

A romantic couple embracing outdoors. The man, with dark hair and a beard, is wearing a blue tank top and has his arms around the woman. The woman, with long blonde hair, is wearing a green top and is smiling up at him. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor setting.

A MATCH
ME UP NOVEL

YOU
(AND ME,
Baby)

WESTON PARKER

YOU AND ME, BABY

WESTON PARKER

STAR KEY PRESS

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FIND WESTON PARKER



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DESCRIPTION



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.

Introduction



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

Where you at?!?

Come grab your spot with the best book part in town and let's connect.

Also you get a FREE novel when you join, cause, why not?

See you on the inside...

[Get it HERE](#)

SHARP

Seattle was famous for its waterways and the iconic Space Needle. People came here from all over the world, seeking the romance of the ferries and dinner seemingly at the top of the world.

Living here wasn't quite as magical or romantic as tourists seemed to believe. At least, it wasn't for me.

Considering that David had just sauntered into the office five and half minutes late, I suspected he bought into the more relaxed pace out-of-towners believed we kept. I cocked an eyebrow at him, folding my arms as I turned away from our reception desk to face my tardy employee.

"Welcome to work, David. I'm glad you decided to grace us with your presence."

Everything and everyone around me ground to a halt, the entire open-concept workspace suddenly so quiet that I might've had a shot at hearing a pin drop. David paled, stammering as he tried to come up with a good excuse.

"I, uh, I..." he trailed off, clearly unable to come up with something I would deem good enough to excuse his decided lack of punctuality.

Some people believed cleanliness was next to godliness. I didn't like dirt, but I absolutely despised people being late. To my mind, punctuality was next to godliness. Everyone around here knew it, too.

While calling him out in front of all of the others probably wouldn't seem entirely professional to an outsider, it was a good opportunity for me to remind my employees what happened to those who didn't take their work seriously enough to bother showing up on time.

"This is your last warning, David," I said, rocking back on my heels as I looked him over.

Pale and frazzled. Definitely not in the right state to do what we did here. "Take the rest of the day off. I'll take over your meetings."

His eyes widened. "No. Please. I can do it. I'm sorry. Just let me work. Please."

I sighed. The guy was too shocked and terrified to speak in full cohesive sentences. In this game, a person had to be one hundred percent with it, one hundred percent of the time. If they weren't, they didn't close deals. And if they didn't close deals, they were of no use to me.

What we did here was high-paced and cutthroat. The business of buying and selling companies was no picnic. If an opportunity presented itself, we had to be there to take it before anyone else was—hence my intense hatred of tardiness.

When my employees didn't get to where they needed to be on time, then someone else would come along and steal the deal from right under our asses. It cost me money, and I liked making money. I did *not* like losing it simply because an employee had proven to be incapable of reading his watch correctly.

"No," I said firmly. "Go home, David. If you wanted to work, you should've been here to do it. You can try again tomorrow."

He sputtered, his face turning bright red before he huffed out a breath, turned around, and shuffled back out of my building. To anyone who had been watching, I knew that would've seemed ruthless of me. It wasn't like I got off on having to treat a fully grown man like an errant schoolchild,

but I'd lost too many acquisitions to mistakes like the one he had just made.

Only five minutes late had cost me thousands, and I couldn't let it slide. Not ever again. The companies we were looking to acquire or absorb and then either restructure or sell off part by part were mostly struggling.

The takeovers weren't hostile exactly, but oftentimes, it required a certain finesse to get the owners to agree to sell. More often than not, making a bad first impression meant losing that owner's interest in our services almost immediately.

Worse yet was when that allowed one of our many, many competitors to swoop in and buy the company at the last possible moment. And it happened a lot more than anyone would like to admit.

All of which meant that I had to do what I had to do to ensure the continued success of my own business before I ended up on the chopping block myself. It wasn't personal. It was business, and if that made me a ruthless asshole, then I was okay with it.

Spinning around to face the reception desk again, I glanced at Caroline and snapped my fingers. "What did David have on the agenda for today?"

Our receptionist nearly knocked her computer over in her haste to get me an answer. Blinking rapidly, she pushed her glasses up to the bridge of her nose and quickly clicked into our shared calendar.

"He was going to pay a visit to Marvin Martin at Martin and Sons Hardware," she said, thankfully proving to be as efficient as always regardless of how stressed out she seemed to be all of a sudden. "After that, he was headed over to the Anderson Clinic to follow up on a meeting he had last week."

"Follow up?" I frowned. "The Andersons are sinking faster than the fucking Titanic and the whole damn city knows it. Any reason on there about why it's taken him a week to follow up and why he didn't close the deal in the first place?"

“Uh, the only note he entered on the system is that the owner wanted to confer with his wife and that he would get back to him.”

“Jesus,” I muttered. “What is this, cold calling? Send me the details and the address of both meetings. I’ll take them.”

Gary, my assistant, had been standing beside me for all this time, and he suddenly stepped forward. “I’m afraid that’s not possible, Mr. Sharp. You have—”

“Don’t tell me it’s not possible. If something doesn’t seem possible, you shuffle things around until it is possible.” I glanced back at Caroline and waved my phone at her. “Details, darling. Please and thank you. I’ll see you all later.”

When I turned around, I did up the button on my jacket in the same motion and then strode smoothly toward the door. Since I was heading out again, the jacket would be staying on after all and I refused to show up at a client’s half dressed.

Only heathens and non-believers walked around in public with their suit jackets unbuttoned or their ties loosened. Heathens, non-believers, and strippers—possibly. Although not even strippers were likely to walk around in public in a state of undress. They thought the same way I did. If you wanted the goods, you had to pay for it.

My phone buzzed with the details I’d asked for before I’d even made it to my car. I smiled. At least Caroline was consistent. She could be counted on to do her damn job and to do it well.

After sliding into my newly purchased, low-slung Maserati, I checked the time and address of David’s first meeting and cursed. As it was, I’d hardly have enough time to make it all the way out there without being late myself.

How he’d thought he was going to make it there after getting to the office late in the first place, I didn’t know. All I knew was that I was going to have to put even this powerful machine to work in order to avoid making the same mistake.

Martin and Sons Hardware was out in the suburbs, the crown jewel of a franchise which had done well for the family.

As I stopped outside the weathered building, I realized it'd been allowed to fall into disrepair since the last time I'd been here.

On the other hand, that had been many moons ago. It went to show how long this place had been around, though. It was a pity it was looking so shabby when it used to be glamorous in every way that counted to men—maintained with good quality products and knowledgeable staff.

An elderly man walked to the door, leaning against the frame as his gaze swept across my car. The faded green shirt he wore allowed me to identify him as an employee, since it was their uniform, but it was the look in his eyes when he glanced at me that told me this was Marvin Martin.

The man had become a legend in his own right—to the guys around these parts anyway. Wishing that I knew what David had told him prior to this meeting, I huffed out a frustrated breath before pasting a grin on my face and climbing out of the car.

The older man watched me warily, the deep wrinkling lining his face scrunching up in his distaste. I knew what he was thinking. I was just another slick city boy who didn't know a screwdriver from a wrench. That there was no way he was selling his business to a guy like me. One who wore tailored suits and drove a car that likely couldn't even take a proper-sized toolbox.

“David?” He murmured the name as I strode toward him, and I shook my head.

He had me pegged all wrong, but we'd get there. “No, sir. The name's Danny Sharp. I'm the CEO of Sharp Acquisitions.”

“I had a meeting with someone called David. Where is he?”

“I'm afraid he had to take the day off.” I extended my hand toward the older man. “It's a real honor to meet you, Mr. Martin. This place you have here was an institution to me growing up.”

His pale blue eyes widened in surprise, but I saw the flash of approval in them. “Well, I’m sure you’ll appreciate how much I value it, then. Come on in, son.”

Got ya. I couldn’t quite believe it’d been that easy to win him over, but on the other hand, I wasn’t just trying to be nice. It helped to grease the wheels with a little charm at the outset of any meeting, but it’d been true that I used to be in awe of this store. I’d loved it once upon time.

“So, Danny,” he said as he waved me into a seat in his stuffy, cramped office. “How did it happen that the CEO of an outfit like yours ended up having to take a meeting with a guy like me?”

“You can call me Sharp. Everybody does, and I wanted to take this meeting.” I smoothed out my tie as I leaned back in the threadbare chair I’d just sat down on. “If you don’t mind me asking, what happened here, Mr. Martin?”

“Marvin, please,” he said, then blew out a heavy breath. “I don’t want to sell this place, Sharp. Your boy contacted me to set up this meeting, but I believe I can still turn things around.”

We’re cutting straight to the chase then. Good. I like that. “Let’s be honest with each other, Marvin. You’re going under, and I’m going to make you an offer. It’s going to be a good one. You’ll be able to retire comfortably with the additional benefit of knowing that you’ve sold to someone who has no interest in discontinuing your legacy.”

A hard glint appeared in his eyes. “You misunderstood me. I’m not interested in selling. Times are tough everywhere for everyone. I’m not ready to give up.”

Sigh. I didn’t want to use intimidation or scare tactics on the man, but what I was about to say was as true as what I’d said before. “You’re right. Times are tough, but most people don’t get handed a deal like this to bail them out. If you turn me down, maybe you’ll be able to stay afloat for another month or two, but after that, you’re going to have to file for bankruptcy. When that happens, it won’t only be your business that’ll be going. You’re mortgaged to the hilt. You could lose

your house, your pension, and even that nice old fishing boat you bought at such a bargain price a decade ago.”

He scowled at me. “How do you know all that?”

“My people do their research. Before I came here, my assistant sent me all the details I needed to know.” Also true.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out my trusty notepad and pen. After writing out the number I was willing to pay him for his dump, I tore the page out of my notebook and folded it in half, then pushed it across the table. “That’s my offer. It’s a hell of a lot more than you’ll get for it anywhere else, and that’s because, like you said, I know how valuable it is to you.”

Narrowing his eyes at the paper like it was about to bite him, he hesitated before finally, reluctantly raising his hand and reaching for it. As soon as he saw what I’d written, his breath left him in an audible rush I was sure he regretted letting me hear, and then he shook his head.

“I don’t know about this, Sharp. Let me think about it and get back to you.”

I placed my elbows on my knees and leaned forward, looking intently into his eyes. “You’re going to need to make a decision now. That offer expires as soon as I walk out the door.”

Shock registered on his features, his nostrils flaring as he fought the instinctive urge to tell me to fuck off. In the end, though, after a few long quiet minutes of contemplation, he sighed and rubbed the back of his head before he hung it.

“Yeah. Okay. I’ll take your deal.”

I grinned, getting up and extending my hand again. “Good man. You made the right decision. I’ll have my people send over the paperwork by the end of the day.”

After we shook on it and I headed out, I wasn’t oblivious to the tears in his eyes, but I also didn’t feel bad about putting him on the spot. First, because I had to be cunning and cutthroat to be good at my job, but more importantly, because Marvin Martin and his company had needed this.

My job was to help people get out of bad businesses. To unglue them from the sinking ships. Contrary to how he felt right now, I *had* helped him and I knew it. All that remained now was for him to start seeing it that way. And he would. Once the tedious, obligatory mourning period was over.

GRACE

“**H**ave you ordered yet?” I asked as I dropped into the seat across from the one Hope was in. “Please tell me you’ve ordered.”

“Relax.” My twin sister chuckled with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Your caffeine will be here before you know it.”

“Thank you,” I groaned, but then I spotted a waiter walking our way with two steaming mugs of heaven on his tray, and I grinned. “You’re an angel. What did I do to deserve you?”

“Uh, you shared a womb with me for nine months,” she teased. “That’s good enough for me.”

“Yeah, especially because I’ve also put up with you for the thirty years it’s been since then,” I joked. “Seriously, though, thank you for ordering. I wouldn’t have been able to wait another minute for a coffee. It’s been such a day.”

She turned her wrist to check her watch. “It’s not even seven a.m. yet.”

“I know. I’m already at least two cups behind. It’s a nightmare.” Dramatically covering my eyes with my arm, I stayed that way for a second until our waiter dropped off the nectar of life.

Hope rolled her light green eyes at me. The eyes that were the only way of telling us apart since we were identical in every other way. Springtime green compared to sky blue. But I

was pretty sure I didn't look as smug as she did when I rolled mine.

"You're such a drama queen sometimes." She laughed, shaking her head at me. "Drink up, drama queen. Before you ask someone if it's possible to mainline your cappuccino."

I perked up. "Do you think that's a real possibility?"

"No." She shut me down, humor shining from her gaze as she looked back at me. "So, what's going on with you? The only times you take your coffee this seriously are when something is wrong."

"Nothing is wrong," I protested defensively, but then I realized that there was—and that she knew it. I sighed. "There isn't really anything wrong. The art center just isn't doing as well as I'd hoped. I thought business would pick up eventually, but it's just not happening."

"Shit." She stared at me over the edge of her cup with her eyes wide. "What are you going to do?"

I shrugged. "Nothing. I'm just going to keep swimming until things start looking up."

"Grace," she murmured the low warning. "Be honest with me. How bad is it?"

"It's not *that* bad." When she arched a brow at me, I released a breath through my nostrils and made a face at her. "Stop looking at me like that. It really isn't that bad. We're breaking even, but only just. As long as the center can keep its head above water, I'll be okay."

Hope's spine straightened slightly and she lifted her chin. "You just have to keep working hard, then. Something's got to give, right?"

"Right," I said, hoping against all hope that I wasn't being naïve about things. "It's going to work out, isn't it?"

She moved her eyes from one of mine to other. "It is going to work out the way it should, but it might not work out the way you want it to. That being said, you just need to keep

working hard. You have a passion for the art. All you need to do is find a way to make others see it the way you do.”

I thought it over for a beat before I nodded. “I’ll figure it out. In the meantime, that’s enough depressing stuff. It’s way too early for wallowing.”

“Okay, I’ve got something to distract you,” she said obligingly, a light coming on in her eyes as she leaned back in her chair. “Approximately fifteen years ago, around this time of year, you and I made a pact.”

So caught up in the chaos of the morning, I frowned at her and took another sip of my coffee. Maybe the caffeine would clear my mind. “What pact? We made lots of pacts back then. You’re going to have to be more specific if you want me to remember one particular pact we made fifteen years ago.”

“We did make lots of pacts,” she conceded. “The one in question, however, related to something we would do after we turned thirty. We just turned thirty last month, so you’re up.”

“I’m up? What am...” My eyes widened as I suddenly remembered what she was talking about. “Oh. Oh, no. We were kids when we agreed to that. You can’t keep me to it.”

“We were kids, but you still agreed to it. If I remember correctly, there was even a pinkie swear involved.”

I groaned, muttering under my breath as I lowered my face into one of my hands. “There was always a damn pinkie swear involved.”

“Exactly.” When I looked up, she seemed perkier than ever, clearly having heard what I’d said and not put off by my lack of enthusiasm at all. “Little did we know back then that your dearest sister would not only remember the pact, but that I would be also perfectly positioned to set you up.”

Another groan rumbled out of me. “That’s not fair. We only said that if we weren’t married by the time we were thirty, we would put ourselves out there. No one said anything about signing up with a blind dating agency.”

“Sight Unseen has a spectacular success rate,” she argued. “Say what you will about it, but my boss’s formula works. It

helps people to connect on an emotional level before the physical comes into play. Let me sign you up. You'll see for yourself how amazing the process is."

"No." I shook my head firmly just in case the word itself wasn't enough. "Look, I have mad respect for Milena. You know I love your boss. I don't doubt her formula and you've raved enough about the process since you started working there that I know exactly what I'd be in for, and it's an intriguing idea, but it's not for me. Besides, you're not married either. Sign yourself up."

She giggled, rolling her eyes at me. "Just because you don't like my boyfriend doesn't mean I don't have one. I'm in a relationship, and therefore, I've already put myself out there."

"A swing and a miss," I said in a sing-song voice. "You put yourself out there and caught the wrong guy. This could be your chance to set that right."

Hope sighed softly. "Graham has his issues, but I can change him. He's not the total piece of shit you think he is."

I held her gaze, trying so hard to keep my eyes from rolling but they did it anyway. "You're not going to change him. Men are too pigheaded to change, especially at our age. Cut him loose and set up a profile for yourself with Sight Unseen. If it works for you, maybe I'll give it a chance sometime."

"Nope. No deal. I take my pinkie swears very seriously. Otherwise, what's the point? I'm signing you up when I get to the office. It'll be good for you. I know it will."

"Just not yet." Once she had her mind made up, there was no swaying her. All I could do was try to delay the inevitable in the hopes that she forgot about our conversation. "Give me a week. At least it will help me to get into the right frame of mind. If I go into it so negative, you know it's not going to work."

Hope lifted her mug to her lips, giving me a long look as she took a sip and swallowed it. Once it was down the hatch,

she released a slow breath and nodded. “One week, but after that, I’m signing you up. Get your head right. This is happening.”

I truly hoped it didn’t happen, but I also knew that there would be no getting away from it if she was serious about creating a profile for me. Milena Kress, my sister’s boss, was her idol. She wholeheartedly believed in Milena’s method, and to be fair, Sight Unseen really did boast an impressive success rate.

It wasn’t so much that I doubted the process as it was that I doubted my own readiness to be part of it. With the art center taking up all my time and energy, I just didn’t have anything left for dating right now.

When we’d made that pact, thirty had seemed so far away. Like every other fifteen-year-old, we’d thought that thirty was ancient. Now that we were here, I didn’t feel ancient. In fact, I kind of felt like I was right at the precipice of my real life beginning.

Signing up with any dating agency right now, much less one built around *dating in the dark*, just didn’t appeal to me. Thankfully, Hope stopped talking about it then, telling me instead about the plans our parents had for their anniversary this year while we finished our coffee.

By the time I got to the center, I’d all but forgotten about the pact my sister was trying to keep me to. As I unlocked the front doors and opened them wide, I glanced over my shoulder, praying to see a stampede heading for me.

There was no stampede. Not even a little one. No one on the sidewalk even seemed to have noticed that I’d just opened for business for the day.

Walking into the space I’d lovingly renovated and had handpicked every piece for, I stopped and turned in a slow circle, wondering what I was doing wrong. I had some amazing art in here, and the gallery was warm and cozy but spacious and inviting at the same time.

At the very least, I'd have expected to have built up a small client base of buyers for rich clients by now. I'd invited a bunch of them to the opening, but only one or two had ever returned. Sighing as I headed for my small office, I stashed my purse and slid my pumps off my feet, replacing them with a pair of power heels.

After applying a fresh coat of lipstick, I checked my reflection in the mirror and then walked out onto the floor, ready for action that didn't come. In the first hour of the day, I had exactly one customer visiting the center.

The lady walked around for a few minutes and then left again without purchasing anything and without even saying a word to me. Tears burned the backs of my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. I refused to be defeated.

I had no customers and no man. I wasn't going to find someone in a week any more than I was going to make a success of the center in that time. There had to be something I could do to turn things around. The company was struggling, but so were many others. I wouldn't give up, even though it felt like maybe, just maybe, I should at least consider it.

SHARP

Dear Mr. Sharp,

We are pleased to inform you that your application has been accepted. Welcome to the Sight Unseen program and congratulations for taking the first step toward finding the love of your life.

Our unique algorithm has already started doing its magic and we look forward to introducing you to your first prospective match. Once the computer finds her, we will notify you of your first date. Please keep an eye on your emails over the coming days. You're sure to hear from us very soon.

Attached is a breakdown of the process as well as a list of rules you are expected to follow when you start dating. We know it can be tempting to become a rebel when you think you've found the one, but we implore you to trust the program you've chosen to become a part of.

Yours in search of a happily ever after of your very own,

Milena Cress

Founder and CEO

The Sight Unseen Dating Agency

SHIT. Why I had to have gotten this email while I was at the office, I didn't know. I'd signed up to the program a week ago, and I'd almost given up hope when I hadn't heard anything from them since.

My door opened, breaking into my thoughts and making me start. On instinct, I slammed the lid of my laptop shut, my heart racing in my chest at the thought of someone finding out I'd signed up with a dating agency.

Usually, I didn't give a damn what people thought of me, but this was different. This didn't have anything to do with Danny Sharp, the ruthless businessman who didn't let anything or anyone stand in his way. This was personal. Something I'd done that would hopefully get me closer to what I wanted out of my life in the long run.

The anonymity afforded by the nature of the program had drawn me in, convincing me that it was the way to go. No one would know who I was, not even the girls they set me up with.

I refused to blow all that by letting my assistant find out as soon as I'd been accepted into the damn program as ostentatiously as if I'd gotten into an ivy league school. As I breathed through the surprise of having been interrupted, I snapped my gaze toward the door, seeing my assistant still hovering at the threshold.

He was at least two dozen feet of prime Seattle real estate space away from me, and there was no way he could've seen what had been on my screen before I'd shut the laptop, but I scowled at him anyway.

“What?”

Gary cleared his throat, taking a tentative step into my office before he jerked his head back to indicate his. “There's someone out here wanting to talk to you. The guy won't give me his name and you didn't have any meetings scheduled for now, so he didn't have an appointment.”

Curiosity piqued my interest, and my head cocked slightly as I nodded curtly at Gary. “That's fine. Let him in.”

Buttoning up my suit jacket as I stood, I barely had time to smooth my tie before a burly, bearded guy walked in and offered me a magnanimous grin. “Sharp! Buddy, it's good to see you. Sorry for the cloak and dagger stuff. I couldn't afford

making an appointment or having anyone here know who I am.”

I strode up to him and extended my hand, grinning right back at my college roommate. “You’re welcome here any time, Adam. If no one can know you’re here, I’m assuming it’s not a personal call.”

He laughed, shaking his head at the same time that he shook my hand. “No offense, you know how much I love you, but you never have time to grab drinks anymore. I’ve made peace with settling for the occasional text and seeing each other at weddings.”

I shrugged. “It’s not like you’ve got a lot of time on your hands either, Mr. Big Shot Developer and Brand New Father of Twins.”

“Do you want to see a picture?” He beamed at me, already reaching into his pocket for his phone.

I didn’t really want to see a picture, but I nodded anyway. Deep down inside, I was jealous as hell of him. I’d never say it out loud to anyone, but I wanted what he had. *Desperately*.

At thirty-five, we were the same age, and he had everything I’d ever wanted by this point of my life. A booming business, a loving successful wife, and a pair of the cutest kids I’d ever seen.

“This is Spencer,” he said proudly as he stuck his screen in my face and flipped through so many pictures. “Look at those arms, man. He’s going to make the Seahawks proud one day.”

After about a dozen photos of the boy, he showed me even more of the girl. “This little lady is Paige. She’s gorgeous, right? I’ve already bought the shotgun shells for when she turns fourteen. We’re going to need them. She’s fascinated by food whenever she sees us eating something, so I’m thinking she’s probably going to be a chef.”

The kids weren’t even one yet, but I couldn’t judge him for dreaming about what they might become one day. When I’d seen more pictures of the babies than I could handle, I smiled and took a step back.

“They’re gorgeous,” I said smoothly, meaning it but also fighting with all my might against the competitive urges that rose up in me. “What can I do for you today, Adam? I’m afraid I don’t have a lot of time.”

“Oh, sure. Sure.” Still grinning, he locked his phone and slid it back into his pocket before he took the seat I motioned him into. “I need to talk to you about a new development I’ve been buying up property for.”

“Okay.” I strode back around my desk and took a seat, rolling my chair closer before folding my arms on the glass top. “Do you want some coffee while we talk?”

He shook his head. “I won’t be long. I’ve got a busy day ahead, but I needed to see you first.”

“Tell me what’s going on, then. Why are you here, talking to me about a new development? I’m not interested in investing, if that’s what you’re here for.”

Laughter bellowed out of him. “Wait until you see what it is, but that’s not what I’m here for today. I’ve got investors lined up around the block for this one, but if you do want in once you’ve got the details, I might be able to make it happen for you.”

“I’m listening,” I said curiously, my brows tugging together as I noted the resignation darkening his brown eyes. “There’s a problem, isn’t there?”

Releasing a long breath through his nostrils, he nodded curtly. “I’ve bought up almost every property I need in the area for the development, but there’s a pesky little art center I haven’t been able to acquire. The business is struggling, but I still don’t have a signed sale agreement in my hands. Since it’s a company in trouble, though, I knew you were the man I needed to talk to about it. I’ll pay you double your usual fee to make this happen for me.”

“An art center?” My frown deepened. “A struggling art center is what’s standing between you and a much bigger project?”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Adam blew out a deep breath as he dropped his chin closer to his chest. "Can you help me?"

"Sure." There was no doubt in my mind that I'd be able to get it done pronto. "I'll take care of it for you myself. Don't worry about a thing. Consider it done."

A relieved sigh came out of him as he grinned again when he stood up. "In that case, I'll email you the details and tell my people to carry on planning as if we've already got the property. Thanks, Sharp. This has been a real headache for me."

"Think about me as your painkiller." I grinned back at him as I walked him to the door and shook his hand. "Get those details to me and I'll get on it as soon as I can."

Adam left, looking considerably lighter than he had when he walked in, and I shook my head. A struggling art center, and he was letting it stand in his way. I didn't get it. Sure, artistic types tended to be passionate and dramatic, but a gallery was a business like any other.

If it was going belly up, passion wouldn't save it. Relocating to a better location might and taking a second look at the product on offer, sure, but not passion. All I needed to do was to make sure that the owner of this place understood that.

Knowing Adam, I didn't doubt that the offer he'd make the company would be more than fair. The owner could take the money and either use it to try again somewhere else or to get out of the game entirely.

That would be up to them. My job would be making sure they sold this particular property to him, and that they did it fast

About an hour after he'd left, I got an email from Adam's assistant with all the details I needed to start doing my homework on the center. As soon as I had the name, I looked it up, and my first impression was that I was impressed.

The website was professional and beautiful, the artworks featured seemingly high quality. For just a minute, my mind raced with possibilities of what I could do for a place like it if I acquired the company and helped them turn it around, but then I remembered that wasn't what I'd be doing this time.

This time, it was all about the land the little center was on, and I would get that land for Adam. *Come hell or high water.*

I had enough on my plate at the moment that I really just wanted to get this out of the way. There were multimillion-dollar deals waiting on me, and I couldn't afford to let this take up too much of my time. I needed to get it over with so that I could focus on the work that really needed my personal attention.

As I stared at the website, I clicked on the map to get the address, and once I had it, I decided to visit it today. Before the weekend and before Adam could accuse me of letting grass grow under my feet.

If everything went well, I'd have a signed contract in my hands by this time next week. That was what I was hoping for, and I usually got what I wanted.

Time to go to work.

GRACE

Oftentimes, our saving grace came at a time when we least expected it. Mine came late on Friday afternoon, in the shape of an older lady who took a real interest in every piece I had.

“The work you have here is so unique,” she commented, her voice breathy and hushed like older people’s voices tended to become when they got on in age. Even so, she spoke with a certain authority that made me gravitate toward her as more than just a potential customer.

Something inside me told me that she was someone I could learn from, and as I stood by her side as she moved from piece to piece, I smiled. “Thank you. It means a lot to me to hear that someone else appreciates the work we showcase here.”

She chuckled, her cloudy blue eyes traveling to mine for just a moment before she moved them back to the painting in front of her. “Real art is underrated and undervalued these days. When I was growing up, it wasn’t like that. We were cultured, and our parents dragged us from gallery to gallery to ingrain a true understanding of art in us.”

“My parents did the same,” I offered, happy to reminisce with her even if a lot of people would’ve rolled their eyes at her *back in my day* stories. “They couldn’t afford to buy much at any of the galleries they took us to, but they still brought us there. We also went to plays and to the ballet, and my sister and I sang in the choir for the longest time because they insisted that we learned what *real music* was all about.”

A spark lit in her eyes as she smiled. “It sounds to me like you hit the jackpot with your parents. Too many people these days don’t take the time to expose their children to everything they ought to be exposed too. Life is too busy, apparently.”

“Life is busy,” I agreed. “I think a lot of parents want to take the time to expose their children to the arts, but they just don’t have it. Life may be busy, but it’s expensive too. People need to work harder than ever to keep their heads above water.”

“Oh, the optimism of youth,” she said with that soft smile still on her face. “What I would give to be youthfully optimistic again.”

She moved along to the next painting before she glanced at me again. “Every generation says that, my dear. Everyone thinks they’ve got it tougher than those who came before them. To those people, I say *go back to the history books*. Every generation has had their struggles and every generation to come will face their own. Life is what you make of it. For all of us. If you want to do something, you make the time to do it. It’s that simple.”

“That’s very true,” I said after pausing for a beat. Joining her in front of the next painting, an abstract done by a local girl too young to have created something as deep as this, I let out a soft sigh. “At the same time, social media, the internet, and the mainstream media have forced a couple of generations now to grow up before their time. We’re exposed to things younger than we ever have been before. It shows in those who choose to put their experiences on canvas.”

After talking to her for a few more minutes, she circled back to the piece by the local girl, nodding as she dug into her purse and came out with an old-school checkbook. “I’ll take this one.”

She turned to the painting and blinked hard as she studied the price tag below it. “Ten thousand dollars, you say? Is that right? It doesn’t seem like much for a piece like this.”

My eyes nearly fell right out of my head. She obviously hadn’t read that right. “Oh, no. It’s one thousand dollars, not

ten. I'll convey your thoughts to the artist, though. She'll be very pleased to hear you thought that even ten times as much wouldn't have seemed like enough for the piece."

The lady seemed surprised, but she nodded and squinted as she raised the checkbook and dug a pen out of her purse next. "Have you got something I can press on? My handwriting is terrible nowadays as it is. Let's not make it utterly illegible if I try to write on my hand."

Stunned by the sudden sale, I led her to the counter and chatted to her some more before walking her out. As we were saying our goodbyes, a man appeared at the other side of the street, seemingly searching for something until his gaze landed on the sign hanging on the wall above my door.

My heart catapulted in my chest when he moved those eyes onto mine. Then it jumped into my throat and nearly escaped right out of my mouth when he kicked into motion and strode confidently toward me. The older lady waved goodbye, and I returned the wave absently, but I was mesmerized by the man crossing the street.

I hadn't even seen him look left or right. It was like he simply knew instinctively that no car would dare to hit him as he confidently stepped off the sidewalk and came to me. From the distance, he'd been good-looking enough to have caught my eye, tall and built like a professional surfer, but it was clear that he was not, in fact, a professional surfer.

Not only because he was in Seattle and the surfing, obviously, wasn't great around here, but also because he was dressed in a charcoal gray suit that must've cost more than my monthly rent. With short black hair and vibrant intelligent hazel eyes, he definitely wasn't the laidback surfer type.

The closer he got, the more entranced I became by him. It wasn't just because he was good looking. There was no getting around the fact that he was hot as hell, but there was so much more to him. He moved with a quiet confidence that I noticed in a lot of men around my age. He also practically oozed power and control, and combined with the expensive suit he was wearing, I came to the conclusion that he was one of the

many high-powered businessmen who thought they owned this city.

Hot as he was, an instant bitter distaste of him crept into me. The man I was looking at might be pretty on the outside, but it was what was on the inside that mattered more to me, and I doubted he had anything pretty inside him.

I didn't know him from a bar of soap, but I was willing to bet that his heart was as charcoal as his suit and that he'd sold his soul to the corporate forces a long time ago. As he came to a standstill only a few feet away from me and flicked his gaze back up at the sign above the door, I forced a smile to my lips and took a half step forward.

"Hello, there," I said, feigning the same warmth and cheerfulness I treated all my customers with. "Welcome to Artfully Yours. How can I help you today?"

Slowly bringing his eyes to mine after glancing into the center behind me, he nodded slightly. "I need to talk to the owner of the gallery."

My brows twitched. "Okay, well, you're looking at her. I'm Grace. Are you interested in purchasing some of our pieces, or is there something else I can do for you?"

Although I sensed there was something off about him, I still swept my hand out toward the door and motioned for him to follow me. "Let's not talk on the street. May I offer you a drink?"

"No, thank you." He walked into the gallery behind me, and when I glanced at him over my shoulder, I saw him taking an assessing look around.

Once he was done, he looked back at me and I saw the confused disapproval staring back at me from sea-blue melded with honey eyes. "The roof is leaking."

"Excuse me?" I frowned, folding my arms tightly over my chest. "What business is that of yours?"

Instead of responding, he cast another look around, seemingly making mental notes of all the shortcomings he noticed. "There's also dampness in your walls, and from the

lack of people in here, I'm assuming that old woman was the only customer you've had today."

I blinked, positively reeling as I stared at the handsome devil who may well have been wearing Prada. "Thank you for the observations, sir. Are you here to buy something, or did you simply pop in to tell me how unimpressed you are by the place?"

"At least you're direct," he said, that air of authority I'd seen in him ringing from his voice. "Let's be honest with each other. It's Friday afternoon, and I want to get home at some point before midnight. This place isn't worth the offer on the table."

Before I could recover from the rude comment that also told me he knew way more than I thought he did, he reached into his pocket and produced a small, leather-bound notebook and an equally expensive pen. Unlike the older woman, he didn't ask for anything to press on as he raised the notebook and scribbled something in it, then tore off the page and handed it over to me.

"This is what the place is worth," he said curtly. "That's what I'll pay you for it, and it's already generous, so there's no room for negotiation."

My hand trembled as I lifted the piece of paper and glanced at the number on it. My eyebrows mashed together and I scoffed. "First, I'm not interested in selling, and second, you're obviously low-balling me. I've dealt with my fair share of bullies, Mr. Whoever You Think You Are. So thank you for the offer, but no thank you."

I shoved the paper back at him, but he didn't take it. Instead, something like disbelief flared in his eyes as he stared back at me. "Do you know about the development going up all around you? Trust me when I say that it's in your best interest to sell to me. Right now. Right here. You're barely making ends meet as it is. Once construction starts and all of your precious artworks are covered in dust, the last bit of the money you've been making is going to dry up."

I squared off with him, not afraid to go toe-to-toe with the elegantly dressed, snobby bully who was talking to me like I was stupid. “There are plenty of my neighbors who haven’t sold yet. The development is far from a done deal, so thank you for coming in, but I have no intention of selling my business.”

I didn’t even care what his logic was. A lot of the people in my neighborhood had sold, but I wasn’t the only holdout. Plus, I’d be damned if I let this fucker intimidate me into selling.

Exasperation flashed in those eyes, and I saw the slight twitch of his jaw at my response. “Every time I have to come here, that offer is going to get lower and lower. In the end, you’ll wish you’d sold to me today. I guarantee it. This place is going to be my gift to the residents of this area, all of whom will be so very grateful about what is going to happen here.”

My teeth ground together. “Don’t talk like you already own the place, sir. You don’t, and you’re not going to. Again, thank you for coming in, but I’m not interested. Goodbye.”

Striding toward the doors, I held my hand out, silently telling him that it was time to leave. He stayed where he was for one more moment, doing a last mental sweep of the room before he finally left, leaving only his spicy, masculine scent to remind me that he’d been here at all.

A sense of dread formed deep within my belly. I’d been so busy trying to figure out how to save my business that I hadn’t paid much attention to what had been going on around me, but it looked like I should’ve been.

Guys like him didn’t appear out of nowhere, leave when they were told to, and then leave well enough alone. I already knew he would be back, and I didn’t doubt for a minute that he would keep coming until he wore me down.

If it was war he wanted, though, then that was what I would give him. I’d already won the first battle, and I knew enough about business to know how this worked. If I kept refusing him, he was going to try to back me into a corner.

Unfortunately, there were plenty of corners he would be able to back me into if he tried. I was only too well aware of how vulnerable my position was, but I wouldn't make it easy on him. If he kept coming at me, I would be ready.

He could bet his ass and his expensive suit on it.

SHARP

Breakfast with Marcus was one of the few indulgences I allowed myself during the work week. My best friend since grade school, he knew me better than anyone else, and since he was in construction and had nothing to do with me professionally, I could cut loose and be myself with him.

Every Monday morning, we met at a homestyle diner situated about halfway to work for both of us, and my week was always off to a good start when I had pancakes and bacon with him. He grinned when I walked in, waving at me from our usual booth near the back.

“Hey, buddy,” he said, giving my hand a quick shake before I dropped into the seat opposite him. “You look stressed. How are you already stressed? You haven’t even hit the office yet.”

I chuckled, shrugging as I picked up the coffee he’d already ordered for me. “Last week didn’t end the way I wanted it to. I may have misjudged someone, and I thought it would be easier to buy her business than it’s going to be.”

He whistled between his teeth, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter. “Admitting you made a mistake is usually the first step to fixing it. If you fucked up, maybe try approaching it from a different angle next time.”

“I didn’t—” I cut myself off. With Marcus, I didn’t have to keep up that impenetrable front. “Okay, yeah. I fucked up, but it’s too late to go back now. Trust me when I say that the

owner of the business I need to buy will remember me, and she won't do so fondly."

"Imagine that," he mused. "Someone who doesn't think fondly of Danny Sharp. No offense, bro, but this city is filled with people who don't hold you in very high esteem."

"Sure, but that's only because I've already bought their businesses. I haven't even gotten that far with this woman yet, and as things stand, she's not ever going to sell to me."

"So send in one of your minions," he suggested conversationally. "You'll get it done. You always do."

"True, but I thought this one was going to be easy and I might not have started off as friendly and charming as I usually do. It was late on Friday afternoon, I was very much over the week, and I went in there like an unprofessional, out of control bulldozer."

Marcus never judged me, and he never took anything too seriously. "You'll fix it. Everyone is irritable on Friday afternoons. Just apologize and turn on the charm. You'll have her eating out of the palm of your hand in no time."

"That would be nice, but I doubt it's going to happen." I chuckled, relieved that I could just be me when I was with him.

Very few people knew this, but when it didn't come to business, I was actually a pretty nice guy. Some even said that I had a good heart. Marcus grinned at me, blowing past my failure like it was nothing.

"Are we still on for fishing this weekend?" he asked. "We were supposed to go out this weekend coming up now, right?"

"Right," I said. "I'm so ready for it. I need a weekend away from it all. This year is beating me down and I can't wait to breathe fresh air and just let it all go for a couple days."

"Well, you might have to go without me," he said cheerfully. "I may cancel at the last minute."

"What?" I frowned. "Why?"

He wagged his brows at me, his green eyes alight with excitement and humor as they came back to mine. “I’m waiting to hear back from a girl I asked out. If she says yes, I’m going to have a date this weekend and I don’t want to skip it.”

“So you’d bail on me for a woman who hasn’t even confirmed your date yet?” I shook my head at him, bringing my hand up to clutch my chest. “That’s low, man. I’m hurt.”

“What can I say?” he asked laughingly. “I’m sorry, but she looks like a supermodel and she had a good personality, too. You’d have bailed on me for her if you knew her, but I’m not introducing her to you until she’s head over heels in love with me. Just in case she decides to bail on me for you.”

I heaved out an elaborate sigh. “Fine. Leave me to fend for myself out there at the lake. If a big-ass fish bites my head off, you’ll feel bad for canceling.”

“If a big-ass fish bites your head off, you’re doing it wrong, Sharp. I’ve been out there with you often enough to know that you can fish. I think you’re going to be okay if I can’t make it.”

I held up my hands, giving him a shrug that said I wasn’t sure if I agreed, but then I let it go. We ordered our food, and while we ate, he told me all about this new girl in his life and got me caught up with what had been going on in his life over the last week.

After I left the diner, I made a detour past the art center on my way to work. Slowing my car when I saw Grace opening up for the day, I wondered if it was worth another stab. Since I had to make it worth it, I decided to see where her head was at now that she’d had the weekend to think about it.

The owner of Artfully Yours had taken me by surprise when I’d first seen her on Friday. At first, I’d known I was on the right block, but it was her instead of the gallery that had made me stop.

Honestly, I wasn’t the type to stop and stare at random people on the street, but I had done it with her. She was like a

ray of sunshine with her long, bright blonde hair and eyes the color of a summer sky.

I'd heard her laughter even from the other side of the street, a melodic flowing sound that reminded me of carefree days beside the lake as a teenager. That wasn't something that happened to me. Not even occasionally. It didn't happen to me—ever.

When I'd stopped to seek out the source of the sound and I'd found her talking to some old lady on the other side of the street, I'd been blinded by her. Literally like I'd looked directly at a ray of sunshine.

That never happened to me, either. Shaking myself out of my thoughts, I tried not to get hung up by how beautiful she was or how polite she'd been even when she'd shut me down. I couldn't let lust stand in the way of a business deal. She was breathtakingly beautiful and kind if the way she was laughing with that old woman was anything to go by, and best of all, she hadn't cowered when confronted by the worst part of me.

If she'd been anyone else, I'd have jumped at the opportunity to ask her out, but she wasn't anyone else. She was the owner of a business I had to buy, and I'd already gotten off on the wrong foot with her. She'd caught me off guard, and I'd overcompensated as a result.

Unfortunate, but true.

When she saw me walking toward her now, I saw her chest rising and falling on a great old sigh as she waited for me at the doors. “What do you want?”

Her voice was razor sharp when she spoke to me, and I almost missed the radiant smile she'd given me before she'd known who I was. “How are you, Grace? I just wanted to stop by to ask if you've given any more thought to what I said.”

“No, I haven't. I don't make a habit of wasting time, and thinking about an offer I'm not interested in would've been a colossal waste of it. Do yourself a favor and move on. I'm not selling to you.”

Taking Marcus's advice, I turned on the charm and switched it up. "I'm sorry about the way I came in here on Friday. I had a hell of a week and I shouldn't have taken it out on you. I know how you must be feeling about me right now, but it really is in your best interest to sell to me and to do it before the offer expires."

Defiance flared behind those clear blue eyes, and she raised her chin just a fraction of an inch higher. "While I do appreciate a man who is capable of apologizing, I'm still not interested in selling. To you or to anyone else. The developers have another thing coming if they think we're all just going to roll over."

"That may be true," I said. "The offer isn't coming from the developers, though. That offer I made you is coming from me."

