?”

“Just one more thing.” She shifted slightly into the early afternoon sun streaming in through the window, her red hair glowing like a luminous halo around her head. “You should talk to him. If and when you get the opportunity, take it. Speak to him, ask the questions you want to ask, and at the very least, get some closure.”

I dragged in a shuddering breath, but before I could say anything, she reached for my hands and squeezed them. “You have exceptionally high standards, my Shelby. And so you should because you are an exceptional person, but sometimes, people make mistakes. They do stupid shit and they screw up. Sometimes it’s because pride or fear gets in the way, and sometimes, it’s just because they haven’t thought something all the way through. Either way, we can’t hold it against them forever.”

Tears welled in my eyes. I wanted to argue, to rant about how Foster’s mistakes weren’t mistakes. They had been nothing less than deliberate deception, but the sincere, soft

look in her eyes—and the fact that it was her wedding day—stopped me.

“You don’t want to be stuck in the same place you’ve been in since college forever, Shel. Misunderstandings are just that. They’re *mis*understandings, which means you may not understand things for the way they really are.”

With the tears threatening to ruin my makeup and my brain and heart at war about whether she was right, I simply nodded. “I’ll think about it, but right now, you need to get married and we need to make sure we get you to the chapel on time.”

She smiled and the makeup artist gently ushered me out of her way, stepping into my place to get started on the already beautiful bride. Needing a distraction, I headed over to the glass dining table that had been pushed up against the wall and I picked up the phone that was playing music through the speakers in the room.

It belonged to one of the bridesmaids, but she’d opened it up when she’d allowed it to be connected to the Bluetooth so we’d all be able to use it to choose songs. The only rule was that we weren’t allowed to constantly switch to a new song while another was still playing, so I added my choice to the queue and then ducked into the bathroom to dab away the tears.

After rolling a piece of toilet paper onto my finger, I pressed gently against the corners of my eyes and inhaled deeply. This was Ashley’s day and I needed to get it together. Standing there by myself in that bathroom, I moved over to the vanity and gripped the edges. Then I moved my gaze up to stare at myself in the reflection of the mirror.

I looked gorgeous, and I had to say so myself because no one else was going to, but it was true. The dress was more incredible now that it’d been finished, the fabric shimmering with every move I made. Ashley’s hairstylist had put gentle spiral curls in my blonde locks and two sparkling barrettes fixed the front of it away from my face.

The makeup artist was a real artist and she’d turned me into a work of art, my face contoured but still natural and my

eyes huge with all the products she'd used on them. The only problem was the haunted sadness within them, and if even I could see it, that meant everyone else would too.

I blinked a few times, pasted a smile on my face, and then tried again and again when the first time didn't work. Eventually, I focused my mind deliberately on Ashley and Chase, the memories I had of the two of them smiling at each other and joking around.

I thought of the way he looked at her and the easy banter between them, and then I reminded myself that was what I was here for. Them.

Little by little, the sadness receded and I gave myself a real smile, ready to get on with it. By the time I emerged from the bathroom, the bridal party suite had once more turned into a hive of activity. Women were everywhere, touching up their lip gloss and smoothing out their dresses.

The photographer had arrived, and he took some shots of us before he moved into place to capture the final touches of Ashley's makeup being applied. After that, we helped our bride get into her dress, and just then, the song I'd added to the playlist came on and I grinned.

The opening bars of *Going to the Chapel* by the Dixie Cups started playing and Ashley squealed. "This is so perfect."

My eyes met hers in the mirror and I inclined my head when she shot me a questioning look, but we didn't speak. She smiled radiantly at me and then presented her back to her mom and sister to lace up the dress.

The rest of the day was a complete whirlwind. We smiled for so many pictures that my cheeks hurt. During the ceremony, I pretended that the tears were only about how happy I was for Ashley, but I shed a few for myself too.

The more I thought about it, the more I was starting to realize that she was right. I did hold people to exceptionally high standards, but it wasn't like I was unforgiving. I just didn't like to mess up. As the girl who had been the nerd all through school and college, I'd grown so accustomed to being



the butt of jokes that I'd promised myself going into adulthood that I would never allow it to happen again.

Now, I was wondering if that had made me too rigid. If perhaps I'd overreacted at the café that night. I didn't feel like I had, but it was a possibility I had to consider.

Once they were pronounced husband and wife, Chase dipped Ashley down low and they kissed. More tears flowed down my cheeks and I couldn't stop them. I wanted what they had so damn bad.

The companionship and camaraderie. A best friend to go through life with who understood me better than anyone else. A lover I could spend days in bed with, exploring his body until I knew it as well as I did my own. A man who wanted to start a family with me and face those challenges right there at my side.

I'd thought I found my person and now I wasn't sure I ever would. None of this was ever going to happen for me and it broke my heart all over again.

I sucked it up, though. Smiling and cheering along with everyone else, I waited for them with the rest of the guests when they left the chapel. Then I chatted to some people while the bride and groom went to have more pictures taken. Through it all, I kept a smile on my face to hide my battered heart.

It was exhausting, but since I would do anything for Ashley, it wasn't *that* bad. Later on, at the reception, once the others were dancing and having a good time, I finally allowed myself to drop the act for a minute.

Ashley and Chase were at the bar with their families, completely engrossed in conversation. The other bridesmaids were all on the dance floor with their dates, and everyone else I knew well enough to speak to was otherwise occupied.

I figured it was a safe time to sit at my table and just take a minute to feel the pain brought on by the realization that all my daydreaming about having found the one I was going to do this with had been for naught. All my dreams and fantasies

were going to remain just that, and I had to come to terms with it.