I paused, needing to keep her on her toes by any means necessary. "Failing art galleries are a dime a dozen in this city. The offer I made you was more than fair. You can have any realtor look it over and they'll tell you the same thing. If you insist on turning me down, I can take the money I was going to pay you for your business and go buy another failing art gallery somewhere else."

"Well," she said confidently as she literally showed me the door. "You'd better get to it, then. Go purchase one of the many other failing art galleries and leave mine alone."

"When you reconsider, let me know." I took one of my business cards out of the metallic silver case in my pocket and snapped it down on her reception desk. "Don't toss that in the trash. You're going to want to keep it so that you've got my number when the time comes. No one is going to make you a better deal, and because I truly am sorry for the way I came in here on Friday, I might even be amenable to honoring my initial offer after all."

Her eyes shot a brief look at the business card on the counter, but then she closed them and motioned at the door again. "I don't know how I can make this any clearer to you."

I'm not selling the gallery. Now get out before I call the police on you."

"I have a great deal of respect for the police," I said as I moved toward the door she seemed so adamant I should use. "Call them on me whenever you want. I'm sure even they will tell you that you're making a mistake. I'll see you soon, Grace."

Striding out and back to my car before she could say anything else, I slid in behind the wheel and turned over the engine, wondering what might have happened between us if we weren't at such opposite ends of this thing. She was strong, interesting, and beautiful. It really was too bad that, in this scenario, she was also the enemy.

I wasn't the type to leave my enemies standing. Not ever, and I wouldn't make an exception for her. Sooner or later, I'd cut her off at the knees. It was what I did, and as she would soon be learning, I was very damn good at it.

Regardless of the fact that I'd rather have fucked her than fucked her over. *That's life, I suppose.*

Besides, I would be hearing from Sight Unseen soon. Hopefully, they would be able to provide me with a date who would vanquish all thoughts of Grace from my mind. And when that happened, all would be well in the world.

I would have Artfully Yours and the future Mrs. Sharp within my grasp all within the same month. Confidence swelled within me as I gunned it to my building, more sure than ever that I would soon have everything I wanted.

Grace had turned me down—again—but she would take my deal. Even if I had to put the pen in her hand to sign it myself.

GRACE

Moping around the center wasn't going to get me anywhere. I knew it, and yet, I couldn't help doing just that.

When Hope appeared at my door just before noon, I nearly stumbled over my own feet in an attempt to get to her as fast as I could. I needed a hug from my sister, and hopefully it would be the duct tape I needed to hold myself together for the rest of the day.

"Thank God, you're here," I murmured as I sank into her open arms, squeezing her tight and hanging on for dear life. "I've had the worst week ever."

"It's only Tuesday." She chuckled as she stroked my hair with one hand, holding me against her with the other for another long moment. "What's going on?"

I sighed, releasing her to link my arm with hers as I led her to my office. Since I didn't have any employees, I couldn't close the door to have this conversation with her. I'd need to see in the unlikely event that a customer came in, but also since I didn't have any employees, there wasn't anyone around to overhear us anyway.

While I would've liked the illusion of privacy of closing the door regardless, I didn't do it. Instead, I grabbed her a bottle of water from the mini-fridge in the corner and handed it over before taking another for myself.

"I spent the morning crunching the numbers," I admitted. "The center is in more trouble than I thought."

“You didn’t crunch the numbers before?” she asked with just the slightest hint of disbelief in her tone.

I shrugged. “I have crunched them before, obviously, just not for the last few weeks or so. It’s too depressing to look at them all the time.”

My sister’s eyebrows hiked up only a little, but then she breathed out and sat down, making herself comfortable before looking back at me. “Okay, give it to me straight. How bad is it really?”

“It’s bad,” I admitted, my voice hushed. There was no one around to hear me, sure, but I still didn’t want to be saying this out loud. “I have enough money to pay my expenses for this month, but next month is going to be tough. There’s definitely not enough to even start thinking about the month after that.”

Hope flinched, the corners of her mouth turning down. “I’m sorry, Grace. I know how hard you’ve worked to get this far. I have some money you can hav—”

“No.” I didn’t even let her get the words all the way out. “You know I won’t take any handouts. I got myself into this mess. It’s my responsibility to get out of it. I won’t take your savings to toss them into the same hole mine have been swallowed up by.”

“It’s from me, which means it’s not a handout. My money is your money, you know that. If you don’t take it...”

She didn’t have to finish the sentence. I knew where she was going with it. I needed cash, and if I didn’t get it, I would lose the center for sure. Sighing as I lowered my head into my hands, I ran my fingers through my hair and peeked through the curtain of locks that would hide the shame on my cheeks from her.

“There’s one option I haven’t told you about yet,” I admitted reluctantly, but if I could trust anyone to be honest with me, it was Hope. “A guy has come in twice now offering to buy the business from me. I think he’s working for that developer who’s been sniffing around here, but he may also

just have been using the possibility of the development to make me a lower offer. I don't know."

"What?" she squeaked, launching forward to lift my hair and bending her head down so I could see her staring at me. "That's great, sis. It's the perfect solution. The center isn't working and this is your way out while still walking away with some money."

"I know, but he's such a dick. He's got no class whatsoever and you should see him strutting around here like a peacock who knows it's a done deal even when I turn him down."

"Okay," she said slowly, dragging out the word. "You wouldn't have to work with him, though. If he's a dick, he's a dick. The only real question is if he's got the money to back up his offer."

I snorted. "Judging by his suits and his haughty personality, he's got the money."

"Well, then, I don't see the problem. If he's got it and it's green, take it." She sat back down again. "If you really want to stick it to him just a little for being an asshole, make him a counteroffer for a slightly higher amount. You said he was lowballing you anyway, so make him a realistic counter and walk away."

"I don't know," I moaned but finally lifted my head back up. "I really don't want to give in to him. It's the principle of the matter."

"Principles don't pay the bills, honey," she said, smiling as she exhaled deeply. "I know you don't want to give in and I realize that you especially don't want to give in to a dick who's already acting like he owns the place, but be realistic. You can take the money you get from the sale to open an all new gallery in an all new location. Obviously, this location just isn't working with what you're offering. There's no shame in trying again somewhere else."

"But—"

Hope fixed me with a stern look. "There are no buts in this situation, Grace. Having a business of your own means that

you have to be able to have tough conversations and make tough decisions, regardless of how dickish the person is you have to deal with.”

“See, I know you’re right, but I really wish you weren’t.”

She smiled again. “So do I, but it is what it is. You did a great job here and you’ll be able to do it again, just in a better location this time. There’s a reason there aren’t many galleries left around here. Historically, it might’ve been a decent place to be, but that’s changed. You knew it was a gamble when you opened here.”

“It was so much cheaper than the other locations we looked at.” I sighed. “Those are going to be even more expensive now.”

“Exactly, but they’ll be even more expensive next year, and probably unaffordable by the year after that. Get your foot in the door now, while you still can.”

My heart gave a painful twist in my chest as I looked out at the floor beyond her shoulder. I’d put my heart and soul into this place. I didn’t know if I had it in me to start all over again, but at the same time, it was starting to look like I wouldn’t have much of a choice.

I could either start all over again now—with the dick’s money—or I could start all over again in a few months’ time after being declared bankrupt. And therefore, try to start all over again with no money.

Hope came around to my side of the desk, kneeling before me with her bohemian skirt pooling on the floor around her. Tilting her head back to look into my eyes, she took my hands in hers and gave them a reassuring squeeze.

“I know this sucks, Grace. I really do. I’ve been here with you since the beginning and I know how much it meant to you to make this place work, but it’s not happening. This offer is a gift, and you might hate me for saying it, but I think you should take it.”

As I looked back into her eyes, knowing that she meant every word she’d said, I nodded. “Let me think about it. For

real. I just need some time to get my head wrapped around it before I tuck tail and give him a call.”

She dipped her chin in an understanding nod of her own before she squeezed my hands again and stood up after releasing them. “Speaking of things you needed time to get your head wrapped around, it’s been a week.”

Fuck. “I was really hoping you were going to forget about that.”

Hope chuckled, her head shaking as she adjusted the metal bracelets on her arm and smoothed out her skirt. “No such luck, my beloved sister. I’ve put in an application on your behalf already and created a profile for you with Sight Unseen. You’ll be getting an email about your first date soon, so keep your eyes open for it, okay?”

“Do we really have to do this now?” I asked on a soft groan. “I’m already thirty. I’ve got ten more months of being thirty ahead of me. We didn’t make a pact to put ourselves out there as soon as we had our birthday. The only reference I remember was *thirty*. We are that now, but it’s not like we’re turning thirty-one tomorrow.”

“We’ll be thirty-one before you know it,” she said, far too chirpy for my taste. “The time is now. Besides, it’ll be good for you to have something to look forward to while you’re dealing with the sale of the business. Just trust me, Grace. The process works. You’re going to enjoy it.”

I doubted that very much, but I didn’t say it. Ultimately, this was my sister’s job we were talking about and she’d always been so supportive of me that I didn’t want to be down on what she did for a living. Hope had always loved love. She’d been born to be a matchmaker. I just wished it wasn’t me she was trying to matchmake for.

Not right now, anyway.

As she left, I knew I was in for it now, though. Soon enough, their super fancy computer would spit out the name of my first date, and if I didn’t show up, there would be hell to pay. I sighed, but I resigned myself to playing along.

If for no other reason than to support my sister. I wasn't going to fall in love with some stranger before I even saw him, but I would go to my dates and hope that, at the very least, I made a friend. Right now, that was as good as it was going to get for me.

SHARP

“It’s a rare occasion that I get to see you during the week outside of breakfast,” Marcus said as I followed him into his condo. “I’m glad you’re here, though. Do you want a beer?”

“Yeah. Please.” We walked to his kitchen and I loosened my tie, taking it off and stuffing it into my pocket before shrugging out of my jacket. “It’s not so rare. You asked if I wanted to hang out tonight and here I am.”

“I ask if you want to hang out tonight at least once a week, and you always say no. Why the change of heart?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just feel like every day is becoming the same. There’s no excitement anymore. No action. It’s all just wake up, get dressed, go to work, go home, eat, and go back to sleep. Rinse and repeat.”

“Bro, you desperately need to get out more,” he said, rolling his eyes at me as he took a beer out of his fridge and gave it to me. “Besides, that’s what adulthood is. The same shit to make money to pay for shit you already have.”

I laughed. “It’s not that deep. I just want something new in my life, you know?”

“Oh.” Marcus’s brows rose as he opened his own beer and dropped the cap on the counter with a slight clink. “I can ask Brianna if she’s got a friend we can set you up with.”

“Brianna, the supermodel lookalike?” I shook my head. “No thanks. I’ve got that covered.”

“What do you mean you’ve got it covered?” He led me out of his kitchen and we headed to his lounge, each of us dropping into one of his lumpy sofas. “How can you have it covered when you haven’t even been out on a date in God only knows how long?”

“I haven’t had time to go out on a date in God only knows how long, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t found the time to hook up.”

He snorted. “Okay, so you’ve fucked some people recently. Good for you. It still doesn’t explain how you’ve got it covered.”

“Have you ever heard of Sight Unseen?”

“Uh.” He didn’t answer me immediately, his face scrunching up as he thought about it. “I think so? It’s that dating app thing, right? If it’s that, I’ve seen the billboards, but I don’t really know much about it.”

“It is the dating site.” I swallowed a long sip of beer before admitting the truth. “I signed up with them and I have my first date coming up. I just got the email about it on my way over here.”

Marcus blinked hard, then did it again. “*You* signed up to a dating site? Why?”

“Because I’m tired of horsing around and meeting women in bars who are only after money or dick. I’m ready for the real thing, and I haven’t had any luck finding it for myself, so I’ve roped in the experts.”

“Okay, but why Sight Unseen? Like I said, I don’t really know much about it, but on the billboard, there are people in the dark with a wall between them. What’s that all about?”

“That’s their thing,” I explained. “They set you up on dates with people their algorithm says you’re compatible with, but you don’t see the person you’re on the date with.”

“Oh, I get it. Sight Unseen. Right.” He arched a brow at me, pulling a face like the idea disgusted him. “That sounds terrible. How does it even work? They stick you in a restaurant with all the lights out?”

“No, they’ve got it down to an art form. There’s even rules and stuff, and if you break them, you’re out of the program.”

“There are rules for a dating app?” He stared back at me incredulously. “Why? Okay, I’m curious now. What are these incredibly serious rules that will get you kicked off this ridiculous app?”

I pulled my phone out of my pocket, actually a little relieved to have an opportunity to study the email I’d been sent earlier a little more closely. I hadn’t had time to go over the rules they’d attached to the initial email, but they were set out in this one.

They’d also given me a new name for the date and sent through the details of the girl I’d be going out with. I’d been itching to take a look over it all, but since I’d been driving when it’d come through, this was the first chance I was getting.

I read the crux of the email out loud after scanning it. “Okay, so the rules are that no real names are to be used or exchanged while you’re dating the other person. The name they’ve given me for this date is Cole.”

“Uh, okay, Cole. What else?”

“We won’t be allowed to see each other until the fifth date, if we make it that far. No touching of any nature, which is apparently to keep things from getting physical. Lastly, we’re not allowed to exchange any personal information. If we do, that will end the dating through the company.”

“That’s even more ridiculous than I thought,” he said while I was still staring at my screen. “There has to be some level of physical attraction, am I right? You’re not going to be able to get serious with someone you don’t find physically attractive at all.”

“I don’t know,” I mused out loud as I thought it over. “What I want is a friend and partner. That’s what this program is about. It helps you to find someone you might normally have overlooked but who you have an emotional connection with. I think the idea is that if you connect on that deeper

level, you'll automatically be attracted to the person you connected with irrespective of their looks."

"That's bullshit," Marcus argued. "For all you know, the person they set you up with will have a mustache. Are you sure you're ready for that? Also, if you're not going to be seeing each other, isn't the no touching rule redundant? If you can't see each other, how the hell are you supposed to touch the other person, let alone get physical with them?"

"I'm not sure if every date will be set up so there's an actual wall between us. On the ad I saw before I applied, there were some of the dates that just take place in the pitch dark. I think they like to switch it up depending on the people and what you checked as being comfortable with."

"Dating in the dark?" He quirked his eyebrows at me. "So, what? You're going to sit in a pitch black room with all the lights out and pour your heart out to a stranger?"

I chuckled. "That's the general idea, yes. Pour your heart out and find out if the person the computer chose for you is the one."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" He sat up on the sofa, turning to face me fully. "I've known you for a long time, dude. I know that heart you're going to be pouring out to someone and I know what you're looking for. I also know that you like your women sexy as fuck and that you're not going to get into anything real or serious with a woman who grows a better mustache than you do."

I rubbed the skin at the top of my lip. "My mustache grows just fine. I just don't like having one. Besides, it's not all about looks, Marcus. It's a risk I'm willing to take. Razors are cheap. If I have to buy her one eventually, I will."

"I'm really not sure about this." He released a deep breath and then held up his bottle of beer toward mine. "If you're on board, though, I look forward to hearing how it went. To you and what's the chick's fake name?"

"Winnie," I said after glancing back down at the email and clinking my bottle against his. "There are no Winnie's with a

mustache.”

He chuckled. “Maybe but maybe not. It doesn’t really matter, though, because that’s not her real name.”

“True. I wonder what her real name is and if she chose Winnie as a pseudonym.”

“Did you choose Cole? If not, it’s a fair bet that she didn’t choose Winnie, either.”

I laughed but settled back with my beer as I shook my head. “I didn’t choose Cole, and I suppose it doesn’t matter what her real name is, anyway. I’ve done some research on this algorithm of theirs, and it’s supposed to be powerful in doing what it does. We’ll see, but since I haven’t had any luck finding a girl to get serious with by myself, it felt like time to give a computer a chance to do it for me.”

“May the odds be ever in your favor,” he said. “If Winnie is a weirdo, will you keep going?”

“If Winnie is a weirdo, she’s a weirdo the computer thought would be right for me, so yes. I think I will keep going. For now, at least. Besides, what have I got to lose?”

“Uh, how about millions in alimony payments over the years if you marry the wrong girl?” he asked. “Or your heart if you see the girl you supposedly connected with and you don’t find her attractive at all.”

“I don’t know,” I repeated, saying the words even slower this time. “Again, the allure of this program to me is that it takes money and looks out of the equation. Otherwise, it would’ve been no better than picking up a girl in a bar. This is about what’s on the inside and not what’s in your bank account or what you wear.”

“Sure, I hear you, but I still think it’s a risk. Just promise me you won’t get swept up in the romance of it all.”

“I won’t,” I promised. “You know me. I don’t get swept up in the romance of anything. I’m just ready for a change, and this seemed like as good a place as any to start.”

I meant it, too. What I wanted, I wasn't finding for myself. I didn't mind admitting that to Marcus. He already knew anyway, so it didn't matter.

Sight Unseen was a risk, and he wasn't entirely wrong about the physical attraction thing either. If I saw the woman I'd connected with after five dates of talking and I wasn't attracted to her, I probably would be mighty disappointed. I was choosing to believe in the premise that had made Milena Kress a millionaire, though.

As I sat here, trying to come to terms with dating a girl I wouldn't see until after I'd gotten to know her, I had to believe that if I liked who she was, I would find her attractive once I finally saw what she looked like. Love was supposed to be blind, and going at it with my eyes wide open hadn't worked so far.

Maybe that was the mistake I kept making, going after girls who looked a certain way instead of going after them for who they were. I was ready to find the woman whose soul was made of the same fabric as mine, and if I had to date her in the dark in order to get there, then I'd do it.

"It's a risk I'm willing to take," I repeated before draining the rest of my beer and holding up the bottle. "Do you want another one? I'm setting my limit for the night at two. I don't drink much in the week anymore because I can't handle working with the hangover I get if I drink much more than that."

Marcus nodded and got up, swigging the last of the contents of his bottle as well. For the rest of the night, we didn't talk much more about Sight Unseen or the date I had coming up, but I couldn't stop thinking about it nonetheless.

Somewhere in the city, a woman had gotten an email tonight about a date with a guy named Cole. I wondered who she was and how she felt about it. I just fucking hoped that the algorithm hadn't gotten it wrong. I wasn't interested in dating someone who wasn't ready to get serious, and I really just hoped she felt the same way.

“**F**or the record, this is a bad idea,” I said. Again.

Hope sat on my bed while I got ready for my first date after I’d matched with some guy who’d signed up with Sight Unseen—of his own free will. She had her knees drawn up to her chest, and her smile was a little less bright than I’d been expecting it to be.

“It’s not a bad idea,” she said, but her voice lacked some serious luster. “You’re going to have fun. It’ll work if you let it, so just let it.”

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked after zipping up the side of my dress. “I thought you’d be all over this, but you look like you don’t even want to be here.”

“Of course, I want to be here,” she protested, but then she let her head hang forward and pulled her fingers through her loose hair. “I honestly wouldn’t have wanted to be anywhere else, but I’m worried about Graham. I think he’s drinking again.”

I spun around to face her, my woes about my date forgotten. “What? Are you serious?”

She sighed, her eyes unfocused and strangely empty when she raised her head again. “Yeah. I found some empty bottles in the garbage when I was at his place the other day. He’s also dodging my calls more often than he’s taking them, and when I do see him, he’s been behaving differently.”

“Differently?” There was a definite edge in my voice when I asked the question.

She nodded before refocusing and wincing like whatever thought she’d just had had caused her pain. “He’s not as aggressive as he was the last time he got drunk, but he’s been argumentative and he’s been picking fights with me for no good reason.”

Leaving my hair wet and my face bare of makeup, I strode over to the bed and climbed onto the mattress beside her. “That’s it. I’m not going on this date. You and I are going stay right here, we’re going to order in, and we’re going to talk through this. It’s time for you to break up with him, Hope. If he’s going down this path again...”

I trailed off. I couldn’t make this decision for her, but I wanted to. Graham had been sober when she’d met him, but in the few months they’d spent together, he’d fallen off the wagon a couple of times. Each time it happened was worse than the last, and although he hadn’t physically hurt her before, he’d been incredibly aggressive toward both of us when I’d gone to pick her up the last time he’d been drunk.

While I didn’t know his history with alcohol, I did know that he had one. I also knew he’d promised Hope he was done with the stuff that last time. My sister shook her head at my suggestion, sitting up straight and schooling her features.

“You’re not using me as an excuse to get out of this,” she said decisively. “Cole will be waiting for you and you guys got a compatibility score in the high nineties. You’re going on this date.”

“Not while you’re in trouble.” I put my arm around her shoulders and pulled her into my side. “No man, not even one I got a hundred percent compatibility with, is ever going to lure me away from you when you need me.”

“I’ll still need you after the date.” She let me hold her for a second longer before she pulled away from me and rolled off the bed. “Let me help you with your hair and makeup. It’ll take my mind off things.”

“If the guy isn’t going to be seeing me, why are we even going to bother with hair and makeup? I could be naked and he wouldn’t know.”

“Maybe he wouldn’t know, but everyone else would. You have to get from here to the restaurant, and I’m pretty sure people between here and there will notice. Plus, when you look good, you feel confident. That’s what we’re going for. We’re doing it for you, not for him.”

“I’m not doing any of this for me. It’s all for you.” I sat down at my dressing table when she pointed at the bench seat in front of it, but then reached up and touched her forearm. “Are you sure you’re going to be okay? You have Cole’s contact details. We could always reschedule.”

“Correction, I don’t have his contact details. I have access to the system that does. I don’t know who he is, either, and before you ask, I can’t find out.”

“Well, I’m sure you can, but I wasn’t going to ask you to. I wouldn’t ask you to violate the rules that way.” *Not yet, anyway.* “The point is that you can get in contact with him and postpone.”

“Nope. I can, but I’m not going to. There’s not much else to say about Graham right now, so there’s nothing else for us to talk about. I just need to see how it plays out, and in the meantime, I’ll feel better knowing you’re going on a date with someone you scored so well with.”

I groaned. “You’re really not going to let me get out of this?”

“Not even to help me in a time of crisis.” A soft smile formed on her lips. “I’ll be fine tonight, I promise. Just try to relax and have fun with Cole. For me.”

“You’re a manipulative wench,” I teased. “Now I’m going to have to try, even if I still don’t understand why I can’t just see the guy. How am I supposed to have meaningful conversations with some guy I don’t know and can’t see? He could bullshit me all the way to the bank and I won’t be able to read his facial expressions to know about it.”

“Oh, hush. This is going to be great.” She brushed my hair until it was sleek and smooth, then motioned for me to close my eyes while she worked her wonders with my makeup. “So, when you get to the restaurant, you’re going to be handed a pair of goggles. The hostess will lead you to a private room, and before you enter it, you’ll be required to put them on. Once they’re on, she’ll lead you into the room. For safety sake, the men and women are told to enter from different entrances to the restaurant, so don’t bother sitting outside and trying to spot him going in.”

“I hadn’t even thought about it,” I said honestly. “I kind of figured you guys would’ve come up with a way around something as simple as that for not seeing the other person.”

With only a few strokes of the makeup brushes, she declared me ready and then ushered me out the door. I really wasn’t looking forward to it, but when I arrived at the restaurant and a perky hostess handed me the blackout goggles, icy panic sped through my veins.

“Are these really necessary?” I asked, eyeing the military grade looking contraption.

She chuckled as she nodded. “Yes, ma’am. We’ve been working with Sight Unseen for about a year now, and they take it pretty seriously. You should also know that once they’re on, there’s an alarm that activates on the clasp. It’ll go off at the front desk if you try to tamper with them.”

“What?” My sister had definitely neglected to mention that little nugget of information. “That’s insane. What if there’s an emergency?”

“You listed an emergency contact person with the agency, didn’t you? If your phone goes off more than two times, the waiter will take it, answer it, and put the caller in touch with your contact person. We’ve literally been trained on how to handle this, and whenever we’ve got Sight Unseen dates happening here, we have one of their people on call just in case we need their help.”

“That’s crazy. Like, seriously. Who does this?” I shook my head as I followed her through the main dining room and to a

door at the back.

The hostess opened the door, but instead of finding myself already in the private dining room, I was in an antechamber of sorts. With opaque glass walls cordoning me off from view, she stopped and smiled.

“It’s time to put those on now,” she said in a reassuring tone. “Trust me, it will all be fine. We’ll be right here if you need us. I know it can be disconcerting to be deprived of your sight, but this works. I promise.”

“How do you know?” I asked, genuinely curious as nerves coursed through me.

She held up her left hand and showed me the sparkling diamond. “I took part in the program last year. We’re getting married next month. Just breathe, and who knows? You could be next.”

I knew she was just trying to be kind and positive, but that was the last thing that was going to set me at ease. More on edge than ever before, I jammed the goggles on and then felt her fastening the clasp behind my head.

It was blacker than night with them on, not even a sliver of light creeping in from above or below. They covered my eyes completely, and she’d been right when she’d said it was disconcerting. Silently cursing my damn twin for getting me into this, I let her take my arm and lead me to my seat. Then an unfamiliar voice said an unfamiliar name.

“Are you Winnie?” the voice asked. “I’m Bryan, your host for the evening.”

Since my name wasn’t Winnie, I didn’t respond at first.

“Winnie?” the voice asked again.

That was when it hit me. Tonight, I was Winnie. “Oh, yeah. That’s me. Sorry.”

“No problem, ma’am. Welcome to La Pentola.” He paused for a moment, and I heard the smile in his voice when he spoke again. “Ah, and here’s Cole.”

There was a slight scrape of his chair against the floor, and I felt the tablecloth move as he sat down. “Right, Cole. I’m Bryan. I’m your host for the evening. I’m going to leave you guys alone for a few minutes while I organize your drinks. Feel free to start talking. If any of the staff comes in, we’ll announce ourselves as we open the door. If you don’t hear anyone say anything, it’s because you’re alone.”

I heard his footsteps retreat and then the soft click of the door closing, but there was no sound after that. We were both sitting in the dark, silent as we attempted to adapt to these strange circumstances.

Logically, I knew where we were and that there was someone sitting across from me, but I felt strangely lost. Detached. Vulnerable.

I didn’t like it at all, and if he didn’t say something soon, I was going to start hyperventilating. I loved my sister more than anything and anyone else in the world, but I was *so* getting her back for this. Soon. Very, very soon.

“So, uh, this is weird, right?” I said to break the ice, letting out a soft chuckle with the words. “Is it your first time dating in the literal dark, or have you had some time to ease into it?”

“It’s, uh, it’s my first time,” she replied quietly, her tone tentative but her voice smooth, melodic, and beautiful. “It’s weird. I’m so nervous. Are you nervous? I feel like someone could creep up on us and we’d never know.”

“No one will creep up on us,” I assured her, wanting to ease her nerves even when my own were definitely on edge as well. “I might’ve, uh, checked the locking mechanisms on the door I came in through. I’m sure you’d have had the same one on your side. It’s solid. I also asked the host outside about it, and he gave me his word that once we’re in here, those two exterior doors are locked and the only one that remains open leads right into the kitchen.”

It wasn’t lost on me that we were both tentative. I almost never *ummed* or *uhhed* in conversation, but it sure was happening a lot tonight. It’d probably get better once we eased into it, though. It was just entirely unnatural to be seated across from somebody and not be able to see them.

Plus, I had no idea what the interior of the room looked like and I was a little off my game because of it. Being deprived of my sight was more alarming than I’d been prepared for, but I focused on the woman across from me,

wanting to let her know that she was safe and that we both just needed to relax.

“You inspected the locking mechanism on the door while you’re on a date?” Since she sounded sufficiently distracted by that bit of information, I leaned into it.

“I did. Does that make me as weird as this situation?” I asked. “It’s my first time, too. I think the reality of how vulnerable we truly are during this situation only dawned on me when they handed me the goggles. I wanted to be sure we would be safe.”

“And are you?” she asked curiously. “Sure, I mean. Are we safe, uh, Cole?”

I bristled a little at being called a different name. It was one thing seeing it on the email and having the host say it, but it was another thing entirely coming from her, a girl I was supposed to be dating. If this went well, like I hoped it would, she would be screaming my name in the throes of passion for the rest of her life, and it sure as shit wasn’t *Cole* she’d be shouting.

“We’re safe,” I said to address her concern before moving on. “Look, you know my name isn’t Cole and I know yours isn’t Winnie. How about, in order to keep things from getting confusing, we just go by the first letter of our real names? I don’t know how you feel about Winnie, but Cole doesn’t suit me.”

She giggled. “Am I allowed to ask what does suit you, or is that getting too close to revealing forbidden information?”

“Forbidden information,” I repeated out loud. “I like that. Do you think it’s part of their master plan? They make even something as simple as our names forbidden fruit in the hopes that it makes the whole thing too tantalizing to walk away from?”

Her voice took on a more conspiring tone, and I heard the smile in it even if I couldn’t see it. “I think you’re right. I think it is part of the master plan. Everyone wants what they can’t have, right? This way, you can’t have anything you actually

need to know about the other person, and that makes you want them more.”

I laughed. “You sound like either a journalist digging for an explosive story or a spy sharing theories right now.”

“I could be either of those things,” she said, pretending to be flippant about it. “You’ll never know.”

“I might know eventually,” I reminded her. “If we make it through five dates like this, that is. How are we doing so far? Do you think we’ll even make it to date number two?”

“I think we might,” she mused, some of the act she’d been putting on just a minute ago melting out of her voice as curiosity crept back in. “It’s actually going a little better than I thought it would, to be honest. I didn’t think we’d have anything to talk about, but here we are, chatting away about master plans and spies. This may just be the most fun I’ve had on a blind date yet.”

“Okay, so master plans and spies do it for you. Noted. Will you excuse me for just a minute? I need to go do a quick career change. Do you prefer the CIA or MI6?”

She laughed out loud, and the sound was like music to my ears. She had a beautiful laugh, lyrical and carefree. “I don’t think it’s as easy as slipping away for a minute and making a phone call, but MI6 could be great. Have you been to London? I haven’t, but I wouldn’t mind going, and if I was dating an MI6 agent, I suppose you’d have to whisk me away there sometime.”

“A person doesn’t need to work for MI6 to whisk you away to London. I’d do it even if I’m not a spy, but we’re getting ahead of ourselves. What’s the first letter of your name then?”

“G,” she said without hesitation. “Yours?”

“S,” I replied, not even considering saying D instead. I went by Sharp personally and professionally. My mother was the only person in the world who called me Danny, and she could keep that name for herself. “So, London, huh? Is it on

your bucket list, or would you just not mind going if an MI6 agent wanted to take you there?”

“Oh, no. I’d go anytime. With anyone. As long as that person took me there, I’d be happy. International travel by myself is out of the question unfortunately. It’s just too darn expensive.”

Surprised by her honesty, I leaned back in my chair and wondered for a minute how to respond. If I told her that I traveled regularly, I’d sound cocky and maybe even condescending, but on the other hand, I loved traveling. The person I was going to be with for the rest of my life would have to love it too if things were going to work out.

Instead of commenting on how expensive it was, I went at it from a different angle. “If it wasn’t out of the question, would you travel internationally, or are you more of a homebody?”

She laughed softly, releasing a low hum that turned into a groan. “Gosh, it’s so weird having a conversation like this with someone I’ve never seen, but um, if it wasn’t out of the question, I wouldn’t even have been *here* right now. I’d be on a tropical island somewhere with an icy cocktail in my hand and I’d only leave when the heat got to be too much. Then I’d head somewhere snowy and stay there until the cold got to be too much.”

“And then you’d go back to the tropical island?” I ventured a guess, and she chuckled.

“It sounds like you’ve got me all figured out, Mr. S.”

“Ah, yes. They didn’t tell me you were a flight risk,” I said. “If I’m reading you right, though, you’d never come back here if you had a choice.”

She sighed. “No, I would come back here. There’s no place like home, right? It’s nice to dream about hopping from place to place, going wherever I want, but I don’t think I’d ever be able to do it for real, and not just because it’s too expensive.”

“Why, then?”

“Well, I, uh, I have a sister who I’m really close to, and I’m close to my parents, too. My family is so important to me. I’d never be able to go for months on end without seeing them.”

So far, she was giving me all the right answers. If I had a checklist for what I wanted in a woman, she would have me ticking away at the boxes left, right, and center. “Yeah, I get that. I’m close to my parents, too. I’m an only child, though, so no siblings to be tight with, but I always wanted them.”

“I can’t imagine life without my sister in it,” she said thoughtfully. “On the other hand, growing up as an only child must come with its own perks. You never have to share your stuff, or your parents, and you always get to watch what you want on TV.”

“True, but there was also no one to blame when I broke something or messed up,” I admitted on a low chuckle. “Thankfully, I’ve known my best friend for a long time and he’s like a brother to me. He even used to come on vacation with us and stuff so I wouldn’t get lonely.”

“That sounds nice,” she said. “What about you, though? Would you travel a lot if you could?”

When she circled back to the subject, I knew it was important to her, too. Just like it was to me. She wanted to know if I was a homebody who would never take her anywhere or if I had the same wanderlust she seemed to have.

“I feel very much the same way that you do. I love experiencing other cultures and seeing different places, but three weeks is my limit. After that, I just want to come home. I always miss the taste of real cheese too much by then.”

“What?” She laughed, clearly startled by the admission. “Cheese? Are you serious? Don’t they have cheese overseas?”

“Sure, they do, but it’s not the real thing. There’s nothing like American cheese on a sandwich when I get home.”

She laughed some more, and I drank in the sound, wishing I could see her face right then. “That’s a strange thing to miss,

S. I think I get it, though. It's about the comfort and familiarity of the tastes of home."

"Exactly. Have you traveled much before? It sounds like you know the feeling."

She cleared her throat lightly. "No, I, uh, I haven't traveled at all actually. My sister and I go to New York every once in a while, but that's about it. I just guessed what the food thing was about based on what you said."

"You got all that just because I said I missed cheese while I was away?"

She paused. "Uh, yes? Is that a bad thing?"

"No. No, it's not a bad thing at all. It's just surprising that you understood it so perfectly that you found the words to describe how I feel about it."

"Yeah, it's kind of like when you finished my sentence earlier," she said after another brief pause. "What's the catch with you, S? I've never talked this easily on a date before. Ever. You seem nice and it feels so damn natural to talk to you, so why hasn't anyone snapped you up yet? Why are you dating in the dark with the rest of Seattle's singles? Or is that the catch, that you're not single and that you just enjoy seeing what else is out there? Well, not *seeing* but you know what I mean."

I laughed. "No, I *am* single. I'm as single as they come and I've never been accused of being easy to talk to before. Honestly, it's never been this easy for me to talk to anyone on a date before, either. I guess that algorithm really is all it's cracked up to be since it matched the two of us."

"Yeah, it seems so," she mused. "So what is the catch with you then? If it's not that you're secretly married, what is it? There has to be something."

"I'm a workaholic," I said honestly. "I've always promised myself that I'd slow down if I ever met the right person, but I haven't had time to meet the right person because I haven't slowed down. It's a *catch-22*, I suppose. What's your catch?"

She snorted, but it sounded more like she was trying to hold back laughter than it did derision. “My catch is pretty much the same as yours. I’m incredibly career driven, and I want a family and all that, but I’ve always thought that I had more time.”

“Has your time run out somehow?” I asked.

She chuckled. “No, not really, but it is *running* out, even if it hasn’t run out quite yet. Isn’t everybody’s, though?”

I nodded before I remembered she couldn’t see me. “Yes, it is. Especially for those of us who still want to be able to walk and see properly by the time our kids graduate from college.”

I heard the slight click of the door opening. A throat cleared just a second after. “I’m sorry to interrupt. We’re not supposed to during the initial conversation, but I tried waiting for a lull in yours to come in. It hasn’t happened yet, though. Let me just take your order and then I’ll be out of your hair.”

The waiter rattled off our food choices, and I noticed that it was all stuff that would be easy to eat while we couldn’t see, and then he was gone again. For the rest of the night, he only came back to refill our drinks or deliver and collect our plates.

G and I didn’t stop talking once, and by the time we said our goodbyes, I was pleasantly surprised by how well—and how fast—it’d gone.

“This was probably the best date...” I trailed off before I shook my head. “No, not probably. This was definitely the best date I’ve ever been on.”

“I feel the same way,” she admitted, her voice quieter now than it was before. “I’ll be waiting for our next date, S. I wasn’t expecting to want a second date, but I do.”

“So do I,” I agreed. “Date number two can’t come fast enough. I’ll be *not* seeing you soon, G. Thanks for a great night.”

Before I could do so much as ask for a hug, the hosts were back and they were ushering us away from each other. I wasn’t

nearly ready for the night to end yet, but I guessed that was also part of the master plan.

Leave them wanting more, and in my case, they'd definitely achieved just that.

GRACE

Another day, another empty floor at the art center. If it had been any other day, I'd have been pulling my hair out about it by now, but it was almost noon and I still felt like I was floating on a ray of sunshine.

All because of last night. With the mysterious S.

I really hadn't thought the date would go so well. I'd thought there was no way a computer would have better instincts than I did, but maybe it was because there were no instincts involved that it'd gone so well.

On paper, S and I were clearly a match, and that had translated into real life when we'd met last night. We'd hit it off—big time.

When Hope walked into the gallery and saw the smile on my face, she arched a knowing brow at me and poked me in the ribs once she was close enough. "You see? Do you freaking see now what I was talking about? Have I managed to convert you, you doubter?"

I laughed, squealing as I danced away from her hand and eventually gave her a swift nod. "I do see, and I'm sorry for being a doubter. I never should've doubted you or your magical computer. Before we get into how my night went, though, tell me about yours. Did you hear anything from Graham?"

"No." Her lids fluttered closed for a moment and she took a deep breath. "I tried calling him, but there was no answer."

When she opened her eyes again, she exhaled through her nostrils and blinked away the sadness that had been in her eyes. “Let’s not go there. Let’s focus on the positives, like your date with Cole. If you’re smiling like that more than twelve hours after it ended, I’m assuming it went well?”

I nodded enthusiastically, pressing my hand to my chest and the other to my forehead as I mimed swooning. “It went so well. Honestly? It was the best thing I’ve done in a long time. We started talking almost immediately and we just didn’t stop. I could’ve spent all night talking to him and I still don’t think we’d have run out of things to say.”

Hope grinned, squeaking before she launched herself at me to wrap me up in a hug. “I’m so happy for you! I knew you were going to come around if you just gave it a chance.”

I hugged her back, letting my gratitude over her pushing me to do this flow freely into her. “You really should look into doing it yourself. I know you’re with Graham, but you and I both know it’s not going to work out. Just sign yourself up already.”

She let out a quiet sigh and released me, those springtime eyes of hers filled with sadness once more. “I can’t just dump him, Gracie. I know how you feel about him and seriously, I don’t know if it’s going to work out anymore, but I still can’t just dump him. Graham needs me, and I want to at least try to help him.”

“Graham might need you, but somewhere out there is a man who needs you more. A man who might be waiting for an email about being matched up with you and it’s not coming because you’re not in the system yet.”

“Well, if he’s really the one for me, then he’ll still be there if I ever sign up.” She dragged in another breath, gave her head a little shake, and flashed me another smile. “Tell me about Cole. What did you talk about?”

“Nothing,” I said dreamily. “Everything. I don’t know. It was so weird, but it was like we just clicked, you know? Like we knew what the other person was thinking even before they said it. We have so much in common in terms of what we’re

like and what we want. I think there may really be a future there if it keeps going as well as it did last night.”

“Well, my fingers will be crossed,” she said, but then I saw the flicker of worry in her eyes. “If he wants to see you again, there will be another email. I can put in the request from your side, but he needs to accept. Just like you need to accept if the request comes from him, but Grace? If it doesn’t happen, if there is no email, we’ll try again, okay?”

So that’s what the worry is about. “Stop looking at me like that. I really hope that I don’t get rejected this early in the game, but I don’t think I will be. There will be another email. Count on it.”

As if S—or the Sight Unseen system—had heard me and wanted to reward my confidence, Hope’s phone beeped at that very moment, and after glancing down at it for a beat, she lifted her head back up and smiled at me.

“It really must’ve been some date because the email just came in. It usually takes the men a little longer than this to request a second date. I don’t know, something about their egos and knowing that he’s dating someone he can’t see makes some of them hold off at least a couple more hours, but Cole wants to see you again, too.”

I clapped my hands together, bouncing on the balls of my feet as I waggled my eyebrows at her. “When is it? When will I see him again?”

She giggled. “Hold your horses, cowboy. We’ll set it up, but I don’t know when yet. The email with his request literally just came in. You were standing right there.”

Lifting her phone, she hit something on her screen and then looked at me again. “There. I’ve accepted on your behalf, so now the system will do its thing. Just give it time.”

“I don’t want to give it time.” I pouted. “I want to see him again soon. Like, tonight soon. If we have a super long date for our second date, can we jump straight to date number five?”

“Nope, there are no shortcuts. You can’t roll dates two, three, and four into one to skip ahead. No matter how long the date lasts, it’s still just one date.”

I sighed. “Fine, but if I’m ever asked for a comment about the process, I’m telling them that there should be a fast-track for the couples who hit it off as well as we did.”

“Far be it from me to rain on your parade, but a lot of couples feel the way you do after the first date. That’s why Sight Unseen is doing so well. The algorithm works, but so does Milena’s process. You need to keep trusting it.”

Knowing that pouting wasn’t going to get me anywhere, I nodded and put my hands on my hips, looking around the empty gallery and realizing that I had more than enough to keep me busy until the second date anyway. “I need to call the dick, don’t I?”

“You do,” she said gently. “Why don’t you just send him a message instead? It may be easier than having to listen to him being smug about you reaching out to him after you said you weren’t interested.”

“That’s a good point.” I ran both of my hands through my hair, tugging at the ends as I tried to gather the courage to do what needed to be done. “Putting it off isn’t going to make it any easier, is it?”

“There’s no time like the present. At least I’m here for moral support.”

I looked around the gallery once more, noticing the dampness and all the other flaws he’d mentioned. I loved this place, and I really had poured my whole heart and soul into it, but he wasn’t wrong about the structure or the fact that my business was failing.