As I watched one of the bridesmaids being spun around the dance floor by her husband, a white rose suddenly dropped on the table in front of me. My gaze jerked up and I was ready to tell whoever had done it that it was way too soon for the white-rose thing, but as I looked up, I found myself staring right into Foster's green eyes.

My heart seized in my chest. Confusion spiraled through me, and I wondered what he was doing here. And just why the hell he was wearing a tux.



FOSTER

I had never been a romantic. Hearts, flowers, and poetry had never done it for me, and honestly, I was a little clueless about this kind of thing. It was why I'd asked for Shelby's help in the first place way back when.

Upon Hope's insistence, however, I was trying really hard. I was wearing a tuxedo she'd helped me choose. I was at the wedding. I'd brought the rose.

Now all I needed to do was get the girl.

Unfortunately, no one had told me how to do that. The rest of it, sure. *Make the grand gesture, Foster. Get dressed up, Foster. Take the rose, Foster. It'll be so romantic.*

From here on out though, I was on my own and really wishing they'd given me more. Ashley was in on it and waiting for my signal, but beyond that, it was all on me.

Shelby's blue eyes filled with tears. She stared up at me, looking like a beautiful, sad fallen angel who'd had her wings clipped. I felt terrible knowing I was responsible for those tears. That it was me who had made her look that way.

Well, me *and* Hope, but mostly me. Apparently.

Drawing in a deep breath, I kept my gaze fixed on hers, willing to do anything to stop her crying. "Would you like to dance?"

As the words came out of my mouth, I realized I probably should've asked her if she'd do me the *honor* of dancing with me, but again, I sucked at this stuff. I extended my hand

toward her, holding it steady. She cocked her head and stared at it like she was about to smack it away.

“I think I know what happened that night,” I said when it became obvious she wasn’t just going to give in. “It took me a while to figure it out, but I think I have, and I can explain. I swear to you on everything that I hold dear in this world that it wasn’t what you thought.”

A tiny crease appeared between her eyebrows and she scoffed, but she didn’t look away. She also didn’t smack my hand, so there was that. “I’m sorry about what happened back in college. The truth is that the date back then was meant for you, but I misread the signs and asked that other girl at the last minute because I thought I was about to make a fool of myself.”

“So you made a fool of me instead?” She narrowed her eyes at me. “You’re not really helping your case here, Foster.”

“No, I know.” I exhaled harshly, my hand still waiting for hers. I tried again. “The thing is, I didn’t mean to make you feel like a fool. In fact, I didn’t think you’d care at all and I kept thinking that you didn’t until Hope brought it to my attention the day after the reveal date that you probably really did.”

“Hope?”

“My brother’s fiancée. Porter. You remember him, right?”

She nodded slowly. “I think so, but what does his fiancée have to do with us?”

“More than you might think,” I admitted grudgingly, finally sliding my hands into my pockets. “I’m the idiot in this scenario, not you, but I also didn’t have anything to do with us being set up with each other at Sight Unseen.”

“But you work there.” She tucked her chin in low and shook her head at me. “Do you honestly expect me to believe you didn’t know?”

I slid my phone out of my pocket and held it out to her. “I don’t expect you to believe it from me, but maybe you will if you speak to Hope. Take it. She’s waiting for your call.”

Shelby frowned as she glanced at my phone. “Call me crazy, but I’m not inclined to let your brother’s fiancée talk you out of trouble with me.”

“Shit, I didn’t think about it like that.” I shot her a sheepish smile. “Look, Hope works at Sight Unseen too. She’s my boss, actually. You and I were a ninety-seven-percent match, so the system would’ve put us together anyway, but Hope isn’t only Porter’s fiancée. She’s also my friend and she has been for a long time.”

My heart slammed against my ribs. Everything rode on her believing what I was saying, and it was true, but I needed her to know that. “After that first meeting you and I had, I told her about you and I admitted that I used to have a huge crush on you.”

Shelby’s eyes widened and I could see her pulse thrumming under her jaw. “Maybe we should dance.”

I yanked my hand out of my pocket and extended it toward her again immediately. This time, she took it and I helped her up, feeling my skin sing where it came in contact with hers. I’d never felt anything like it with any other woman, and it made my heart pound even harder.

Because for the first time, it was really sinking in that this was Amanda. *My* Amanda. The girl I’d spent weeks obsessing over and looking forward to meeting, and it’d been Shelby all along. I almost groaned out loud when I pulled her to me once we reached the dance floor, and I held her as close as I dared, feeling the heat of her against my abdomen as I swayed us gently from side to side.

“Hope saw your profile when your application came in,” I said quietly, speaking against those floral-vanilla-scented locks that flooded my brain with memories of all the times I’d smelled it in the dark and how much I’d wanted the woman it belonged to.

My cock twitched in my pants, but this was *not* the time for that. With strict purpose, I focused my mind on what needed to be said instead of how good it felt to have her soft curves in my arms again. “It was very soon after I’d told her

about you, and between her and Porter, they'd set me up on three awful dates before you and I went out the first time."

"That was true?"

"Everything I told you was true. Hope asked me to give her one last chance to set me up. She begged me, but she was acting a little weird and I felt like I owed it to her to give it one last try."

"Why would you owe her anything?"

I cringed. "I may have set her up with Porter last year without telling her it was him. It was a whole thing, but it's also a story for a different day."

"So she set you up with me without telling you?"

"Yep." I adjusted my grip on her lower back, daring to tug her just a little bit closer. "I won't lie. I was very tempted to look you up on our system once I realized how much I liked you, but I didn't do it. There was too much going on with the inheritance, and moving, and stuff, and if the reveal date had been even a week later, I probably would've given in."

"But you didn't?"

"I didn't," I promised. "I had no idea that Hope had set me up with you until I saw you take that white rose from Adam at the reveal, but when I saw you, Shelby..." I trailed off, dragging in yet another deep breath and closing my eyes. *Jesus. Talking about my feelings really doesn't come naturally to me.*

"When I saw you, I was so fucking relieved because, deep down inside, I think I wanted it to be you all along. I meant what I said that day in your office. I was seeing someone and it was going really well. I really liked her, and if you hadn't been Amanda, I still would've tried to make it work with her, but after seeing you again, I realized that a part of me would always have belonged to you."

"Is that true?"

"Yes." I opened my eyes again, pulling my head back so I could look into her brilliant blues. I saw the disbelief

swimming in them, the hurt, and the doubt. “Porter thinks it’s because you’re the one who got away, but he’s wrong.”

“He is?”

I nodded. “It’s because I’ve always known that it was you. I’ve always known that you and I belong together, and now that I’ve found you again, I’m never letting you go. Or at least, not without a fight.”

Her gaze flicked from one of my eyes to the other, her teeth worrying her lips as she processed what I’d said. “Why did you try to get me to talk to Hope?”

I smiled. “She said she’d help me and that if you didn’t believe me, that she was in the office. She’s working tonight and she’s on her computer. A computer that has access to the Sight Unseen system. She’s willing to do a video call with you to show you the logs.”

“How do I know those logs haven’t been manipulated?”

“The company has faced its fair share of controversy. I’m sure you’ll remember seeing it all over the press last year and a few times before.” Her brows puckered as she thought. Then she nodded. “Our boss, Milena Kress, the CEO, is obsessed with privacy and cyber security. Our system is light years ahead of where it should be for one belonging to a dating agency. Absolutely everything we do gets recorded and logged, and the only person who can delete anything is Milena herself, but the system even keeps track of that.”

“So what you’re saying is that Hope can show me my profile. Who accessed it and when?”

I nodded. “She can show you the entire history of your profile, from the moment we received it to the final notes she made after our reveal date. Every keystroke and click related to our case is there. It’ll prove that she was the first at the company to access your profile, that she set us up, and that there’s no trace of me ever having looked at it.”

“Okay, but she’s your brother’s fiancée and you just said she was your longtime friend. The system won’t prove that she never told you about it.”



I smiled and inclined my head to concede her point. “Well, obviously you’ve learned a thing or two from the lawyers you work for.”

She gave me a tight eyed look and I sighed. “Fine. That’s another reason she said you could call her. She said you’d be able to look into her eyes when she told you that she’d kept it from me.”

Clearly, Shelby was still having trouble believing me. I didn’t blame her. Trusting someone when you thought they’d deliberately made a fool of you not once, but twice, had to be hard as hell. My gaze lifted away from hers until I saw Ashley’s smiling face in the crowd and I nodded at her.

She shot me a discreet thumbs-up, and a minute later, the music abruptly changed to a tango. I tightened my grip on Shelby and channeled my instructor from those lessons we’d had. If my words weren’t doing the trick, maybe the dance could do it for me.



SHELBY

**A**fter the tango, I was out of breath and staring up into Foster's eyes. The fact that he would show up here—with a white rose, no less—explain everything, and then do that in front of all of these people just to remind me of how much fun we'd had together in the dark told me that he really did have feelings for me.

No man would've gone out of his way like that just to mess with someone. His explanation had also really made sense. I would've asked him to give me a moment to check that his brother's fiancée really did work with him and that it wasn't a lie, but I didn't need to.

Now that he'd said their names and told me some of their story in the context of *Sight Unseen*, I remembered that I'd watched a part of a docuseries about the couple. Ashley had made me watch the end of one of the episodes with her before she'd signed up, and Hope and Porter had been the stars.

Of course, I wanted to watch it again—the whole thing this time—now that I knew Foster had probably been in it too, but before any of that, I needed to do *this*.

I pressed myself up on my toes, my arms looping around his neck, and I sealed my mouth over his. Foster froze for a beat, then wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me all the way into him as he kissed me back.

It was our first kiss in the light, but it was as electrifying—if not more so—than all those stolen kisses in the dark had

been. My skin buzzed, my body melting into his. I pushed my fingers into his hair and held on to the back of his head.

Tears were leaking out of the corners of my eyes, but they were happy tears this time. Ashley had been right after all. It'd all been a misunderstanding. Foster hadn't been playing me at all, and the only reason he'd given away my date back in college was because he hadn't believed I'd wanted to go on it with him.

I wished in that moment that I'd had the courage back then to have given him just one moment of encouragement. Just one word that would've changed his mind and made him see that he had been then and still was everything I'd ever wanted.

But we couldn't get the lost time back.

The best we could do was to make up for it.

Foster grinned against my lips as he slowed the kiss to a natural end, his fingertips now resting just above my ass. "Do you have any official duties left?"

"None." I smiled back at him, deciding that I was going to have the courage now that I hadn't had back then and just go for it. "Do you want to get out of here?"

He groaned, heat creeping into his eyes, and he nodded. "Is that even a real question? Where's your stuff?"

"My purse is at the table, but everything else is in my car." I took his hand when his fingers laced between mine. He strode hurriedly off the dance floor. I laughed. "We can come pick up the car tomorrow?"

"That's a great idea." He shot me a grin over his shoulder, snatching up my silver clutch—the only one on the table—as soon as we reached it. "Do you have to say goodbye?"

"No, I'll just text Ashley on our way." From the corner of my eye, I saw her watching us anyway, and I smiled at her. She beamed proudly at me and put her hands together in front of her chest.

Foster followed my gaze as he raced us to the main exit doors, nodding at her with a quick jerk of his chin. We spilled

out into the cool night air. In one smooth move and without breaking stride or letting go of my hand for any longer than strictly necessary, he slid his jacket off his shoulders and wrapped it around me, all the while marching us to a white SUV.