After speaking to S, I’d also realized that I wanted to get my ducks in a row. Whether he was the one for me or not, I wanted to be ready for the one when, and if, he did come along. In order to do that, I needed to get ahead in my career.

That wasn’t happening here. I was just spending more and more time and money I didn’t have on trying to force

something that wasn't working. Hope had been right before. If I sold to the dick, at least I'd have the money to start over again elsewhere.

"Wait here," I murmured to her as I went to my office to get the card he gave me. When I went back out, I typed his number into my phone and glanced at my sister. "This doesn't mean that I'm selling. I just know that I need to at least see what his offer would be for the company."

She nodded, sliding her hand into one of mine while I typed a message with the other. I really didn't want to hear the smugness in his voice when he realized who I was, and it'd been a good idea of hers to send him a message instead.

Me: Okay. Let me have it. Artfully Yours, what's your best offer?

Hope arched a brow when she read the message over my shoulder. "Wow. You really don't like this guy, huh?"

"Nope," I said just as he read the message.

Almost immediately, the dots started waving and I held my breath as I waited for his response to come in. When it did, it was no more professional or warm than my message to him had been.

He Who Shall Not Be Named: I'll be there on Monday. We can go over what you need to do to sell. I'll bring the paperwork.

Me: I'm not selling. Just want to see my options.

He Who Shall Not Be Named: Sure. I'll see you on Monday.

"God, I hate this guy," I muttered, and Hope nodded her agreement as she kept reading our texts over my shoulder.

"He does seem like a dick, but he's a dick with money that you need to start afresh, so just take the meeting. Also, try not to punch him in the face while he's here."

"I'll do my best, but I'm not making any promises." I'd never punched anyone in the face before, but there was a first

time for everything, and if I was ever going to punch anyone right in their smug face, it was Danny fucking Sharp.

The asshole.

The only good thing about selling the gallery to him was that if I did, he would stop coming around and I would never have to see him again. And that would suit me just fine. If I never had to see Danny Sharp ever again, I would die happily, knowing that I was better off for never having wasted another minute of my life speaking to him.

On my way to the art center to deal with the haughty owner, my phone buzzed with an incoming email. My heart jumped into my throat when I saw it was from Sight Unseen, and I opened it immediately.

At first glance, it was nothing earth-shattering. A system-generated email letting me know that my second date with G would be tomorrow night—if I was available. The same email would've gone out to her, and if we both accepted, we would be going out again tomorrow night.

I tapped the green button to accept immediately, grinning as I thought about how much I'd enjoyed my time with her. It'd taken longer to get to the second date than I'd hoped, but that *leaving them wanting more* thing was effective.

At this point, I was practically salivating to see her again. If absence made the heart grow fonder, then I was halfway in love with her by now. I knew it could all still blow up in my face, but I was eager to spend some more time with her and to get to know her better.

If they kept taking this long between dates, though, I was going to be tempted to hire a hacker to break into their system long before we got to date number five. The waiting was frustrating. I'd never been a very patient man and it was slightly infuriating not to have any other choice but to sit around, doing nothing but twiddling my thumbs, while out there, in the same city as me, was G.

Now that I'd met her, I wanted to get into getting to know her better—and I didn't want to have to wait for the Sight Unseen process to unfold before I did. Since I didn't have much of a choice, though, I slid my phone back into my pocket after hitting accept.

If she did the same thing, we'd both get an email soon with the time and location of date number two. In the meantime, I had an infuriating art center owner to buy a company from. I hadn't been able to believe it when I'd gotten that message from her.

There was no greeting, no attempt at formality or professionalism, and no name signed at the end. The damn girl was so full of herself that she'd just told me to *let her have it*.

Who does that?

In all the years I'd been doing this, I'd never had anyone approach it quite the way she was. The girl was crazy if she thought it was helping her cause.

If I hadn't needed this particular property for a client—and a friend at that—she'd never have heard from me again. I wasn't some desperate dick who let people treat me that way and then still helped them out of the hole they'd dug for themselves.

If it'd been up to me, I wouldn't have been pulling up outside her gallery right now, but since it wasn't up to me, I put my car in park and climbed out, eager to get this deal done so I didn't have to see her again. As I'd somehow known she would be, Grace was standing at the door, waiting for me.

In the back of my mind, I noticed again how beautiful she was. All blonde haired and blue eyed, with curves I'd have liked to have gotten lost in for days if she hadn't had such a shit personality.

Her hair was pulled up into a high, messy ponytail today and her eyes were lined with thick, black coal. Like she was trying to look more severe or maybe more serious than before. If that was what she'd been after, she'd failed dismally.

Some wisps of hair had fallen out of her ponytail and now framed her face, making her seem softer than I thought she was trying for. The eyeliner only served to accentuate those blue eyes, and there was no malice in them.

Hostility, yes. Annoyance, definitely.

But no malice.

She didn't have a core made of iron or a soul made for corporate negotiation, regardless of what she might've preferred me to believe.

"You're here." She pushed away from the door, waving for me to follow her into the gallery.

I rolled my eyes, but I went. Because of Adam. "Hello, Grace. How are you today? It's so good to see you. Thank you for reaching out."

See, that's how you do it. Jesus. Is civility really that hard?

Grace closed the door once I was inside, peering out at the sidewalk like she was just checking one last time that no one was going to rush toward her with a better offer. They weren't going to, though. Nor were there any customers in here or anybody outside looking like they were desperately going to bang down her door to get the artwork they wanted.

I almost rolled my eyes, but I didn't. Unlike her, I was a fucking professional and all I wanted right now was to close this deal. I didn't need to aggravate her further, even if I was surprisingly tempted to do it. *Just to play with her a little. Knock her off her unnecessarily high horse.*

After closing the door and locking it for good measure, she spun back around to face me and crossed her arms firmly over her chest. "Let's not beat about the bush by pretending you care who I am. All you care about is that I reached out. You're welcome for that, by the way, but I'm not accepting the offer you made me last time you were here. It's too low."

Forgetting all about playing with her and without even thinking about being coy or charming, I arched a brow at her. "Excuse me? That's what this company is worth. I don't know

if you've noticed, but you're not exactly sitting on a goldmine here."

"No, I'm not," she agreed, surprisingly. "The location alone, however, is worth more than what you offered. That's not to mention the business you'd actually be buying and the intellectual property that would be going along with it."

Fuck. Okay, so she's more intelligent than most people I have to deal with. She was defensive as hell, though, but I guessed I couldn't blame her for that. "The location alone is worth something, sure, but that was a good offer. If you want to talk to me about the business and the intellectual property being worth more, then we'll have to sit down with—"

While I was speaking, she looked down at her phone and smiled, and my eyes narrowed to slits. "Be more professional, for God's sake. Put your phone away. This isn't recess."

"Don't tell me what to do," she said firmly, glancing at her screen once more with her smile widening before she finally put the fucking phone away. "That had nothing to do with you. Now, if you want to sit down with my books and assess what the business and the intellectual property are worth, we can do it. Do you have time now, or would you like to make another appointment?"

"I thought you weren't selling."

"I'm not." She arched an eyebrow as she tilted her head at me. "I'm simply examining my options and I can't do it if there isn't a realistic offer on the table. Also, don't lecture me about being professional, Mr. Sharp. You're the one who came in here like a bull in a China shop, acting like I'd already sold to you when I explicitly told you I wasn't interested."

"Yet here we are," I replied, not backing down. "You explicitly told me you weren't interested, but now you want a realistic offer." I glanced down at my watch. "I've got exactly twenty minutes. Show me what you can in that time, and I'll see what I can do."

She nodded, gesturing for me to follow her to the borderline cubicle she used as her office. Once we were inside,

I was surprised to find that she was actually prepared. A neat folder lay on her otherwise disorganized desk, and she picked it up, snapping it out in my direction.

“Everything you need to see is in there,” she said briskly. “The business may be struggling, but the product is solid. There are valuations in there for each and every work I’ve got, and you’ll find that they’ve been provided by a reputable appraiser. As for the intellectual property, there is goodwill connected to the name Artfully Yours in this community, as well as a few other issues I’ve outlined in there.”

I’d never admit it to her, but I was impressed. She was handling herself better than ninety percent of the business owners I’d dealt with that had been in the game for a lot longer than she had.

“Thank you for this,” I said, taking the folder from her. “Is this a copy for me, or do you need me to look it over here and give it back to you?”

“It’s for you.” She nodded, like she was being fucking gracious about it, and I wasn’t so impressed anymore. “Take it with you. Study it. If you have any questions, you can let me know and we’ll take it from there. That’s all the time I need from you today, though.”

My brows hiked up on my forehead. “Oh, is it?”

She nodded again. “Yes, it is. I got that ready for you so that we wouldn’t have to sit down together. I’d prefer not to see you when you break my hard work down into a series of what you will perceive as failures.”

Since it wouldn’t get me anywhere to point out that they had, in fact, been failures or else we wouldn’t have been here, I kept my mouth shut about it. “I understand. If I have any questions, I’ll have my assistant contact you.”

“Please,” she replied as she walked me back to the main door and unlocked it, clearly serious about not wanting me to look anything over in her presence. “Come back to me with a decent offer, and then we’ll talk. If not, then I suppose you’re

going to have to go find one of those other struggling art galleries you mentioned before to purchase.”

“I’ll run some numbers and see what I can come up with to buy *this* struggling art gallery, but you need to know that I didn’t lowball you before. You might think that this place is worth more, but I can guarantee that the next offer isn’t going to be much more than I’ve already offered. It just wouldn’t be worth it, irrespective of what I may find in your paperwork.”

“Run your numbers, Mr. Sharp. Come back to me with a better offer, and then we’ll talk. It doesn’t matter what you say until you’ve seen what’s in there, but for the record, I’m not some naïve girl who believes what she’s got is worth billions. All I’m after is an offer that realistically reflects the value of what you’d be purchasing.”

Her gaze locked on mine, and I saw the determination bubbling beneath the surface of those clear blues. She truly believed the dump was worth more than I’d offered her, and if I’d been considering it as a purchase to turn the place around, I’d have set her straight right here and right now.

It wasn’t up to me, though. This was about what the land was worth to Adam, which meant that he and I needed to sit down with what she’d given me and decide what our next move was going to be. All I knew was that I’d definitely underestimated her.

She wasn’t just some pushover who was going to give me her gallery on a silver platter, but I really was good at what I did. In the end, this place was *going* to be mine, and when it was, we were going to knock it down and Adam was going to do his thing here.

There were no two ways about it. She was already on the hook. Now all I had to do was reel her in.

GRACE

With my heart pounding, I walked into the room I was shown to after I arrived for date number two. We were at the Sight Unseen offices and I hadn't seen a single window since we'd gotten off the elevator.

Nerves raced through me, but I knew what to expect. Hope had told me that they'd boarded up the windows to keep any ambient light from the city shining into their—creatively named—*dark rooms*.

Since my sister wasn't allowed to be too involved in the process for fear of her being tempted to break the rules and dig into S, or Cole, she wasn't here. Her coworker smiled as she walked into the pitch-black room beside me.

“Now, I know it's going to be a little scary for a minute,” she said. “Your date has already arrived, though. He will be here any second, just as soon as we're done. So you won't be alone in the dark for too long.”

I breathed out a slow, quiet sigh of relief. “Okay. Are there any hazards in here I need to be aware of before I start stumbling around in the dark?”

She chuckled. “None whatsoever. Cole will be led through a door on the other side of the room. The lights in the hallway he's waiting in will be turned out before the door is unlocked. That way, you won't be able to see him when he comes in.”

“You guys really thought of everything, didn't you?” I groaned.

“We sure did. There was some trial and error at first, of course, but we’ve got all the wrinkles pretty smoothed out by now.” She motioned into the pitch black. “The room is set up so that each of you has a side. There are no barriers between the two sides, however, and no goggles this time. You won’t be able to see each other, but you will be free to move around. The floor is padded in case someone trips over something, and there’s some space to lie around as well as a sofa for each of you on your respective sides of the room, but that’s it. No hazards.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, then leaned in closer to her. “How often do you guys clean this place? I mean, is it safe to sit down and stuff? I’m not a germophobe or anything, but this seems slightly suspicious. It could be—”

She laughed, shaking her head at me. “You’d be surprised at how often I get that question, and I assure you that we have cleaners coming in after every date. You can ask Hope about it. She’ll tell you.”

“Okay.” I moved further into the room as she started backing out. “I’m ready. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Just before she closed the door and cut off the only bit of light there had been before, she winked at me. “Have fun, Winnie. I’ll see you later.”

I groaned at the sound of that name, but almost as soon as she closed the door on my side of the room, a door on the other side opened and I heard the soft rustling of clothes. I knew he was here, but I couldn’t see him for shit. Not even an outline. Nothing.

“G?” he said, sounding as discombobulated as I felt right now. “You’re in here, right? The guy outside said you were here already, but I wasn’t expecting it to be so completely pitch black in here.”

“I know,” I replied. “I’m here. I haven’t found the sofa on my side of the room yet, though. Have you?”

“Uh.” He paused for a minute. “Yeah. Yes. I think I just found it. You?”

My knee hit something soft as I inched forward. I bent over, my palms making contact with a soft, cushiony surface. “I just found mine, too. Should we sit down? The girl who showed me in here said we could also lay around if we want to.”

“I might do that later. For now, I think I just need to try to get my bearings and I’m already sitting down, so I’m good.”

I chuckled. “Okay, then. I’m sitting down now, too.”

Carefully lowering my butt to the seat, I lay back to judge how big the sofa was. Then I reclined on it, kicking up my feet and lying down with my head on the armrest. “Okay, I’m on the sofa. In the interest of full disclosure, I should tell you that I’m lying down on it after all. It’s surprisingly comfortable. You should try it.”

“I will, but I’d rather lie down next to you.”

My cheeks flushed. “Yeah, I think I might’ve preferred that, too. I’m not sure if it’s allowed, though. We’ll have to check before next time.”

“There’s going to be a next time?” he teased. “What happened to having to request and have a date accepted first?”

I shrugged. “I have a good feeling about this. It’s going to happen. Unless you’ve met someone between our last date and now?”

It was a fear I’d been carrying around deep within me ever since our first date. Obviously, I had no clue what the man looked like, but his voice was hot, with this low, deep rumble that was somehow smooth and comforting all at the same time.

He sounded like he was good-looking, but maybe I just thought so because I was already insanely attracted to him just for how well we got along. “I haven’t met anyone. Have you?”

“No. I was worried you might, though. What happens if someone meets someone else while they’re taking part in this program?”

“I don’t know,” he mused. “Honestly, I haven’t really even thought about anyone else since we met. I’m not searching

while we're out there right now. Are you?"

"No," I admitted softly, but it still sounded loud in the quiet room. "I, uh, I haven't really been able to stop thinking about you either, if I'm being completely honest. I've been wishing away the time between this date and the last one since we left the restaurant."

A low, sexy chuckle came from his side of the room. "It's been the same for me. It's frustrating, isn't it? Having to wait for Sight Unseen to set it all up when, if I'd had a choice, I would've seen you again the very next day."

"My thoughts exactly," I agreed. "I even asked if there was a way for us to fast track the process, but apparently, there isn't. Is it weird that I asked that after just one date?"

"No," he said immediately. "I'd have asked too, if I'd thought there might be a way. They seem pretty stuck on their rules, though. I don't think they make any exceptions."

"They don't." I sighed but didn't tell him that my sister worked here and that was how I knew. I'd been told numerous times that I was not allowed to mention her employment with the company. "How was your day?"

"Yeah, uh, it was fine. I'm dealing with a particularly difficult prospective client and the deal is driving me up the wall, but it'll be done soon, so at least there's that."

"I'm not allowed to ask what you do for a living, right?"

"I think we're allowed to be vague," he replied. "As long as we don't say anything that will allow us to hunt each other down outside, I think we're safe." He paused for a beat. "I'm a businessman. Before I ask what you do for a living, how was your day? Your week?"

I closed my eyes, twirling a lock of hair around my finger as exasperation rolled through me. "Urg, you don't want to know. It's just nice to have you to talk to so I can get my mind off work and life right now."

"What do you do that requires having your mind taken off it?"

“It’s nothing important,” I said honestly. “Soon, it’s probably just going to be nothing, but I really don’t want to talk about that.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Anything but that. Tell me more about yourself. What do you do over weekends?”

“Oh, you mean when I’m not supposed to be working but I usually am anyway?”

I laughed. “Yes, that’s exactly what I mean. Do you work all weekend, every weekend?”

“No. Sometimes, sure, but only when it’s crunch time. If I’m not working and the weather allows it, I like being outdoors. I go fishing with a friend whenever we can both be away and I enjoy hiking. You?”

“I’ve never fished, but I love hiking,” I said, smiling. “It’s one of the few things that helps me properly clear my mind, you know?”

“I do know. It’s the same for me.” He paused for a half a heartbeat. “How would you like to go hiking for date number six?”

I laughed. “Jeez. Weren’t you the one who just reminded me about requests and acceptance for date number three? Yet here you are, rushing all the way to date number six.”

“I’m a straight shooter. I’m just calling it like I see it right now.”

“Sure, okay,” I agreed. “We’ll go hiking for date number six. If we get that far.”

“We will,” he said confidently. “Hey, so you said you were close to your family. Do they know you’re doing this?”

“Yes. My sister, uh, actively encouraged me to enroll. You could even say she made me do it. Does yours?”

“My mother knows, yes.” I heard the smile in his voice. “You should know that I told her about you. She’s very excited about getting to meet you soon.”

“She is?” I was surprised he’d even told her about me. “Why? What did you say?”

He let out another low chuckle. Then I heard him let out a soft whoosh of air before he admitted it. “Enough that she may already be planning a springtime wedding.”

I shot up straight on my sofa, laughing as I snapped my head in his direction. “Are you serious? What on earth have you told her?”

“Just how I felt after our first date.”

“Okay,” I hedged. “So she’s already sort of planning a wedding. I love the spring, by the way, but what happens if she doesn’t like me when she meets me?”

“She will,” he said confidently. “The only thing she wants to know is how long she’s expected to wait before we give her a grandchild.”

“What?” I laughed out loud, so surprised that my ears were ringing. “Wow, she’s really bought into this whole thing, huh?”

“I wasn’t raised to do things halfway,” he said. “In my family, if we go for something, we usually get it.”

“Ooooh, he’s so cocky.” I laughed some more. “I like it, though. You’re confident. Assertive.” I hesitated for a beat. “Are you really ready for all that? Marriage, and babies, and life as a parent and a husband?”

“Yes,” he said. “I am. I’ve never told anyone except my best friend this, but I’ve been ready for it for a long time and now I’m finally at the point in my career when I can afford to slow down enough to be able to do it right. I’d be able to support my wife, so you...”

My hand flew to my chest, but a warm tingle rushed through me at the thought. I shattered the intensity of his statement by lightening the moment, needing to take a damn breath before I had a cardiac episode because of this man.

“Who said I want you to support me?” I teased. “As for whether your mother can expect those grandbabies, tell her I’ll

let you pump me full of them as soon as I have a ring on my finger.”

“Then I’ll have a ring for you when we go hiking,” he joked, or at least, I thought he was joking.

Once again, there wasn’t a beat of awkward silence before the buzzer in the corner sounded and I groaned. “Crap. That means we’ve only got one more minute before they come get us, right?”

“Right,” he said. “Hey, G?”

“Yeah?”

“Before we have to leave, I just want you to know that I really wish I could kiss you right now.”

“Me too,” I admitted quietly. “Only three more dates, though.”

“Fucking torture,” he groaned, then chuckled as the door opened on his side of the room.

As I heard him get up, I narrowed my eyes and stared in his direction, trying my utmost best to become like a cat and get at least a glimpse of him—even if just to assure myself that he was real—but I couldn’t see a thing.

I’d just have to wait, and he was right. It really was going to be torture.

SHARP

I sent a request for date three with G, or *Winnie*, before I even left the building after our second date. As soon as I'd opened my eyes this morning, the first thing I'd done was to check my phone to see if I had an email confirming the next date.

The second thing I'd done had been to will my raging erection away since I'd been dreaming about her voice all night. It was the strangest thing that'd ever happened to me, but I had such a hard-on for a girl I'd never even laid eyes on.

It was insane, but her voice was gorgeous and I was pretty sure that if I tried hard enough, I'd be able to get off on the sound of her laughter alone. That being said, the dating agency's promise was proving to be true, that the emotional connection would be strong enough if you were matched with the right person that you wouldn't care what they looked like.

I already didn't really care what she looked like. I wanted her more than I'd ever wanted any woman in my life, and if I really had to wait three more dates, my balls were going to be navy blue by the time I finally got to touch her.

Now that I'd gotten to know her a little better, I truly believed that I would remain attracted to her regardless of any physical characteristics she might have. On the inside, she was fucking beautiful, and if that was what I was supposed to be waiting three more dates to find out, then I already knew it. The woman was beautiful inside and out—because it really

didn't matter to me what she looked like. I knew I would find her beautiful at this point.

Or maybe I was being naïve and buying into Sight Unseen propaganda on the subject, but right now, it didn't feel like that. I couldn't stop thinking about her and I was so incredibly attracted to her that I ended up jerking off just to be able to get on with my day.

When I strode into my office later that morning, there was still no email and I was getting agitated. I was on edge, a bundle of energy with no outlet, and there would be no outlet unless I heard from her. Unless I knew that I would be seeing her again and when.

My thoughts slammed to a halt when I opened my door to find Adam already waiting in my supposedly private office. I cleared my throat and schooled my features to mask my surprise.

“Adam? What are you doing here?”

He grinned. “Sorry about the invasion, man. I still can't be seen here, though. I told your assistant that heads would roll if he didn't just let me in.”

“Sure,” I said, but I was definitely going to have to talk to Gary about this. We had other areas where he could've waited. “We don't have a meeting on the books for this morning, do we?”

“No, but I got your email about needing to set something up soon and I thought we could get a head start. Have you bought the gallery yet?”

“Not yet, but we're close. That's what I needed to talk to you about.”

Adam's face dropped and his features hardened. “I thought I could count on you to get this done for me like, yesterday, Sharp. The deal isn't done yet and *close* isn't good enough. What's the holdup?”

I ignored his attitude. Everyone always wanted everything done *like, yesterday*, but the business world didn't work that way. “No one is trying to steal this out from right under our

noses. Calm down. You've met the woman, haven't you? You know exactly what the holdup is?"

"No, I know what the holdup was when I was still dealing with her. I have no idea what the holdup is now that *you* are. What does she want?"

He strode away from the window where he'd been standing, looking at the city and Space Needle in the distance, and dropped into the seat across from my desk without waiting to be invited to do so. "Seriously, Sharp. I need to put this thing to bed. What do we need to do to make that happen?"

"She wants more money," I said. "A better offer. According to her, the company is worth more than you authorized me to give her. She's given me some stuff to look over, and it's not worth much more, but it is worth *more*."

"I'm paying you double your usual rate, so if she wants more money, give the girl more money," he snapped. "If she thinks it's worth it and she's not willing to budge, then what are you waiting for? It's worth fucking millions more than that to me. We're talking about a multibillion-dollar development here. She's not the only thing standing in my way, but she sure is a fucking roadblock, so get rid of her."

"I'm not in the business of paying people more than what they've got is worth," I said, moving around my desk and sitting down. "That's a slippery slope, Adam. You just said she's not the only thing standing in your way. If you want me to throw in an extra cool million just to get rid of her, then I'll do it, but if I do, you have to know that the other people you're buying out are going to expect the same thing."

"So have her sign a fucking nondisclosure agreement," he roared, his face going red until he breathed in deep and nodded. "I'm sorry, but this just isn't good enough. Just do what you have to do to get rid of her."

"Mark my words, if we concede to her now, you will have to do it again. There's a reason we don't negotiate with terrorists, Adam."

“She’s not a fucking terrorist, Sharp. She’s a hippy-dippy artist with a superiority complex and not enough sense to know what’s good for her. Just get her out of my building and out of my life. She’s been a thorn in my side for way too long.”

“So offer her more money even though we don’t know if she’ll accept the deal then? Has it occurred to you that she could be playing us against another potential buyer? If she gets a better offer from us, she’s got something to take to the bank.”

“Then be the bank,” he insisted, scrubbing his hands over his bushy beard before bringing his gaze back to mine. “If she wants more money, give her more money. Make her sign an NDA if you think we’ll need one to protect us from exposure down the line, but get her out of there. I just want her gone. Do you know that the first time I went to talk to her, she chased me out of the gallery as soon as I introduced myself? I’m done with that woman. If you can’t get her out of there, I’ll find someone who can.”

As he started rising from his seat, I blew out a breath and nodded. “I can get her out of there. Nondisclosure agreements are par for the course with me in any event, so she’ll sign one, but be careful with this, you hear me?”

“I hear you,” he said, smiling as he lowered his chin. “You’ll do it? You’ll get her out of there?”

“Of course, I’ll do it.” I scoffed. “Hell, you may even be right that it’ll be worth the extra money just not to have to deal with her anymore. I’m not a fan of the chick either, but you can’t get so emotional about this, Adam. The success of the development depends on whether you can keep yourself from going under before the first building even goes up.”

“Yeah, I know.” He exhaled heavily before getting to his feet and offering me his hand. “Let me know when it’s done. I know you’re just trying to protect me, and I appreciate it, but I don’t need you to be my friend right now. I need Danny Sharp, the best closer in town. Close the deal, you hear me? No matter what it takes.”

I nodded as I shook hands with him. “I’ll close it. What amount are you authorizing?”

“I’m leaving it within your discretion. Don’t go offering her something she’ll be able to retire on and live comfortably for the rest of her life, but give her however much it’s going to take to get her to sell immediately.”

“Got it,” I said, then walked him out before heading back to my desk and picking up my phone.

Since she’d messaged me the last time, I sent her a message now instead of calling.

Me: I have a new offer for you. I’ll come by later to see what you think.

Artfully Yours: Sure.

I huffed out a breath. *Holy shit, I’m really starting to not like this woman.*

One thing I had to give her was that she had balls. She went toe to toe with me like few people ever had, and she didn’t cower under any intimidation techniques. People who stood their ground the way she was usually earned my respect, and she would’ve too—if she wasn’t so damn annoying about it.

At this point, even if Adam wasn’t paying me double, I’d have thrown in some of my own money just to get rid of her. I had better things—better people—to think about, and I was about ready to get back to it.

GRACE

As I was leaving the art center to go grab some lunch, a broody, black-haired dick showed up. Irritation flared those hazel eyes as he widened them at me. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Yes, Sharp. I’m going somewhere.” I hiked my purse up on my shoulder. “It’s noon and I’m hungry, so I’m going to get something to eat. If you’re still here when I get back, we can talk. If not, then I guess your offer wasn’t good enough to convince you to wait for me, and if that’s the case, I’m not taking it anyway.”

Those eyes rolled as he slid his phone and his car keys into his pocket, sweeping his arm out in an *after-you* gesture. “I’ll join you for lunch. I don’t have time to waste hanging around here, waiting for you to have a leisurely meal that you’ll probably drag out on purpose just to keep me waiting.”

Already annoyed with him, I released a breath through my nostrils and started walking. “Fine, if you insist on joining me, then I suppose you can. You’re paying, though. You might not have time to waste, but I don’t have money to waste feeding you.”

“If you take my offer, you’ll have money to waste on whatever you choose to waste it on,” he said.

I shrugged. “That may be true, but I’m never going to have enough money to waste it on feeding you. There’s a bistro around the corner. Keep up. Like I said, I’m hungry.”

“Well, I’m starving,” he snapped like he just couldn’t help but rise to the challenge—even if I hadn’t meant to challenge him at all.

Slightly amused, I led him to the bistro and patiently waited in line to be seated, even though he was getting more agitated by the second. “Can’t we just go somewhere else? There is a sandwich shop right there. Problem solved.”

“The sandwich shop is no good,” I said, pretending to be sorry about it when I really wasn’t. “They don’t sell the steak I want for lunch.”

“Steak?” he repeated incredulously. “How long were you planning on keeping the art center closed for? The rest of the afternoon? It’s no wonder it’s in the state it is.”

My temper flared, but the hostess interrupted us before I could tell him off. She led us to a table and handed over some menus. Before she left, Sharp ordered a large coffee and a sandwich. Then he turned to me.

“I thought you knew what you wanted.”

Even the hostess looked surprised by the *sharpness* of his tone, but I didn’t let it show. I was the one who’d annoyed him, and he deserved it for being such an ass. “I thought I knew what I wanted, but now I’m not so sure. Could you give me a minute?”

I gave her a sweet smile and she scowled at Sharp before she left us so I could make my decision. He sighed once she was gone. “If you’re done playing games, can we talk about the offer?”

“Sure.” I opened my menu and studied it instead of looking at him. “I hope it’s a good one this time. Just so you know, I’ve spoken to a few people to get some advice, and I’ll know if you lowball me again.”

I hadn’t spoken to anyone, but I did know what my company—and the property—were worth. Sharp took an envelope out of the inside pocket of his jacket and held it out to me. “There it is. That’s a formal, written offer, and it’s the best one we’re going to make. I don’t care who you spoke to

or what they said, that's more than your place is worth and we're not going any higher."

My heart thrummed like a hummingbird in my chest, making me feel a little dizzy as I plucked the envelope from between his fingers. Trying my best to hide my shaking hands as I opened it, I lowered them to my lap and slid the paper out from inside.

When I spotted the amount written on the line, my mouth dried up and my heart lurched. It was more than I had ever expected, but I refused to show him how excited I was. I wouldn't give him that pleasure, but *great balls of fire*, that was a lot of money.

It was enough for me to get another premises in a better location—one of those locations I'd wanted before and hadn't been able to afford—and to eat a steak for lunch every afternoon for a year if I wanted to. With my stomach doing flip-flops and tears of relief threatening to make their appearance, I blinked hard and cleared my throat before I finally looked back up at, feigning impassiveness.

"Thank you. I'll have my people look it over."

"You'll have your..." He trailed off, shaking his head at me like he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Before he could say anything else about it, both of our phones went off on the table. He snatched his up and I swore I saw a smile starting to form on his lips before he remembered who he was with.

"This is work," he said gruffly. "I need to step outside for a moment to deal with it."

"It's unprofessional to be busy with your phone while we're talking," I said, referencing his snide comment from the other day when I'd checked my phone. "You should put it away. Someone once told me—"

He got up, bluish eyes meeting mine as he held on to his phone like it held the secrets to the universe. "I'll be back in a few."

I shook my head at him, but as soon as he turned and strode away from the table, I grabbed my own phone and grinned when I saw the new email from Sight Unseen. My mood had changed instantly when I read it.

I'd accepted S's request for the third date as soon as I'd received it, and this was the confirmation of that date. For *tomorrow night*.

I made a muted but excited squealing sound as I did a little jig in my chair. The email confirming the date also told me that he had requested for it to be tomorrow night at the same place as the last one had been.

Since I'd preferred our relaxed, romantic date in the dark room to wearing the goggles at the restaurant, I was definitely glad that he'd put in the request. More especially so that he'd put it in for so soon.

As I reread the email, a smile so wide that it hurt my cheeks appeared on my lips and it refused to leave. Bringing my phone to my chest, I squeezed it the way I'd have liked to be squeezing him right now.

Shit, when Hope had come up with this plan, I would've jumped at it if I'd known this was how I was going to be feeling two dates in. Instead, I'd made her wait a whole week before I let her enroll me. S and I might've been at our fifth date by now if I hadn't insisted on that week.

At the end of the day, though, I didn't know if he'd been enrolled then and I was choosing to believe that everything was working out exactly the way it was supposed to. I couldn't believe it, but I was already a little smitten with a man I'd never even seen before.

If not smitten, then at the very least taken by him. Now I just wished I could be *taken* by him in the other sense. The physical sense.

The guy had never even touched me, and yet I was so attracted to him that I squirmed a little in my chair just thinking about that rich, gorgeous voice of his. The only thing

that made me feel marginally better about it was that he seemed to be feeling the same way.

I didn't know if he was as attracted to me as I was to him, but he definitely liked me. He liked me so much that he'd put in a specific request for our date to be tomorrow night. Sight Unseen wouldn't have allowed it so soon if they didn't think we were ready for it, though, but I also didn't know if they were used to people getting so super excited at this point in the process.

It was entirely possible that no one could wait any longer to see one another between dates two and three. I'd have to ask Hope about it sometime, but for now, I was just over the damn moon about knowing I was going to get to see him again so soon.

The ironic thing about it was that I honestly hadn't thought about dating anyone seriously for years. I hadn't thought I even wanted to be dating anyone seriously, but after two conversations with him, it just felt right.

It felt so good when I was with him, so natural, that I was slowly starting to think that I'd found *the one* and fallen in love—sight unseen. As soon as I thought it, though, I yelled at myself internally to calm the hell down.

No one is falling in love, Grace. Stop it!

And I wasn't falling in love. At least, I didn't think I was. Logically, I knew it was too soon, but whatever I had with him certainly did make me feel a lot more warm and fuzzy than anything else I'd ever had with another man.

We just clicked. Like puzzle pieces. I didn't know if we'd fit together as well physically just yet, but I sure hoped we did. I didn't care much what he looked like, but I wanted to fit with him.

It was amazing how fast I'd gone from not wanting to date anyone to being so completely consumed by this unusual relationship I was starting with him, but it'd happened and there was no going back now. I wouldn't apologize for it, either. *What's the use of a mind if you can't change it?*

I'd always been one to listen to my heart regardless of what I might've thought about what my heart wanted before. I wasn't about to change now.

When I saw Sharp making his way back to me, his cheeks slightly flushed for some reason, I forced myself to stop smiling. It was hard, but I managed it since his proximity sucked all the joy out of the air.

The man was good-looking, but he was such a buzzkill, and besides, he'd been good-looking before I'd met S. I couldn't even think about any other man that way right now.

As he sat back down, he cocked his head at me and went right back to business. "Well, you've had a few minutes to think about it. Do we have a deal?"

"No, not yet," I said. "I'll look it over properly and on my own time, and then I'll give you my answer next week."

His jaw ticked at my response, but I didn't care. Not being in control clearly annoyed him, and it'd be good for him not to be in control for a few more days. Maybe he'd learn something about humanity and the appropriate way to treat people when you were trying to buy their livelihoods from them.

Obviously, I was going to take the offer, but I'd do it next week. It didn't hurt to know Sharp would be squirming about the loss of his precious control while I'd be happy on my date with S, getting to know him better and spending some more time with a man I was starting to think of as my soulmate.

It was early days and I didn't want to ruin anything or jinx it, but S made my heart happy and filled my soul with little bubbles of joy. I smiled innocently as Sharp narrowed his eyes at me, but then the hostess came back to take my order and he asked for his to go.

Another score for the home team.

As I watched him leave, I wondered what S was doing right now and I wished I could tell him about the offer I'd just received. My life had taken a couple of drastic turns over the

last few weeks, but I was strapped in, and man, was I enjoying the ride.

“**Y**ou’re leaving early today, boss,” Gary commented before his face turned bright red. “I’m so sorry. I know it’s none of my business. I was just surprised. Good night, sir. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Chuckling as I shook my head at him, I waved off his apology. “There’s nothing to be sorry for. You’re absolutely right to be surprised. If it makes you feel better, I’m surprised too, but I’ve got plans tonight and I need to go get ready. Work can wait, right?”

He blinked at me several times in rapid succession, then nodded. “Yes, sir. It can wait. I hope you have a good evening.”

“Oh, I’m going to.” I couldn’t stop smiling as I left the office to go get ready for my date with G. I knew Gary was surprised to see me so excited and carefree, but I really was as surprised as he was. I was never like this at the office.

This side of me was strictly reserved for personal use only, but fuck it. I was in a great mood and I didn’t care who knew it. Soon, I’d be seeing G and that was all that mattered.

When I finally got to the Sight Unseen offices, the same host who’d shown me in before was waiting. “Hey, Cole. It’s good to see you again.”

I grinned at him as I shook his hand. “Yeah, man. You too. Is she here yet?”

“She is. I’m the only one still here tonight, so I showed her in myself,” he said as he led me up the stairs and to the corridor we’d gone down last time. “You guys are our last date and our only date in this venue tonight, so we’ll be here if you need us, but you’ve got a little more time if you want it. I don’t mind waiting a little longer.”

“We want it,” I said immediately, feeling pumped as we stopped outside the door. “The usual time limit is two hours, right?”

“Yes, it is, but since we don’t need the venue after you, you can have an extra hour.”

“Excellent. Thanks, man.”

“Sure thing.” He smiled at me as he reached for the door. “I’ll be around if you need me, as always, but there won’t be any interruptions. Have fun. You both looked really happy when you left here last time. I’m rooting for you.”

“I’m pretty sure you say that to all the couples,” I said.

He shrugged. “Not all of them. I have no idea what some people talk about in there, but when they leave, they’re as angry as hornets in a kicked nest sometimes. I’m glad it’s going well for you. We like seeing it when everything works out for the couples.”

I winked at him. “Hey, if we end up getting married, I won’t forget who was by my side to see me through all this.”

He laughed. “That’s good of you. Have fun in there.”

“We will.” I guaranteed it.

When he opened the door, I blinked against the pitch-black darkness in the room. “G, baby? Are you here?”

“I’m here,” she said happily, and it sounded like she was already back in her position on her sofa—and like she was as excited as I was. “How did you get them to give us another date so soon?”

“My powers of persuasion,” I joked, feeling my way to my sofa and dropping down in it. “No, honestly, I didn’t have to persuade them to do anything. I just requested the date and

added in a note asking for it to be sooner than it was before. They obliged.”

“I’m so glad they did,” she murmured, letting out a dreamy-sounding sigh. “Are you sitting down yet?”

“Yes, why?”

“I, uh, I have a question for you and you might want to sit down for it.”

I got comfortable on the sofa, my legs spread and my arms on the backrest behind me. “Consider my curiosity piqued. What’s your question?”

“Have you really been thinking about me between dates? I don’t mean to sound needy. I’m not generally a needy person, but I’ve been thinking about you a lot and I need to know if we’re on the same page.”

“We’re on the same page.” If I told her just how much I’d been thinking about her—and what I’d been doing at times while thinking about her—I’d just scare her off. “Let’s just say that you’ve been on my mind constantly and that I can’t fucking wait to actually have you in my arms.”

She giggled softly. “How do you know I’ll even fit in your arms?”

“I have long arms,” I teased. “Anyone fits in them. Is there anything in particular you want to talk about tonight?”

“Have you been in many serious relationships?” she asked.

I closed my eyes, groaned, and dropped my head back. “No, and before you ask, it’s not because there was a lack of opportunity. Work just got in my way.”

“Why did you groan just then?”

I sighed. “Because now I’m going to have to ask you the same question and I don’t really want to know. I tend to lean toward the jealous, possessive side of things as a boyfriend. I don’t particularly want to think about you with other men at the moment.”

“A boyfriend, huh?” she said lightly. “Is that what you are, my boyfriend?”

“I, uh, I don’t know. Maybe? I could be. We’re dating, aren’t we?”

“Yeah, I guess we are. Are you smiling? Because I’m smiling.”

“From ear to ear, baby,” I murmured. Then I gave my head a little shake to clear my thoughts. “Okay, so to answer your question, I’ve been in one or two serious relationships, but the last one ended three years ago. I haven’t had contact with the girl since and there are no lingering issues or feelings there.”

“Three years ago?” she asked. “I just realized I don’t even know how old you are. We are allowed to ask that, right?”

“I’m pretty sure we are,” I said. “I’m thirty-five. You?”

“Thirty,” she said. “Is that too young for you?”

“Nope. Am I too old for you?”

“Nah,” she teased. “I like my men a little more distinguished, but before that jealous, possessive side of you comes out to play, you don’t have to worry about me having had many relationships with distinguished older men. I haven’t even had one actually. There were a few flings when I was younger, but no serious relationships to speak of.”

“When you were younger?” I asked. “You haven’t had any flings recently?”

“I, uh, no.” Her voice rose an octave or two. “These last couple of years, I’ve been working really hard and I kind of buried my head in the sand on the whole dating issue. Does that bother you?”

“Fuck no,” my voice came out as more of a growl. “Once again, that’s pretty much exactly what I wanted to hear. This is going to sound selfish, but I’m glad there hasn’t been anyone else for you for a while, either. I don’t want to go through this whole thing only to find out there’s some ex-boyfriend waiting in the wings to try to steal you back.”

“If there was, would you fight for me or let me go?”

“What do you think?” That was definitely a growl. I took a deep breath, trying to calm all the turbulence inside me just thinking about her ever having been with anyone else.

The sound of her chuckling softly calmed me more than the breathing did, though. “I think you sound like the kind of guy who’d fight to the death for someone he loved.”

“I would,” I murmured, closing my eyes again. “Okay, so now that’s out of the way, is there anything else you want to know about me?”

“Well, uh, we’ve covered a lot of the other basics. Family, hobbies, work-life balance, our pasts, some of our childhood...” When she trailed off, I heard her inhaling as deeply as I did before. “I do have another question, but it’s a little out there.”

“Shoot,” I said. “I’m an open book. I told you my mother is pretty much already planning our wedding, and that’s even more true after I spoke to her about our last date, so ask me anything you want to know.”

“It’s about sex,” she said hesitantly, and I groaned again. “Why did you groan this time?”

“Because sex isn’t something I want to talk about with you. I’d rather be *doing* it. But okay. What do you want to know?”

“We’ve established that we’re pretty compatible in every other way,” she said. “Our values, interests, and what we want out of life align quite well. We get along like a house on fire and it’s still really easy for me to talk to you, but what happens if we’re not sexually compatible?”

“We are,” I said confidently. “I can’t tell you how I know, but I do know. Just trust me.”

She giggled. “I do trust you, weirdly, but this isn’t something you can just declare and make it so. Talk to me about what turns you on. I’m not a kink-shamer, so you don’t have to worry about that, but I think this is the only way to find out if we’d be compatible in bed.”

“You want to know what turns me on?” I asked, my voice already getting husky. “Honestly? Right now, you’re turning me on.”

“What?” she squeaked. “How?”