Its lights flashed when we got close and he opened the passenger door for me, helping me in. He jogged around the front of the vehicle and collapsed into the driver's seat beside me. I turned to him with an amused, playful smile on my lips even as I buckled up.

“You in a hurry to get somewhere?”

He turned over the engine and gunned it out of the parking lot, only glancing at me with that heat still in his eyes before he looked back at the road. “I’ve waited way more than long enough to get you in my bed, Shelby. I hope you don’t have any plans tomorrow. Or the day after that.”

A thrill shot through me and I shivered. *Yep, he’s definitely not faking this. There’s no way he’s messing with me right now.*

“Not tomorrow, but I do need to work the day after that.”

He let out a long-suffering sigh, his knuckles turning white on the steering wheel. “Yeah, so do I, but we’ll have to see if we get around to it.”

I giggled, my eyebrows lifting slightly. “We’ve got one whole day and two nights between then and now. I’m sure we’ll make it.”

He arched a brow as he glanced at me in the rearview mirror. “Only one whole day and two nights, huh? That’s definitely not enough time. How much vacation time do you have?”

“I only just started working there.” I giggled again, unable to help the sounds from spilling out of me. My heart raced and my hands trembled. “I have a few, but not that many.”

“We’ll talk about it.” He reached for one of my hands and brought our joined hands to his lap. “It’s not far now.”

I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or to himself, but either way, excitement rippled through me. It'd been a long time since I'd been with a man, and even then, I hadn't done it very much. The way Foster was acting was making me feel like I was about to be *ravaged* and I couldn't freaking wait.

As we sped up the ramp of a large, well-lit parking garage, I squeezed his hand and braced myself for the ice water I was probably about to dump all over both of us. "Uh, Foster? Before we go in there, you should probably know that I'm not, uh, I'm not very experienced."

"Why are you saying that like it's a bad thing?" His voice was husky now, red streaks appearing over the tops of his cheeks before he parked in a spot near an elevator door. He killed the engine, obviously not put off *at all* by my admission. "We're meant to be together, you and I. Truth be told, selfishly, I'm fucking ecstatic that you haven't got that much experience. It means I get to be the guinea pig for everything you've ever wanted to try *and* that I get to have you in ways no one else ever has or ever will."

My pulse thrummed in my veins. I stared back into those green eyes, the irises almost completely swallowed by pupils now. "You seem pretty confident about all this."

He smirked. "That's because I am. Let's go, baby. Fair warning though, the first time may not last very long, but I promise all the times after that will. I'm just really worked up right now."

I giggled again, my entire body feeling shaky. I followed him out of the car. He gripped my hand again and practically dragged me to a super fast elevator. Before the doors had even slid closed behind us, he tugged me into him, one hand snaking around to rest on the small of my back while the other landed on the side of my neck and jaw.

His head descended, his mouth crashing into mine. He walked me back until I hit the wall. He broke the impact with his forearm, but I doubt I'd even have noticed a slight sting of pain right about now. Not when he was kissing me so desperately, his need matching my own. Our tongues plunged

into each other's mouths and our bodies pressed together as close as they could while we were still wearing our clothes.

The clothes didn't last long, though. He kept kissing me as we left the elevator, and I didn't even get a chance to look at the hallway or at his place as he kept devouring me, his own actions feeling mindless and mechanical as he brought us to his door and unlocked it without looking.

I'd have to be impressed with that later, though. Right now, all I could think of as he tugged down the zipper of my dress was to get him naked as fast as I could. While we were pawing at the fabric of each other's clothes like we were in some kind of naughty race, he kept moving us until I felt the back of my knees hit something that felt like a mattress.

As they did, he pushed me down and climbed up on top of me, his hot, hard torso pressed to mine as we clawed at each other's underwear. When we were finally naked, the tip of him slid through my wet folds, pressing right at my entrance.

He sucked in a sharp breath, his heart hammering against my chest. He finally broke the kiss to look into my eyes. As he did, a lock of his dark hair fell over his forehead and I smiled, reaching up to push it back.

"We need a condom," he murmured, his lips swollen from the force of our kisses and his breathing loud and erratic. "Give me a minute."

I nodded, my eyes on the cut lines of his body. He sat back on his knees and reached into the nightstand beside his bed. I knew I could take this opportunity to check out his bedroom, but I couldn't tear my gaze away from him for long enough to do it.

Foster O'Brien had always been hot, but in the nude, he was absolutely delicious. My mouth even watered a little bit, which seemed odd but I didn't question it. The fact of the matter was that I wanted every last rippling, well-defined inch of him.

And I wanted it now.

His broad shoulders bulged as he bit open the box of condoms. He pulled out one of the foil packages. His strong chest heaved as he bit open the foil next. My gaze followed his arms to his hands as his long fingers worked at rolling the latex over his shaft.

His dick was huge and looked rock hard, and the tip had been glistening before he'd covered it with the condom. I swallowed back my nerves. I was no virgin, but it really had been a long time, and that thing looked like it could wreak havoc on any woman's body.

Foster glanced at me when the condom was on, but as he crawled over me again, he drew in a deep breath, took my hands, and settled between my legs. "Why do you look scared?"

"I, uh, I am. A little," I confessed on a quiet whisper. "It's been a few years, and..."

"And you're afraid I'm going to hurt you?" He made his eyes big at me before he let out a choppy breath and then kissed my forehead. "We'll take it slow, okay? The very last thing in the world that I want is to hurt you."

Miraculously, after how desperately and urgently everything had started, he managed to dial it back almost all the way. He was patient and attentive as he pressed against my entrance and slowly pushed himself into me. I was so wet that there was no resistance at all. As I adjusted the angle of my pelvis and wrapped my legs around his hips, he cursed and pressed his forehead against mine.

I swallowed hard, tears pressing against the backs of my eyes, but not because he was hurting me. It was the exact opposite actually. Having him inside me felt so damn good, so right, that I was about to cry.

Foster kissed my eyes, then dragged his lips across my skin to my mouth. When he started moving inside me, he was kissing me so passionately that some of the tears leaked out.

Tiny explosions of pleasure started going off inside me almost immediately, and I clung to him, kissing him back. He



stoked a fire deep within my body and fed the flames with every thrust of his hips. When he sped up just a little, I started whimpering and my toes curled, my kisses no longer rhythmic. A soft cry worked its way out of me.

I'd never, ever felt this kind of slow build of pleasure, but it felt like it was going to blow me apart if I let go. Foster didn't stop, his hands in mine and his kisses soft but insistent. He kept going and eventually started speaking against my lips.

"Come for me, Shelby. I know you want to. Just let go."

"I can't."

He kissed me again, his movements remaining steady, and he kept me right on that edge.

"You can. I'm right here. Hold on to me. I'm right here."

I had no idea how he'd known exactly what I'd needed to hear, but as he said the words, I screwed my eyes shut. My body went rigid and I surrendered. The waves of pleasure overwhelmed me immediately. I was pretty sure I even screamed his name as I shook uncontrollably underneath him.

It took the orgasm forever to release me from its grip. When it did, Foster looked like he was in pain. His features were contorted, his lips parted, and his body quaking before he finally let go. I hung onto him as he finally gave himself over to his own release.

In the aftermath, we kept holding each other, his breath feathering across my heated skin as he collapsed on top of me, dotting soft kisses to the column of my neck as he waited for our bodies to come down.

In that moment, I knew I'd made the right decision. I loved this man, and I didn't want to spend another day without him.



“I ’m never going to get enough of you,” I murmured into Shelby’s mouth. I kissed her with the sun starting to rise on the horizon outside my windows.

All night, we’d slept maybe about two hours. The rest of the time, we’d been getting to know each other in a whole new way. Shelby smiled at me sleepily, but when I started moving my fingers inside her again, her lips parted and let out a soft moan.

“Foster, I can’t.” Her hips began rolling. They moved with my hand, and I bent my head to kiss her again.

“Yes, you can, my love. I’m not going to stop until you realize there’s nothing you can’t do with me.” I stroked the inside of her channel, my fingertips meeting the slightly ribbed patch of flesh deep inside.

Her eyes were shut, and her brow furrowed. Her cheeks got flushed all over again. Suddenly, she stopped moving and her eyes flew open, immediately finding mine. “What did you just call me?”

“My love?” I stared into those stunning blue eyes, a playful smile lifting the corners of my lips at the shock I saw in them. “What? Surely, you know by now that I love you.”

“No, I—” She cut herself off, staring at me incredulously for another beat. Then she smiled. “I love you too, but does that make us crazy?”

“Only as crazy as the next people who are in love.” My gaze dropped to her deep red lips that had long since been kissed clean of any makeup. The color that was on them now was because of my mouth having been on hers almost all night. I had to admit, it was really hot to know that. “I love you, so stop telling me you can’t and just do. Just feel.”

I started moving my fingers slowly again, careful to be gentle after the night we’d had but also unable to let her out of my bed just yet. After everything we’d been through to get here, I might just force us both into retirement so we’d never have to leave it again.

Shelby lifted her head, her mouth searching for mine. I pressed it to hers, kissing her, and I felt her inner muscles starting to flutter around my fingers again. I loved how responsive she was and I planned on finding out every little thing that made her scream and doing it over and over again.

At first, when she’d told me she wasn’t very experienced, I hadn’t believed her. She was gorgeous, smart, and strong. It seemed impossible to me that any man wouldn’t have wanted her and done what he could to have her, but either she’d resisted their advances or I’d just gotten lucky.

As soon as I’d seen the way she’d looked at me last night when I’d been putting on the condom, I knew it had been true. She’d looked terrified for a moment, and then, when I’d felt how tight she was, I’d come very close to losing it right then and there.

But all of it turned me on even more now because it meant I could make her mine in every way. I hoped she would do the same to me. As she started bucking around my fingers, I pressed my thumb down on her clit. She came, and I moaned with her, somehow feeling like I was sharing her pleasure.

It’d been like that all night. When she had an orgasm, it almost felt like I was having one too. Our connection was just that intense—or maybe I was sleep deprived. Either way, I really would never get enough of her and all I could do was pray that she felt the same way.

Panting as she opened her eyes, she twined her fingers around my free hand and brought my palm to her mouth, kissing the very center of it. “I think you’ve broken me.”

“Ruined you for other men,” I corrected her teasingly.

She laughed breathlessly, nodding as she let her lids flutter closed. “I still can’t believe we’re really here,” she murmured.

I looked at her beautiful face, the afterglow she had and the faint sheen on her forehead. “Yeah, neither can I. Do you really forgive me for everything?”

She chuckled, not opening her eyes but keeping her grip tight on my hand. “There was nothing really to forgive, was there? I thought you did something that you hadn’t done. It was a misunderstanding. If anything, I should be apologizing to you for reacting the way I did without giving you a chance to explain.”

“No apology necessary, but I forgive you anyway. After I wimped out in college, I guess I should’ve known you’d suspect that I was being less than honest with you.”

Her eyes finally blinked open and she smiled at me. “Both of us wimped out in college, but we’re putting it behind us now. There’s nothing we can do to change the past, so I guess we better focus on the future.”