“I don’t mean just right this minute, but in general, at the moment, when I think about you, it turns me on.”

“Oh,” she said breathlessly. “Then I guess it’s only fair for me to tell you that you turn me on, too.”

For the first time since we started not seeing each other, silence fell between us. I could hear the sounds of her breathing coming from her side of the room, and she wasn’t panting or anything, but she was definitely breathing a little heavier than usual.

As for me, my cock was straining against my zipper and I couldn’t stand the thought of just sitting here by myself when I could be just a few feet away with her. “Hey, G?”

“Yeah?”

“I want to touch you so damn bad right now.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “That’s against the rules, S. As much as I want you to touch me and as much as I want to touch you right back, we can’t.”

Now that I’d put the idea of touching her—for real and not just in my dreams—in my head, I couldn’t get away from it. “There’s only one other person here tonight. The host who brought you in? He told me we’re their last date for the night and the only one in this venue, so we’ve got some extra time.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning the only other person here has probably gone back to his office to get some work done and we won’t be out of time as fast as we usually are.”

I thought it over for one more minute before I got up.

Fuck the rules. “Rules are meant to be broken, aren’t they?”

“Why is your voice coming closer to me?” she asked, sounding slightly panicked. “Don’t fall over the sofa!”

“I won’t, but my voice is coming closer because I’m coming to you.” I moved slowly through the dark, holding my hands out ahead of me just in case. “Keep talking so I know where I’m going.”

A second later, the panic had drained from her voice and was replaced with a playful flirtatiousness. “I like the idea of being bad with you, but no one can ever know.”

“They won’t,” I assured her just before I smacked into the back of her sofa, stretching my hands out further until my fingers were met with a head of soft, thick hair. “This is you, right? I’m not touching some random person who’s been spying on us all along?”

She giggled, and then I felt dainty fingers on my forearms as they traveled up. “No, it’s me. Come here.”

I lifted my leg slowly, climbing over the back of the sofa instead of walking around it. Scared of kneeing her in the head or something, though, I moved carefully, focusing on the sound of her breathing to get an idea of where she was sitting.

As my legs came down, they landed on top of hers until she squealed and spread them to make space for me between them. “S? Why are you climbing over? You could’ve just walked around.”

She giggled, and I grinned even though I knew she couldn’t see it. “I’ve finally got your hands on me and we’ve got extra time, but we still don’t have all night. I’m not wasting a minute that I could’ve had you touching me on trying to feel my way around in the dark.”

As I lowered myself down beside her, I heard another giggle before she scooted back to make more space for me. Then those hands were on my chest as I turned in her direction. “You’re so hard.”

“If you think my chest is hard, just wait until you feel what’s going on with other parts of my body,” I joked, but it was true. “Hey, G?”

“Yes?” she whispered, and I felt her shifting closer to me as my hands traveled along the length of her legs to find her waist.

“I’m going to kiss you now.”

“Yes please.”

I leaned forward slowly, giving her hips a tug until she was flush with me. Then I ran one of my hands up her back and into that hair, guiding her head to mine as best I could in the dark. When I found her mouth with my own, her lips were soft and plush.

If anyone ever found out what we were doing here, we’d be kicked out of the program for sure, but it felt so good to finally feel her body against mine that I wasn’t going to stop. Nor would I ever stop searching for her if we did end up getting kicked out of the program.

I had money and resources, and I would spend every last cent I had tracking her down, but now that I had her in my reach, I wasn’t ever letting her go.

GRACE

There was something incredibly erotic about kissing in the dark. Just like I'd felt about every time I'd been deprived of my sight during this process, I found that all my other senses were on high alert and it did things to me I couldn't explain.

So this is why blindfolds are so popular in the bedroom. Who woulda thunk it?

I'd never thought being blindfolded would be my thing, but after this, I was certainly going to keep it in mind for the future. Hopefully, a future where I would still be with S and we'd recreate the moment of our first kiss time and time again.

It was definitely a kiss worth making an effort to recreate, too. Seriously, the man knew what he was doing with his mouth. With his whole body actually.

As soon as his fingers had wound into my hair, he'd taken a firm grip of it at the back of my head and had guided me to his mouth like he knew exactly where mine was. Even in that one movement, just him holding my head that way, I knew he was in complete control, and I gave it to him willingly.

Heaven knew, I didn't have a clue what to do in this situation. I was happy to finally have tangible proof that he was real and that I hadn't just been talking to some random employee of Sight Unseen. I didn't care about control.

He could have me—all of me—and I'd give it willingly as long as he stayed right where he was. His lips dominated mine, but at the same time, the kiss was gentle and caring. Slow and

exploratory. So many sensations zapped through me that I had to focus in order to identify them all.

The first thing I noticed was his scent. A little while ago, I'd had an olfactory experience at the gallery, and I recognized his as a warm elegant blend of bergamot with cinnamon. Somehow, it suited him.

Also because of the exhibit, I knew that bergamot was considered to be the finest of all the citrus notes, more rounded and richer than any of the others. It provided a clean, woody scent that was strong and masculine. The cinnamon added a depth to it that I thought was perfect for him.

"You smell nice," I murmured against his lips.

He chuckled into my mouth, groaning softly as I raised my hands and felt my way past sculpted biceps, across broad shoulders, and to the back of his neck to push my fingers into a full head of hair.

"That feels so good," he said on a quiet sigh. "You smell gorgeous. What is that, jasmine?"

"Among other things, but yes. There is jasmine in there. You have a good nose."

He let out another soft chuckle as one of his hands skated up and down my side, making me shiver. "You have a good everything."

"Likewise," I agreed, then pressed my lips back against his and moaned when his tongue delved into my mouth.

As he kissed the breath right out of my lungs, I still didn't know what he looked like and I still didn't care, but what I'd felt so far had already surpassed my wildest expectations. I ran one of my hands back down again until my palm made contact with a clean-shaven and strong jaw. While I didn't feel any hint of stubble, I could tell from the texture of his skin that it was because he'd shaved earlier instead of it being because he'd never grown a beard in the first place.

"You shaved for this?" I asked, honestly a little surprised. "I thought I was the only one silly enough to dress up for dates you wouldn't be seeing me on."

“Nah, I wanted to make an effort for you.”

A thrill passed through me at his words, and I pulled back slightly. Not enough to stop but enough to run my nose along the length of his as I reveled in the fact that he was real. “Did someone give you a cheat sheet with exactly what to say to climb into my heart?”

“No, but it does feel like it sometimes, doesn’t it?” He inhaled deeply, like he was breathing me in while he dragged his knuckles across my cheekbone. “Fuck, you’re beautiful.”

“How do you know?” I cupped his face in both of my hands this time, using my fingertips to feel the contours of it. “You feel just as hot as you sound.”

“The only reason I’m hot right now is because of you,” he teased, his voice more strained than usual. “And I know you’re beautiful for the same reason you think I’m hot. I can feel it now, but I knew it even before.”

“Because I’m beautiful on the inside?” I joked in an attempt to lighten the moment, but he didn’t let me.

“Yes, because you’re beautiful on the inside, but also because I knew that inner beauty would radiate right out and make you the most stunning woman I’ve ever seen.”

“Oooo, he’s a real charmer,” I crooned.

He laughed, then wound his hands into my hair again. “Come here, you,” he grunted before bringing my mouth back to his and kissing me even more passionately than he had before.

When he’d come over here, I’d thought we were just going to sit around and touch each other in the dark. I didn’t even really think we’d touch any naughty bits. Just that it would be a little innocent exploration with maybe a kiss or two thrown into the mix.

I wanted him so bad that my panties were soaked and my nipples were hard peaks inside my bra, but I still didn’t think much was going to happen until he pressed me back on the sofa. Lowering his body down over mine, he didn’t stop kissing me as he placed most of his weight on his elbows

beside me, but I still felt the hard length of him at the apex of my thighs when he settled on top of me.

A loud moan escaped from what felt like the very center of my soul as that tiny bit of friction sent pleasure racing through my veins. My hips bucked of their own accord, and I tightened my grip on him, wrapping my arm around his neck until the nape of it was in the crook of my elbow.

He groaned, deepening the kiss as he rolled his lower body against mine, repeating the movement over and over again until I was panting and writhing beneath him. Without stopping to talk about it, I dropped my hands to the hem of his shirt and pulled it up over his head. I hadn't felt any buttons there earlier, so I hoped I wasn't about to strangle him with the collar of a button-down.

The material was soft, though, and it'd felt like a long-sleeved T-shirt to me before. When he broke the kiss for the fabric to pass between us, I was relieved when the shirt slid right off. Making a mental note of where I dropped it so we'd be able to find it again later, I lifted my shoulders when he slid the straps of my dress down my arms. Then I helped him get it off me by undoing the zipper at the side and pushing it down past my hips.

He chuckled, but then he groaned when his hands came back to my body and found my flesh bare. "You weren't wearing a bra?"

"Nope. The dress doesn't need one, but I had so many layers on over it anyway that it wouldn't have mattered."

His fingers danced along my skin until he cupped the mound that was my breast. I arched into his big hand, moaning when a smooth fingertip brushed over one of my sensitive buds. The merest touches sent jolts of pleasure through me, and I decided that was it. I was picking up a blindfold on my way home, even if it turned out to only ever be a memento of this night.

We worked together to get him out of his pants, and I heard the slight thuds of his shoes when they dropped to the floor. It would've saved us a lot of effort later if we kept our

clothes on for this, but I wanted to feel as much of him as I could and I was pretty sure he felt the same way.

Once he'd rolled my panties off, he brought his hand to my mound and hissed when his fingers slid easily between my wet folds. "Fuck, G. This is going to kill me."

Returning the favor of the bit of relief he was giving me, I reached between us and kept moving down until the side of my hand brushed against a long, velvety length. I turned my hand then, knowing I'd found what I'd been after. I wrapped my fingers around his shaft, a little more than surprised at how thick it was.

"This thing is huge." I giggled into his mouth. "Maybe it's just because it's dark, but it feels massive."

He let out a string of whispered curses before releasing a shuddering breath. "That thing may be huge, but it's also been desperate for you for so long that it's not going to take much for it to finish this. Be gentle with me, would you?"

I shivered, once again wondering how he always seemed to know exactly what to say to get to me. Slowly moving my fist up and down, I swiped my thumb across the wet tip of him and moaned. "Don't worry. I won't judge you for not lasting long tonight. I'm definitely not going to."

In response to my words, he let out a low growl and sealed his lips back over mine, not stopping until his fingers had pushed me right to the very edge. Even then, he only broke the kiss to issue a soft command.

"Come for me, G. Now."

We were keeping things down because we were afraid of alerting the host to what was going on in here, but there was no mistaking the authority of the command, regardless of how quietly he'd spoken it. My body responded in a way it never had before, and as if that had been the last bit of what I'd needed to get there, I let go, surrendering to an orgasm so powerful that I might've blacked out a little at the end of it.

S saw me through, kissing me until I came back to earth with a slight zinging sound still sounding in my ears. I felt him

smiling against my lips. “I can’t wait to be able to see that happening.”

“If we don’t get kicked out for this,” I murmured.

“I don’t give a shit if we get kicked out for this. I’ll find you, G. I promise you that I’ll find you.”

I melted beneath him, then wrapped my legs around his hips and pulled him into me. “Take me, then. Make me yours.”

“With pleasure.” When he didn’t do it, though, I frowned until I realized his arm was moving at my side. Honing my senses, I realized then that he was fiddling with something on the floor. It took me a second to figure it out.

“You brought a condom with you?”

“I keep one in my wallet. Give me a second.”

Easing his weight off me, he seemed to manage to get the condom out of his wallet because the next thing I heard was the soft rip of foil. There was some more rustling, and then he lowered himself over me again.

When he was back in place, he held my face in his hands as he pushed into me. Slowly. Gently. Until he was buried deep, deep inside me. My lips tilted up in search of his, and they found them right above mine.

As I kissed him, he started moving and the last doubts were eradicated from my mind. We were compatible in every way, and he proved it with every perfectly timed thrust and touch that sent me spiraling into another orgasm long before it should’ve.

I felt him tremble above me. Then his cock swelled and his hips lost their tempo, the last few jerky thrusts telling me that he’d found his own bliss right along with me. We stayed together naked on the sofa for a long time after that, talking quietly as he held me for as long as he could until we finally got dressed again.

I had no idea if our clothes were on the right way around, but when the buzzer went off, he was back on his side of the

room and I was on mine. My heart was racing when the host came in to fetch me first before he'd come back for him.

“Good night, G,” S murmured, and unless I was very much mistaken, I swore I heard the same kind of longing in his voice that I felt in my chest.

More than anything, I wanted to be leaving this room with him tonight. “See you soon, S.”

What a night, I thought as I followed the host out, not saying a word as he handed me off to a security guard to walk me out of the building.

Missing S already, I wondered how soon I would be not seeing him again. At this point, it didn't even matter if they set up our fourth date for tomorrow morning, it would still be too long. It didn't matter who he was to the outside world. I wanted him in my life. Every day from now on. Forever.

“Hey, man,” I said when I opened my front door and found Marcus waiting for me on the other side. “I’m almost ready. I just can’t seem to find the reel I’m looking for.”

“It should be in your tackle box,” he said but followed me into my place and closed the door behind him. “We packed everything in there the last time we went fishing. I remember looking around to make sure we didn’t leave anything behind.”

“Yeah, I know we did, but it’s not that one. I ordered a new one online and it came last week. I just don’t know where I put it.”

He laughed. “Head in the clouds much? You never forget where you put things.”

“Yeah, I know that, too,” I said, glancing at him over my shoulder. “Do you want some coffee while you wait?”

“Sure, but I’ve got my reels and you’ve got your old ones. You don’t actually need the new one.”

“I don’t, but I want to try it out.”

We walked into my kitchen and I fixed us each a cup of coffee, but I still couldn’t remember where I’d put the damn reel. All I’d been able to think about these last couple of days was my last date with G. The memories were on my mind constantly, and it was making me feel dumb that I couldn’t seem to focus on anything else.

Marcus cocked his head at me. “You want to talk about it? Maybe it’ll help you work through whatever it is you’re thinking about enough that you’ll be able to remember where you went with the reel.”

“How did you know?” I asked as I handed over his mug. “Am I that obvious?”

“To me, yes.” He shrugged, but then he flashed me a shit-eating grin. “Is it that girl? The one from the dating agency?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “We had our third date the other day and it went really well. I don’t know what’s happening to me, man. I can’t think about anyone or anything else while I’m awake, and when I’m asleep, she’s in my dreams. I think I may be developing an obsession.”

“Or you’re falling in love,” he suggested. “It could also just be the mystery of it. You know, since you can’t see her, you’re obsessing about what you do know about her in the hopes of figuring out who she is.”

“I know who she is,” I said sharply, and his brows jumped up.

“You do?” He frowned. “How? You just said you went on your third date the other night. Weren’t you only supposed to find out who she is on date number five?”

“I don’t know her name, but I know who she is,” I corrected myself. “Sorry. I don’t know why I got so defensive there. Something in me snapped when I thought you were insinuating that I don’t know her, because I do. I know more about her than I knew about most other women I’ve dated and I’ve told her stuff I haven’t told anyone but you.”

Looking back at me for a long minute before he responded, he searched my face before he finally nodded. “Yeah, that’s it. You *are* falling in love. Hard, I’d say. By the looks of things, anyway.”

“You could be right,” I admitted, raising my mug to my lips as I thought it over. “That’s crazy, though, right? I can’t be legitimately falling in love with a girl I’ve only been on three dates with.”

“Why not?” he challenged me, but he always did. It was kind of a thing we had. “A lot of people believe in love at first sight. Hell, my own parents knew each other exactly one month before they got married. Why not love at first date?”

“I thought you didn’t support me with this,” I said. “What changed your mind?”

“I haven’t changed my mind and I never said I didn’t support you. All I said was that I wasn’t sure about the concept of dating someone in the dark and not being able to see them while you’re getting to know them. That being said, it’s obviously working for you.”

“I don’t know,” I hedged. “I mean, sure, I really like her and there’s definitely something to not being able to see somebody while you’re getting to know them. Weirdly, it makes it easier to open up than it is when you’re looking right at them, but falling in love this fast? It just doesn’t seem right.”

“It doesn’t matter what *seems* right. It matters what *feels* right,” he said, placing enough emphasis on the words that I got the point he was trying to make. “And hey, if it’s bothering you so much, kiss her. That way, you’ll know how you really feel and you’ll find out if she has a mustache.”

“She doesn’t have a mustache,” I said. “Trust me. I know that much about her for sure.”

“How?” he asked, then snorted as he stared at me like he was seeing me for the first time. “Holy shit. You broke the rules. You’ve already kissed her, haven’t you?”

I smirked. “You know I’ve never liked following the rules, so yes. I have kissed her, if you must know.”

“Oh, I must know,” he said immediately. “It’s no wonder you can’t stop thinking about her, man. You kissed her and then you had to walk away. It’s unfinished business—”

I didn’t say anything, but his eyes widened. “You dog. You could’ve led with that. You didn’t kiss her and walk away, did you?”

“Nope,” I said, and I couldn’t deny that it came out sounding smug. “I did a whole lot more than kiss her before I walked away.”

“You fucked her?” he asked incredulously. “How do you fuck someone you’ve never even seen before?”

“Well, it’s pretty easy, actually. All the equipment is right where it’s supposed to be and people have these things called hands that are kind of useful to find all the right parts, even if you can’t see what they look like.”

He rolled his eyes at me. “Thanks for the anatomy lesson, shithead. If you can’t stop thinking about her after that, I’m guessing it was good?”

“Best sex I’ve ever had,” I admitted after taking another sip of my coffee. “I wouldn’t say I fucked her, though. I did, but it felt like more than just fucking.”

“Potato, potahto. Okay, we’ll call it making love then. Is that better?”

I shook my head. “I’m still not sure that’s quite where we’re at, but you’re right. It’s semantics. The point is that it was great and now I can’t stop thinking about her.”

“Thinking about her, or doing it again? Because there’s a big difference between those two things.”

I lowered my chin as I narrowed my eyes at him. “How do you mean?”

“Well, there’s thinking about her, which means that you’re really into her and having sex with her just kind of seals the deal. On the other hand, if all you’re thinking about is the sex, you’re just horny and it doesn’t matter who you fuck, as long as you fuck someone.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely not that last one. I haven’t even thought about touching someone else since I met her. I’m stupidly into her for having only met her a few weeks ago.”

He was silent for a beat. “If I were you, I wouldn’t get too up in my head about that. The company has a thing about it being just five dates, right? People can walk away before then

and whatnot, but you never said anything about some people needing more than that. I think *that*, by itself, should tell you something.”

“What should it tell me?”

“That you’re not the only person who’s felt so invested so soon. Besides, after three dates out here in the real world, most people have already made a few decisions about the future of the relationship. It’s not that uncommon to feel like it could work or not work once you’re three dates in.”

“That’s the thing, though. I don’t just feel like it *could* work. It’s like I already know it’s *going* to work and now I’m just waiting for it to happen.”

“Sure, okay. I think I get that, but once you meet each other for real, you’re still going to have to adjust to each other’s lives outside of a dark, isolated room where you just get to spend time together without anything getting in the way.”

“When you put it like that, part of me wishes we could just stay in the dark room. Or stay isolated, at least. Even if we just switch a light on in there. It’s really nice not having any disruptions or interruptions. No phones, no work, no nothing. It allows you to really just talk, you know?”

“Without anyone checking their social media notifications?” He laughed. “I could definitely get into something like that. Maybe I should sign up after all.”

“Maybe you should,” I agreed before I drained the last of my cooling coffee. “While you check out the website, I’m going to go find that reel so we can go. We’re burning daylight here.”

“How do you know I’m going to check out the website?” he asked. “Has being in the dark given you the ability to read minds?”

“Maybe,” I joked, then pushed to my feet and walked over to the closet in my hallway.

Just like he’d predicted, talking about G had cleared the cobwebs in my head a bit. I’d suddenly remembered stashing

the box in here after it'd been delivered. When I opened the closet and saw the box sitting right there, I grinned. "Found it! Hurry up with the application process."

"Fuck you!" He laughed again, the sound filtering down the hall from the kitchen. "I'm not applying. I was just checking it out. I think I'm going to wait and see how it treats you once you've made it through the first five dates before I make my final decision."

"Fine," I called. "It's your loss if your perfect match gets put with someone less perfect in the meantime."

"If she's my perfect match, she'll be there when I sign up. Otherwise, she was never the one to begin with."

I strode back into the kitchen, tackle box in one hand and my new reel in the other. Marcus slid his phone into his pocket and looked at me. "The rules are stated pretty clearly on the website. There are warnings about them *everywhere*. What do you think they'll do if they find out you broke them?"

"They're not going to find out," I said. "There was only one guy there and he never came in."

"Yeah, but there have to be cameras in there for safety, right? Do you really think a big company like that is going to stick two strangers in there in the complete dark without having a failsafe? I know they vet you all carefully, but anything could happen."

"Fuck, I didn't think about that," I muttered, my blood running a little cold. "You're right, though. There probably are cameras, but I doubt there's someone sitting there watching them all the time. Maybe they just keep the footage in case anything happens."

"I hope you're right, bro." He smacked me on the shoulder as he got up and walked past me. "It'd suck if this ruins your last couple of dates with her."

"I promised her I'd find her if we did get kicked out," I said. "I'll go to the ends of the earth if I have to, but I'll never give up."

“Good on you, man,” he said. “Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Let’s hope.” I followed him to the door and down to his truck, but my mind was now firmly back on G like it’d never been even semi-cleared of her.

Only a few minutes ago, I’d thought talking about it had helped, but now I realized that talking about it had just brought up a whole new issue to deal with. In the back of my mind, I was already bracing for the possibility of Sight Unseen finding out we’d broken the rules—and about how far I’d go to get to G if they did.

GRACE

I was standing in my kitchen when my front door burst open and Hope marched in. Since my entire apartment was open concept, all I had to do was look over my shoulder to see that my unannounced visitor was in fact my sister and that she was in a horrible mood.

With our shared features pinched and murder in her eyes, she slammed the door behind her and stalked up to me, bracing both of her palms on the counter that separated my entrance hall from my kitchen. “How was the date the other night?”

“It was good.” I smiled. “Why do you sound so aggravated? Did Graham do something?”

“Not everything is about Graham,” she snapped before letting her head hang between her shoulders and dragging in a deep breath. “Tell me about the date, Grace. How did it go?”

I frowned, but then I shrugged and smiled at her again. “It was so great. I really, really like S and every time we talk, I just like him more. Have I ever thanked you for pushing me to do this?”

“Yes,” she said. “You have thanked me, but you also told me you understood the rules when I explained them to you. Did you only talk the other night, or is there something you want to tell me?”

I let out a noncommittal hum and nodded. “We talked. It’s so nice to just be able to talk about anything we want to talk

about. Do you have any idea how freeing it is to have that kind of connection with someone?"

I waved my hand before I laughed. "Of course, you do. You have Graham and you work for Sight Unseen, so I guess you know all that much better than I do."

"I do work for Sight Unseen, which is why I know that there are cameras in all of the rooms we use for the dates. Did *you* know that, though? There are cameras, Grace. In every room. Did Cole take advantage of you?"

My heart stopped and my blood ran cold. "There are cameras?"

The spatula I'd been holding to cook the eggs I hadn't broken yet dropped to the counter with a clatter as I spun around to face her properly. "Why didn't you tell me there were cameras?"

"Answer the question, Grace. Did he take advantage of you?" Her eyes flashed with anger and an intense storm was brewing behind them.

I shook my head hard and fast. "No, he didn't take advantage of me, but even if he had, he can take advantage of me anytime he likes."

Grinning as I brought my hand up to fan my face, I watched as my sister's features relaxed slightly when she realized nothing had happened that I hadn't wanted to happen. She was still angry, though. "You do realize this is my job, right? I got you into the program and I'm *Winnie's* handler at the agency. I'm not allowed to be present for any of the dates because of who we are to each other, as you well know, but that doesn't mean that they don't hold me accountable for your actions."

My chest tightened and my brows flew together. "You're not in trouble, are you?"

"Would you have cared if I was? You knew the rules and you knew I was in charge of your profile, which also means that you knew I'm the one who was responsible for explaining said rules to you. I did explain them, and I ticked them as

having been thoroughly explained before you were even eligible for the first date.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, shooting her my best puppy eyes. “I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t think you’d get in trouble. Honest. I thought that, at worst, we could get kicked out of the program. I really didn’t think it would come back to bite you.”

She sighed and dropped her arms back to her sides as she shook her head at me. “What were you thinking, Gracie? You know how seriously Milena takes the rules. I’ve been talking about it ever since I started working there, so why on earth would you, of all people, ignore them?”

“I don’t know,” I confessed, walking around the counter to give her a hug. “I really am sorry and I just…” I trailed off as I squeezed her. “I wasn’t thinking, okay? I never meant to get you in trouble. I just really, really like him. I think I may even be falling in love with him, and when we’re in that room together, it’s like nothing else even exists. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

She harrumphed, but at least her arms finally came up and she hugged me back. “Yeah, I’ve heard a few of my clients talking about the experience like that, but it doesn’t matter how connected you feel to him or how much it feels like only the two of you exist in the whole wide world, you can’t do that again, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed before pulling away from her. Looking into her eyes, I felt my brow furrowing as I searched her face for any sign that they were about to pull the plug on us. “Are we getting kicked out of the program?”

“No.” She let out a deep breath, shaking her head. She backed away from me and sat down on my sofa. “Milena would’ve completely cut the two of you off for this if it wasn’t for me, though. She still might.”

“No,” I pleaded immediately. “Please don’t let her do that. I like him so much. It would break my heart to lose him now, and I know he promised he would find me no matter what, but please don’t let her cut us off.”

She gave me a long look before she collapsed back against the sofa and crossed her arms. “I’ve already pleaded your case, and right now, it looks like she’s decided to give you a second chance.”

“Thank God.”

Hope narrowed her eyes on mine. “You’re lucky I was there when she found out, though. She called me in to discuss you as a couple, which is also why she had the tapes pulled. We usually review everything after the third date to see if the clients are still on track.”

“So you watched me have sex?” I couldn’t stop the amusement from leaking into my voice, but she huffed out a breath and gave her head a firm shake.

“No, I stopped watching as soon as he got on top of you, but the point is that you’re lucky it was only Milena and me who saw the tape. If there was anyone else in her office with us, she wouldn’t have had a choice. We can’t let it get out that we knew about a couple breaking the rules and let them stay in the program. It could ruin her entire business, Grace. Do you understand that? If anyone finds out...”

“They won’t,” I promised, walking over to her and sinking to my knees. “I swear to you that no one else will ever find out. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Good, because we deleted the footage, and after I told her that it must mean that you’re in love with him if you’d break the rules like that, she agreed to keep you in the program. She loves love, and I appealed to the romantic in her to convince her that it wasn’t like you at all to do something like that unless you had very strong feelings for the guy.”

“I do,” I said. “I do have incredibly strong feelings for him. It’s not just that, though. It’s like I can’t control myself when I’m around him. Like he’s inside me.”

“He was inside you,” she deadpanned, but when she finally cracked a smile, I knew we were past the worst of it.

I chuckled, pushing back up at my feet and looking at her as I walked to the kitchen. “You know I didn’t mean it that

way, but sure. He was inside me. Physically as well as emotionally. I wish I could tell you how I feel when I'm with him, though. You'd understand it then."

"You're not the only couple in the program, you know," she said, watching me as I walked to my refrigerator and took out more eggs without even having to ask her if she wanted any. I already knew she did.

As I carried them to the stovetop, she sighed. "There are a bunch of other couples at the exact same point as you two who feel very much the same way you do, and yet none of them are breaking the rules."

"I know, and I know that it's unfair that we did. I don't know how any of those other couples feel, but—"

"You still don't get it, Grace. There are a lot of things that go on in that room, but people find a way to make it work without actually breaking the rules the way you did."

"What do you mean—"

"That's not the point. Okay? The point is that other people respect the rules no matter what, and that you didn't. I'm so happy for you that it's going so well and I can't even imagine how you must be feeling to have taken it that far with someone you've never even seen, but you have to promise me that it won't happen again."

"It won't happen again," I promised dutifully. "No matter what, I will not touch him again until I'm allowed to. You have my word."

"Good," she said. "There won't be any more chances, Grace. You have two dates left. If it happens again, you will both be kicked out of the program and I'll personally delete his profile so that neither of us will ever have any idea who this man is. Do you understand?"

"You would do that?" I asked, my heart racing as I turned toward her again. "Why?"

Her eyes met mine and I didn't see a single shred of remorse in them. "Because it's my job and I love my job. I also trust Milena's process and I respect the rules. I went out

on a limb for you because you're my sister, but I will not let the entire company crumble, which is what will happen if people find out that they don't need to respect the rules. They'll start using it as some cheap, anonymous sex site. Plus, this really is just so unfair to every other couple who has followed the rules. I know it doesn't feel like what you did is so bad, but it is."

I put my hand over my chest. "I promise you that it will not happen again, okay? I'm sorry and I'll apologize to Milena personally as well. We didn't mean to cause trouble for the company or anything like that, I swear."

"Okay, Grace. I believe you, but just remember what I said going forward. It's literally in my job description to delete the profiles of people who are no longer in the program for any reason. There's a big red delete button next to every code name for that exact reason. I will not hesitate to push that button if you two so much as think about doing it again."

I nodded, relieved and filled with dread at the same time. S and I had one more date before we'd get to touch each other again, and that was fine. Now that I understood what was at stake, I wouldn't make the same mistake again.

It also really wasn't about sex for me with him. It'd been the best sex ever, sure, but we had time for the physical stuff later. For now, I was just grateful that we were still in the program and that I'd have the opportunity to keep getting to know him.

"Now that you're properly chastised, do you want to tell me about it?"

"Sure." I grinned as I cracked our eggs into a pan. "Let me make an apology breakfast, then I'm going to tell you everything you want to know, and probably some stuff you don't."

She laughed, finally relaxing as she turned on the sofa to face me. "If you guys end up getting married, I'll expect a special mention at the wedding."

“You’ll get more than just a special mention,” I said. “You’ll be in the wedding, right there next to me, knowing that it would never have happened without you.”

When she nodded and smiled excitedly back at me, I knew my sister and I were going to be okay. Now all I had to do was convince her to join the damn program herself so she could get rid of Graham and find the real love of her life.

Who knew? If I managed to do that, we might even be planning a double wedding soon.

SHARP

In the days that followed, I was nervous as hell. I'd requested a fourth date, but I hadn't even received the email confirming that Sight Unseen had received my request. I had no idea if they knew what'd happened or if we were even still in the program, but I was going out of my mind not knowing when or even if I was going to get to see G again.

When my phone vibrated on my desk, I snapped it up so fast I almost fell off my chair doing it. My gaze darted to the screen, and I let out a disappointed breath. It wasn't the email I'd been waiting for from Sight Unseen.

Instead, it was a message from Grace telling me that she was ready to talk about the deal. *Well, fucking congratulations. You've only been sitting on it for a whole fucking week.*

I rolled my eyes, breathing through the frustration that was coiling me up tighter than a snake in a basket that was too small for it. Once I felt my thundering pulse calm down, I replied to her message, telling her that I'd be by later this afternoon to discuss.

Honestly, all I wanted to be doing was thinking about the girl who was stealing my heart and wondering how I was going to track her down if we were out of the program. Now, I had to go deal with the infuriating woman who I was pretty sure was playing games with me.

Whether she knew it or not, I'd seen the look on her face when I'd handed her that offer last week. Although she'd tried

to hide it behind her hair when she'd looked down at the paper, I knew she was excited about it.

I also knew it meant we could've closed the damn deal right then, but I'd gotten an email from Sight Unseen and I'd needed to respond to it as fast as I could—away from her prying eyes. By the time I'd gotten back, she'd still seemed happy—presumably with the offer—but instead of just telling me she was taking it, she'd batted her eyelashes and told me she needed to think about it.

While I'd been taking it relatively easy on Grace because of the way I'd gone in there that first day, I was done with the nice-guy act now. She was standing in the way of my friend's development just for the hell of it—and to get a rise out of me—and what was more was that it was starting to affect my relationship with Adam.

I'd gotten so many messages from him over the last few days, it was getting ridiculous. He was eager to put this deal to bed and so was I. While I'd known she wasn't going to budge on having to *think it over*, I was getting tired of waiting on her.

Today was the day. She was either in or she wasn't, and if she wasn't, then the gloves were going to come off. There were other ways I could go about acquiring her business if she was going to insist on making me go that route, and I was fed up with her attitude.

Fueled by the intense, almost irrational desire to get this out of my life so that I would hopefully finally have a minute of peace to figure out what I was going to do about G, I shoved my chair back. Pushing to my feet, I strode over to the coat rack beside my door and grabbed my jacket, slid it on, and buttoned it up.

After hanging my coat over my arm, I yanked the door open and marched out of my office and into Gary. "I'm going out. I don't know how long this is going to take, but I need to get this deal closed before I'll be back. Cancel whatever you have to cancel."

"Yes, sir," he responded without hesitating, having resigned himself to my usual attitude at the office being back a

couple of days ago.

When I'd first arrived back after we'd had our brief moment of camaraderie before my date, he'd even asked me how it'd gone. Since, by then, I'd already sent the request and hadn't heard back yet, I'd snapped at him and he'd realized that he and I were *not* friends.

Although I knew he'd enjoyed my momentary lapse in workplace decorum, it wasn't going to happen again. At least, not until I had G's number in my phone and I could get in touch with her whenever I wanted to.

If that happened, the chances were good that I'd be in a much better mood much more often, but for now, I definitely wasn't in a good mood. Striding past his desk without another word, I left him to do what he needed to do without caring about what I was walking away from this afternoon.

Any of my other meetings could be rescheduled. It would be worth it to make some apologies if I never had to deal with Grace again. Adam would have Artfully Yours and I would have peace of mind. Finally. The man was driving me nuts about this.

When I arrived at the art center, Grace was in her tiny excuse for an office, and she looked up when she heard my footsteps echoing through the otherwise empty gallery. Seriously, there was never anyone else in here. I had no idea how she'd even survived this long.

As soon as her gaze met mine, she nodded and pushed the envelope I'd given her with the offer in it across her desk. "I'm ready to make a deal for the sale of the company."

"Thank God." I reached for the envelope and pulled out the paperwork inside. When I saw she'd signed the offer, I let out a relieved sigh. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I've never been so happy to finish dealing with a business owner. I'll have my lawyers send out the agreement of sale. You'll have to sign it and get it back to them."

She blinked when I looked back at her after sliding the offer into the envelope again. "That's it? That's really all that's

left? You mean I don't have to deal with you again, just with the lawyers from now on?"

I chuckled dryly. "You'll *never* see me again. Don't worry. After today, we're done. Just sign the papers when they come in, okay?"

"If I'm satisfied with the papers when they come in, I'll sign them," she retorted, then arched a brow at me. "You didn't think I was just going to trust you and sign them blindly, did you?"

"No, I'll never make the mistake of thinking that you'd want to make any part of this process too easy for me." As my eyes locked on hers, I was once again taken aback by how blue they were.

If I wasn't so wrapped up with G, I might've thrown in a hate-fuck to get her to close the damn deal for good, but since I was so wrapped up in the woman I actually wanted for good, I simply shook my head at the thought.

"Just sign the papers, would you? I'll make sure the terms reflect everything we talked about precisely, right down to the last zero on the amount you'll be paid."

She nodded curtly. "If the papers reflect everything precisely, I'll sign them. Like I said, I don't trust you. You marched in here one day and decided you were buying my company. You're rude, brash, and cunning. I'll read over the papers. You can go now."

"With pleasure," I snapped, then spun on my heels and walked out of her office, clutching the damn envelope as hard as I could just in case she decided to try to snatch it away from me.

The offer was signed, but until she put her signature on the dotted line of the sale agreement, this wasn't worth much more than the paper it was written on. Still, I had her properly on the line now. The offer was accepted, and as far as I was concerned, the deal was done.

As I dropped back into my car and turned over the engine, my phone went off again. Although I didn't want to get my

hopes up, I still decided to check it before pulling out of my parking spot.

My heart lurched into my throat when I saw that finally, the incoming message was the one I'd been waiting for. Nerves raced through me as I opened the email, not knowing if this was good news or bad.

Grace and the blasted deal were forgotten as I scanned the contents of the email and a wide, relieved grin broke out across my face. They didn't give me a reason for the delay, but we hadn't been kicked out of the program, either.

Instead, it said that our fourth date had been set up for tomorrow night. Excitement and the kind of joy I hadn't felt very often in my life coursed through me. They had no idea what'd happened on our last date and I was seeing her again tomorrow night.

There were still about twenty-six long hours between now and then, but at least I knew when I'd be seeing her again. It was the best news I could've gotten, and the tension that had been keeping me so coiled up slowly started easing.

I had a signed offer in my possession and another date with G. Things were definitely looking up, but instead of driving back to the office, I went straight to my lawyers. The sooner they could start drawing up the paperwork for Artfully Yours, the sooner they would be done with it. The sooner they were done with it, the sooner I could put the art center and Adam in my rearview mirror and start thinking more about my future with G.

We had one date left to go, but we'd already broken the rules once. Even if it was just for a kiss, I was sure as hell planning on breaking them again. The delay in the response from Sight Unseen had thrown me for a loop, and now that I'd faced the prospect of not having her in my life until I managed to track her down, I was more sure about my feelings for her than ever.

I just hoped she felt the same way. If she did, it was another done deal as far as I was concerned. G was mine, I was hers, and everything was the way it was supposed to be.

Sort of anyway. I still had to find out who she was, but it was unlikely that was going to change anything. If the way I was feeling right now was any indication, she could turn out to be the devil herself and I would still worship at her feet.

At least, that was how I felt at the time. If I'd known then what had been waiting for me around the bend, I might not have been so sure.

GRACE

As I got ready for date number four, I couldn't stop thinking about date number three. The last time we'd been together had also, obviously, been the last time I'd heard from him, and strangely, I missed him more than I'd ever have thought possible.

He was unlike any guy I'd ever met before, or so I thought, and I couldn't wait to spend more time with him. With Hope's warnings about the rules ringing in my ears, I left my apartment early and drove over to the Sight Unseen offices.

We had another date in the dark room since we'd both opted not to go back to the restaurant where we had to wear the goggles. Our only other option was a room where we'd be on either side of a glass partition, and it meant we'd be able to have the lights on, but we also wouldn't be able to be in the same room.

It might've sounded silly, but I preferred to be near him in the dark rather than to have a physical barrier between us in the light. Hope had advocated for choosing that option since it also meant that we wouldn't be able to get to one another, but I'd asked her to trust me.

S and I weren't animals. We'd be able to control ourselves and I wanted to prove it to her. Although my entire body started tingling with remembered pleasure as I shed my coat and walked into the dark room, I shut it down.

Soon enough, if this went as well as all of our other dates, we'd be together. For now, I had a point to prove—to myself

and to Hope. Sex was a natural part of any healthy romantic relationship, but it could also wait.

I just had to cross my fingers and hope that he understood, if he even tried anything, but I'd cross that bridge when I got to it. Obviously, I couldn't tell him they knew we'd broken the rules. If I did, I'd have to explain how I knew and why we were still in the program, and that would involve telling him my sister worked here.

Which was also against the rules.

"G?" The sound of his voice broke into my thoughts and I smiled in the darkness, easily finding the sofa this time since I now knew exactly where it was.

"I'm here," I said. "How are you?"

"Much better now that you're here. It feels like it took us forever to get to this date."

I laughed as I sat down. "I know. It felt the same way to me, but it was only a few days. You're early."

"I, uh, yes. I honestly couldn't wait. You're here early, too, though. Our date isn't supposed to start for at least another ten minutes or so."

"I know, but I couldn't wait, either," I admitted. "If I'd known you were already up here, I wouldn't have hung around outside for so long. I sat in my car for fifteen minutes before I came in."

He chuckled. "How was your day?"

"It was good," I said, smiling before I took a deep breath. "I've made some decisions about my future since the last time we were here, and it feels good to be facing a potential new start."

"Yeah, it does," he agreed. "Unless you weren't talking about us and our future, in which case, I have no idea if it does."

"Well, it could have an impact on our future, for sure, but the decision I was talking about relates to my work. I've been

wondering about my next step for a while now, but I wasn't sure what to do."

"You're sure now?"

I nodded, even though I knew he couldn't see it. "I am. I made the right decision. Onward and upward, right?"

"Definitely. I obviously don't know exactly what you're talking about and I'm guessing you can't give me any details because of the rules, but if you're happy, then I'm happy. Especially if the decision you made is going to take you onward and upward. Did you get a promotion?"

"In a way, yes," I said. "How about you? How was your week?"

There was brief pause. "Very much the same in a way. I got some things done that have been dragging for a while, so that's good. It gave me some time to daydream about you today."

"A businessman daydreaming?" I teased. "I would ask you what you were daydreaming about, but that might tempt us to break the rules again."

"I'm already tempted to break the rules again," he groaned. "Can I come over there just to kiss you?"

"We only have to wait one more date," I said, not wanting to turn him down or make him feel rejected, but needing to make it clear that we couldn't break the rules again. "Just one more date."

"What am I supposed to do until then?"

I thought about everything Hope had said and sighed. "Think about me."

"I'm already doing that." I heard him release a deep breath. "You're really not going to let me come over there to kiss you?"

"Trust me when I say that I want you to kiss me, but it'll be better if we wait. It'll allow the anticipation to build even more."

He let out a dark chuckle. “I’m pretty sure my anticipation levels can’t take much more building, but okay. I’ll abide by the rules for now. Tell me more about your family and your sister. Have you told them about me?”

I laughed. “I’ve told them all so much about you that I’m pretty sure they’re tired of hearing it. They’re looking forward to meeting you, though.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting them, too,” he said. “What should I expect when I meet them?”