“About that.” I ran my fingers up and down the bare length of her arm, still staring at her like I would never stop. “This may go without saying, but you’re my girlfriend now, right? We’re going to give this thing a real try?”

“Yes, and thanks for asking and not just assuming.” She lifted her hand to drag her fingertips along my jaw. “Do you have any idea how much time I spent wondering what this face looked like? It seems so surreal that I finally know now and that it’s you.”

“Yeah, I’m still trying to wrap my head around it too. If it helps, I spent just as much time thinking about you.”

Surprise flickered in her eyes. “You did?”

“I did.” A naughty smile spread on my lips and I winked at her. “Not all my thoughts were pure, though. Especially not after we kissed.”

She widened her eyes at me. Then they dipped down to my chest where my body disappeared under the sheets with hers. Her cheeks blushed beet red before she looked up at me again. “Will you tell me what your thoughts were sometime?”

“I’ve shown you what some of them were,” I said, then grinned. “I’m looking forward to showing you all the rest too. How about you?”

“Uh, the same.” She flushed to the roots of her hair this time, vulnerability shimmering in her eyes as she looked up at me. “You felt it too, then. The chemistry? It wasn’t just me?”

I snorted. “It definitely wasn’t just you, baby. I spent most of our dates so hard, I could barely move, but at the same time, I just wanted to keep talking to you forever. It was weird.”

“Weird in a good way?”

“Weird in the best way,” I assured her, then studied her eyes and frowned. “You’re really not very comfortable talking about sex or being turned on, are you?”

She shook her head. “I guess I just haven’t had much practice.” Her hands came up to catch my face, her eyes locked on mine. “I hope to get some now, though. A lot, actually. I want to be as confident as you are about it, and as open as Ashley is, but I’m going to need time.”

“I can give you that. I can give you all the time in the world, as long as you keep forgiving me when I fuck up and keep letting me explain myself to you if I make a mistake. You may not have much experience with sex, but I don’t have a lot with relationships.”

“You don’t?”

I shrugged. “I’m a nerd at heart, remember?”

“Says the guy who just admitted to having a lot of experience with sex,” she teased. “How about this? We just agree to be patient with each other, to hear each other out

always, and to be honest if we run into anything we're unsure about?"

"Yes," I said. "To all of the above."

"Good."

My stomach rumbled and Shelby laughed. "Should we go grab some breakfast? We can cook together. I'll show you some of my mom's tricks and you can show me some of yours?"

"As long as you promise never to mention our mothers while we're naked again, I'm in." I planted another kiss on her lips and then reluctantly rolled away. I got off the bed and handed over my shirt for her to wear.

When she put it on, I almost tackled her right back to the bed, but eventually, I beat the urge and took her hand and led her to the kitchen instead. Shelby's head seemed to be on a swivel as we left the master bedroom and made our way to the main area of the apartment. I smiled when her gaze finally came back to mine.

"Nice place, right?" I said. "It could be yours soon too, if you'll agree to move in."

Her jaw slackened. "Whoa, there. Easy, tiger. Let's give this a few months before we start talking about moving in together."

"Fine, but as soon as you're ready, tell me and I'll ask again, but I'm ready now." I meant it too. We were going to make this work. I could feel it in my bones.

As we walked into my kitchen, I showed her where everything was and then just watched her for a moment, completely enchanted with her full curves in my white button-down shirt. Her shapely legs reaching from underneath it. Her messy, blonde hair against the collar.

"You should keep that," I said as I finally forced my ass into motion and strode to the fridge to get some eggs. "It looks way better on you than it ever will on me."

She smiled and waggled her brows at me. “Thank you. I’m going to take you up on that, but only so I’ve got something to sleep in that smells like you for now.”

“I smell like me. You could just sleep with me naked every night instead of sleeping in clothes that smell like me.”

She gave me an amused but exasperated look. “What happened to slowing down?”

I shrugged. “Just putting it out there, but how about we just agree that every time the clothes you take stop smelling like me, you take something else of mine with you? If I can’t physically be with you every night, then at least I know you’ll be thinking of me.”

“I’m always going to be thinking of you,” she said as she pulled a mixing bowl out from under the counter. “Do you need me to spritz some of my perfume on your pillows so I can make sure you’re also thinking about me?”

I chuckled. “You don’t have to. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you, but be my guest. Mark your territory. I kind of like it.”

Shelby chuckled and took the eggs I held out to her. “Pancakes?”

“It’s like you read my mind.” While she set about making the batter, I passed her all the ingredients she’d need. Then I took my place behind the stove with her with a pan in front of each of us. Between the two of us, we made our way through the batter quickly, ending with a massive stack of pancakes that we doused in butter and syrup and then carried back to bed with us.

Shelby sat down on my bed, her gaze on the view of the gray skies, the city, and the waterways beyond. “I can’t believe I didn’t notice this before. Does every room in your apartment have a view like this?”

“Pretty much.”

“Wow. I see why you said you had to move. A place like this isn’t easy to find.”



“Definitely not,” I agreed, settling in beside her with my back against the headboard. I took a pancake and ate it with my hand. “Hey, I was thinking, do you want to go to Paris with me next weekend?”

“Paris?” She turned to gawk at me, then started laughing. “Holy hell. I can’t believe I totally forgot how rich you are now.”

I grinned. “Is that a yes?”

“That’s a hell yes.” She leaned forward and closed her sticky, syrupy palm on my cheek, and she kissed me, but I didn’t mind.

I was planning on dragging her to the shower with me after this anyway, and then we were coming right back here. It started raining while we kissed. After the shower, I brought her back to my bed and made love to her with the rain lashing against the windows. I vowed that I was going to make this our very first Sunday tradition.