As we talked, I practically felt our relationship and our connection growing. I lay back on the sofa again, laughing at some of the things he said and the remarks he made. After we’d talked about our families some more, I heard rustling from his side of the room.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Getting comfortable,” he said. “Since it really doesn’t look like you’re going to let me come over there, I’m lying down. Are you lying down? Because it sounds like you are.”

“I am. I’m glad you’re getting comfortable.”

“I would’ve been more comfortable with you, but I’m not about to harp on about it. So where would you like to go first?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you said you want to travel. If I was to make our first trip away, where would you like to go?”

“Anywhere?”

“Anywhere,” he said. “Except Mars. There’s no air travel there yet.”

I laughed. “Oh, well, if Mars is off the table, then I guess we should probably just stay right here. I mean, what’s the point of seeing the world if we can’t see another planet yet, right?”

“Have you ever been scuba diving?” he asked after laughing with me for a minute. “It’s like another planet when

you're underwater."

"I haven't been, but I'd like to give it a try. Especially if it's like being on another planet. You've gone skydiving too, haven't you?"

"How did you know?"

I shrugged. "You seem like the type. Is there anything you haven't done?"

"A lot, actually," he replied quietly. "There are some things that I haven't done because I was waiting for the right person to do them with. Do you think you're that person?"

"If you're talking about base jumping, then no. You're barking up the wrong tree."

He sighed. "Well, I guess that's it, then. If there's no base jumping in our future, I think it's time to call it quits."

I laughed. "It was nice talking to ya."

"I'm shaking my head at you right now, just so you know," he said, his voice thick with restrained laughter. "I wasn't talking about base jumping, though. I have zero inclination to try that, though I don't really know why."

"Probably because jumping from great heights without a parachute seems unnecessary," I suggested. "Not one of those tiny ones, either. A proper parachute."

"So you're not a complete thrill-seeker, adrenaline junkie then?"

"Nope," I said. "I'm adventurous, sure. I just draw the line at things that seem downright dangerous."

"Funny. I'd have thought falling in love with a stranger in the dark would've qualified as downright dangerous."

"Who says I'm falling in love with you?"

"A guy can hope, right?"

"There's no reason not to," I said, admitting that he might be right without actually saying it. "Are you a real thrill-

seeker, then? If you are, how do I know that all of this isn't just about the thrill of it?"

"I'm not a complete thrill-seeker," he said. "Most of the more thrill-seeking type of stuff I've done, I've only done as a distraction, you know? A way to break out of the mundane routine of day-to-day life."

"I get that," I said. "Being a grownup definitely isn't always everything it's cracked up to be. You'd like to keep doing stuff like that, though? With your wife, I mean?"

"If I ever get married, then yes. Not every day or even every month, but every once in a while, I think it'd be nice to get out together and get the blood pumping."

"What happened to our springtime wedding?" I teased.

He laughed. "You know what I mean. We don't know what the future will bring, but I do know that I want the fifth date to just get here already."

"Same here," I agreed. "Do you think we'll be good together outside of the dark? It was recently brought to my attention that I need to remember the real world still exists."

He let out a soft groan. "You've been talking to my best friend, haven't you? He's been all about reminding me that there are no distractions in here and that it might not be so easy once we get out of the dark."

"I haven't been talking to him, but it's nice to know that you've been thinking about us out there, together, as well. I'm ready for it, though. I think we'll be good together out there."

"So do I," he agreed. "As for being ready for it, I was ready for it after our first date. This has all just been me going through the motions. Speaking of which—" He was interrupted by the buzzer sounding. "Fuck, only one more minute. I guess I'll just have to do this directly, then."

"Do what directly?"

"Ask for your name," he said. "Will you please tell me your name? I was going to give you a whole speech about how

I'm tired of going through the motions, but we don't have time for that now."

"I can't tell you that yet, S. We've made it through date number four and we'll be together on the next one. Just trust me, please?" I didn't like the pleading quality of my voice, but I was ready to get down on my knees to beg him to just play by the rules for a little while longer.

"Fine, but only if you promise me that you'll email Sight Unseen and request our fifth date as soon as we leave here tonight."

"As soon as I get to my car," I promised just as the door opened and the host came in to get him.

As I watched his faint silhouette leaving the room, I got up and waited for the hostess by the door, unable to believe that we had made it this far.

Next time I saw him, it would be the real thing.

Excitement bubbled through me and I couldn't stop smiling as I headed down to my car. Before I even got inside, I sent an email to Sight Unseen—through the proper channels and not just by texting my sister—to request date number five.

I was so ready for it, and I was so excited that I was pretty sure I wasn't going to be getting a wink of sleep until it happened.

SHARP

As soon I got to the office, I checked my emails again, but there was still nothing from Sight Unseen. G had promised to request our fifth date as soon as she left, and now I was hoping that she hadn't gotten cold feet.

Either way, she'd promised to do it, and now I had to give her time to decide. Part of me wanted to email them myself, but all of the date requests so far had come from my side, and the fifth date was the big one. The important one.

The company required that the request for it came from the party who had requested fewer dates during the course of the process. The party who had requested the majority of the dates—me, in our case—could put in a request, but it would only be confirmed if the other party requested the date as well.

Which meant that I could both accept and request this date, but ultimately, G had to put in a request of her own. Not knowing whether she was delaying or if the delay was coming from the company was driving me up the wall.

My only saving grace was in the knowledge that Sight Unseen didn't rush anything. Throughout this process, they'd taken everything at a leisurely pace. It seemed they believed that absence made the heart grow fonder, and at the same time, I'd read somewhere on their website that they weren't a speed-dating agency.

All in good time, one of the catchphrases had read. Meanwhile, I wasn't used to waiting. I was very much accustomed to instant gratification and I liked it that way.

Patience was not a virtue in my book and I didn't have much of it anyway.

"Sir," Gary's voice interrupted my thoughts, and when I looked up at him standing in my doorway, he gave me an apologetic smile. "That man who never wants to give me his name is here to see you."

Inwardly, I groaned. I'd sent through the signed offer to Adam and to the lawyers. The deal was basically done, and yet here he was, without an appointment and being a dick to my assistant. I knew I was a dick to my assistant sometimes, but he was *my* assistant to be one to.

Adam was starting to take this too far, but I still pasted a grin on my face after telling Gary to let him in. "What can I do for you today, Adam? The lawyers are drawing up the paperwork as we speak and the deal should be done by next week."

He came over and shook my hand, but he did *not* look like a man who'd just gotten what he wanted. "That's what concerns me. That woman hasn't signed the actual agreement of sale yet. Why is it taking them so long to draft it? They should've had it ready for her at the same time as the offer."

"That's not how it works," I explained, sitting back down and waving him into the seat across from me. "They can only start drawing up the formal paperwork once they know what the terms are and what the final purchase price is. My guys don't do boilerplate agreements. They make sure that every contract they put out is tailor-made for the deal we're doing so that nothing can come back to bite us in the ass."

"Yes, I understand that, but surely, they could've had it drawn up. All they would've had to put in is the final amount. That can't take more than a minute."

"Look, I understand that you're eager to put this thing to bed. Trust me, I get it better than most, but it's practically done."

"I'm happy to hear that we're so close, but I don't want it practically done, Sharp. I want it *done* done."

I nodded. “Yes, I know. Let me set your mind at ease. Just because it’s you, I will personally check in with the lawyers as soon as we’re done here, and I’ll give you a call once I’ve spoken to them. To the best of my knowledge, the paperwork was in the process of being finalized and it’s not impossible that they’ve sent it to her already. Everything is under control, okay?”

“Let me know what they say,” he insisted, then got up. “You’re not getting a cent until she’s signed the papers. I’ll hear from you soon.”

“You sure will,” I assured him, then rolled my eyes once he was out of my office.

The man was going to give himself a heart attack if he didn’t calm the hell down. Also, I knew he wanted my involvement to be kept on the down low, but he had my personal mobile number. Why he couldn’t just call instead of showing up every time he wanted to talk was beyond me.

Since he was an old friend who was paying me double for my services, though, I couldn’t complain too much. This deal had been a nightmare and I’d definitely think twice before I did another for him, but all was well that ended well—and this would be ending well soon.

Gary closed my door when Adam left it hanging wide open, and I picked up my phone and put in the call to the lawyers I’d promised him I would. I didn’t even bother phoning their offices, scrolling instead to the personal number of the managing partner at one of the most prestigious firms in the city.

Adam might’ve wanted it done yesterday, but I wanted it done right. Same as with all my other deals, which was why I paid top dollar to a top-notch firm to make it happen.

“Sharp,” Trevor Goldair greeted me from the other end the line. “Is this about the Artfully Yours contract?”

“Yep. Where are we at with it? My client is getting antsy.”

He laughed. “Aren’t they always? The good news is that I’ve sent it off to the owner already. A few minutes ago,

actually. Now all we need is to get the signed agreement back from her to make it final.”

“Did you speak to her when you sent it?” I asked. “She’s a tricky one. I’ve had to follow up with her at least twice on everything to do with this deal.”

“Didn’t want to sell, huh?”

I shrugged. “Most people I deal with don’t, but most people I deal with also have to. She has to. I’ll check in with her to make sure she got it and that she gets it back to you on the double.”

“I sent it through to the email address she wrote on the offer. We put a message on the email to the effect that it will all be over once she gets it back to us, but I didn’t speak to her directly.”

“I’ll sort it out,” I said. “A follow-up phone call shouldn’t be required, but under the circumstances, it’s prudent.”

He chuckled. “She’s been putting you through your paces, has she?”

“That’s one way of putting it.” I shut my eyes and raked my free hand through my hair. “Let me speak to her and make sure she gets it back to you soon. I desperately need this woman out of my life.”

“Sure thing. I’ll be on the lookout for it and I’ll let you know as soon as we receive it. Good luck, Sharp. For your sake, I hope she signs it today.”

“So do I. There’s no reason for her not to, but knowing her, she’s probably going to put it off for a few days just to annoy me.”

We hung up soon after that, and I tapped out a quick text to Adam to give him the update. He wouldn’t be happy until I could tell him that she’d signed the papers and sent them back, but at least this way, he’d know that the wheels were turning.

My team and I were on it, and we’d get it done sooner rather than later. After briefly considering driving over to Artfully Yours with a printed copy of the agreement for her to

sign in my presence, I decided that doing so would probably just give her more reason to delay.

She already knew I was eager for this to be over—just like I knew she was eager to never have to see me again—but going over there would allow her to get a kick out of making me wait. No doubt she'd come up with some bullshit about having to look it over with her own lawyers and that she could only get an appointment next week or something.

Instead, I'd keep things simple. I'd make it clear that she needed to check her damn emails and sign the papers, and then I'd follow up with her again if she hadn't done it by the end of the day. I'd been to that gallery enough times to know that she wasn't drowning in customers. She wasn't too busy to have printed and signed the thing by now, but Grace wouldn't do that.

Simply because it would make me happy if she did.

As I thought about her sitting in her office, reading over the contract and deciding how long she was going to make me sweat over it, I remembered seeing a printer on her desk. A proper electronic signature would do just fine, too, but just in case she was going to try to claim that her printer was broken or out of ink, I'd have one of my people run over a copy for her.

With the way she was acting, one would think I wasn't doing her a favor by paying her that much money for a sinking business, but I was. She was just being a stubborn child about it.

After sending Goldair a message about the printed copy, I waited until I saw he'd read it before I picked up my phone again. I clicked into my text thread with her, sighing when that last, sarcastic "sure" she'd sent taunted me from the bottom of the screen.

Me: The paperwork is on its way to the gallery and the agreement has been emailed to you. Sign it and this relationship can be over.

She was online, but it took her a few long minutes before she even read the message. I rolled my eyes. *Stubborn, stubborn woman.*

When she opened it, it also took her an inordinate amount of time to type the one word I already knew was coming. It finally landed in my inbox with a low ding, and I had to grit my teeth as frustration over her flippant response rolled through me.

Thankfully, this was the last I would have to deal with her. If she didn't sign those damn papers today, I would take her a pen myself. She could even keep the thing after as a memento.

Grace: Sure.

I sighed. *Please, dear Lord, can she please just sign the darn papers and get them back to the lawyers today? I'll really owe you one if you can just help me out with this.*

As I leaned back in my chair, I knew it was unlikely that we'd be putting this deal to bed today. I'd told Adam by next week for a reason. Now all I had to do was to hope she surprised me—and G had put in the request she promised me she would.

GRACE

Hope and I went to lunch at the same bistro I'd gone to with Sharp, but it was a much more pleasant experience with my sister than it had been with him. We ordered salads and sandwiches and sat under the roof on the terrace.

I smiled at my sister over the rim of my mocktail, happy to be getting out with her again. Sight Unseen was busier than ever, and at this rate, I was going to have to start putting in requests for dates with my own twin.

"How did your last date go?" she asked. "I heard you behaved yourself. Thanks for that."

I laughed. "I promised you I would, didn't I? I thought you said there aren't people watching all the time."

"There aren't, but Milena checked after what happened before. She's also taken a special interest in your case now."

"Oh?" I arched a brow at her. "That's funny because I put in a request for the fifth date right after I left the fourth one and I haven't heard anything yet. I thought she might be putting it off a little to punish us for breaking the rules."

Hope chuckled. "No, she's not a villain, Grace. We typically take a bit more time to review every couple before we set up the big last date. Since it's the most important one, we want to be sure we've got everything just right before we even send out the emails."

"I guess that makes sense, but I miss him." I pouted playfully. "Think you can help me out and get Milena to set it

up already?”

“You’re going to have to wait your turn, impatient sister of mine. We’ve got a few couples who are at the same point as you and we’re setting everything up, but it doesn’t happen overnight. Particularly not for the last date. There’s method to the madness, though. We want to be sure to give everyone enough time once the excitement of the fourth date being over has passed. In the heat of the moment, people often do things they regret later.”

“If that’s another reference to us breaking the rules, I’ve got it, okay? We messed up, but we’re past that now. I really like the guy and I can’t wait to see him for real.”

“What do you like so much about him?” she asked. “I’m asking because Milena told me to. Like I said, she’s taken a special interest in your case and she wanted me to check in with you to make sure that you’re really happy with the guy before we proceed.”

My heart skipped a beat when I thought about him, and I smiled. “He’s kind and sweet, and we have the same sense of humor. I’ve never laughed so much with a man in my life. We also get along so well that it sometimes feels like I’ve known him all my life.”

“Those are all good signs,” Hope said, smiling right back at me. “Milena will be glad to hear it.”

“Yeah, but you said it’s not taking her longer to set up our fifth date than anyone else’s, but then you also said that she wanted you to check in with me first. That means that it *is* taking longer.”

“No, we’ve been doing everything we need to do on our end. Checking in with you is just the last step before we set it up. Honestly, we’ve already had our preparation meeting for the date.”

“You need to have a preparation meeting for a date you’re not going on?” I stared back at her and made a face. “Why? What do you need to prepare for?”

“Well, for one, both daters’ profiles are finally opened up to the handlers to allow us to do one last round of vetting before we take the big step of introducing you to each other.”

I squealed, my eyes going big as the implications of what she’d just said dawned on me. “Wait, does that mean you know his name now?”

“I do,” she said coyly. “I know what he looks like from the picture he submitted, too, but before you even ask, I’m not telling you anything.”

“Hope!”

“No, Grace,” she insisted, lifting her chin slightly higher as she shook her head at me. “We’ve already given you some leeway because of who you are to me, and now Milena wanted me to make sure you weren’t just caught up in the excitement when you requested the last date so soon after the fourth.”

“I wasn’t caught up in the excitement,” I said quickly. “I mean, sure, I was excited, but that’s not why I requested the date so soon after leaving the last one. Cole and I agreed to go forward with the fifth date and I promised him I would request it so that we could see each other sooner.”

“Milena and I both understand that,” she explained, and I saw the worry swimming around in her eyes. “Are you sure about this, though? Are you sure you’re really happy with him? Milena is concerned that you’re going through with it because of me and the fact that I work there. I told her you were hesitant at the beginning and—”

“That was before I met Cole,” I protested. “You can’t hold it against me now.”

“We’re not holding anything against you,” she said calmly. “I’m just checking in with you. We’re trying to protect you, Grace. We just want to make sure that there are no external influences affecting your decision. Are you happy when you’re with him?”

“I’ve never been so happy with anyone,” I said without hesitation. “It’s the truth, Hope. What’s more is that you already know it. Have you ever seen me this way?”

She paused for a beat. “No, I haven’t. We set you up with the right guy, huh?”

“Yeah, you did,” I teased. “Honestly, the prospect of meeting Cole is what has been keeping me going these last few days. I’ve started to look into other possible locations for the gallery and I know selling is the right thing to do, but now that I’ve got the papers…”

I trailed off, and my sister finished the sentence for me. “Now that you’ve got the papers, it’s suddenly real?”

I nodded. “It’s so real. I only got them today, but the dick has already messaged me to tell me to sign them and get them back to the lawyers. You’d think he’d understand that this is a big deal for me. I mean, I’m going to sign them, but just give me a minute to process the enormity of selling the place that was once my dream.”

“He’s still being a dick?” she asked as the waitress brought our food. “I’d have thought that now that he’s gotten what he wanted, he’d be nicer to you.”

“Nah, nice isn’t in that guy’s vocabulary.” I speared a tomato with my fork and imagined it was his head instead. “He’s the worst guy I’ve ever met. I hate him. I get this sick feeling in my stomach every time I get a message from him these days.”

“He can’t be that bad,” she said. “I know you think he’s a dick, but he’s just doing his job.”

“You’re only saying that because you haven’t met him. If you did, you’d agree with me. A person can do their job without being downright horrible about it. I’m not expecting him to hold my hand and tell me everything is going to be okay. I also realize that he has a tough job, but he’s cocky, and ruthless, and mean.”

“Well, at least if you sign the papers, you’ll never have to deal with him again.”

“I know,” I said after chewing and swallowing my first bite of the salad. “That’s the only reason I’m tempted to sign them

today, even though I would've preferred to take a moment to absorb the magnitude of what I'm doing here."

"You just want to be rid of him?" she asked.

I nodded. "So badly it's not even a joke anymore. Anyway, enough about him. What's going on in your life, superstar? I feel like I've hardly seen you these last few days. You're always at work."

She laughed. "It's only been a few days, for heaven's sake. It's not like you haven't seen me for weeks, but I know I've been busy. The more success stories we have, the more applications we get."

"How are things with Graham?" I asked, and she shrugged, but some of the light dimmed from her eyes.

"They're not great, to be honest," she said, her eyes on her salad as she poked at it but didn't take another bite just yet. "I'm starting to think you've been right all along. I don't know how much more of this I can take."

"I'm sorry." My heart ached for her, but I was glad she was finally starting to see the situation for what it was. Her relationship with him wasn't a good one, and it wasn't good for her. The sooner she realized that, the sooner she could start moving on. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet." She sighed, shaking her head as she finally put down her fork and picked up her sandwich instead. "It's just hard, you know? I don't want to give up on him and then spend the rest of my life wondering what if, but I also don't want to waste time on a relationship that, ultimately, isn't going anywhere."

"Well, you know I'll support you no matter what you decide. If I need to get on Team Graham, I can get on Team Graham. I just don't think it's the winning team."

"No, I don't think it's the winning team anymore either," she said softly before she bit into her sandwich.

We finished our food and our drinks, changing the subject away from Graham as we talked. She told me more about some of the other couples she was handling at work and how

excited she was about being part of a company that was growing as well as Sight Unseen.

Not only was the company growing, but they were connecting more and more people with their soulmates and Hope loved being a part of that process. I was proud of her, and I told her as much as we walked back to the gallery after lunch.

As we walked in, I saw a manila envelope lying on the floor. Someone had obviously been by while I'd been closed, and I wouldn't get any prizes for guessing what that was. Sharp had sent over the papers and he'd told the guy to shove it in under my door if I wasn't here.

I sighed as I scooped it up and opened it. Then I slid the contract out and flipped through it. "Well, this is it. I read it over on my computer earlier and everything is on the up and up. The terms are exactly what we agreed to."

"So all that's left now is for you to sign it," Hope said, walking over to the counter with me. "Do you want me to stay with you while you do it?"

"Please," I said. "Actually, before I do it, do you mind looking them over with me one last time? I didn't see anything suspicious, but a second pair of eyes on something this big isn't a bad idea."

"Of course," she agreed immediately.

When we reached the counter, I paged through the agreement again just to make sure that all the pages were there, and Hope suddenly stiffened at my side. "Danny Sharp?"

I glanced at her. "The dick himself, yes. It's even a dickish name, isn't it? Why do you ask? Do you know him?"

All the color drained from her face as she looked back at me. "Uh, Grace? We need to talk. Right now. Don't sign anything just yet."

My entire chest cavity went ice cold and a sense of dread formed a rock in the pit of my stomach. I had no idea what

was going on, but I had a feeling I wasn't going to like it when I found out.

SHARP

Another day had gone by without an email from Sight Unseen and without confirmation that Grace had signed the papers. As a result, I was in a pissy mood. I'd even sent an email to the dating agency to ask if there was some kind of holdup, and I'd requested the date from my side as well.

Combined with Grace's stubborn refusal to do what she'd said she would, I was *this* close to losing my shit. All of it.

Instead of going directly to my office, I decided to swing by the lawyers' offices. Maybe they had received some kind of communication from the insufferable woman explaining what the holdup was.

When I marched into their building, I was shown to Goldair's office and he grinned at me until he saw the expression on my face. "Sharp? I can have a team in here in five minutes. Just tell me who we're suing and what we're suing them for so I know who needs to be on our team. Just breathe."

"We're not suing anyone," I said, though I didn't blame him for thinking there was something seriously wrong. "Have you received the Artfully Yours paperwork or anything from the owner explaining just what the fuck her problem is?"

"No," he replied immediately, efficient and to the point. "We have followed up with her from our side as well, but we've not had the courtesy of a response."

“Why am I not surprised?” I snapped, fuming at this point. “She signed the offer. Is there any way we can hold her legally accountable for fucking around with the agreement of sale when she accepted the formal offer?”

“Well,” he started, but I cut him off before he could explain.

“Never mind. I don’t actually want to litigate against her. It would just mean having to deal with her for longer.”

I spun around, striding back to the door when he called to me. “Where are you going, buddy? Let’s talk. We’ll devise a strategy you can discuss with her when you go see her.”

“I’m going to get the damn papers myself,” I seethed. “If she’s incapable of sending them, then I’ll go get them, and if she still hasn’t even signed it, we’ve got a problem.”

I really, desperately didn’t want to have to go back to that art center, but I’d had it with her. I hadn’t tried to sneak anything untoward into the agreement, nor had I changed the terms. It was straightforward and exactly what we’d discussed.

If she was having second thoughts about the sale, she should’ve come to me, and if she wasn’t, then she was just being spiteful now. I knew she enjoyed annoying me, but she’d gone too far. We were finishing this today—one way or another.

Goldair let me go, not trying to call me back again, but he’d be hearing from me real soon if Grace wanted to keep playing these games. I wasn’t playing anymore, though. I could walk right into the office of one of the most respected lawyers in the city without an appointment and without even being stopped.

Grace had no idea who she was messing with, and while I’d been letting her get away with it so far for the sake of closing the deal for Adam, it was about time she learned that offers expired. Failing businesses went under. Developments continued and tanked hard-ass business owners who refused to get out of the way.

It was the cost of doing business and Grace was about to realize it. On my way to the art center, I breathed in deeply, but the air didn't help me calm down. If anything, the oxygen allowed my brain to bring my thoughts into sharper focus as I considered how she'd been acting this entire time.

When I finally walked into her tiny excuse of an office, she looked up at me calmly, slowly moving her gaze away from her computer and leaning back in her seat. Before she could ask me what I was doing here, I answered the question for her.

“What are you doing, prolonging this, Grace? What's the point?”

Those vibrant blue eyes stared into mine, searching as she cocked her head and sat quietly at first as if she was listening intently to the sound of my voice. “Grace? Are you going to tell me why you're dragging this out?”

When she still didn't respond, I sent a piercing glare at the ceiling, and when I lowered my head again, I spotted the contract sitting on top of a pile of papers on her desk. “Well, at least I know you got it. Have you signed it yet?”

I reached out to snatch up the agreement to see for myself, since she seemed to have gone mute, but her hand shot out and rested right on top of it.

“Seriously? You won't even let me see if you've signed it yet?”

She looked at me like she was seeing me for the first time, her hand still preventing me from picking up the contract. “I haven't signed it yet, and I'm not going to.”

“What?” My brows shot up. “We had a deal, Grace. What the—”

Her voice was as calm and even as I'd ever heard it when she interrupted me. “You didn't let me finish.”

“So finish,” I snapped. “Why aren't you going to sign them? Everything is in order. There's nothing in there that shouldn't be and the amount is right, so why haven't you signed and returned them?”

“I wanted to talk to you again before I did anything,” she explained, leaning back in her chair without ever looking away from me. Her brow was slightly furrowed and there was something different in her eyes today, a curiosity I’d never noticed before.

“Fine. Well, here I am. You’ve seen me. Can you please just sign the papers now so we can get this over with?”

“No,” she said clearly and simply. “I will sign them right here and right now if you agree to go on a date with me.”

I blinked. Hard. I wasn’t shocked often and I definitely wasn’t known for being rendered speechless, but that? I was legitimately shocked. Perhaps more so than I’d ever been before. “Excuse me? I think I was hallucinating for a second there. What did you say?”

“I said that I’m not signing the papers until we go on a date. Agree to go on a date with me, and you have them. You can leave here today with them in your hand, but only if you promise that you will be there for our date.”

“No,” I said, just as clearly and simply as she had before. My eyebrows mashed together as I looked back at her, wondering if she’d lost her ever-loving mind in the last few days or if she’d never had one to begin with. “There is no fucking way I’m going on a date with you, Grace. Why would you even ask me that?”

“If you want this contract, you will go on a date with me.” Her eyes lit with amusement, and that was when I realized that she was still playing a game with me.

There was no way I was going out with her, though. Not while I was waiting to hear back from Sight Unseen. If G had changed her mind and I received the notification that there wouldn’t be a fifth date, maybe I’d consider it.

But unless and until that happened, I considered myself a taken man. I’d told G I wasn’t seeing anyone else and I wasn’t screwing it up this close to the finish line. “I can’t go on a date with you, Grace. I’m seeing someone and she wouldn’t like it.

Plus, it's entirely unprofessional. You're holding the company, and the sale, hostage unless I go on a date with you?"

"Yes, I suppose that is what I'm doing," she said without a single hint of remorse anywhere on her features or in her voice. "I don't care if you're seeing someone else. You're going on a date with me. I'm sure if you explain it to her, tell her that I'm unhinged and unreasonable, she'll understand. It's your job, right? Or have you decided that these papers aren't so important to you after all?"

"You *are* unhinged and unreasonable." I breathed as I tried to understand just what in the *hell* was happening right then. I looked into those blue eyes that I'd once thought were pretty, and I tried to see the flicker of crazy in them, but I didn't find anything.

Curiosity. Amusement. Maybe even a little bit of anticipation, but no crazy. Nothing that said that this woman was absolutely fucking bonkers. "I've already told you that I'm not going out with you. The woman I'm seeing wouldn't appreciate it and I'm not making a mess of the best thing that has ever happened to me just because you seem to get off on making my life difficult."

"That's not what I'm trying to do, Sharp." *How is she so calm about all this?* "I'm not trying to force you to screw up the best thing that's ever happened to you. All I'm asking you is to agree to a date. One date."

"It's not happening, Grace. Once I'm seeing someone, I'm seeing them and no one else. I'm too old to keep one foot in the dating pool while I'm trying to build a life with someone else, and frankly, I don't have the energy for it anymore. I'm not going out with you. You hate me and I severely dislike you. Even if I was single, I wouldn't have agreed to this, but I'm not, so it doesn't even matter."

"You're loyal," she mused, and her hand twitched on the papers. For a moment, I thought she was finally coming to her senses, but then she slid them toward her and put them in her drawer. "Well, you know where to find me when you're ready."

I'll be waiting. One date and I'll sign them. No date and they stay right where they are."

"I hope you know what you're doing," I warned her. "I won't play this game with you anymore, Grace. It's over. I'm done. If you want to keep your failing business, that's fine. Declare bankruptcy. The development will continue with or without you, and the only effect it's going to have is to significantly devalue your property, but that's on you. It's the only real asset your company has, though. So I really do fucking hope you know what you're doing."

Blue eyes bright and shiny on mine, she shrugged. "Like I said, you know where to find me. Come see me when you're ready, Sharp. I'll be here, and I'll be waiting."

I spun on my heel and got the hell out of Dodge. Adam was going to kill me. He was going to kill me and there was no way he was going to pay me, but that was okay. I never should've mixed business with friendship anyway and I didn't need his money.

Even double my rate wasn't worth what this deal had put me through. Besides, my bank account was perfectly healthy. I had enough zeroes behind the other numbers to keep me going three lifetimes from now.

I'd just have to tell him that he was going to be able to pick her property up for a song in a few months from now when she finally went belly up. It was only a matter of time.

Oh, and also, there's not enough money in the world to make it worth my while to go out on a date with that woman. Shocked, baffled, and possibly more confused than I'd ever been, I headed back to my car and drove away from Artfully Yours for the last time.

Adam could deal with her himself from now on. If she was so desperate for a date, maybe he could convince his wife to let him take her out. I wasn't fucking around on G for this shit. Not even if I didn't even really know if she wanted me anymore.

GRACE

Lying flat on my back on my bed after work, I stared up at the ceiling and thought about my earlier encounter with Sharp. My phone was pressed to my ear, and when Hope answered, I didn't waste any time with my reason for calling her.

"Are you absolutely sure that Danny Sharp is the guy I've been seeing through Sight Unseen?"

She let out a deep breath. "Yes, Grace. We've been over this. It's him."

"You're *really* sure, though?" I asked again, but deep down inside, I already knew it was true.

When I'd listened to his voice earlier and ignored the sharp bite in it when he was addressing me as me and not G, I'd recognized it almost instantly. "It's just that he's such a complete prick in real life, and that's not the guy I've been talking to."

"It's him," she repeated patiently. "You showed me his picture on his website after I told you, remember? We know it's him. Why are you still putting yourself through this?"

"I'm just trying to reconcile the person I've been talking to with the person I've been dealing with professionally, and they're so different that I can't get my head wrapped around it."

"Look, on the one hand, you've been dealing with him as the CEO of a company that basically specializes in hostile

takeovers. On the other hand, you've been dating him as a man, away from the office, who's looking for the person he wants to spend the rest of his life with."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm just me. At the office and in that room, I'm just me. I'm not two completely different people."

She paused for a beat. "Are you really telling me that you've treated him with the same respect and kindness that you do everyone else? Because I doubt it. I saw those messages you sent him as He Who Must Not Be Named, and you weren't yourself on those, either."

"Only because he brings out the worst in me." While S brought out the best in me. It was so damn confusing that I was glad I was already lying down. "I've never met anyone I've disliked so instantly, so severely, and he feels the same way about me. The word *hate* might even have been thrown around a few times."

"Yet, when you've been on your dates, he's been the perfect gentleman." She lowered her voice even though we were both alone in our bedrooms. "You like him so much for who he really is that you slept with him without even knowing his name or what he looks like, and you told me it was because you know who he is inside."

Her voice returned to normal. "So I guess the real question is whether you believe he's the guy you've seen or the guy you've only spoken to? Who is he, Grace? The dick or the dreamboat?"

I sighed.

When I thought about S, which I now knew stood for Sharp, my entire body tingled. My heart skipped and then skipped again, and I got this little smile on my face that I couldn't hide. When I thought about Danny Sharp, all I wanted to do was kick something.

How can he be so completely different at work and away from it?

Logically, I knew it was true. As soon as Hope told me the other day that the guy I'd been seeing was also named Danny

Sharp, she and I had raced into my office. She'd stood right behind me as I'd gone onto his company's website and clicked on his name.

His picture hadn't even fully rendered on my ancient screen yet before Hope had groaned and confirmed it was him. Apparently, there was no mistaking his well-built frame or that shock of luxuriously dark hair.

Luxuriously dark hair I'd had my hands in while he made me see stars and feel things I'd been dreaming about almost every night since. The well-built frame I'd felt on top of me and had clung to like I never wanted to let him go—because I had never wanted to let him go.

If I could've, I'd still have been there. In that room. With S—Sharp—on top of me. Inside me. *There has to be something wrong with me.*

I couldn't, for the life of me, imagine that it was even remotely possible that Sharp was the guy whose mother was waiting to meet me. The guy I'd been looking forward to meeting for weeks now.

Even as I thought about it, though, I remembered the day we'd gotten the emails for the next date when we'd been at that restaurant. I remembered the tiny flash of a smile I'd seen before he'd schooled his features and excused himself to go deal with his *work*.

When he'd received that email, he'd been happy. Excited. And it hadn't been about work. It'd been about me. It'd been about going on a date with the girl he'd already been sitting across from. A girl he liked so much that his mother was planning a springtime wedding and who he was going out of his mind thinking about.

“Do you want to set up the fifth date now?” Hope asked, breaking into my rambling thoughts. “I know you told me to hold off and I've told Milena that you asked for time, but we'll need to let him know if you've decided to walk away. We can't keep him waiting forever. He's already sent a pretty aggravated email asking for an update.”

“Now that sounds more like the Sharp I’ve come to know and not completely hate but definitely not love,” I said. “Just hold off for one more day. I’ve got something I’m working on and I want to see how it plays out before we go ahead.”

“Okay, we can give you one more day, but we really can’t give you much more than that,” she said. “It’s not fair to keep him hanging much longer, even if he has been a dick to you for weeks.”

“I know. I understand. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Once the call ended, I dropped my phone on my mattress and wondered how the hell I’d gotten myself into this situation. How had I gotten him so wrong, either as S or as Sharp? Usually, I was a pretty decent judge of character.

I gave everyone the time of day and I found something in all of them that I liked. I treated people well, the way I wanted to be treated, and I was one of those people who’d strike up a conversation with a stranger in the supermarket and leave there with a friend.

With Sharp, I’d left our very first conversation with an enemy for life. The man wanted nothing to do with me. What was he going to say if we proceeded to the fifth date and he saw me? He was going to be gobsmacked, but was there even any reason to try anymore?

I’d seen the look on his face when I’d asked him out earlier, and he hadn’t been happy. Sure, he’d been shocked and all, but there hadn’t even been the briefest flash of happiness. If we went on the fifth date and he saw *me* being revealed to him, he was going to be disappointed, and I didn’t think I could bear it.

As I lay there obsessing about a man whose personality seemed to be split like Jekyll and Hyde, my phone buzzed at my side. I frowned as I picked it up and saw a message waiting for me from Sharp.

He Who Must Not Be Named: Sprite’s at 7. Don’t be late.

My brows curved up. I hadn’t been expecting him to agree to the date after how disgusted he’d seemed by the idea, but I

guessed buying my business meant more to him than his intense dislike of being with me.

Surprised, confused, and a little bit frustrated, I hit send on my reply.

Me: Sure.

After that first time he'd simply replied that one word to me, I'd made a point of using it in my responses to him. Just so he'd known what it felt like when you were saying important things to someone and they send you such a curt, sarcastic reply.

As I stared at the name I'd saved his contact as on my phone, I wondered if this was going to be part of the funny story we'd be telling our kids one day, or if it would be part of the horror story I'd be sharing with my girlfriends over cocktails for the rest of my life. Whichever way it went, I started when I saw the time at the top of my screen.

It was already after six, and an aggravated yelp came out of me as I bolted upright on my bed. The asshole had probably deliberately waited so long before telling me to meet him at seven in the hopes that I'd be late. That way, he'd be able to leave before I arrived and he'd still be able to say that he'd shown up for our date.

Over my dead body, Sharp. Or S. Whoever you really are.

As I raced to my closet and put on the first dress I put my hands on, I felt a little pang deep down inside my soul. I already knew which one of the two he really was. He was S, not Sharp. At work, sure, he was Danny Sharp, the ruthless businessman who, according to his website, got stuff done.

At home, however, I was pretty sure the person he really was was S. The kind, funny guy who joked around with me and made me laugh. The man who'd sworn to me that he would find me even if we got kicked out of the program and who'd told me that he couldn't stop thinking about me.

Still confused and frustrated about getting myself into a situation like this, I left my apartment as soon as I was ready and headed for Sprite's. I was determined to find out tonight

what kind of man he really was, and once I knew, I'd tell Hope whether to schedule the fifth date or to let him know that I was walking away before the reveal.

When I got to the restaurant at exactly one minute to seven, Sharp was already there. Looking as gorgeous as ever in another impeccable suit, he sat with his phone in his hand, staring at it in aggravation.

Is he waiting for the email about the fifth date? Is that why he was in such a bad mood earlier?

It seemed like a safe bet, but now wasn't the time to stand here wondering. Now was the time to go find out if S was the man I thought he was, or if he was the horrible one I couldn't stand being around.

Dragging in a deep breath, I headed to his table, my eyes locked on his hazel glare when he suddenly looked up and saw me coming. He was so hot, but was he good, or was he bad? *I guess I'm about to find out.*

SHARP

As I sat in the restaurant where I was meeting Grace, I wanted to scream. Loudly and without interruption. There was still no email from Sight Unseen, and it didn't matter how hard I glared at my phone, it didn't beep. Well, it didn't beep with what I wanted it to beep with.

At this point, I was convinced that the next time I heard from the agency, it would be to tell me that G had decided against continuing our relationship. It was killing me and yet, there was nothing I could do about it.

I hated feeling like my hands were tied, and I hated not knowing what had gone wrong. I'd gone over the fourth date in my mind with a fine-toothed comb, and it'd gone well. Really well. We'd both been happy and wishing that we could've stayed together when we'd left, and she'd promised to request our fifth date that night.

I'd wracked my brain, and the only thing that I could come up with was that she'd met someone else after all. It was either that, or she was somehow incapacitated, and the thought she could be hurt, maybe even lying in a hospital bed somewhere, was why I wanted to scream.

My skin felt like it was on too tight. My heart was pounding constantly, and when I looked up and saw Grace walking toward me, I muttered a string of curses. This was the last thing I felt like doing tonight—or ever—but I was here because of Adam.

After I'd left the art center this afternoon, I'd called him to tell him I was done. When he'd picked up the phone, I'd immediately heard that something was wrong with my old friend.

It turned out that his twins were sick. They both had fevers, they were crying nonstop, and neither he nor his wife had gotten a wink of sleep. When I'd spoken to him, they were considering taking them to the hospital. Their family doctor had said it was just a flu and that it would work itself out, but I'd heard the edge of hysteria in his voice.

In that moment, I couldn't bring myself to add to his distress. He'd been acting like an idiot over these last few weeks about this deal, but I understood that he was under pressure. He was also a good man who'd been a friend of mine for a long time.

And so, I'd lied when he'd asked me what was up. I'd told him he'd have the agreement of sale by tomorrow and that I would personally collect it from Artfully Yours tonight. I was pretty sure he had been about to cry with relief by the time we hung up. The guy was seriously strung out, and so here I was, on a date with a woman I couldn't stand in an attempt to have some good news for him in the morning.

"Hi," Grace said softly when she reached the table. There was even a small smile on her face, but when she realized I wasn't even going to stand up to greet her, let alone get her chair, she let out a little sigh and sat down across from me. "I wasn't expecting to hear from you."

"Yeah, well, I wasn't expecting to reach out to you." I picked up my scotch and swirled the amber liquid around the tumbler before I tossed it down the hatch all in one go. Once I'd swallowed it, I sat back and watched her watching me. "What's this really about, Grace? Why did you want me to go out with you? I know you don't actually want to date me, so why even show up?"

"How do you know I don't actually want to date you?" she asked, her eyes still firmly holding mine. "I didn't ask you

here to talk about myself, anyway. Why don't you tell me about the girl you're seeing?"

My muscles tensed and I struggled to swallow past the tightness in my throat. "You want to know about the girl I'm seeing?"

"Yes." She smiled hesitantly. "I'm not trying to steal you away from anyone, Sharp. I would never do that, so I'm interested in knowing what it is you like about her so much."

"Why?" I frowned. "You're not jealous, are you?"

"Jealous? No." She chuckled, and for just a fraction of a second, the sound was familiar somehow.

Dismissing it, I shook my head. "I'm not talking to you about her until you tell me what we're really doing here. Why did you want me to agree to a date with you?"

While I was tense as hell, Grace was as calm as she had been this afternoon, perfectly composed and not nearly as hostile as she had been since I'd first told her who I was and what I wanted from her. It was unsettling to see her like this.

I felt like I was missing something, but I had no idea what it could be. As she stared back at me, she smiled. "Is she pretty?"

"She's beautiful," I answered on instinct before I ground my teeth together. "We're not talking about her. We're talking about you and me and what the hell we're doing here together."

"You told me to meet you at Sprite's at seven," she said. "We're at Sprite's and it's just past seven. That's what we're doing here."

I exhaled sharply through my nostrils. "That wasn't what I meant and you know it. Why did you ask me out?"

"Why aren't you kinder?" she asked suddenly. "You're not at the office now. You're not here for work. Why aren't you relaxing?"

"Because I *am* here for work," I snapped. "Do not, for one second, think that I'm here because I want to be with you,

Grace. I'm not. I'm here for the contract and for the sake of closing the deal."

"Is that really the only reason you came?" she asked, her eyes back to searching mine. I'd noticed her doing it this afternoon as well and I had no idea what she was looking for, but she wasn't going to find it there.

"Yes, that's the only reason I came," I said, signaling to the waiter that I wanted another drink without bothering to ask her if she wanted something or calling him over.

She frowned when she realized it, and I could've sworn I saw a tiny flare of disappointment in her eyes before she blinked it away. "Is the girl really so important to you? I saw you checking me out the first day. I've seen some interest in the way you've looked at me occasionally."

I rolled my eyes. "So what? You're not an ugly woman, and when I first met you, I wasn't seeing the other girl yet. I have eyes. I noticed you, so yes. I checked you out. Things have changed since then."

"Why? Just because of this other woman?" she asked inquisitively. "Do you not have eyes anymore?"

I snorted. "Let's cut the bullshit, shall we? You wanted me here just to fuck with me a little bit more. For some reason, you seem to enjoy taunting me. Just do your thing and get it over with. You wanted me to agree to one date, and I agreed to one date."

"So tell me about the girl, then," she said. "What's she like?"

"She's amazing. She's the one woman I've ever met that I'm sure I could be with forever, and I'm not going to ruin it for someone like you, Grace. I realize you're just doing this to piss me off and you're accomplishing your mission. Are you happy now? Can I have the contract?"

"Will you tell her about our date tonight?" she asked, ignoring everything I'd said.

I arched a brow at her. "Do you care?"

She shrugged. “Indulge me.”

“Then yes, I will tell her.” If I ever saw her again, that was. “Unlike you, she’s not into games. Not into these types of games, anyway. It hasn’t been going on for long, but we’re serious. I would never lie to her or hide things from her, and I don’t intend on letting this ego trip you’re on be the thing that gets between us if she happens to find out down the line.”

Grace’s eyes flashed with something I couldn’t quite place, but it looked strangely like pleasure. She’d liked what I’d just said. I shook my head, muttering into my next drink when the waiter finally brought it and asked her if she wanted something.

“Fucking crazy,” I murmured before taking a small sip. “Absolutely fucking insane.”

Grace waited until the waiter was gone before she looked back at me, and the grin spreading on her lips was devilish. “How’s this for crazy? Absolutely fucking insane, was it? If you want me to sign the papers, you’ll sleep with me.”

For the second time in one day, it felt like a tsunami had swept my feet right out from underneath me. It took me much longer to recover this time as I stared back at her, convinced that she’d lost her marbles.

“Why would you even ask me that?” I frowned as I realized there was definitely something going on with her. “Is there someone I can call for you? A family member or a friend maybe? They can come pick you up and get you the help you need.”

She leaned forward, an amused smile replacing the devilish grin as she shrugged a shoulder. “Come on, you can’t tell me you’ve never been propositioned by a woman before. Sleep with me and I’ll sign your papers. It’ll be fun.”

“No.” I picked up my glass and downed the whole thing again, and I shoved my chair back and got up. Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out my wallet and dropped a few bills on the table. “That should be more than enough to cover my drinks.”

“Where are you going?” she asked, her voice slightly panicked now. “We’re still on a date, Sharp. It hasn’t even been ten minutes.”

“You wanted me to go out with you, and I came out with you. Now you’re shifting the goal posts and insisting I fuck you before you sign the papers.” I shook my head. “Keep your company. I don’t want it anymore. Also, do me a favor and lose my number. I’m done with you, and I’d never risk what I have right now for you. Since that seems to be what you’re expecting me to do, consider this as my formal withdrawal of my offer.”

“You’re choosing her over your work?” Grace asked softly, stunned and obviously feeling a little off kilter as she looked up at me.

I nodded without even having to think about my answer. “I’d choose her over everything. Every time. Remember, Grace, lose my number. We’re done. Good luck with your bankruptcy.”

As I turned around and strode away from her, I felt her gaze burning into my back and I didn’t turn to look at her again. I’d meant it when I said I was done with her. It was clear she was never going to sign the deal.

Adam was just going to have to find a way to work around her. I was out. For good this time.

GRACE

I was dreaming. I knew I was because Sharp was suddenly in my bedroom with me and even my subconscious remembered the harsh way he'd turned me down earlier. In my dream, he wasn't turning me down, though.

He'd come home with me and his lips were on mine, that hard body pressing me up against the back of my door as he clawed at my dress. "I can't believe I didn't realize it was you, Grace. Of course, it was you. It's always been you."

Goosebumps erupted over my skin, his words making me smile against his lips. "I didn't realize it was you at first, either. But your voice, when I really listened to it, I knew who you were."

He kissed me again, and it was every bit as good as it had been in the dark. Maybe even better now that I could see the desire burning in his eyes every time I pulled back.

One of his large hands traveled down the length of my thigh, his fingers wrapping around it just above the knee. He hooked it up around the backs of his legs, then used his other arm to lift me against the door.

Since it was a dream, I didn't have to worry about my weight, falling, or how we were going to get from this position to the next. I didn't have to worry about anything. I could just enjoy being with him, and I was definitely doing that.

Having his lips on mine was like something out of a movie. It made me want to pop my foot or write songs about it—and I didn't even know how to write a song.

Everything about it was perfect. The pressure of his lips on mine made me shiver against him and he groaned when he noticed it. “You’re not cold, are you?”

“Nope.” I smiled, lifting one of my hands from his shoulders to run through his beautiful hair.

Back in that room, I’d gotten to a point where it really didn’t matter what he looked like. I’d wanted him anyway—possible snaggletooth, bad skin, or overly hairy body included.

I’d known after our first time together that his body wasn’t overly hairy, but there were still a hundred other things that could have been true about his appearance. Yet none of the possibilities had fazed me.

It had been the strangest—and perhaps naïve—feeling, but the connection I’d felt with him was so strong that I was sure no physical flaw would override it. While all of that was completely true, I couldn’t deny the physical attraction I’d felt to Sharp from the get-go.

The man was extremely handsome, with all those chiseled features and his strong nose and chin. Knowing now that he was S?

My S, who I could laugh with for hours, was also a man I would have no objection to licking like a lollipop for the rest of my life. It was a major relief to know our emotional connection wasn’t going to be snatched away by us being entirely put off by each other in real life.

Sharp grinned against my lips, pulling away just far enough to look into my eyes before he secured his hold on me. “I can’t tell you how much I like looking at you.”

“I was just thinking the same thing,” I admitted, squealing with laughter when he pushed away from the door and carried me to my bed.

When we reached it, he laid me down gently before striding around the mattress to flick on the lamp on my bedside table. As he did, he glanced at me and started loosening his tie. “I want to be able to see you properly

tonight. I know there was enough light in here to make out the basics, but I'm done with the dark for now."

I nodded as I scooted up on the bed, then beckoned him to me. I marveled at him as he started undressing himself instead of climbing onto the mattress with me. Piece by piece, the suit disappeared and my mouth watered with every part of him that was revealed to me.

I'd felt S's body in the dark and I'd known that Sharp was built every bit as perfectly as a thoroughbred racehorse, all sleek lines and powerful muscles, but seeing *both* of those men exposed to me was so much better than feeling it or wondering about it. With Sharp's looks and S's personality, I felt like I'd struck the jackpot.

And since this was a dream, we didn't even have to clear the air before he was naked in front of me. So ripped and so *big*. I'd felt how big he was before, obviously, but seeing it was different. He smirked when he noticed me gaping at him, but then he was on top of me, clawing at my dress and kissing me senseless as he got me naked, too.

Once I was, he sat back on his knees between my legs and raked his eyes over every inch of me while I did the same with him. We surged back together long before I'd looked my fill, and then he was on me again, touching me everywhere he could reach and making me writhe with need underneath him.

I gave as good as I got, though, not wanting to be outdone and not wanting to *not* be touching him after so long. In my dream, we spent hours exploring each other's bodies and neither of us got tired.

If this happened for real once we'd gotten past all the obstacles between us, we were both going to have to take a few days off work. Or maybe even a few months.

My body was on the verge of a spontaneous eruption by the time he sank into me, and I welcomed him with open arms—and open legs. He made love to me slowly at first, his eyes on mine and one of his hands always in one of mine while the other kept touching me.

It was so intense to see everything he felt reflected back at me from gorgeous bluish-hazel eyes that it wasn't long before my muscles started contracting. Sharp moaned and increased his pace, and I met every thrust with a desperate roll of my own hips into his.

Soon after that, I saw the first sparks of pleasure in those eyes and it undid me, making me soar to the heavens above as my toes curled and I came with his name on my lips. A few thrusts later, he was right there with me, hanging onto me and looking into my eyes for as long he could before he finally surrendered and found his release deep inside me.

A loud, blaring noise woke me up, and as my eyes flew open, I smiled. Right now, Sharp thought I was crazy, but I wasn't. I'd been working with a plan, and even though I hadn't texted Hope last night, I immediately reached for my phone now.

I'd gone to that restaurant not on a mission to ruin his relationship with his precious G, but to test him. To find out what kind of man he really was.

And he'd passed the test.

With flying colors actually.

He was exactly the kind of man I'd thought he was, and although I was going to have a lot of explaining to do, I was ready now.

Danny Sharp really was two different people at work and at home, but at least now I knew which of those people was dominant. Last night, he'd proven a few things to me, and I'd realized that I still really liked him.

Not for the way he'd treated me as Grace, but for the steadfast way he'd stood his ground about his relationship with G. A woman who hadn't even requested another date with him for all he knew.

He hadn't even hesitated before choosing her above me, above sex, and even above his job, which I knew from our conversations was important to him. A woman he'd only been on four dates with and wouldn't even know what she looked

like when she was literally sitting across from him, and yet, he'd chosen her without even skipping a beat.

It'd been the kind of show of loyalty and dedication that I wouldn't have seen from any of the guys I'd dated in the past. Although the way he'd treated Grace had been shit, as G, I'd secretly been thrilled about it.

It'd also proven to me that he was a man who would go above and beyond for his girl. A man who would choose her—me—over *everything. Every time.*

That was what he'd said, and I believed him. I knew that what I'd done last night would complicate things even more when he finally learned who I was, but I was hoping he would give me the opportunity to explain myself to him.

I was hoping he would give *G* the opportunity to explain herself to him.

At least I was sure now, even if he would probably need some time after the reveal to get his head wrapped around it. I could give him time, though.

For now, I was ready to put both of us, but mostly him at this point, out of our misery. Smiling as I texted my sister, I knew I shouldn't have been so excited, considering the reaction I was probably facing from him, but I was.

Me: Go ahead and set up the fifth date. I'm ready now and yes, I'm sure.

I really was. Sharp was strong. What had happened last night would be difficult for him to deal with once it was revealed who I was, but he could deal with it. I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't thought he had the mental fortitude to be able to handle the fallout.

There would be fallout, but if we could survive it, I was convinced we would be able to survive anything. Now I just had to wait and see if I was right, or if I'd blown up any chance S and G might've had at a happily ever after in order to satisfy my own curiosity.

The reality, however, was that until last night, I hadn't seen a future for myself with Sharp. There wouldn't have been any

point in setting up the fifth date because, as much as I liked S, I'd needed to know who he really was.

I knew now. I'd done what I needed to do to be sure, and now it would be Sharp's turn to do what he needed to do. If he wanted anything to do with me—or with G—once he found out we were one and the same person.

I was all in, with S and with Sharp, but when I received my sister's reply, I knew the ball was in his court now. All that remained was to see what he was going to do with it.

Hope: Okay. I'll set it up. Get ready, G. There's no turning back now.

“**D**rinking at eleven in the morning,” Marcus commented lightly when he walked up to me at the bar where I’d asked him to meet me. “On a school day. Now there’s something we don’t do every day. What’s up?”

He smacked my shoulder as he dropped into the stool beside mine at the long counter, already rapping his knuckles on the surface to signal the bartender to hit him up. As the man looked at him, Marcus flicked his fingers toward my tumbler and nodded, and the guy grabbed the bottle to pour him a scotch of his own.

“This is one of the things I love about you,” I said bluntly, still staring into the amber depths of my glass like it held the secrets to the universe. “I asked you to meet me at a bar at eleven in the morning, during the week, and you didn’t ask any questions. Then you walked in, saw me drinking, and ordered your own also without asking any questions. You’re a good person and a good friend.”

“Uh oh.” He chuckled. “How long have you been here?”

I shrugged. “About an hour.”

“Okay. How many of those have you had?”

“This is my first one. I’ve been nursing it.” I took another sip, wincing at the slight burn before setting the tumbler back on the counter with a soft thud. “For the first time ever, I fucked up a deal because of personal shit.”

He took a beat before he replied. “That’s okay, Sharp. It happens to everyone. Business is business and personal is personal, but sometimes, those things get entwined and it’s difficult to separate them.”

“Sure, but this wasn’t that.” I raked a hand through my hair, holding it for a long second before I shook my head. “Do you remember that art center I’m trying to buy?”

“The one for Adam’s development?”

“Yeah, that’s the one,” I said dryly. “The owner propositioned me last night. I thought the deal was done. I even told Adam I was going to pick up the signed agreement from her last night.”

“She propositioned you when you went over there?” He sounded surprised, and he hadn’t even heard the worst of it yet.

“No, she propositioned me at the restaurant I told her to meet me at after she insisted that I had to go on a date with her if I wanted her to sign the papers.”

Marcus choked on the sip of scotch he’d just taken, then laughed. “Are you serious? She made you take her out?”

“Yep,” I said, popping my lips on the P. “Here’s the thing, though, the woman hates me. We got off on the worst foot and it just escalated from there. I know she’s not interested in me that way, but when I asked her about it, she refused to give me an answer.”

“She made you take her out on a date and then propositioned you,” he mused. “You still don’t have the papers?”

“Nope. When she told me I had to fuck her to get them, I left. I told her to keep her failing business, too.”

“Adam is not going to like that,” he said.

I nodded my absolute agreement. “I know, but there’s no way I’m going to sleep with someone just to get a deal closed. Besides, the initial agreement was that she’d sign the papers if I went on a date with her. Then on the date, she tells me that

I'm only getting them if I sleep with her. If I had slept with her, she'd probably have insisted I ask her to marry me before she signs them, and on and on it would've gone."

"You're sure she's not interested in you that way? It kind of sounds to me like she might be. Unless you don't think she'd have gone through with it."

"I honestly don't know." I pinched the bridge of my nose. "It was the weirdest experience I've ever had, and I didn't like it. I even asked her if I could call someone to come pick her up. I'm not sure if it's the stress of having to sell her business or what it was about, but I'm pretty sure there's a screw loose somewhere."

He shrugged. "It's not impossible. The trauma of realizing that her business was failing to such an extent that she's forced to sell it might've triggered something, but what do I know? Maybe you should look into getting her a psychiatric evaluation."

"I'm not going to look into getting her anything," I said. "She's her family's problem now. If she even has one. I'm out. Adam could possibly use that to leverage a sale, though. I don't know, but it doesn't matter because it's not my deal anymore."

"You're really walking away?" he asked. "I've never known you to do that before. Hell, a little *quid pro quo* isn't even that unusual. People fuck other people to get what they need from them all the time. Sex is basically a currency in some circles."

"I know, and a month ago, I might even have done it. Grace is not a bad-looking woman. In fact, she's young, she's hot, and she's feisty. She said we would have fun together and I don't doubt that it might've been possible, but too much has happened between us and I'm seeing someone. I wouldn't ever cheat on her, but especially not to indulge Grace's power trip."

"You're seeing someone?" He frowned at me for a moment, and then his features smoothed out. "Oh, you mean the chick you *haven't* been *seeing*."

“Yeah, okay, but those are semantics. We haven’t seen each other, but we are kind of seeing each other. Even if I am starting to suspect, strongly, that she’s decided against going ahead with the process.”

“Why is that?”

“I still haven’t heard anything about our fifth date,” I grumbled. “It’s taken long in the past, but not this long.”

“Maybe there’s a holdup on the company’s side,” he suggested. “I’ve been noticing more and more of their ads popping up, and maybe it’s just that I’m seeing them now when I wasn’t really paying attention before, but they’re suddenly everywhere. If they’ve had an influx of new clients, it could be that they’re too busy setting up first dates to pay immediate attention to the couples who are almost there.”

“Sure, but you’d think they’d want to get the couples that are almost there through the process so that they could stop having to worry about us,” I argued. “Plus, I’ve just got this feeling in my gut that this is about G and not about the agency. Although things have taken a bit more time than I wanted them to before, they’ve actually been pretty efficient. This is different. Something is wrong.”

“If you really feel that way, you’d have taken this Grace up on her offer and fucked G out of your system. You’re obviously still hoping to hear from her.”

“Of course I am,” I snapped, then released a sigh and glanced at him. “Until I get confirmation that she’s walked away, I’m going to keep hoping that I’m wrong about this. I want her, man. I really like her and I would never risk my relationship with her for the sake of a deal.”

“You said the girl is beautiful, though. You never know. Something might’ve happened with her that could’ve taken your mind off the drama with G.”

“I don’t care how beautiful she is,” I growled. “It’s not her I want, it’s G. You still don’t get it. I feel things for that woman I’ve never felt before and I’m not going to just fuck her out of my system. Sadly, I don’t think I ever will be able

to. If I'm right and she's walked away, I think she will always be the one who got away. My one true love and the relationship that never was."

He paused for a long minute before he let out a whistle between his teeth. "It sounds like Sight Unseen has really worked for you. Don't give up hope. You never know. Maybe the wait is part of the process. They want to give everyone time to thi—"

My phone buzzed on the counter and both of us stiffened, our gazes shooting to the device as I frowned and wondered if it could be the email I'd been waiting for. Gingerly reaching for my phone, I unlocked the screen, and when I saw that was, in fact, an email from Sight Unseen, I frowned at Marcus.

"Do you think they planted some kind of bug on it during one of our dates?" I asked quietly. "We've always got to surrender our phones, and for them to email me now when I'm right on the verge of storming over there and demanding answers?"

He laughed. "Check what the email says before you start concocting conspiracy theories."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." I opened it, relief washing over me in waves when I saw that it was the email I'd been waiting for. "Our fifth date is happening. She didn't walk away."

A knot of tension that'd been building in my chest released, and I dropped my head into my hands as I let the relief comfort me. I couldn't even describe how worried I'd been about what I'd do if she had walked away.

The prospect had been brutal, and if I was asked for any comments on the process once we'd completed it, I was telling them that.

They couldn't leave people hanging when they'd made it this far. At the very least, they had to give people a reason for the other person not continuing. Or maybe that was just me. I didn't know. All I knew right now was that I had my fifth date

with her and that I'd never been so relieved about anything in my life.

Marcus chuckled, raising his glass as he grinned at me. "To the potential love of your life deciding to meet you. Man, am I ever going to get over how wrong that sounds?"

"Probably not," I said, but I clinked my tumbler to his and tossed back everything that had been in it before signaling the bartender for another. "Shit, I want to celebrate. Do you want a tequila?"

"It's not even noon," he said, but then he shrugged. "Sure, why the hell not? If I'm going to be planning your bachelor party soon, I'm going to need a few more stories to tell about having been by your side throughout this process, and this feels like the start of a good story."

"Let's do it." I ordered the shots when the bartender brought our next drinks, and then I turned to him. "Who said you were going to be organizing my bachelor party even if this works out?"

He laughed. "Who else is going to do it, man? Gary? I think not. He'd schedule a conference or something. It's going to be me."

"Yeah, maybe you're right."

Marcus poked me in the arm, making his eyes big at me as the bartender poured our tequila. "Hey, do you want me to be there for your fifth date just in case it turns out that G is a man?"

"She's not a man," I said confidently. "Trust me. I may not know that much about her physical appearance, but I've had my hands on her. She's not a man."

And right now, I couldn't wait to get my hands on her again. *After* I asked her about the reason for the delay. There had to have been something, and I would find out what it was, but once I did, I was making it very clear to her that she was not allowed to disappear on me again.

She could leave me, obviously, but she couldn't just disappear. I'd barely gotten through it with my sanity intact

this time. If it ever happened again, they'd have to lock me up in a mental hospital right next to Grace, and that? Having to live in such close proximity to her? It would probably kill me.

GRACE

“**Y**ou did *what?*” Hope stared at me when I finally told her why I’d asked her to hold off on the fifth date. “Are you kidding me?”

“No,” I said, picking up one of the cushions from her sofa and hugging it against my torso. “I had to do it. After you told me that Cole was Sharp and Sharp was Cole, I was so confused. You have no idea how strongly I disliked the guy or how deeply I care for him. I needed to do *something* to make sure that I wouldn’t be making a huge mistake by going on the fifth date.”

My sister took a deep breath and held it for a long time before she slowly released. “You do realize that he’s going to think you’re some stalker now when he sees you at the reveal, right? Did you even think about that before you carried out this crazy plan of yours?”

“Yes, but it was worth it because I know now that *he’s* worth it.”

“Well, I hope you’re sure because you’re going to have to be sure enough for the both of you now.” She groaned and leaned her head back against her sofa, closing her eyes as she took yet another big breath. “Do you even realize how much harder you’ve made things for the two of you going forward? This is going to be a massive hurdle for you to get over once he finds out who you are.”

“I know, but I’m ready to explain it to him, and hopefully, he’ll understand,” I said.

Hope opened her eyes again and focused them right on me. “What if he doesn’t? What if he thinks that you really are some psychopathic stalker who’s been playing him the whole time? I mean, you made him go out with you and then you told him to sleep with you before you’d sign the papers. Talk about coming on strong.”

“Look, could I have found a better way to go about it? Probably. I can admit that it wasn’t my best plan, but it was the only one I could come up with on such short notice that would allow me to know what I needed to know about him. If he knows Winnie the way I hope he does, then eventually, he’ll understand that I wasn’t trying to hurt him or mess with him. He’ll know that it came from a good place.”

“You’re putting a lot of stock in hoping that he understands the way your mind works,” she said. “I’ve known you since our conception and you just shocked the hell out of me when you told me what you did. What makes you think that some guy you’ve only been on four dates with is going to understand why you did what you did rather than thinking that you belong in the loony bin?”

“It’s a leap of faith,” I said. “He gets me, though. I’m not saying that you don’t, I’m just saying that he does, too. Maybe even more so than anyone other than you. At least, that’s how I’ve felt whenever we’ve been together. I guess that will be the ultimate test, though. If he doesn’t want to hear me out or if he doesn’t believe me once he has, then I was wrong all along.”

“You’re really that sure that he gets you?” she asked after hesitating for a second, her eyes filled to the brim with deep, dark worry. “Can you even begin to imagine what’s going to go through his mind when he sees who you are?”

“Yes, but nothing I can come up with is good. If he really is the one for me, though, we’ll get through this.”

“Okay, Gracie.” She exhaled through her nostrils as she nodded. “I just hope you got all your answers ready because he’s going to need them from you. Clearly and concisely, I would say.”

“I do have them and I’ll be as clear as I can be. All I need is the chance to actually give them.” My heart twisted in my chest at the thought of not getting that chance.

I knew full well that I might’ve taken things too far. Maybe I should’ve stopped at insisting on the date and then just insinuating everything else, but that didn’t feel like it was far enough at the time. I needed to push him, and I needed to see how far he would let me take it before he showed me what he was made of.

Still, it felt like there was an iron grip around my lungs and it would stay there until our date. I knew I’d taken a big risk and I knew it was possible that I would regret it, but right now, I couldn’t bring myself to regret it just yet.

I rarely, if ever, felt about people the way I had about Sharp. Sure, I could’ve kept wrestling with it mentally and gone on the date, and then we could’ve hashed it out there. Together.

But that wasn’t who I was. My feelings for him—as S and as Sharp—had simply been too strong on two completely different sides of the spectrum. The extremes had been too much for me to take, and I’d needed to see what kind of stuff he was really made of.

The backbone. The balls. The core of who he was. I needed to know whether, at the very center of his being, he was good or bad, and I knew that now—even if my methods might have been slightly unconventional.

Hope peered at me curiously. “Okay, well now that we’ve got that out of the way, I’ll admit that I’m surprised he wouldn’t sleep with you for the job. Everything about the assessments and the profile we have on him says that he should have done it. That he’s doggedly persistent and that he’ll do whatever it takes to close the deal.”

“That’s exactly why I did it. I needed to see how far he would go, but he didn’t do it because of his relationship with Winnie. He flat out told me that she’s the only woman he can see himself being with for the rest of his life and that he wasn’t going to ruin what he had with me for someone like me.”

She blinked back the surprise at my words. “That’s big, Grace. Bigger than I think you realize, or maybe you do since you’re the one who pushed him to get there.”

“Are you starting to understand why I did it?” I asked, needing my sister on my side. If I hadn’t been able to make her understand it, I had no hope of convincing him.

She didn’t answer me immediately, turning toward her window with a contemplative expression on her face instead. After thinking about it for several eternities, she turned back to me. “Logically, yes, I do understand. You had a very strong reaction to the way he treated you in business and you aren’t used to disliking people that much, that instantly. I’m glad it worked out for you, I really am, but you need to know that he may feel very differently.”

“I do know that. Especially because it also means that I found out who he was before he knew the same about me. I realize that he’s probably not going to like it, but if we’re meant to be, we’ll get through it.”

A soft smile appeared on her lips. “That’s what it boils down to, I suppose. If you’re meant to be, you will get through it. How do you think he’s going to react when he sees you? Am I going to need extra security to keep him from tearing my set apart?”

I chuckled. “I don’t know how he’s going to react, but he’s not going to Hulk out on you. Don’t worry. Your set is safe.”

“Good, because that gazebo is expensive and Milena adores it. She’s not going to take it well if he smashes it to pieces.”

“What exactly do you expect him to smash it with?”

She shrugged, laughter shining in her eyes as she giggled. “A shoe? His fists? I don’t know. I’m just really not sure what to expect from him.”

“Neither am I, but he’s not the crazy one, remember? I am. Besides, if we get through it, we’re meant to be together, but if he rips your set apart with his bare hands, then I may need to re-evaluate.”

“True.” She nodded. “Are you ready for it, though? Like, really ready? Because Saturday is approaching fast and you’ll need to be prepared for quite a few very different outcomes.”

My stomach dropped. Saturday *was* approaching fast. It would be here before we knew it, and I wondered if I should’ve told Sharp who I was before the reveal. It was against the rules, obviously, but at this point, we were way beyond them anyway.

Telling him would’ve helped him to be able to get his mind wrapped around it before the date, but it would also mean that he might not show up for the date at all. I knew it was unfair, but I desperately wanted to go on this date with him.

My time with S had been so magical and this date was what it had all been steering toward. That, and I still really liked him. I didn’t know what I was going to do if he bailed once he realized who I was. He was the only person I’d ever connected with like that and I didn’t want the stupid deal to ruin all that for us.

Take the deal and our business dealings with one another out of the equation, and we were soulmates. Hell, there was a fine line between love and hate anyway, and the fact that he’d elicited such strong emotions from me so instantly even on the negative side of things meant something.

No matter which way you sliced it, something in him reacted to something in me and vice versa. A bad reaction was still a reaction. We were both passionate people, clearly, and as a couple, we would be great. I already knew it. I’d known it since our very first date.

Hope smiled at me when I finally looked at her again. “I’m sure everything is going to work out fine, Grace. What’s done is done and you’ve got answers for him, right? You know this guy and he knows you. It’s going to be fine.”

I wasn’t so sure. Obviously, I wanted her to be right, but the thing about Sharp was also that once he’d made up his mind, it was made up. He wasn’t one to be swayed easily, clearly, and his mind was pretty much made up about me.

I was choosing to focus on how great things could be between us if we could get through our shared recent history, but he might approach things from the opposite point of a view. Like I'd just thought, a bad reaction was still a reaction, after all, and ours had been among the worst.

Then I'd gone and made things even more complicated. It could turn out that my soulmate chose hate over love, and if that happened, then I was screwed. Because I knew for a fact that from now on, I would be comparing every guy to S.

Everything he said. All the chemistry I had with him. It would never come close to what I felt on those dates in the dark. And I didn't want to spend the rest of my life wondering what might've been if *the one* hadn't gotten away.

SHARP

Sitting in my office, I couldn't concentrate for shit. I was hungover because Marcus and I had really tied one on yesterday, but that wasn't what was distracting me. What was distracting me was G and our date tomorrow night.

Marcus and I had gone over a dozen scenarios for how the night would go, but I just didn't know what to expect and I couldn't stop thinking about it. After all these weeks of waiting for dates and emails, of spending time with a stranger I couldn't see, it was all finally coming to a head, and frankly, I was just a little apprehensive about it.

Things with G had just been too easy. Too natural. Frustration about the process aside, when it was just me and her, things had just gone too well.

As much as I'd enjoyed every minute of my time with her, there had to be a catch. I hadn't been thinking about it much before, but now that it was almost time for us to meet, it'd occurred to me that things didn't just go that well in real life.

I wasn't some romantic with my head in the clouds, building a fairy tale about living the life imagined with a girl I'd never met before. Sure, I'd let things run away with me a little bit when it came to G, and I still really liked her.

Wild horses who were also rabid zombies couldn't keep me away from that date tomorrow night, but I was a realist. Given how well things had gone and the delay between our fourth and fifth dates, my gut said that something was off.

I was still trying to figure out what it might be when my door burst open and Adam came storming in without even letting Gary announce him this time. “What the fuck do you mean you’re withdrawing from the Artfully Yours deal?”

He slammed the door behind him and waved his phone at me as he marched across my office. “I got your email, but you’re going to have to explain this to me. You told me it was as good as done and that you were picking up the papers the other night, then I finally get back to the office after my kids got better and I have this shit waiting for me? What’s going on, Sharp? What happened?”

“First, I’m glad your kids are better,” I said calmly. “I’ve been worried about them and about you and Ange, so it’s good to hear that they’re over the bug.”

He scowled at me. “It was the fucking flu, Sharp. What is this?”

“Well, you sounded a lot more worried about the *fucking flu* the last time I spoke to you, so yell all you like, but I’m still glad they’re better.”

I got up and walked around my desk before motioning for him to take a seat. “Sit down before you hurt yourself. This is going to be a tough conversation. Can I offer you a glass of water so you can throw it at me later?”

“No,” he grunted as he lowered his bulky frame into the chair I’d offered. “I won’t need a glass to chuck at you if you’ve fucked this up. All I need is my fist and I’ve got two of those, so we’re all good.”

I chuckled. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that, but look, what I said in the email is true. You can keep your money. The deal might still happen, but I’m no longer going to be brokering it for you. I have colleagues I can refer you to that I know will do a good job.”

“I didn’t go to anyone else, Sharp. I came to you and I did for a reason other than our friendship. You’re the best. If you couldn’t close this thing, then the deal isn’t going to happen. What went wrong?”

I swiped my tongue out across my lips before I sat down at the very edge of my desk, within striking distance of his fists, but screw it. He wasn't going to punch me. "I can't close the deal because the owner of the company is insisting that I sleep with her before she signs the papers."

Shock registered on his features first, but then he scowled at me again. "I've seen that woman. She's definitely not some ogre. Just fucking sleep with her already and get it done."

"No," I said, enunciating the word clearly. "I won't entertain something like that, Adam. Not even for you. If you want someone to sleep with her to get her to sign the papers, do it your damn self. You've got a dick too, so use it."

"I'm married, asshole," he snapped at me, but then he frowned. "Why did she even ask you for that? Is there something going on between the two of you?"

"Definitely not." I shook my head and pushed away from the desk again, walking over to my wall of windows and sliding my hands into my pockets. "I'm honestly not sure why she asked. She only insisted on me going on a date with her at first, and I didn't even want to do that, but I did. I went because she promised me I could have the papers, but then when I got there, she tells me that she's not signing them until I sleep with her."

He blinked hard. "Have you ever had something like that happen to you?"

I snorted. "Nope, not even close. I've had people come on to me, but I've never had someone straight up refuse to sign the contract unless I fucked them."

He grunted. "Meanwhile, I was sitting at home, up to eyeballs in vomit and fever medication. I realize that it's a little out there, but why not do it, man? Like I said, she's hot. It's not like you'd have to cover her face with a paper bag to be able to get it up."

"And like I said, I'm not entertaining this. I'm out, Adam. She's got the paperwork. I saw it in her office with my own

two eyes. She might just come around and sign it yet, but I doubt it. You're going to have to send someone else after her."

"That's not going to work for me," he said stubbornly. "If you do it, I'll pay you triple your rate. I need that property, Sharp."

"Triple my rate puts you way over budget and you know it. Plus, you could quadruple my rate and I still wouldn't do it. I'm not sleeping with her to get this done. She may be gorgeous, but I'm not going there. There wouldn't be enough water in the world to make me feel clean again. Ever. She and I really don't like each other."

"So it'll be a hate-fuck," he suggested. "That's kind of hot, isn't it? People do it all the time."

"Not me," I said firmly. "I'm sorry, Adam. I truly am, but you're going to have to bring someone else in to put this thing to bed. There is no way I'm copping to that demand. The date was already pushing it, but this is just ridiculous."

"You really think she might just sign still?"

I shrugged. "I told her to keep her failing business and that the development was going to go up around her regardless. It might've been enough to convince her to let it go. She may also sign it just because she thinks she's won by pushing me so far that I walked away."

"She did win," he grunted.

My shoulders rose and fell again. "Maybe she did, but there are more important things in life than winning."

"There are?" He arched a brow at me. "To you? Like what? I've never heard you say anything like that."

"Maybe I should rephrase. There are more important things in life than winning idiotic games with a woman who was scorned because I was mean to her and is getting off on making me pay for it."

"Well, at least that sounds more like you," he said. "Listen to me, though, Sharp. There are few things more important to me than this development. I realize I've been acting like a

complete prick about it, but it's because of how much I need this to happen.”

“I get it. I do, but I'm not the right person to bring it home for you. Grace and I are oil and water. I may even be the reason it's taken so much longer than it had to. She and I just don't mix well, and I truly believe that you'll be better served by somebody else. Most of the work is done. She knows she needs to sell and she realizes that now is the time to do it. She's got the paperwork and she signed the offer. All you need is someone to bring it down the home stretch.”

“You do realize that if you walk away, I'm not paying you for any of it, right? Someone else will get all your money even if all they have to do is bring it down the home stretch.”

“I'm aware,” I said, heading back to my desk. “It was never about the money for me, though. I'd have taken double my usual fee, but I'd also have done it for you for free if you'd asked. You know how much I hate leaving things unfinished, and you also know that I rarely walk away from a fight, but since you know those things about me, you also have to know how serious I am about this.”

He blew out a heavy breath. “You'll recommend someone good? I'll give it another shot myself, but I doubt she's going to bite.”

“I'll recommend someone great,” I promised him. “Give me the weekend, and I'll have a list of names to you by next week. I'll even set up some meetings myself and guide them through it before I let you know which firm I think will be the best fit.”

“Thank you,” he said. “If anything changes in the meantime, you'll let me know?”

“Of course.” I walked him to the door and shook his hand, then released a heavy breath once he was gone.

With Grace and Artfully Yours officially no longer any of my business, I felt like a hundred-pound weight had been lifted from my chest. I really would find someone to help

Adam with her, and as long as I wasn't that person, I was happy.

Not as happy as I was about tomorrow night finally happening, but happy.

As I sat back down, I tried to get to work, but I still couldn't concentrate. Maybe once the date was done, I would finally be able to get back to being my usual, productive self, but for now, there was no hope in hell of that happening.

I was too excited. Too apprehensive. Too close to knowing if Sight Unseen really had helped me find the love of my life. If they had, G and I would be walking away together tomorrow night and we'd never look back. God knew, I wanted that to be true more than anything.

But my gut was still telling me to be careful, and since listening to it had served me in the past, I wouldn't get ahead of myself. I'd done enough of that during this process. For now, I needed to keep my head on my shoulders and the cart behind the horses.

In a little bit more than twenty-four hours, I would finally find out who G was, and until then, I needed to work. It took some doing, but eventually, I managed to do what needed to get done. If things went nearly as well between G and me tomorrow night as I was hoping they would, I wouldn't be back at the office on Monday. Or Tuesday.

So I got a head start on that list of names for Adam and I reviewed a bunch of the other deals I had in the works. All the while, however, G's voice was in my head, and soon, the woman herself would be in my arms.

Somehow, it still wasn't soon enough, though. Once I had her, I was never letting her go. I just hoped she knew that going in, but she sure as hell was about to find out.

GRACE

On Friday night, Hope and I ambled through the mall, going from store to store and not finding what we were looking for. Eventually, she took hold of my arm and gave me a long look. “What’s going on, Grace? You’ve never been this indecisive about a dress.”

“I know, but this isn’t just a dress. It’s a dress for a date that might be my last first date, but it’s also a dress that needs to knock his socks off and convince him to hear me out.”

“You’re expecting too much from the dress,” she said dryly before she frowned. “Are you having second thoughts? It looks like you’re suddenly having second thoughts. Just yesterday, you were super confident about all of this.”

“I’m up and down. It’s not that I’m having second thoughts. I’m really excited for the date and I’m glad that it’s finally about to happen, but I’m getting more and more worried about what he’s going to do when he sees me.”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat that had been appearing whenever I thought about it. “I’m at the point where one minute, I’m convinced he’s going to be surprised but okay with it, and next, I’m afraid he’s going to call the cops and file a restraining order against me.”

She pursed her lips. “He’s not going to call the cops. You know how surprised I was when we found out that your date was also the dick who’s been trying to buy your business. You also know how surprised I was when I found out what you did,

but the more I've thought about it, the more I've realized that it wasn't so bad."

"I told him I wouldn't sign a contract if he didn't sleep with me, and I did it completely out of the blue and without any explanation whatsoever. It was bad."

She chuckled, but then she shrugged her shoulders and pulled me over to a coffee cart. "It might've taken him by surprise, but it's really not so bad. If it had been a man who told a woman to fuck him before he signed a contract, no one even would've batted an eye. It's not like you tied him up and made him sleep with you."

"Yeah, I know, but I doubt he's going to see it that way. I guess I'm just scared that his hatred for me is going to win out over his potential love for G."

"It won't," she said firmly. "Finding out who you are might knock him on his ass for a bit, but he'll get over it. Besides, you said he was the one who came into the art center acting like an entitled asshole. If it wasn't for that, things might've happened differently between you two in the light the same as it did in the dark."

"That was weeks ago, though," I said. "Plus, he apologized for it."

"With his words, yes, but not with his actions. You said he behaved exactly the same as he had before despite his apology."

"That's definitely true, but we were both assholes, you know? We both did things we probably shouldn't have done. Honestly, I'm not even sure how it happened that we worked each other up so much. We just did."

"Exactly, so it's not like his side of this thing is squeaky clean. Your last interaction might've left him stunned, but again, you didn't actually force him to do it. A pretty girl propositioned a handsome boy over dinner. I mean, that's not the end of the world. It's even kind of exactly what people go on dates for."

“Well, they’re looking for love, but sure. Propositioning each other might be part of the deal.” I sighed. “I just don’t know, Hope. You should’ve seen his face when I asked him to sleep with me. He was so, so shocked.”

“Shocked isn’t a bad thing, though,” she said. “In fact, a lot of people like it when their significant others keep them on their toes. They like being surprised by that person.”

“To this extent, though?”

She thought about it for a minute before she shrugged. “I don’t know. At this point, I’m completely over surprises in my own relationship. I just want to know what’s going on and where we stand, but a surprising number of people check the box on the Sight Unseen application form that says they like to be surprised.”

“What did you check on the application form you filled out for me?”

She winked. “That you like to be surprised.”

“What did Sharp check on his?”

“You know I can’t tell you that.” When we got to the counter, she ordered us each an espresso and then paid the man before we moved off to the side to wait. “What I can tell you is that you need to stop overthinking it. You didn’t do anything atrocious and you got the answers you needed from it, so chin up and eyes on the future.”

“Chin up and eyes on the future,” I repeated dutifully after her.

The barista handed over our drinks. Then Hope pointed a finger at me before we left the coffee cart. “Now, you’re going to stop being so damn indecisive and choose a dress that can handle the pressure you’re going to put on it. Okay?”

“Okay.” Confidence surged through me again. She was right. I had been overthinking it. Overthinking everything.

A lot of the people who had been part of the Sight Unseen process probably felt this way before the big reveal. Most of

them probably wondered if the connection they'd formed would survive once life got in the way.

Business was part of life, and so was getting off on the wrong foot with someone. It didn't need to be the end. S and I weren't necessarily doomed just because we'd been annoying each other for a few weeks now.

Over the course of those same few weeks, we'd been falling for each other during our dates and thinking about each other between them. Hell, that might even be one of the reasons why Sharp had been so damn on edge all this time.

It sure hadn't helped my nerves to be missing him and wondering if I was crazy for developing such strong feelings for someone I'd never even seen before. So it was entirely possible that it'd been the same way for him.

As Hope and I entered the next store, I lifted my chin and actually looked at the dresses on offer properly this time. An electric blue A-line with a sweetheart neck and a hem that would hit me about mid-shin caught my eye.

It was beautiful, the material soft and flowing, and the color would work well with my eyes, hair, and complexion. I pointed at it. "That's the one."

"You haven't even tried it on yet," Hope said, but she nodded her agreement anyway. "If it looks the way I think it's going to, though, then you're right and it's definitely the one. See? There's my sister. You know when something is right. You always have."

I smiled. "Yeah, it's good to feel a little more like myself again. I've missed me these last couple of days."

"You got a shock to your system," she said dismissively. "It's natural to be a bit out of sorts after something like that. The important part is that you came back to yourself before the date. Let's go try it on."

Ten minutes later, Hope had tears in her eyes as she nodded at me. "Yep. That's definitely the one. Once Sharp sees how beautiful you are in that dress, he's not going to care

that you two have been annoying each other for weeks. He's also going to wish he took you up on your offer."

"Do you really think so?"

"Absolutely," she said without any hesitation whatsoever. "You look stunning. It's perfect. He's going to forget all about how much you pissed him off as Grace and only be thinking about breaking the rules all over again with G as soon as he sees you."

"The rules aren't in effect anymore, are they?"

She sighed. "During the reveal, yes. They are still in effect, but after that, you're on your own. Speaking of which, we should probably get you some underwear to go with that. We want you feeling like a queen when you get to that gazebo."

"Then we better add some new heels to the mix, too," I said. "I have a feeling I'm going to need everything I can get to feel anything other than nervous as hell."

She giggled. "We'll get you some heels, but this is all completely normal."

After I changed back into my own clothes and we'd hunted down underwear, shoes, and some new earrings, she turned to me again. "Before the date, you should probably tell Sharp that you signed the papers. I know he told you to keep the business, but you know he still wants it. It might help to have the deal completely over and done with before he finds out who you are."

"Yeah, you're right. We need to put this chapter behind us." Without any further ado, I pulled my phone out of my purse and typed a quick message.