# EPILOGUE

One Year Later

**O**n the anniversary of Ashley and Chase's wedding, Foster and I were back in Paris. We were in the same hotel and even in the same room we'd been in the first time he'd bought me here, and he woke me up with his head between my legs again.

I moaned as his tongue lapped at my clit. His fingers teased up my thighs and he spread them apart and licked me like he would never stop. After we'd spent Ash's wedding night together, when he told me he would never get enough of me, I'd thought it was just one of those things people said, but nope.

In the twelve months we'd been together since, he'd proven it to me over and over again, sometimes multiple times a day. I sank my fingers into his hair now, letting my knees drop back, and I lifted one of his hands to my breast.

I felt him smile against my aching flesh, but I knew why. Foster was ridiculously proud of himself for dragging me out of my shell in bed. He'd made it his personal mission—of which Ashley had heartily approved when I'd told her about it—to make sure that I told him exactly what I wanted.

Although that part wasn't just true about us in bed. Sexually, he'd definitely changed me, turned me into a brazen, insatiable beast that he was only too happy to feed regularly,

but in our everyday lives, he also never stopped encouraging me to take what I wanted.

Together, we were so much stronger than we had been apart. I had been promoted three times at work, and while Foster had already been about as high up in the company as he could go while Milena and Hope were still there, he'd been working on a lot of new ideas with them.

Sight Unseen was doing better than ever. Mr. Harrison pretty much let me do whatever I wanted these days because I'd proven I didn't need to be watched every minute to get my job done, and life, overall, was better than I ever would've imagined.

As Foster's tongue kept pushing me higher and higher, my brain shut down and I let go of thoughts. I surrendered to the sensations he was stirring up in me. Every nip, lick, and touch were exactly what I needed. Before I had even opened my eyes for the day, I was coming so hard that my toes curled and my ears rang.

"Good morning." He crawled up the length of my body, a lazy smile on his face, and he brought his mouth down on mine.

At first, whenever I'd tasted myself on his tongue, I'd been embarrassed, but these days, I leaned into it, wrapping my arms and legs around him and deepening the kiss. Foster chuckled and tried to pull away, but I wouldn't let him.

"Don't you want to go to breakfast?" he asked between kisses.

I shook my head. "The only breakfast I want is right here." I pressed my chest against his, moaning as my hard, sensitive nipples mashed into his skin.

Foster settled on top of me, no longer trying to pull away. I pressed my heels down on his ass, pushing him into me, and I kissed him hard. For a moment, he tensed, but then he seemed to remember that he didn't need a condom anymore. He groaned and started moving, thrusting in and out of me like he couldn't bring himself to slow down.

Our bodies climbed together this time, and with the iconic Eiffel Tower in the distance beyond our window, we reached our peak together too. Feeling Foster coming apart inside me, growing, and then filling me with his seed was something I still wasn't used to, and I'd been on birth control for about six months at this point.

It still turned me on to no end to have him without a condom, though. We'd had plans for today, but as I held him in my arms while we came down, I couldn't remember what they had been and I didn't care.

"We're not going anywhere today." I ran my hands up and down the ropes of muscle in his back. "Is it bad that I don't feel compelled to go out while we're abroad?"

"Nah, we've seen all the sights a few times." He pressed an open-mouthed kiss to my neck and lifted his head to look into my eyes. "I'm good with staying in, but we have to take a walk later, okay?"

"Okay?" I frowned as I stroked my fingers up his back and into his hair. "Why?"

"I have something to show you." He smiled, seeming strangely nervous, but I'd learned better than to ask.

Foster loved surprising me, and he never caved before he was ready to let me know what he was planning. After pressing a kiss to my forehead, he rolled off me but brought me with him. I ended up with my head on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart under my ear.

"Any regret about moving in with me yet?" he asked distractedly.

I chuckled. "Not on your life. I love you, and so far, I love living with you. All that's left for us to do now is to train you on how to use a laundry basket."

He laughed. "One thing at a time, babe. You just taught me how to use a dishwasher."

"Exactly. The laundry basket is next," I said jokingly, but also not really joking.

I honestly did love living with Foster. We'd practically been living together since we started dating, so it'd seemed right to make it official about two months ago, but living with a man was a whole different ballgame to what I was used to.

He wasn't the messiest person, but it'd taken us both some time to settle into formal cohabitation. I glanced up at the strong profile of his face and smiled. "Thanks for bringing me back here for our anniversary."

He looked down at me, those bright green eyes happy and relaxed when they met mine. "It was either Paris or Fiji, but since this was our first trip together, it felt like a good place to celebrate one whole year of you putting up with me."

I chuckled. "Fiji was a great trip too, though."

In fact, they all had been. As soon as I'd admitted to Foster—during our first stay in this very hotel room, actually—that I'd always wanted to travel, he'd taken my wishes to heart. In just twelve short months, we'd taken seven trips and he already had a bunch more planned.

I shook my head on his chest as I thought about it. My life had changed completely after he and I had gotten together. In more ways than I ever would've been able to imagine.

Foster was about the most attentive, devoted boyfriend who had ever lived. We cooked together almost every night and for every other meal we possibly could. He'd hit it off with Ashley and with Chase, and they got along so well that he'd even taken them on a couple of our trips with us.

After that doubt I'd had about him at the reveal, he'd never given me any reason to doubt him again. In fact, he was always making an effort to prove how much he loved me, and in return, he made it easy for me to be the same.

We were one of *those* couples now, the ones who were so damn sweet together that it gave people a toothache—and I loved it. So did he.

We'd spent a ton of time together over the last year and we'd gotten to know each other pretty well, and I'd come to learn that he wasn't just open about sex. When he was talking

to me, Foster was always honest. He'd told me time and again how our relationship was everything he'd always wanted and it made me feel so much more secure than I'd even known I needed to feel.

We might've started in the dark, but we were all about living our lives out in the open now. It still gave me the tingles and tears welled in my eyes until I felt a firm smack to the side of my ass.

"Nope. No crying today. Come on, lazy bones. Let's go for that walk."

I groaned, but then he rolled off the bed and walked butt naked to our adjoining bathroom. I watched his toned muscles tense and release as he walked, his firm behind flexing as he moved. I bit the inside of my cheek and scooted off the bed.

If he was going to have a shower, I was going to be right there with him. Once we were under the hot spray though, he turned me down for possibly the first time ever. I wrapped my fingers around his length, stepping into him and tilting my head back for a kiss, but he gave me only a chaste peck and then pulled my hand off his package.

"We're going for a walk, remember?"

"Sure, I remember, but do we have to do it right now?" I asked curiously, wondering what on earth he was cooking up this time.

He wriggled his nose before he kissed the tip of mine. "Trust me, it's killing me to say this, but yes. Right now."

I sighed but held out my palm for some shower gel. Then I quickly lathered up and washed myself without trying to seduce him again. When he had his mind set on something, nothing could sway him, and I was too curious now to find out what he was so set on this time anyway.

If he'd turned me down, it had to be something big.

We got dressed and left our hotel hand in hand, stepping into the sunshine on the cobblestone streets and making our way to the Eiffel Tower. I loved that thing so much that Foster always went a literal extra mile if it meant we could walk past

it again, but this time, when we reached the gardens around it, he stopped instead of carrying on walking.

I frowned. “Why are we stopping? Are we going up again?”

“Nope, not today.” He swiped his tongue across his lips, seeming nervous all over again. His eyes were a little too wild, a little too wide, but then he took my hands. “We’re stopping because I couldn’t think of a better place to ask you this.”

“Ask me what—”

The question wasn’t even out of my mouth yet when he lowered himself down on one knee. I gasped. He released my hand with one of his but kept holding the other, and then he reached into his back pocket and flipped open a ring box with his thumb.

Once that was done, his gaze came back up to mine. “I couldn’t wait any longer to ask you, Shelby. I know you wanted to stay in the hotel and we can go back there as soon as we’re done here, but I’ve been carrying this thing around with me for a month and I just couldn’t wait anymore.”

I was so stunned that I didn’t know what to say. We’d spoken about the fact that we wanted to spend the rest of our lives together and we’d even discussed getting engaged, but I hadn’t expected it to happen *today*.

A smile spread on his lips as those eyes lingered on mine. “Shelby Lowe, I have loved you since I was twenty years old. I was too stupid then to admit it to you, but it’s true. I fell in love with you again when I walked into your office last year, and then I fell in love with you all over again as soon as we started talking on our first date. I am going to love you for the rest of my life and I’m hoping that you’ll let me live it as your husband. Will you marry me?”

I stared at him for a beat. He rose and took the sparkling diamond ring out of the box. I shrieked and threw my arms around him when I realized this was really happening. “Yes! Of course, I’ll marry you! I love you, Foster. I love you. I love you. I love you.”



He chuckled, his breathing shallow. He pulled away from me to slide the ring onto my finger, and then he kissed me. Full on, passionately kissed me in the literal shadow of the Eiffel Tower. I knew all of my dreams were coming true.

This was our happily ever after, and it was starting right now.

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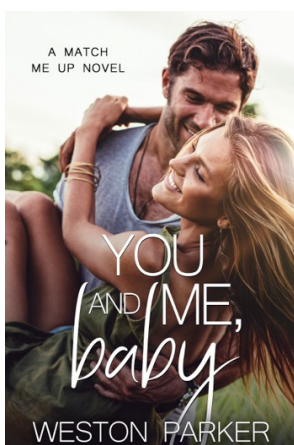
I sure hope you loved Foster and Shelby because I've got a surprise for you! Here is a special Extended Epilogue just for YOU!!

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**If you loved this book, start at the beginning...** Check out book 1 in A Match Me Up Novel, [You and Me, Baby!](#)



**The last thing I need is to fall in love. Especially with him...**

My twin sister has other plans.

She works for a hot new dating agency that's all the buzz.

And I made a pact with her. If we were still unmarried at thirty, we'd put ourselves out there fully.

Well, the time has come. And my sister isn't letting up.

Now I have to start "dating in the dark," whatever that means.

The rules are strict but simple.

No real names.

No seeing each other for the first few dates.

No exchanging personal info.

Straightforward but never easy.

Plus, I don't have time for relationship drama. I have a hot, overbearing businessman breathing down my neck to buy my company.

He's easy to forget about when I start dating Mr. Perfect. My new "sight unseen" date is the stuff dreams are made out of.

Until I realize that business guy and the new love of my life aren't two people.

It's the same guy—the one I love to hate and love to love.

Maybe it's better to be single forever.

**Or maybe it's you and me, baby. Forever.**

**I gotta have this!**

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hey there. I'm Weston.

Have we met? No? Well, it's time to end that tragedy.

*Weston Parker*  
EVERY *good girl* DESERVES A *bad boy*

I'm a former firefighter/EMS guy who's picked up the proverbial pen and started writing bad boy romance stories. I co-write with my sister, Ali Parker, but live in Texas with my wife, my two little boys, my daughter, two dogs, three cats, and a turtle.

Yep. A turtle. You read that right. Don't be jealous.

You're going to find Billionaires, Bad Boys, Military Guys, and loads of sexiness. Something for everyone hopefully. I'd love to connect with you. Check out the links below and come find me.

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## **Never Let Go**

A Match Me Up Novel #3

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