Me: No matter what happens, I'm going to sign the papers and send them over on Monday.

I knew he wouldn't quite understand the first part of the message yet, but he would when it mattered. I watched the screen for a little while after, but he didn't respond. That was all it took for my confidence to falter again.

Just because I had the perfect dress and some pretty stuff to go with it didn't mean I hadn't ruined what we'd had between us as well as the sale of my company. With the nerves back in full force and a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, I followed Hope back to her car and was quiet for the rest of the night.

By this time tomorrow, the reveal would've happened and I'd finally know if S's mother's springtime wedding was even a remote possibility—or if my future, both personally and professionally, was completely screwed.

Although I was usually more optimistic than realistic or pessimistic, there was a part of me that truly believed that my time with S had come to an end. He wasn't going to want me anymore, and I already knew it was going to hurt a lot more when he said it than I ever might've believed possible when I'd arrived at that restaurant for our very first date.

“So this is it, huh?” Marcus said, kicking his feet up on the sofa in my bedroom as he watched me rifling through my shirts. “Are you nervous? You’re nervous. It didn’t even take you this long to get dressed for prom.”

“Obviously, I’m nervous. Why would it have taken me long to get dressed for prom? I knew I wasn’t going to marry Annabel Walters. She was a cool date to have had, but I knew that it wasn’t going to go any further than possibly getting it on at the after party.”

“Are you telling me that you’re hoping for more than getting it on at the after party with your date tonight?” he joked. “Color me surprised, Daniel. I thought all young men were only after one thing.”

“I hate to break it to you, but we’re not young men anymore,” I said, then grabbed a pair of socks from my dresser and threw them at his head. “Also, don’t call me Daniel. Not even my mom does anymore.”

“It’s a beautiful name,” he teased. “I’ve never understood why you didn’t like it, but fine. Here. You can have your socks back.”

He’d caught them in one hand, and when he sent them sailing through the air, I stepped forward and did the same. “Thanks.”

When I turned back to my closet, I pulled out a navy blue shirt that I’d been told looked good on me. “What do you

think, is this the one?”

“Are you asking me if it makes your butt look big?”

My eyes rolled. “No, I’m asking you if it makes your heart beat faster when you see me in it.”

He let out a snort of laughter, then clutched his hand to his chest and frowned. “Nah. Not a thing, bro. Sorry. Maybe you should consider putting it on before I’ll be able to tell you. On the other hand, you could also go shirtless. That’ll definitely do something to her, though I can’t guarantee it’s going to be doing it to her heart.”

I sighed. “Thankfully, it’s not only her heart I want. It’s all of her. That being said, I’m not going shirtless, so tell me which one is better.”

On a whim, I pulled out a gray option too, and it worked when Marcus immediately shook his head. “No, that’s a work shirt. You can’t go in a work shirt. This is huge. Jeez. You might marry this woman one day. Get your head in the game. Wear the blue one.”

I laughed. “Thanks for the opinion.”

After putting it on, I rolled up the sleeves and then put on socks, shoes, and a belt. Marcus looked me over when I walked out of the bathroom after going to brush my teeth again.

“You know, I changed my mind. I don’t think you should be wearing a suit at all. You’re always wearing suits. Maybe you should try jeans and a T-shirt.”

“I wore jeans and a T-shirt to all our dates.”

He scoffed. “That doesn’t count if she didn’t see them, idiot. You don’t want to look like a corporate warrior, do you?”

“I also don’t want to look like a slouch in college,” I retorted, but since I’d been expecting him to give me shit about my outfit when I told him he could come here before the big date, I ignored him.

Frankly, I was happy he was here. He was helping me keep somewhat calm, even if I'd never been as nervous before as I was right now. The closer we got to the time I was supposed to leave, the more nervous I got.

“Seriously, I’ve closed multinational, multibillion dollar deals and I haven’t been this nervous going in,” I muttered, shaking my hands out at my sides. “I think I might need to stop at a doctor’s office on my way.”

He laughed. “You don’t need a doctor, dude. You need to get this over with and kiss the shit out of your G. Maybe do some other stuff with her, but you don’t need a doctor.”

“I don’t know. This isn’t normal,” I said as I selected a tie. “You weren’t exactly supportive of this whole thing when you found out about it. Am I being stupid? Is this stupid? Should I even go to this thing tonight?”

Marcus abruptly stopped grinning. “The great Danny Sharp is second-guessing himself? Are you shitting me right now?”

“No, I’m not shitting you. I’m being serious. I think I got caught up in the excitement and the mystery, and now I’m wondering why the fuck I told a girl I’ve only spoken to four times in my life that my mother is basically planning our wedding.”

“You’ve only spoken to her four times, but each date was a minimum of two hours. That means you’ve spent at least eight solid hours talking to her, Sharp. Eight solid hours without any interruptions. No phones. No work. Not even absently looking around and wondering why the guy in the corner of the restaurant is picking his nose or whatever.”

When I looked at him, he nodded. “You know you’re not being stupid. You know who this girl is and you know how she makes you feel. All that’s left now is finding out what she looks like.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right,” I said. “Okay. I’ve got to get going.”

“I’ll see you later,” he said before winking at me. “Or maybe I won’t see you for a few days, but we’ll talk.”

Once I’d put on my tie and we left the room, he walked with me to the parking garage and wished me luck as I got into my truck. I’d chosen the truck over all my other cars for tonight but it was the one I’d had since high school.

This truck knew exactly who I was, and it said more about who I really was and where I came from than any of my other vehicles. Still nervous as shit, I drove to the address I’d been given and pulled up in front of a private, indoor garden venue.

There was a path of rose petals leading from the wrought iron gates to an ornate gazebo in the center of a space filled with luscious greenery. Since the roof was clear, I could see the night sky when I looked up, but they’d also adorned the gazebo and several of the trees with twinkle lights.

The host, who had met me every time so far, grinned as he stepped up to shake my hand. “How are you, man? Are you ready? Winnie just got here, too.”

“She’s here?” My heart leaped into my throat when he nodded.

“She’s here and they’re going to be bringing her in any minute.” He showed me to the gazebo and then told me to wait in the center. “You’re about to see her for the very first time. As always, we’ll be close by if you need us, but we’ll give you some privacy.”

“Thank you,” I managed to force out before I closed my eyes when he told me to. I heard him backing away, and then I heard soft footsteps that came closer and closer until it sounded like she was only a foot away.

“Okay,” a female voice that I assumed belonged to the hostess said. “In thirty seconds, you can both open your eyes. No peeking until then.”

My heart was going berserk in my chest, but I counted down slowly to one and then I opened my eyes, ready to see my G and to keep looking at her until the end of time. But as I opened my eyes and saw Grace standing there instead, shock

like I'd never felt before reverberated through me, shaking me until it felt like I couldn't even breathe.

“What the fuck?” I muttered harshly. “Is this some kind of sick joke?”

I had no idea what she was doing here, but it had to be a joke, right? G, my G, couldn't be *Grace*. Grace, a name that started with a G, but no. It couldn't be. This was just no way that pretty much the only person I couldn't stand was also the one woman who had captured my heart like she'd had it in her hands all along.

This was just impossible.

No way. No. Fucking. Way.

GRACE

When I opened my eyes, I saw the hope and maybe even in the love in his expression. It made my heart soar with joy for just a fraction of a second, and then the recognition set in.

His features hardened instantly, his eyes narrowing as his head started shaking. “What the fuck? Is this some kind of sick joke?”

My lips parted, but I couldn’t get any words out. This was the moment we’d both been waiting for all along, and the way he was suddenly looking at me cut me even deeper than I’d thought it would. I’d known it was going to hurt, but this was excruciating.

“I can explain,” I said softly, reaching for him but closing my fingers around nothing but air as he took a big step back.

Sharp’s brows tugged together all the way as he glared back at me. “No, Grace. I don’t think you can explain. I’m leaving.”

“Look, I know you’re upset. I was too, but—”

He snorted, squeezing his eyes shut as he shook his head again. “This is a fucking nightmare. Yeah, I’m upset, but I’m also leaving. This was a mistake. It was all just a huge fucking mistake.”

With that, he spun on his heel and walked out, his shoulders tight with tension and his head still shaking. I didn’t say a word as I watched him go, walking away from me as fast

as he could without running. He was right. It was a fucking nightmare. It was the worst outcome imaginable, and it was all my fault.

Okay, not all my fault. But a lot of it was my fault. Maybe if I hadn't made him go on that date with me, he wouldn't have reacted quite like this, but I knew he probably would've anyway.

Tears pricked at the backs of my eyes, and the first time I sniffed, my sister appeared. Since this was the last date and she was one of my handlers, she'd been allowed to be present tonight. I knew she'd come because she'd been worried that precisely what'd just happened was going to happen.

Without saying anything, she pulled me into a hug and held me tight. I lowered my head to her shoulder and snaked my arm around her waist as I let the tears flow. Pretty soon, I was sobbing.

"I was such a moron for thinking this was going to go any better than it did," I muttered into her hair. "It was never going to work out, not even before I made him go out with me."

She held on to me for a few more long minutes, just squeezing me until the worst of the sobs subsided. I knew they would be back soon, and so did she, but for now, she pulled away from me and put her hands on my shoulders. "You were not a moron. This isn't only on you, Gracie. At least you gave him a chance after you found out who he was. At least you went after the answers you wanted instead of just walking away immediately. He's the one who walked away, not you. You're a romantic and you gave this guy everything you have from the very beginning. It's his loss."

"No, it's really not," I said miserably as I swiped some of the tears away and released a shuddering breath. "I've had almost a week to get my head wrapped around who he is, and I had to go to extremes to convince myself that he could just be the man I thought he was when we were talking. I can't blame him for leaving tonight. I knew I should've told him who I was before."

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Hope said firmly, looking right into my eyes. “We knew your identity would come as a shock to him. That’s all this was. It may not be over yet, but it is over for tonight. We should go.”

I nodded, sadness permeating into the deepest recesses of my soul as I took a step away from her and looked around. The venue was so beautiful and so perfect for the true beginning to a happily ever after. There was a faint whiff of jasmine in the air and fairy lights everywhere.

Tucked into the corner behind the gazebo was a table set for two with a bucket of ice and a bottle of champagne already waiting in it. I knew from what Hope had told me before that there was a restaurant down the street that did their catering for them, and that the chef always sent over something special.

Although I’d never admitted it, I’d been looking forward to seeing what all the fuss of the fifth date was about, and now that I knew, it broke my heart that Sharp and I wouldn’t be getting to experience it in all its glory.

Finally together, after all those hours wishing we could just be here already.

Tears started flowing freely down my cheeks again when I thought back to all the times we’d spoken about it. All the times we’d told each other how much we wished we could just be together.

I thought back to how irritated I’d been before our first date, and how quickly my conversation with S had turned me into a believer of Milena’s methods. I remembered how giddy I’d been after and how happy I’d been when he had requested a second date.

The tears came faster when I thought about talking to him about his family and mine, how naturally we’d always flowed into the next subject. I was never going to have that again now.

Although it’d taken me some time after I learned who he was to come around, I’d missed S with every beat of my heart. It had been so real, so special, and now it was gone. Whether

it'd been because of the date or just because of everything else, I would never know.

It didn't really matter. The end result was the same. After weeks of dreaming about tonight, it was over and he was gone.

Hope might've said that it wasn't necessarily over, but it was. She didn't know him the way I did. He wasn't going to get halfway to his car and change his mind. He wasn't going to email them next week and ask for a do-over.

He was more likely to delete every trace of Sight Unseen from his email account and put the whole sordid affair behind him. They would never hear from him again and neither would I. Sharp wasn't the type to give second chances or to prolong the inevitable.

I'd lost the only man I'd ever wanted to make a future with. The only man I'd ever really thought I might want to build a life with, and I was never getting him back. It sucked.

Hope took my hand and started leading me toward the exit. "I know this is hard, but we need to go, Gracie. It'll only get worse the longer you're here and thinking about what might've been."

I was going to be thinking about what might've been for a long time, but I didn't say it out loud. There was no point. "Yeah, okay. I'm ready. Let's go."

Thankfully, her coworkers who were still around here somewhere didn't come out to commiserate with me or say goodbye. They stayed put wherever they were out of sight, and I couldn't help but wonder if they were already preparing for the next couple.

Typically, I knew they had at least two dates every night in every one of their different venues, but it didn't always go that way. Anyway, it wasn't going to do me any good to be jealous of the people who would be utilizing this gorgeous venue next.

Their journey had been and would continue to be their own. I was on the path I was on, and while I felt sorry for myself, I still wished whoever the next couple who would be

in here well. Maybe they had managed to do what we hadn't been able to.

Hope took me to her car instead of back to my own, and then she waited for me to get in before she walked around to the driver's side. As she sank in behind the steering wheel, I frowned at her through my tears. "Hang on, don't you need to work tonight? I thought you said you had to be here anyway."

"It's nothing the others can't take care of," she said as she turned over the engine. "I told them I might have to leave depending on how your date went. They understand."

My heart gave another pang. As if having it broken wasn't enough, there were all these people who had been rooting for us, supporting us as one of their front-running couples, and then we'd screwed it up. They'd made the perfect match. They'd gotten it exactly right, and I felt like I had failed them all.

I never should've made him go on that date with me. As much as I knew it might not have made any difference whatsoever, and as much as I'd known I might regret it, I regretted it so much more now than I'd thought I would.

I should've just told Hope to set up the fifth date and made him prove to me who he was here. We could've worked everything out together. Maybe it would've gone differently if we'd done it that way. Maybe not, but if I'd been as taken aback as he had been, maybe...

"Stop it, Grace," Hope murmured without taking her eyes off the road. "None of this is your fault. We should have some kind of mechanism to protect against something like this happening. I'll talk to Milena about it."

"No, don't," I replied, feeling my heart crack in half as I said what I needed to say. "I just wasn't meant to be with anyone. I definitely wasn't meant to be with Sharp. Milena is right about couples who break the rules. She should've kicked us out of the program. It would've hurt, but it wouldn't have been nearly this bad."

“I’m so sorry for all of this,” she said. “You’re hurt because I kept you to a pact we made a lifetime ago. I never should’ve done it. I just wanted you to be happy. I was projecting, and I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“You keep telling me that I didn’t do anything wrong, but neither did you.” I reached out and squeezed her hand. “This isn’t your fault, Hope. You didn’t tell me to mess with Sharp and you sure as hell didn’t tell me to make him go out with me. If I’d accepted his offer like I should’ve the day he gave me a realistic one on paper, it might not have been so bad.”

She sighed. “Well, you didn’t know who he was back then. You just knew he was an asshole who was trying to strongarm you into selling him your dream.”

“Yeah, but I knew even back then that it was the right thing to do. I knew before I even opened the business where I did that it probably wasn’t going to work. Wishing for something doesn’t make it true.”

She paused for a long minute. “Well, look, the sale might still go through, even if you go back to the developer who approached you originally instead of approaching Sharp. You could still get your money and you could still start over. And then, when you’re ready, we could try again with Sight Unseen.”

“No, thank you,” I said immediately. “I mean it. I am a believer of what you guys do there now, but I can’t go through all that again. Besides, it wouldn’t be fair to the next guy I get matched with. He’ll never live up to S and it’ll just be a disappointment for both of us.”

She let out a breath and dipped her head in a nod, then took my hand and wound her fingers through mine. “You’re going to be okay, Gracie. You are meant to be with someone, I promise. It just might not be the guy you thought you were meant to be with.”

If I was meant to be with anyone, though, it was him, and I’d lost him. Now I just had to figure out how to come to terms with my own stubbornness and stupidity, and then I had to learn to live with it for the rest of my life.

SHARP

In a meeting with my staff on Monday morning, I knew I was being a dick. Even for me. I didn't care, though. I didn't give a shit what anyone thought or if I was hurting their *feelings*. They were here to work, not to have their egos stroked or their hearts protected.

Fuck knew, no one had been there to protect my heart on Saturday night. No one had been there when I'd had my whole damn world ripped away from me. No, I'd been alone, and although I knew I was taking it out on my employees, there was no stopping the rampage I was on.

My chest was heaving by the time I was done barking orders, and every last person in the room was staring straight ahead of them. No one was saying anything and no one was making eye contact with me. I didn't blame them, but if they weren't going to participate, then we were wasting time.

"Dismissed," I snapped. "Get out there and go do your jobs. Do them right this time. Bring me done deals or bring me your resignations. I'll be in my office."

Spinning around, I strode out and glared at Gary when I found him nervously pacing outside my door. "What is it? Is Adam back?"

"No, sir. It's a woman this time. She said she'd wait for you in your office."

Irritation zapped through me. "Why do I even have a fucking door if you're just going to keep letting people in?"

I jerked my thumb at the waiting area adjacent to his office. “Do you see those chairs over there, Gary? That’s where people are supposed to sit until I’m ready for them. If you let one more person in here without my explicit say-so, you’re done.”

“Sir, she said she was from—”

“I don’t give a fuck where she’s from. She shouldn’t be in my damn office.” I strode past him and pushed the door open abruptly, wondering if Ange had come to plead Adam’s case.

I had a list of names ready for him, but—

My thoughts got cut off when I realized it wasn’t Ange waiting for me in my office, but a stunning blonde I never thought I would—or wanted—to see again. “Grace?”

My heart did shit I didn’t think it could do, like a full catapult while also slamming to a complete stop all at the same time, but then the woman shook her head. “No, I’m not who you think I am.”

It was then that I realized it wasn’t Grace. It was someone who looked exactly like her except for the eyes. Where Grace’s were a blue that made me feel like she could see straight into me, the eyes I was looking at now were a soft, warm green. “I’m Hope, Grace’s twin sister.”

“Oh, right.” I wasn’t friendly, but she wasn’t supposed to be in my office. “What do you want?”

Hope didn’t seem the least bit taken aback or surprised by my attitude. Instead, she smiled at me and moved to the sitting area. “May I?”

“Does it matter if I say no?”

She looked back at me curiously, then exhaled through her nostrils and her smile widened. “You really are a dick, do you know that?”

My eyebrows shot up. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” She kept smiling as she sat down, proving that I’d been right about it not mattering what I said.

“Thanks for not calling security on me, Sharp. That is what you prefer to be called, right? It’s Sharp, not Danny?”

I narrowed my eyes as I searched the weirdly collected, much friendlier version of Grace. Like Grace’s clone but without the sarcasm and stubbornness. Oh, and without the utter confusion she’d triggered when I’d opened my eyes to find her standing in front of me instead of G.

“It’s Sharp, and I haven’t decided if I’m going to call security yet. Why are you here, Hope?”

She kept those green eyes firmly on mine, and I wouldn’t even pretend it wasn’t a mindfuck to see a green-eyed Grace called Hope sitting there, speaking to me in a way her sister never had in person. “I’m here because you’re being a complete dick, unsurprisingly from what I heard, but you are also acting like an idiot.”

“You know, the resemblance between you and your sister is suddenly making a lot more sense.” I moved to the sitting area and sat down on the sofa across from her, getting comfortable for the slew of insults I assumed was coming my way. “So, tell me, Hope, how am I being a dick this time?”

She waved a hand as if it didn’t matter. “It doesn’t really matter how you’re being one. All that matters is that you need to stop it. You’re acting like a stubborn, egotistical jerk and it’s hurting my sister. I don’t like seeing my sister hurting, but especially not when it’s my fault.”

I jerked a little bit. “How is it your fault?”

After keeping her eyes locked on mine for a minute, she sighed and set her purse down in her lap, then pulled out her phone. “What I’m about to tell you, and show you for that matter, can never leave this room. Do you understand me?”

“Jesus,” I muttered. “Is confusing me literally hardwired into your family’s DNA? Just say what you came here to say, Hope. I can’t take much more of this.”

A soft, sad smile appeared on her lips. “Neither can she, but that’s why I’m here. I don’t know how much she told you

about me, but I do know that she didn't tell you her sister works for Sight Unseen."

My jaw slackened, but since I figured I was finally about to learn how the hell the whole thing had turned into such a clusterfuck, I kept my mouth shut.

"Grace didn't even want to apply to the program, but when we were little, we made a pact that we would put ourselves out there when we turned thirty, so I wrote her in."

"She never wanted to be there?" Well that made sense of a lot of things.

Hope rolled her eyes. "Oh, keep your bruised ego to yourself until you hear what I've got to say, okay?"

"You two really are very similar. Are you just here to keep playing games with me, or did you come for a different reason?"

"Wow, I can see why it was so hard for her to accept it all," she said, then shook her head and turned her attention to her phone. I tensed for a second, wondering why the hell she'd come here to text or whatever, but only until she turned the screen toward me.

The image on it was grainy, but the play button in the middle told me it was a video. My blood chilled when I recognized it. "Where did you get that?"

"Like I said, I work for Sight Unseen. There are cameras in all of our rooms, and when my boss saw this, she was going to kick you two out of the program—and charge you to get that couch cleaned. I begged her to give you another chance, and then I confronted Grace about it."

"What did she say?"

Hope stared directly into my eyes. "She fought for you to stay in the program. She also promised me that it would never happen again and that you would both obey the rules for the rest of the process. Then she told me how she felt about you. After that, I went to Milena, my boss, and explained that my sister had fallen in love, which is the only reason she didn't kick you out after all."

“The agency has known about it all along?”

“Yep,” she said. “Trust me, if Grace hadn’t fought tooth and nail for you, you’d have been out and you’d never have seen her again. But she really did fall in love with you, and the thing is, I’m pretty sure you fell in love with her, too.”

I sat back on the couch and scrubbed my hands over my face before pushing them into my hair. “Look, it just isn’t what I thought it would be, and now I have to figure out how to get that fucking footage from you people. I can’t let a tape of me having sex be floating around out there.”

She rolled her eyes again. “It’s already been deleted. Don’t worry. This isn’t even the whole tape. It’s a short snippet we kept just in case, and your clothes aren’t even off yet.”

“In case of what?”

“In case we ever needed to remind you of what you had with her,” she said, and although I didn’t know if it was true, the determination in her eyes got through to me. “Grace fell in love with you, Sharp. I’ve never seen my sister like that. After your first date, I was half expecting her to call me to tell me that she’d gone on the date I made her go on, and that she would be withdrawing from the program.”

“She didn’t withdraw from the program, though,” I said.

Hope sighed and gave me a pointed look. “Yes, I know. She didn’t withdraw from the program because the phone call I got was not the one I was expecting. Instead of withdrawing, she called to rave about the program and to tell me that she’d had the most amazing date ever.”

My teeth ground together as I stared back at her. “It was a good date.”

“Exactly.” She stood up, the look in her eyes imploring now. “Don’t keep being an idiot, Sharp. Please? She made mistakes, but so did you. Neither of you are perfect, but the way I heard it, you two are perfect *for each other*.”

As she picked up her purse, she opened it again and pulled out an envelope. “These are the signed papers for Artfully Yours. I know you withdrew the offer, but I also know why

you did it and that it had nothing to do with you not wanting to buy the company anymore.”

When I didn't take the envelope from her, she strode over to my desk and put the envelope down on it. “From what I heard, you're a different person here than you are when you're not at work. That person you were on the dates, Cole or S or whatever you prefer to think of yourself as, that's the guy my sister fell in love with. So I'm talking to him when I say that she never meant to hurt you. She was excited about you and she could never wait to see you again. Right now, she's devastated. Just so you know.”

Hope kept her eyes on mine for another beat, then nodded and left without saying anything else. As she closed the door behind her, I groaned and lowered my head into my hands. Hope had just dropped a bunch more bombs on my head, and while I'd heard her, I had no idea what to do about any of it.

The last thing she'd said was the first thing my mind latched onto, though. Grace—G—was devastated. I didn't know why it hurt me so much more to hear it, but it just really fucking did.

GRACE

Absently drifting around the art center, I was supposed to be packing but I couldn't quite seem to get anything done. I'd contacted the artists whose work I displayed and I had some boxes, but that was about as far as I'd gotten.

Truthfully, without the prospect of another email from Sight Unseen about another date with S, my life had felt strangely empty these last few days. There was a dull ache in my chest whenever I thought about him and it didn't help that I was rattling around a gallery that now belonged to him.

With my business having been sold, Sharp was out of my life for good. Sharp, S, Cole—they were all gone.

Going into all of this, I hadn't wanted a relationship. I'd been happy on my own. Truly. Things had changed, though. *That* had changed.

I knew how unlikely it would seem to anyone on the outside that one date would've made me change my mind so completely, but one date was all it took when it was a date with the right person. I'd had that one date now.

The one that had changed things for me. The one I would also look back on as the greatest date with the best man for me. The one that, for the first time, had made me want more.

I could never get any of that back. Eventually, there would be other dates. If I wanted to, I could tell Hope to sign me back up with Sight Unseen. Or I could try any of the other dating services out there or simply go about things the old-fashioned way and pick up a guy in a bar.

The problem was that I didn't just want a date. I didn't want just some random guy. I wanted a date with *my* guy, who had never really been mine but who had so vehemently insisted that he was.

Although Sharp had been a thorn in my side for so many weeks now, I even missed my interactions with him now that I knew who he really was. The fact of the matter was that I'd rather go toe to toe with him and his dickish alter ego every day for the rest of my life if I could also have the man behind the mask sometimes.

Our connection had been severed so brutally, so instantly when he'd opened his eyes, that the wound inside me was wide open, throbbing and bleeding me dry. *If I could just have one conversation with him. If I could just explain why I did it.*

But I couldn't.

A dozen times since Saturday night, I'd scrolled to his number on my phone. I'd let my thumb hover right above that little green button. I'd gotten so, so close, but I couldn't bring myself to complete the call.

Sharp had made it perfectly clear that he was done with me, both personally and professionally. I didn't want to make him believe that I really was a crazy clinger who was sad, desperate, and alone.

Sure, right now, I was sad, desperate, and alone, but I'd never been clingy and my crazy was pretty limited. In fact, he'd already seen the worst of it. Sometimes, I got a bit wrapped up like I had when I'd found out who he was, and I'd been known to do some things that were pretty out there, but that had definitely been the furthest I'd ever gone.

Mostly, my crazy was limited to spontaneity. I was the girl who suddenly decided she couldn't take another breath before she saw the new ballet and went off to watch it as soon as I could get my hand on a ticket. That kind of thing.

I sighed, bringing my loose hair around my shoulder and playing with the ends of it as I stared at a particularly captivating abstract painting on the wall. The artist had said I

could have some of her pieces again when I reopened in a different location.

At least that was something. Most of my artists had said the same thing. It was comforting to know that they still believed in me even if things hadn't gone well here at Artfully Yours for any of us.

I'd turned the sign on my door to closed after I'd come in, but when I heard the telltale rattle of the handle being pushed down, my heart flip-flopped in my chest and I spun around, hoping against all hope that it was Sharp, but it wasn't.

It was a big, burly man with a thick beard and bright eyes. He raised his hands when my gaze clashed with his. "I come in peace."

"Adam," I said, recognizing him as the developer who had approached me long before Sharp ever had. "What are you doing here?"

He rolled his eyes at me. "I've come to settle this. You and I both know that you are going to sell to me, even if I do have to buy the place out of bankruptcy. I'm going to buy this shitty company eventually and there's nothing you can do about it, sweetheart. Why don't you just give it up already?"

I squared my shoulders, raising my chin just a little bit higher to appear more confident than I was. I wasn't concerned with his assertions necessarily, but I was a bit confused. When I'd signed those papers, I'd sold the company to Sharp, but I'd thought he was buying it on behalf of the man in front of me.

It was the impression he'd created with me from the very beginning even if he hadn't ever said it in so many words, and yet, if Adam was here, it meant Sharp hadn't told him the company was his yet. "There's nothing for me to give up anymore. I've already sold my shitty company, so you're too late. Incidentally, you can say what you want about me or my business, but there sure has been a lot of interest in it lately."

Just earlier this morning, someone else had come in to ask if I'd be interested in selling. It seemed Adam's development

wasn't the only one that was going up around here, which explained why he and Sharp had been pushing me so hard.

The other guy had been far more approachable, but I'd told him the same thing I'd just told Adam. It was too late. This was Sharp's business now to do with what he wanted. I'd taken the other guy's card just in case, though.

Sharp had withdrawn his offer, and although I knew he'd received the paperwork, I hadn't heard anything from his firm or his lawyers. I also didn't have the money in my account yet, but I was ready to sell now and to start fresh elsewhere.

If Sharp really didn't want the place anymore, then at least I now had another interested party. Adam narrowed his eyes at me. "Who did you sell it to?"

"I don't believe that's any of your business," I said curtly. "I'll pass along your details to the new owner. Maybe you'll hear from him."

Thunder clapped behind the man's eyes, and for a moment, I was genuinely scared of him. Fear trickled into me like a block of ice running down my spine when I realized just how big he was and just how alone we were.

A quick glance over his shoulder told me that the door had closed behind him. The sign would still be turned to closed. Although the front wall of the gallery was all windows, the lights weren't even all on in here. It was unlikely someone would see if he lunged at me.

Adam's teeth ground, his jaw ticking as he kept glaring at me. "Just stop with your games, Grace. Don't you think you've dragged this thing out long enough?"

"I'll repeat what I just said. I don't believe that's any of your business." I strode slowly toward him on my way to the door. "If you would please leave now, I'd appreciate it. I have a lot to do before the business will be ready to be handed over to its new owner."

Without a bunch of the artwork, but that wasn't on me. I'd simply told the artists that I'd sold, leaving it up to them to

choose whether to collect their pieces or keep them at Artfully Yours under new ownership.

I'd made sure that it was a term of the agreement that the artists would get to make the decision themselves. These pieces didn't belong to me, and therefore, I couldn't promise they would stay once I left.

Adam's fingers rolled into fists at his sides. He didn't advance on me or anything, but he sure was pissed. As I kept moving toward the door, it burst open again, and a gorgeous man in a tailored suit came striding in like he owned the place—which he did.

Sharp glanced at me with more warmth in those hazel eyes than I'd ever seen from him before, and my heart skipped before it started racing. He was here. I was pretty sure he wasn't here for me, per se, but he was still here and that meant that I might have the opportunity to speak to him.

Once he got rid of Adam.

Those broad shoulders widened as he turned his attention on the other man, a dark eyebrow arching as he slid his hands into his pockets. "Adam, what's going on here? Why does Grace look like you've put the fear of God in her?"

It was clear that they knew each other, but now wasn't the time to ask any questions. I was just glad that he was here, my dark knight in shining armor who kept rescuing me even if I hadn't seen it that way before.

Adam huffed out a breath, his demeanor changing into something almost cocky as he rolled his eyes again. "Sharp, thank fuck you're here. Will you speak to her, please? She says she's already sold the place."

"That's because she has," he replied firmly. "You can go now. There's no need to make a scene."

The big man's eyes narrowed to slits and he tensed. "There's no need to make a scene? You know how important this is to me. What are you doing?"

Sharp didn't even flinch at his harsh tone. He moved back toward the door, then opened it and pulled one of his hands out

of his pockets to motion at it. “Leave now, Adam. The company isn’t for sale anymore. We’ll talk soon.”

The tense standoff lasted for another long minute before Adam cursed and stormed out. I blinked a few times, so much more confused now when Sharp turned back to me and looked like he was fighting with everything in him not to come over and take me into his arms.

A place I’d give anything to be, but it wasn’t like that between us. Not right now.

So instead, I rocked back on my heels, my gaze on his as I drank him in, unable to believe that he was really here. “Sharp? What’s going on? What are you doing here, and better yet, why didn’t Adam know about the sale?”

As he looked back at me, his head cocked slightly before a slow smile started forming on his lips. “You know, now that I know it was you all along, I feel pretty stupid for not realizing it before.”

I blinked some more, suddenly convinced I was dreaming again. I had to be. There was no way he’d be looking at me with so much warmth in his eyes or smiling at me after everything we’d been through.

Lifting my hand, I pinched my forearm and yelped when a sharp pain shot through me. Sharp’s eyes dropped to my fingers before he laughed softly, immediately understanding what I was doing.

“You’re awake, Grace. This is really happening. I think we need to talk. Am I right? Do you want to talk to me?”

“Do I ever,” I murmured, still not knowing what the hell was going on or what had come over him, but I wasn’t about to argue.

If he was really here and he really wanted to talk, then I wasn’t about to waste even another minute. There was so much I wanted to say and there was no time like the present to say it.

Grace was pale, her features drawn as she stared at me like she couldn't believe that I was really here. She'd even pinched herself, but now that she was starting to realize that she wasn't dreaming, I saw the wheels turning in her head before she suddenly started speaking so fast that I almost couldn't even make out the individual words.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know it was you all along. I promise. After our fourth date when you sent over those papers, I was at lunch with Hope. She didn't know who you were before either, but they'd already had the meeting to prepare for date number five, so she knew your name. She wouldn't tell me, though. But then we got back, and the envelope was here, and she saw your name printed on the contract, and—"

"Breathe, Grace," I said softly as I walked up to her, stopping close enough to touch her but not doing it just yet. I smiled, my eyes seemingly unable to unglue themselves from her teary blues. "It's okay. Just breathe."

She blinked hard, then frowned and shook her head. "It's not okay, though. I was wrong. I made a mistake, and it blew everything up, and I'm sorry."

I chuckled, finally reaching for her and cupping her smooth cheek in one of my hands to swipe away the first tear that had slid from her eyes. "I'll admit that you threw me for a real loop with that date, G. I don't think I've ever been that

confused in my life, but I would've walked away at first anyway. It was just—it was a lot. I needed time to process.”

“I get that,” she said softly, leaning into my touch with her gaze intent on mine. “I didn't ruin everything?”

“I don't know that yet,” I admitted. “Or rather, I should say that I don't know if *we* ruined everything. It wasn't just you. The date threw me for a loop, like I said, but it was everything else leading up to it that made me leave on Saturday. I just needed to think.”

“Have you?” she asked so quietly that I wouldn't have heard the question if I hadn't been so close to her. “Thought, I mean? Now that you've had time to process, what are you thinking?”

“I'm thinking that I'm not selling your company today,” I said. “Not to Adam, at least. There have been a few developments, but we'll get there.”

“Okay,” she said hesitantly. “So what now?”

“Now, I think we owe it to ourselves to go on that fifth date. What do you say? Are you up to it?”

Her eyes went round as she stared up at me disbelievingly. “Are you serious? You want to go on a date right now? Before we've even talked about everything?”

I shrugged. “Well, yeah. I can't recreate that beautiful date Sight Unseen set up for us on Saturday, but if memory serves that bistro around the corner was pretty nice. The sandwich I took to-go was good, at least.”

“What about talking?”

“We can talk there,” I said, smiling as I lowered my hand away from her face and twined my fingers with hers. “That is kind of what dating is about, right? Talking and getting to know the other person? We can talk about it here if you want, but I feel like we can do better than that.”

“Okay,” she agreed, wiping away her cheeks with her free hand before tightening her grip on mine. “Only if you promise

to hear me all the way out, though. No leaving before I've said everything I need to say."

"You got it," I promised, then led her to the door and waited for her to lock up before we walked to the bistro.

We didn't talk much on our way over, but at least it gave me a few more minutes to get my head straight. I hadn't slept much last night, constantly replaying everything Hope had said when she'd come to see me in the afternoon.

When I got to the office this morning, I'd managed to get a few things done, but it hadn't taken me long to realize that I was never going to be able to concentrate properly while Grace was still on my mind. Eventually, I'd decided to just get it over with. Then, when I'd seen Adam in there with her and how scared she'd looked, the last remaining doubts had vanished from my mind.

I felt something for this girl, something deep, and I couldn't just leave it. I wasn't built that way. She'd gotten under my skin and now I had to figure out if she and I could sit across a table from one another in real life and actually talk the way we talked in the dark.

If we couldn't and ended up annoying the shit out of each other like usually happened when we were together, then at least we'd both have our answers. So far, though, there wasn't a flicker of irritation to be found anywhere within me as we were seated and ordered our drinks.

It was late afternoon, but not quite late enough for the dinner rush yet. The lunch crowd had already cleared out, though, and we were in that lull when the restaurant was quiet and we were some of the only customers here.

Since it gave us space to talk, I was happy that we'd been shown to a table in an alcove near the back of the dining room. Grace fidgeted with her hands in her lap, her loose blonde hair falling across her face until she pushed it back as she looked up at me.

"What I said earlier was true, you know," she started. "I really didn't know who you were all along. Hope works for

Sight Unseen. I'm not sure if you know that. She signed me up but I wasn't allowed to talk about her employment with the agency during our dates."

"I guess I can see why they wouldn't want that getting out too early," I said after mulling it over. "You really didn't know it was me?"

"I really didn't know it was you," she said. "Hope didn't know your name or what you looked like before, either. She only found out during the preparation for the fifth date. She wouldn't have said anything if I hadn't been complaining about the guy trying to buy my company being such a dick."

Her cheeks flushed a rosy, beautiful shade of pink, and when her gaze hit her hands again, I reached across the table and opened my fingers, turning my palm up. She seemed a little surprised, but then she smiled softly before placing one of her hands in mine.

"I was a dick," I agreed. "Look, I wish I could tell you that it was a one-off thing just with you, but it's not. In my industry, you need to get shit done or you need to move aside for someone else to do it. There's no space for being nice or coming across as soft. I'm not like that when I'm not at work, though."

"I figured as much," she said, finally lifting her eyes back to mine. "Since I have no intention of ever doing business with you again, I can live with that."

I chuckled, stroking a thumb across her knuckles as I sighed. "Well, if you do business with me again, I promise I won't be a dick. You were no picnic yourself, though."

Another flush spread across her pretty face and she bit her lower lip as she nodded. "I know. Something about you just really got to me. I guess I know now that it's because you just seem to affect me more deeply than most other people. You evoke some super strong emotions in me, Sharp. Good and bad."

"Likewise," I said, laughing as I shook my head. "Is that what the date was about, then? Why didn't you just tell me

who you were?”

She sighed, but she didn't look away again. “The date was a test. I should've told you who I was, but I only realized it after. At the time, I was still trying to figure out how the biggest ass I'd met in years was also the kindest, best man I'd ever spoken to. I was so caught up in my own head that I wasn't even thinking about just having it out with you right then and there.”

My brows inched up as I laughed again. “A test? What kind of test is that? Telling someone to sleep with you to get a deal done is a *unique* test, Grace.”

“I know.” Even the tips of her ears had turned red now. “I was trying to suss out how strongly you felt about G, but I was also curious to see if the dick at work or the nice guy at home would win out in the end.”

“So I passed?”

“With flying colors,” she said. “When you came up for your relationship that way and chose a woman you'd never even seen before over a deal that was obviously important to you, I knew that the real you was the guy I'd been on the dates with.”

“And you?” I asked. “Who is the real you? G or Grace?”

“I'm just me,” she said quietly, smiling as she exhaled through her nostrils. “Grace isn't usually as exasperating as she was with you, though. You definitely brought that out in me. It's not just because of the way you acted like you were the king of the world. I wish I could blame it all on you being so damn arrogant that it made me want to tear my hair out, but I was at fault as well.”

“Yeah?” I adjusted my grip on her hand to stroke the inside of her palm. “Why is that?”

She released a deep breath, but then our server came to bring our drinks and take our food orders, and we both got the steak I'd been so annoyed with her ordering the last time. Honestly, today, I'd have ordered whatever they had on the menu that would take the longest to prepare.

I still didn't know how this was going to play out or what was going to happen after, but I wasn't quite ready to let her go again yet. For now, I was happy where I was and I'd stay right here for as long as Grace and the restaurant would let me.

She smiled when I ordered the steak, obviously knowing what it was about, but waited until we were alone again to ask. "You're not in a rush today?"

"Nope," I said truthfully. "I'm all yours, Grace."

I saw the flicker of sadness in her eyes as she shook her head. "I think we both know that's not true, but it's good to know you're not itching to get away from me again just yet."

"I'm definitely not, but I'm curious about why you acted the way you did."

She nodded. "That's fair. So, uh, I don't think we ever talked about this in the context of it being my work, but do you remember that I told you my parents took us to art galleries and stuff when we were growing up?"

"Sure," I said. "You want to expose your kids to all the same things."

"Yes, I do." She smiled, and I swore I saw the first spark of recognition in her eyes now, like she was finally accepting that I really was the guy she'd spent all those hours talking to.

I knew how she was feeling because I was suddenly feeling the same way. Until now, there had been Grace and there had been G. Even after I'd found out that they were the same person, I couldn't quite make that connection in my head.

The longer we spent together, though, the more I was finally looking at her and seeing the girl I'd been obsessing over for weeks now. She was gorgeous. She was kind and funny. She was still the woman I wanted, and I had a feeling that if things kept going the way they were right now, we might just get there one day.

GRACE

The more I spoke to Sharp without him getting all snappy and sharp with me, the more I was starting to feel like I was back to talking to S. Our conversation was flowing more naturally with every minute that passed, and it was becoming easier and easier to say what I needed to say without being scared that he was going to morph back into the asshole.

He was suddenly looking at me differently, too. Like he knew exactly what was going on in my head because the same thing was going on in his. Neither of us came out and said it, but that connection that had been severed was reattaching itself to the very center of my soul, and it was happening so much faster than I'd have thought possible.

On the other hand, everything with S had happened at warp speed. I shouldn't have thought it would be any different once we were actually looking at each other.

The wounds were healing and that same excitement I'd felt about him before was sparking back to life deep down inside of me. The bluish hazel eyes I was looking into belonged to the man I'd been falling for sight unseen, and I couldn't deny that it felt amazing to finally be able to see his reactions while I spoke—and that those reactions didn't at all belong to the Sharp I'd dealt with before.

“So, uh, those trips our parents took us on were the highlight of my childhood. Hope enjoyed them, but she's always been a matchmaker at heart. Even when we were little,

she was the one who introduced Barbie and Ken to each other and planned their wedding down to the last detail.”

He chuckled. “What did you do while she was marrying off your toys?”

“I drew pictures and auctioned them off to our teddy bears,” I admitted. “I pretended that I was the greatest art dealer in the world and that the dolls I discovered were the best artists of our generation. As I got older, though, I realized I didn’t want that. I started visiting galleries by myself and I didn’t quite know what I wanted to do yet, but I knew that I wanted to find lesser known artists who poured their hearts and souls into their work and that I wanted to help give them a chance to make a living from their work.”

“So you opened Artfully Yours,” he murmured, understanding dawning in his eyes. “I mean, obviously, there were a few steps between you realizing what you wanted to do with your life and opening your own art center, but then one day, some dickhead walked in and told you to sell it to him.”

“Exactly,” I said, smiling. “At the same time, I’d already realized that my center was failing and I was determined to try to pull it back from the brink. While I was dealing with the prospect of losing my dream, my sister remembered a pact we made when we were kids and decided to sign me up at a dating agency because she said it was time for me to put myself out there.”

He let out a low whistle. “Okay, I think I’m starting to get where you’re going with this.”

I nodded. “It felt like I was losing control over every aspect of my life and then I went on a date with some guy called Cole and suddenly, things started looking up again. Hope reminded me that if I sold my company to the dick, I could start over in a better location since I would have more money than I had going into Artfully Yours. It took me some time on that front to realize that professionally, I could still rise from the ashes, but talking to you about it helped. It made me see that there could be so much more in my future than I ever thought possible.”

I finally stopped to take a breath and Sharp chuckled, tightening his grip on my hand again. “It goes without saying, but I’m sorry I came in there like a bull in a China shop that first day. I do usually have a little more finesse than that, but I didn’t stop to think about things from the perspective of the owner of the company I was trying to buy. Monetarily, it was one of the smallest deals I’d had on my desk in a long time and I guess I thought of the deal as a nuisance, so you became a nuisance before I even met you.”

“We’ve both made mistakes,” I said after looking into those eyes for another beat. “I told Hope that if we could make it through this, then we were meant to be together. I know it’s early days yet, but how are you feeling? Do you think we might be getting back on track?”

He squeezed my hand and gave me a big smile. “I know we’re already back on track. We’re all good, Grace. At least, on my end, we’re all good. It didn’t quite go the way we expected it to, but here we are. We got over the hump, but now I guess we need to see how things work out without Sight Unseen and all their rules.”

My cheeks burst into flame. “Which rules are you referring to specifically?”

“All of them.” He grinned, but then he started telling me more about his job now that we could actually talk about it and I shared more about my dreams with him.

By the time we were done eating, it felt like nothing had ever gone wrong between us, and when he looked at me as we left the restaurant, I smiled when I saw a flash of heat in his eyes. “So, G, now that the rules are off the table, do you want to come see my place? We don’t have to do anything, obviously, but after the fifth date, we were supposed to let each other into our real lives, right?”

“Right,” I agreed, then took his hand when he offered it. “I’d love to see your place, but I wouldn’t count on *nothing* happening once we get there.”

He laughed, but I knew I wasn’t imagining things when he practically dragged me back to the gallery where we’d both

left our cars. Instead of taking my own, he promised to bring me back to get it later and then led me to a beat-up old truck that somehow seemed to suit him better than the fancy car I'd seen him getting out of before.

Sharp and I kept talking on our way to his place, but the air was suddenly charged between us. As soon as his front door shut behind us, he pushed me up against it and sealed his lips over mine before I could even get a good look around. I wasn't objecting, though.

Giggling against his mouth, I looped my arms around his neck and kissed him back, realizing that he was about to make that dream I'd had about him come true. When I told him as much, he pulled back slightly and arched a brow at me, eyes filled with lusty amusement as he tightened his grip on my hips.

"You had a sex dream about us?" he asked. "You're going to have to tell me absolutely everything. Right now."

I shook my head, biting my lip as I wondered how people even went about saying stuff like that out loud. "Nope. Are you seriously trying to tell me that you haven't had a sex dream about us?"

He smirked against my lips. "I didn't say that. I've been having sex dreams about you since our first date. Show and tell time?"

"Show and tell time," I agreed, squealing with laughter when he lifted me up and braced me against the door, holding me in place with his hips. "This is a pretty good start actually. It's actually how it went in my dream."

He groaned, then kissed me hard and fast before he nodded. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure I've had the same dream, then."

I tipped my head back against the door and sought out his lips, and he brought them back to mine without any hesitation whatsoever. With my arms around his shoulders and my hands in his hair, he kissed me until I was breathless and aching for him.

As if we were once again on the exact same wavelength, he adjusted his grip so he was holding me by my thighs. Then he pulled us away from the door and carried me to his bedroom. I was too focused on him to pay much attention to his place. Our eyes locked on each other as he walked us down a long corridor before finally laying me down on the huge bed.

After that, things went down pretty much exactly like they had in my dream. The only difference was that he looked even better naked than my imagination had ever been able to picture, all stacked abs and rippling muscles.

I hadn't nearly gotten enough of looking at him when he lowered his powerful frame onto the bed with me and kissed me senseless once more as he started taking off my clothes. Just like I'd suspected might happen if and when we got together for real and outside of the rules, we couldn't get enough of each other.

Naked and writhing, we devoured each other until the sun started setting outside. When he reached for the lights, I let him turn them on, but then he turned back to me. "We've had enough of the dark, don't you think?"

I nodded, smiling as I beckoned him back to me. "You're doing a pretty good job of recreating my dream."

He crawled back over me, grinning as his eyes hooked on mine once more. "You're doing a pretty good job of making all of mine come true, Grace."

When he kissed me again, it felt like he was making me a promise. A promise that he would be here for me from now on and that he wouldn't walk away again, and I made it right back. We'd forgiven each other for everything we'd put the other through and now, we were finally really going to see where this went.

We kept making that promise over and over again, with every kiss and every touch until he finally rolled on a condom and sank into me. I looked into his eyes as he did, and our bodies came together. I gave my heart right along with everything else I had.

We'd taken the long road to get here, but we made love for hours that night, making up for every bad word we'd ever said to or about each other and all the other hurt we'd caused.

As I lay there in his arms after, I glanced up at his handsome face, not really wanting to open the door to the past again but needing to know anyway. "Why did you come back to the art center today? You didn't have to. The papers were signed and the place belongs to you now."

"Yeah, but I didn't come for the center," he said, looking down into my eyes with a smile spreading on his lips. "Your sister was pretty convincing when she came to see me yesterday. When you were talking about her during our dates, I didn't realize she was your twin, so imagine my surprise when I walked into my office to find you, but not you, waiting for me."

My eyes widened. "Hope came to see you? I thought she was just going to drop off the papers at your reception desk. She told me she'd take care of it so that I didn't have to go anywhere near you."

"She took care of it, alright." He chuckled, fingers lazily stroking patterns on my back while he spoke. "You guys are a lot more alike than I'd have thought, but that's what made me realize that she probably knows you inside out."

"She does," I murmured, propping myself up on my elbow to look at him properly. "What did she say?"

"That I should stop being a stupid dick and that you really did fall in love with me in that room," he said, eyes on mine as he let out a quiet breath. "She also told me how hard you fought for us to stay in the program and that she'd never seen you like this before."

"My sister is a smart girl," I said. "She's not wrong, you know."

He reached up and tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear. Then he lifted himself up and spoke against my lips before sealing his over them all over again. "Yeah, I know. It wasn't just you either, Grace. I fell pretty hard for you too."

SHARP

I woke up with Grace still in my arms, and although I didn't want to wake her, I squeezed her a little tighter, holding her just a little closer.

Yesterday had been intense. It'd been a real make or break day for us, but we'd made it and I'd never been happier with any decision than I was with the one I'd made to be with her. We'd both suffered a few missteps, but after talking it over, I understood where she'd been coming from and I was sure she felt the same way.

Soft, early morning sunlight shone into the room, warming it and making me feel like even the weather was overjoyed that we'd finally gotten over ourselves enough to have an honest conversation while knowing who we were talking to. The sky outside my window was a bright, unseasonal blue, and I smiled. It was a beautiful day, but if I had any say in it whatsoever, neither of us would be going outside to enjoy it.

As it happened, I knew that the new owner of her company wouldn't mind if she didn't clear out her stuff today and I wasn't exactly sure what was on my schedule, but Gary would just have to cancel it. Now that I finally had her in my bed and in my life, I wasn't leaving her for at least twenty-four hours. Probably more, but we could take that as it came.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand and I sighed, but I needed to send a message to Gary anyway. The earlier he confirmed that he'd canceled my day, the sooner I could really just relax and spend my time focusing on Grace.

The message wasn't about work, though. It was from Marcus and a soft bark of laughter escaped me when I read what he'd said.

Marcus: I took the day off. Sure you're still in a terrible mood. How about you give your poor staff a break and come fishing with me instead?

Me: No can do. You'll have to go on without me. I'm with the reason for my mood and she's made me feel much better. I'm more lamb than lion right now.

Marcus: You're telling me to go by myself... for a girl?? Not so long ago, I remember you giving me shit for canceling for the exact same reason.

Me: I have zero shame about staying with her instead. Have fun. We'll talk soon.

I knew that when we did, he was going to give me shit for this, but so be it. I'd cross that bridge when I got to it, and I'd happily take whatever he wanted to give me in exchange for the time with her.

Grace stirred into my arms when I reached over to set my phone back down, and she started at first when she opened her eyes. Then she giggled and burrowed deeper into my side. "All that really happened, huh? I was half convinced I'd dreamed it again."

"Nope, it really happened," I murmured, bending my head to drop a kiss on top of hers. "Are you still okay with that?"

"I'm more than okay with it," she said after thinking about it for a second. "The only thing I wouldn't have been okay with is if it had all been a dream. You?"

"Same." I held her for another minute, just being in the moment before I realized that if I didn't get out of bed right now, I wasn't going to. "Are you hungry?"

Those blue eyes came up to mine after lingering on the tent beneath the sheets for a beat. "I am hungry, but not for food just yet."

With a wicked smile spreading on her lips, she trailed her fingernails down the length of my abdomen, making me groan when she applied just enough pressure that I knew she meant it. My breath caught and my voice came out rougher than I intended for it to when I reached for her chin and held it between my fingers.

“Are you sure about this? I know we’ve been waiting for a long time, obviously, but you don’t have to—”

She winked and cut me off by pressing her lips to mine, kissing me without any regard for morning breath or any of that other bullshit. It was exactly the response I’d been hoping for, and as we surged together again, it occurred to me that being with her for real was somehow even better than it had been in the dark.

The sun was much higher in the sky when we finally left my bedroom and walked to the kitchen hand in hand. She was wearing the shirt I’d had on yesterday—and only that—and after breakfast, I was taking her right back to bed.

I was insatiable for this girl, but thankfully, it seemed she felt the same way about me. When we got to my kitchen, she looked around, her brows slightly higher than usual when her eyes finally met mine again.

“Your place is massive. What do you do with all this space?”

I looked around the farm-style kitchen and the wooden dining table off to one side that I’d purchased on a whim years ago. “Well, uh, I haven’t really been using it to its fullest potential, but when I bought it, I figured it was big enough to raise a family in.”

She followed my gaze to the table. “So you bought that for loud, family meals?”

“I, uh, yes, I did.” I glanced back at her. “Look, I know we talked a lot about all that on our dates, but we don’t need to rush anything. I was honest when I told you that I wanted to get married and have kids. I do, but that doesn’t mean that you need to feel like I expect anything from you right now.”

“I don’t feel that way,” she said. “Those conversations we had were good, but I knew even then that we weren’t going to jump right into anything. I would like to go hiking with you sometime, though.”

“Sounds good,” I said, relieved that nothing I said seemed to scare her or freak her out. Not in the dark and not here in the bright light of day streaming in through all the large windows around us. “I turned down fishing this morning. Thought you should know.”

“You go fishing on random Wednesdays?”

I laughed. “No, but Marcus knows how much of a mood I’ve been in this week, so he thought my employees might appreciate a break.”

“You were worse than usual?”

I blew out a breath. “My heart got ripped out Saturday, and for a minute there, I thought I’d been played for a fool all this time, so yeah. I’m pretty sure my people aren’t going to miss me today.”

She chuckled softly, then padded over to me on her bare feet and pushed herself up against my chest, winding her arms around my neck and playing with the short hair at the back of my head. “Have I told you yet how sorry I am?”

“Have I?” I murmured before lowering my lips to hers and kissing her again. “What happened on Saturday wasn’t your fault, Grace. I know you’re still blaming yourself at least a little bit because of that date, but honestly? It really was just the shock and the uncertainty about everything. I’m sorry, too, but we’re good now, right?”

“Right,” she agreed, then smiled and nuzzled my neck before stepping away from me. “Am I allowed to ask about what’s going to happen with Artfully Yours now? I thought you’d have sold it right on to Adam, but after what happened yesterday, I’m assuming you didn’t?”

“No, I didn’t.” I walked over to my coffeemaker, and when she nodded after I gestured to it, I slid pods into the slots and got mugs out of the cabinet while I answered her question.

“After Hope left on Monday, my head obviously wasn’t quite where it should’ve been. She dropped off the papers and left them on my desk, but I didn’t call Adam to let him know I’d received them.”

“Okay,” she said slowly. “You did buy it for him, though?”

“Initially, yes. I got an interesting call yesterday morning, though. From another developer who said he’d been by to see you and you’d given him my number.”

“Oh, right. Yes. Fletcher something?”

“That’s the guy,” I said, leaning my hip against the counter as I explained. “Anyway, he told me about his development and said that he knew I owned Artfully Yours now.”

“I hope you don’t mind that I gave him your details,” she said, wide-eyed and suddenly apprehensive again. “I didn’t breach our agreement by doing that, did I? He was just so nice and he said he might want to keep it as a gallery and—”

I chuckled. “Breathe, baby. It’s fine. You did breach our agreement since you weren’t supposed to disclose any details, but it doesn’t matter. The point I’m getting to is that this guy made things make a lot more sense to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Adam hasn’t been acting like himself at all lately. He put me under a lot of pressure to get the deal done, and I never really understood why. I wasn’t lying to you when I said the development was going to go up anyway. I’ve seen his plans, and the property your business is on is just going to be demolished eventually for more parking.”

Sadness clouded her eyes, but she didn’t express it. Instead, she just nodded. “I figured as much, to be honest. I wasn’t under any illusions about you keeping a failing gallery and trying to turn it around. It also explains why you were putting the screws to me if he was putting so much pressure on you.”

“He definitely didn’t make things any easier, but I really didn’t get why until I spoke to Fletcher. His company has also gotten a contract to revitalize the neighborhood and it seems

Adam is pissed that he didn't get the project that was awarded to Fletcher as well."

"Really? One huge revitalization project isn't enough?"

I chuckled. "For Adam, no. He got into a pissing contest over territory and the size of the developments with Fletcher, but Fletcher has gone and done his homework on the community. It turns out the people there have a great deal of respect for you. He also thinks that the gallery could work right where it is once they're done with their project."

She smiled. It was a sad one, but it was genuine, too. "Well, I suppose it's up to you to decide what you're going to do with it now."

"Nah," I said. "We'll decide together, but I'm pretty sure we can sell it for more now than Adam ever would've offered you. We could even start a bidding war for it if you want to. It could be fun."

"Your idea of fun seems to differ vastly from mine," she said. "Do you really think you could get more money for it than what you offered me, though?"

"*We* can get more money for it." I emphasized the word, grinning at her as I handed over her coffee. "Just trust me, would you? Adam is an old friend of mine, but I told you I choose you always. Every time over everyone, and I meant it. So trust me."

She smiled, accepting her coffee as she rolled her eyes at me. "Trust which you? Business you, or *you* you?"

"All of me." I leaned in and planted a soft kiss on her lips, my eyes on her bright blues as I forced myself to take a step back before I forgot about making her breakfast all over again.

GRACE

A month after Sharp and I had finally properly gotten together, things were going well between us. We'd fallen into something of a routine, and I loved every second of it.

While we weren't officially living together—it'd only been a month since our fifth date, after all—we did wake up together most mornings. Almost without fail, unless one of us had already made the other late, we had at least coffee together before we went to work.

Often, though, even if we hadn't woken up together, we'd still meet somewhere for breakfast before we got on with our days. I realized that it probably wouldn't last forever, but we were in the honeymoon phase and I intended on enjoying it to the fullest.

Once or twice a week, I'd bring him lunch to his office, and at least once a week, he'd stop by Artfully Yours to do the same for me. Since he still hadn't sold the place yet, I was managing it, and go figure, now that I didn't own it anymore, business was finally picking up.

Sharp had reached out to some of his contacts to put the word out about the center, and even though he technically owned it, he insisted that I kept every cent we made. We were actually working together pretty well now, though, and while I knew he wasn't going to keep it for me forever, I was enjoying getting to be on this side of things with him while it lasted.

Gary perked up when I walked into his office and set down the takeout I'd brought along for him on his desk. "Thank God, you're here."

"Why?" I asked, cocking a brow at him. "Is Mr. Sharp being difficult again?"

"Not as difficult as he used to be," Gary teased. "It's not that, though. He asked me to call you to ask you to come in a few minutes ago, so he's going to be happy to see you, and if he's happy, I'm happy."

I laughed. Sharp wasn't a fan of how comfortable his assistant had gotten with me, but I loved Gary. He took care of Sharp, even if my boyfriend didn't always realize it. "Well, in that case, I'm happy he's going to be happy so that you can be happy."

Gary chuckled. "Go on in. I'll hold his calls and his next meeting isn't for ninety minutes."

"Thanks," I said. "Do you know why he wanted me to come in?"

"He wanted you to come in because he missed you," Sharp's voice suddenly said behind me, and when I spun around, he held out his hand toward me. "Also, he's got good news. So get your sexy ass in here so we can talk."

I laughed when he dragged me into his office as soon as I put my hand in his. Then I moaned into his mouth when he kissed me as soon as the door slammed shut behind us. "What's that for?"

He was already getting hard against my stomach as he held me to him. "That's because I really did miss you. How's Hope?"

"She's okay," I said, leaning into him and breathing in the delicious scent of him. "I missed you too, but she might need me to sleep over a few more times in the coming weeks."

"Has she finally broken up with Graham?"

I shook my head. "No, but I think she's going to soon. Things are just getting worse and he's really putting her

through the wringer.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, his lips feathering across my temple and making me shiver with pleasure. “I’ve got something to tell you, but if you don’t want to do it right now, it’s okay. I know it’s tough on you that she’s going through a hard time.”

“No, we can talk,” I said, turning my head to steal another kiss before I extricated myself from him. “What’s up? Also, I hope you’re in the mood for Thai. Hope and I were watching this cooking show last night and all the contestants had to make Thai food, so that’s what I brought today and I think I’m going to want it all week.”

His hazel eyes sparkled as he nodded. “I love how quirky you can be. Hey, you don’t happen to want to tell me to sleep with you before I can get it, right? You might be able to convince me this time.”

I laughed, pointing at the bulge in his pants. “I bet I would be able to convince you, but no. It didn’t work out well for me last time. Have we moved on to joking about it, then?”

“No, I was being serious,” he said but took the takeout bag from me and carried it over to the small conference table in his office. “I haven’t seen you for twenty-four hours and it felt like a lifetime, but let’s talk.”

Something I’d learned about him this last month was that he wasn’t shy. It hadn’t only been talking in the dark that made him honest and bold. He *was* honest and bold. About everything. With me, at least.

Although we were able to see each other these days, we still talked a lot and we did so as openly as we had during those first four dates. It was working really well for us so far, since we’d avoided miscommunication as a result.

We’d had enough of being in the dark, I thought—both literally and metaphorically. He told me how he felt about me often and I did the same, but he was also completely open about how much he wanted me. That part, I was still struggling with.

Sharp didn't struggle at all, and I loved every second of that, too. It was nice to have a man be so completely confident about his feelings and to share them so openly. It wasn't something I'd ever come across in dating before, but it was just another reason we were compatible.

I needed reassurance every so often, and he was only too happy to give it. When his voice broke into my thoughts, I focused on him and smiled. "I want to talk to you about Artfully Yours."

My smile faltered at the words and I blinked. "Okay, uh, what about it? Have you sold it?"

He stared back at me, then shook his head. "No, baby. I didn't sell it. I told you to trust me and that we would decide together, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did, but—"

"No buts," he said firmly as he strode to his desk and picked up an envelope. "I've been speaking to Adam and to Fletcher, and it took a bit of doing, but I got an offer from Fletcher for way more than the company or the property is worth. Plus, we got guarantees that Artfully Yours will stay open for at least another year and that you can stay on to manage it if you want."

My hands were shaky when I took the envelope he handed to me. "Uh, okay. That's good. I'm glad you got more for it than it's worth and that you went with Fletcher in the end. I know Adam is your friend."

Sharp's eyes softened as they looked into mine. "I'm not taking a cent of this money, baby. It's yours. Artfully Yours is your company and, therefore, the proceeds of the sale belong to you."

"But you bought it from me."

He shrugged. "I may or may not have sent the papers back to the lawyers. The point is that we've sold it to the highest bidder and that he was willing to offer much more than I ever would've. Plus, he's given guarantees I never would've given. This is a win, baby."

“I don’t know what to say.” I stared back at him in a state of utter disbelief. “Why would you do this for me?”

He smiled, leaning closer until his lips were only inches away from mine. “I thought you knew this already, but I love you, Grace. That’s why I did it for you. There’s not much I wouldn’t do for you.”

“I love you too,” I whispered as tears pricked at the backs of my eyes. “If you didn’t send the paperwork to the lawyers, who’s been paying the expenses for the last month?”

“I took care of it.”

I smacked his shoulder. “Without telling me?”

“I wanted it to be a surprise when I finally got the deal together,” he murmured. “Happy one-month anniversary.”

“If this is what you give me for our one-month anniversary, what on earth are you going to do when we’ve been together for a year?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” he joked, taking my hands in his and staring at our fingers as they entwined. “I’m sure I’ll come up with something, though.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I said before wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him in for a kiss. “Thank you. I’ve got to admit that I’m pretty impressed with you right now. Is Adam going to be okay with this, though?”

He breathed out, resting his forehead against mine as he shrugged. “Well, he’s not happy with me, but he’ll survive. I wasn’t going to sell *your* company to him just because he wanted to flex his muscles with Fletcher.”

I ran my fingers through his hair. “That’s sweet, but I don’t want to be the reason there’s a rift between you and a friend.”

“There won’t be one,” he assured me. “I talked it over with Adam and I explained the situation to him. The fact that he doesn’t *need* the extra parking space. Fletcher, on the other hand, has real plans that incorporate the building and Artfully Yours and he’s had input from the community. Ultimately,

they're both in charge of projects to uplift the area and that's what they need to do, irrespective of who's got what space."

"So you're a mediator, too, huh?" I smiled. "You really are an impressive man, Mr. Sharp. I'm going to owe you so much more than lunch for this."

"You don't owe me anything," he said, then opened his mouth to say more, but the words never came when he felt my fingers running up the insides of his thighs. "Gary is going to be so pissed at us if you make me late for my next meeting."

I giggled as I reached for his fly and started undoing his belt. "I won't make you late. Gary made a point of telling me that we had ninety minutes before your next meeting. We'll be fine. You might just have to reheat your lunch after."

"What's lunch?" he breathed as he closed his eyes and let his head fall back. "The only thing I'm interested in right now is you."

"Wait your turn, baby." I pulled his belt free and unbuttoned his pants. "Lie back for me, would you? Let's see if you can keep it down, or else Gary might come in here to check on us and he'll see a whole different part of you he's never seen before."

"Don't talk to me about Gary right now," he rasped before he sighed and opened his eyes again. "Okay, hang on. I'll go lock the door. Now that you've put the image of him bursting in here in my head, I don't want to take any chances."

I giggled and pushed to my feet before he did. "I'll go lock the door. You just wait here—and don't get started without me."

SHARP

There wasn't a ripple of a breeze on the surface of the water. The gray sky was reflected as perfectly as if I was seeing it in a mirror. Marcus stood quietly beside me, an ancient canvas hat jammed on his head and his line still in the water.

"They're really not biting today, huh?" he complained. "Maybe you're scaring them off with that smile you can't wipe off your damn face."

"Maybe they just don't like the sound of your voice," I suggested. "What happened to fishing being a quiet activity?"

"Oh, that's always been bullshit." He bent over and dug another beer out of his cooler. "Fishing is for drinking and catching up without interruptions."

"You know there are a lot of people who would string you up for saying something like that, right?"

He made a show of looking around us, then turned back to me and shrugged. "Thankfully, there's not a person with a pitchfork in sight. What luck."

I laughed. "If there were any other people around, one of them would've had a pitchfork. I guarantee it."

There weren't any other people around, though. It was Marcus, me, and fish—at least, I thought there were fish. Since we hadn't had a single bite the whole day, it was possible that I was wrong.

Still, the scenery was beautiful, majestic trees rising up in the forest behind us and the glassy lake ahead. I inhaled deeply, smiling again as the fresh, crisp air cleared my lungs.

“This was a good idea,” I told him. “It’s been too long since we’ve been out here.”

He rolled his eyes at me. “That’s because you’re always busy these days. It’s difficult to get you to go to breakfast, let alone come all the way out here for a day. You are sure Grace is going to survive the separation, right?”

“She better,” I growled, and on instinct, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and checked it again, but there was still nothing from her. “Shit. Maybe I should call.”

“Why?” he asked. “You got a text from her less than fifteen minutes ago. Have another beer instead.”

I took the can he handed me and sighed as I let the device slide back into my pocket. “Has it really only been fifteen minutes?”

“Less,” he said, chuckling as he shook his head at me. “I never thought I would see you like this. It’s great. I love it. All the better to give you shit over, but you’re still really happy with her?”

“Two months in and I’ve never looked back.” I cracked open the drink and took a long sip. “I never thought I would see me like this, either. I hoped, but I didn’t think it was actually going to happen.”

He didn’t say anything for a long minute, looking me over and then frowning at me when his eyes finally came back to mine. “Are you really as happy as you seem, though? That was some pretty wild shit you two went through. Is it even possible that none of it did any lasting damage?”

I shrugged. “It wasn’t that wild. We got off on the wrong foot, is all. As soon as we sat down and talked properly outside of the dark, we were fine. I explained stuff. She explained stuff. It made sense. We moved on. There’s no point harping on about it.”

“Sure,” he said. “It’s just that you guys seem unnaturally happy, which is why I’m wondering if it’s real or if you’re both acting just because you want it to be true.”

“We’re not acting,” I said honestly, slowly reeling in my line to check my bait. “When we started dating, I told you that we hit it off really well. This is still that. It’s just amplified now that we’re living together.”

“Except you’re not living together,” Marcus said. “You asked her to move in with you and she’s still thinking about it.”

“She hasn’t slept at her house once this week. All her toiletries are in my bathroom and she has more clothes in my closet than in her own. We’re living together.”

“Deciding doesn’t make it so.” He laughed. “You need to wait for her to say yes.”

“Sure, and I am, but she’s going to say yes.” I turned to him and waggled my brows. “Besides, deciding does make it so if it already is so. I’m telling you, she moved in with me without even realizing it. All I’m waiting on is for her to make it official.”

“You guys are so weird,” he joked. “It’s no wonder you get on so well. You’re like the same person. Her weirdness matches yours.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I said. “There’s even a Dr. Seuss quote about finding the person whose weirdness matches yours, falling into mutual weirdness, and calling it love.”

He thought it over. “That should be your signature quote as a couple. I’ll remember it for your wedding.”

“Sure, except that we’re not getting married yet.”

“Yet being the operative word in that sentence,” he argued. “Just because you haven’t had the balls to ask her yet doesn’t mean that it’s not going to happen.”

“Not asking her yet has nothing to do with my balls. We’ve only been together for two months. It’s too soon, and despite

the way we talked about it when we were dating during the process, we don't want to rush into anything."

He shrugged. "That's probably smart, but it's inevitable. You are going to get married. You two were made for each other."

"Thanks. We think so, too," I said happily before taking a sip of my beer and thinking over everything that had happened these last two months.

When I'd opened my eyes that night on our fifth Sight Unseen date, it'd felt like the world was caving in around me. It had been a feeling I still couldn't describe and one I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy—which Grace had been pretty close to being at the time.

If anyone had told me that night that we'd get together only a few days later and that it would still be going so well two months later, I'd have laughed in their faces. And then I probably would've punched them.

Until Hope had walked into my office, I honestly hadn't thought I'd ever see Grace again. I'd reconciled myself to a long and lonely life without G, who I had been convinced didn't really exist.

Hope *had* walked into my office, though, and thank fuck for that. If it hadn't been for her, I didn't know if I ever would've gone back to Grace to ask her to explain. I liked to think that I would've come around eventually, but I just didn't know.

What she had said to me that day had opened my eyes, and so had showing me that video. A video Grace and I now had the only copy of, even if it was only a snippet.

The point, however, was that hearing it from her how hard Grace had fought for us and that she really had fallen for me had forced me to re-examine what I had thought I knew. *Who* I had thought I knew.

From there, it'd been like the wool had slowly evaporated from my eyes and I'd finally been able to see our situation for what it truly had been. A comedy of errors and

misunderstandings that could either have been a funny beginning to our story or the end of it.

It'd been that easy, and that was what it'd come down to. One simple question. Did we want our story to be starting or ending?

When I'd asked myself that question, I'd realized that I wanted it to be starting, and mercifully, Grace had felt the same way. With that question answered, we'd talked it all out and we'd put the past where it belonged—behind us.

We were at a point now where I couldn't imagine my life without her. I couldn't imagine not waking up next to her or spending a significant amount of time not falling asleep beside her. In a matter of a couple of months, she had become my world and I wasn't fighting it even a little bit.

In fact, I welcomed it.

As soon as I'd started talking to her in the dark, I'd known that she was different. That she was the one I'd been waiting for. It'd taken me thirty-five years to find her, but I had. Even if I hadn't realized it at first when we hadn't been in the dark.

It was strange how much being deprived of my sight had allowed me to see things that I'd missed when they'd been right in front of me. I didn't know if it was like that for everyone, but it sure as hell had been like that for me.

Marcus seemed to sense what I was thinking about, but then again, that wasn't much of a feat. Grace was constantly on my mind and he knew it.

“Sight Unseen worked out really well for you, huh?” he said, then cocked his head as he looked out at the water like he was searching for answers of his own beneath the surface. “Maybe I should check it out?”

“You should definitely check it out.”

Hell, I was all for him and everyone else who was looking for something real enrolling in the program. Milena should've been paying me to be a spokesperson at the rate I was going. “What happened to that awesome chick you were seeing a while ago?”

He waved a dismissive hand. “I didn’t cancel fishing that day, did I? I’m looking for someone I want to cancel on you for. She wasn’t that person. In fact, she never even got back to me after our last date.”

“I’m sorry. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

He shrugged, gaze still fixed on the water like the girl of his dreams was going to rise up from below. “There was nothing really to say. It was just another date with just another girl, and then it really was just nothing.”

“Sign up for Sight Unseen,” I said encouragingly. “At the very least, you might have some fun going on dates that are a little out of the ordinary.”

He nodded, eyes glazed over in thought. “Yeah, maybe I will.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I pulled it out again immediately, smiling when I saw a message from Grace waiting for me to open it. After I scanned through what she’d said, I started reeling in my line again without any hesitation.

“Grace has dinner ready for us,” I said. “Let’s pack up. This was great, but I’m ready to go home.”

Ready to see my girl.

Marcus laughed when I started getting my things together at the speed of light, but he packed up quickly too and didn’t say a word as we bundled everything in the back of my truck and then raced home. From the contemplative expression on his face, I could tell he was still thinking about applying to the Sight Unseen program.

All he needed now was one last nudge, and Grace and I were the perfect people to give it to him. Marcus was the best guy I knew. He deserved to be happy, and he would be. As soon as he got over his preconceived notions about how weird it would be to date someone he couldn’t see.

And it was weird. It really was, but it was worth it, and soon, he was going to find that out for himself.

EPILOGUE

One Year Later

As I tossed some pasta into a pot, I checked my watch and wondered where the hell my boyfriend had wandered off to. Our guests were going to be here in a few, and while Adam and I got along much better these days, I definitely didn't want to entertain him and his wife by myself.

Angela was nice and we'd become friends, but Sharp had set up this whole dinner so that he and his buddy could celebrate the first phase of Adam's development being done. I'd come home early from work and I'd spent the better part of the afternoon making the richest, creamiest pasta sauce I'd ever made—from scratch.

Food-wise, all that was left for me to do now was to make a salad, but I'd do that once they got here. My brow furrowed as I checked the time again.

Once the sauce had been done, I'd gone to take a long bubble bath and I'd expected Sharp to get home while I was in the tub. I'd even hoped that he'd get home in enough time to join me, but alas, I was now all dressed and there was still no sign of him.

Worry started trickling into me. From our very first date, Sharp had never been late. If anything, he preferred being fashionably *early* as opposed to the alternative.

This was *not* like him. I glanced outside and saw the sun was already setting. My teeth sank into my lower lip. The last time we'd spoken, he was still at his office. That had been two hours ago, though. He'd said he had one last meeting and that he would be heading home after.

While his meeting could've been running long, he knew that we were having people over for dinner and he knew what time they would be arriving. He'd told them to be here at that time, so it wasn't like I'd made arrangements he knew nothing about.

I dragged in a deep breath, then exhaled slowly, shaking my hands out at my sides to avoid falling into a complete panic. This really wasn't like him, though. In the fourteen months it'd been since we'd started dating, he'd always let me know if his last meeting was taking longer than expected or if there would be any other delay in him getting home.

Relax, Grace. He's probably still at work. He's fine.

I had to believe that he was. I had to believe that I'd somehow have known about it if he wasn't. In an attempt to do something with my hands that wasn't fidgeting, I drummed my nails against the counter, deciding to focus on something other than worry.

If Sharp wasn't home in five more minutes, I'd call him. For now, though, I was choosing to operate on the assumption that he was simply stuck in traffic or something. Just because I'd suddenly seen the time didn't mean that he had to appear magically out of thin air.

Nothing had changed from before I'd checked my watch. I'd only gotten to the kitchen a few minutes ago. The pasta was ready to be added to the sauce and put into the oven. Everything was under control and Sharp was fine.

In addition to us celebrating the completion of the first phase of Adam's development tonight, we were also celebrating our fourteen-month anniversary. That was probably why it was taking him just a little bit longer to get home.

I was pretty sure he was planning a surprise for me. He and Hope had been up to something for weeks, and while they'd both denied it when I'd asked them, I knew both of them well enough to know that they'd been scheming.

A smile spread across my lips when I thought about all the other surprises he'd given me over the last year. Sharp might've been a total dick at first, but I was now convinced that it was only to hide the fact that he was the most romantic man on the planet.

Given half a chance, he was the guy who ran bubble baths and lit candles. He gave foot massages and watched rom-coms, and he was a complete sucker for fairy lights and dinner for two. I'd never have believed it if I hadn't been seeing it in action every day for as long as I had been.

Whatever he was up to this time, it had to be big if he'd pulled Hope into it. I'd even wondered if he was gearing up to propose, but I was pretty sure he'd have talked to me about it if he was, so it was more likely to be something else.

A few months ago, he'd asked if my passport was ready to go, so I suspected that might have something to do with it, but I just really didn't know. Butterflies flitted around in my stomach as I thought about all the possibilities of what it could be.

This last year had taught me to expect the unexpected with him, though. When Hope had told me that he'd checked the box for liking surprises, I hadn't realized quite how much he loved them—or how good he was at planning them.

It'd started on our first anniversary when he'd surprised me with the sale of Artfully Yours. At the time, I hadn't thought it could get any better than that. I'd stayed on as the manager of the gallery until a few months later, when he'd surprised me again.

There had been other surprises between, but for our six-month anniversary, he'd arrived home with yet another signed agreement of sale. This one was for a property I'd been eyeing for quite some time but hadn't yet had the courage to make an offer on.

It was a renovated warehouse that I'd thought would be perfect for my fresh start, and Sharp had bought it for me. With the money from the sale of Artfully Yours that I'd refused to take from him. I'd accepted the original amount we'd agreed to but not a penny more. Since he'd gotten quite a bit more than that when he'd sold to Fletcher instead of Adam, he'd had what he'd referred to as my *nest egg* and he kept saying he'd just been keeping it safe until I needed it.

Until month six, when he figured that I needed it to purchase the property I wanted but probably never would've had the balls to pull the trigger on. So he'd done it for me. Overjoyed, I'd personally selected my replacement for managing Artfully Yours and she and I still worked together closely, but I'd focused the majority of my attention on creating a gallery that was even better than I ever could've dreamed.

With Sharp's business know-how and contacts, Artfully Forever was thriving and, by extension, so was Artfully Yours since we were still associated with it. I'd never imagined working with Sharp by my side could be so easy or happen so seamlessly, but it had and it was.

The sudden burst of sound from my phone ringing jerked me out of my thoughts, and my heart leaped into my throat when I saw Sharp's name on the screen and realized that many more than five minutes had passed and he still wasn't home.

"Baby?" I said instead of greeting him. "Are you okay? Where are you? Adam and Ange—"

"I canceled with them. You need to get down to Artfully Forever. Now, please. Thank you. I'm fine, and I'll see you soon."

With that, he hung up and my chest felt like it was about to implode, it was so tight. He'd said that he was okay, but he didn't sound it. He sounded stressed, and if he'd told me to get to the art center, then all this had to have something to do with that.

Panicky and shaking, I almost ran straight into my sister when I grabbed my keys and rushed out the door. "Hope?

What are you doing here?"

"Sharp sent me," she said. "I'm driving you to the gallery. Come on. I'm parked right outside."

She took my arm and matched the urgency of my steps as we hurried to her car. My brain felt fuzzy, the corners of my vision blurry with tears. Hope talked to me on the ride over, but I didn't hear what she was saying.

Instead, all I heard was the rushing of blood in my ears. Thankfully, the gallery wasn't far from our place, and before I knew it, Hope was squealing to a stop in front of it. There was no blaze, thank god, so the place wasn't burning to the ground, but that wasn't much of a comfort under the circumstances.

I didn't feel her behind me as I rushed inside, but I didn't stop to see what was taking her so long. Heading straight for the stained-glass double doors, I shoved them open and burst into the space, blinking against the inky blackness I found inside.

"Sharp?" I called out, still panicked, but not so much now that I was here and everything seemed perfectly fine. If he hadn't even bothered to turn on the lights, whatever emergency he'd called me down here for couldn't be catastrophic. "Sharp? What's going on? Where are you?"

The doors closed behind me and I heard the soft snick of the lock sliding into place and stiffened. "Sharp? This really isn't funny anymore."

"It's not meant to be funny," his voice rang out from a few feet ahead of me.

Obviously, Hope must've been the one who'd locked the doors then, but what the hell were they doing?

"It's been a long time since we were in the dark together like this, alone and in love even if we can't see the person we're in love with."

I frowned, but then a slow smile tugged at my lips when I realized what he was up to. "So that's what this has all been about, huh? You're recreating our first dates for our anniversary."

“Yep,” he said, still sounding a little stressed, but his voice was getting stronger and more confident with every word he said. “I’m hoping that I’ve recreated it for more than just our anniversary, though.”

“Okay,” I said, not moving as I blinked and waited for my eyes to at least start adjusting to the dark. “What else are you recreating it for, then?”

“Our engagement,” he said casually, and I squealed, my hands flying up to my mouth as excitement shot through me like the best lightning bolt in the world. “I love you, Grace. I’ve loved you since the first time I didn’t see you and I’m going to love you for the rest of my life.”

“I can’t believe I can’t see you right now,” I murmured, and as if my words had triggered a switch, fairy lights suddenly came on and lit up the entire space.

They had been strung from every available surface, and since we didn’t usually have them in here, I assumed this was what had been keeping him earlier. Right in the center of the room was the gazebo we’d been under on our disastrous *first* fifth date, and Sharp was down on one knee underneath it.

He was dressed in a long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans instead of a suit, and his gorgeous black hair was on the messy side. Those hazel eyes latched on mine, and I smiled as he raised a velvet-lined box to show me the sparkling diamond ring inside.

“I know we haven’t talked about this recently, but I meant it when I told you before I even met you that my mother was planning a springtime wedding for us. She still is. All she needs now are the bride and groom.”

I laughed. “You did all this just so your mom’s plans wouldn’t go to waste?”

“Absolutely. She’s worked so hard on them.” He grinned at me and pushed his hair back as he rose to his feet. “On the other hand, I might’ve also done all this because you’re it for me, Grace. I knew it as soon we started talking with those godawful goggles on our faces that I would never find

someone else I connect with the way I do with you. We might've hit a few bumps along the road, but that didn't change the way I felt about you then and it sure as hell doesn't change how I feel about you now."

Tears gathered in my eyes as I finally managed to make my feet carry me toward him. As he snaked his arm around my waist and tugged me into him, he smiled and pressed a quick kiss to the very tip of my nose.

"I love you, G. Now will you please say you will marry me already?"

I looked up into those eyes I'd been captivated by since the first time I'd seen him from across the street at Artfully Yours and said the word it felt like I'd been waiting all my life to say. "Yes."

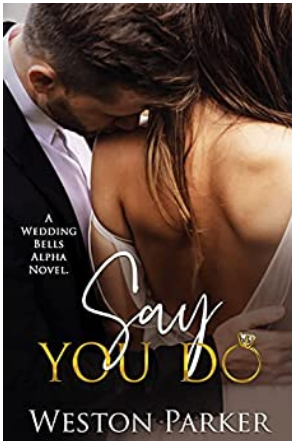
I hadn't even gotten the whole word out yet when he gave me the most brilliant grin I'd ever seen and then his mouth was on mine, kissing me until I knew that this was the real beginning of our happily ever after.

Did you just love Grace and Sharp? I've got a special Deleted Scene for you!! [Get your copy HERE!!](#)



If you loved this book, don't miss out...

Check out book 1 in the Wedding Bells Series, [Say You Do!](#)



MY BROTHER IS AN IDIOT—HE'S getting married.

And I'm in charge of getting things together since our folks are gone.

Lucky me. The guy who thinks love is for the birds and worn-out 80s songs.

I honestly don't have time for this drama. I run a billion-dollar company, have women to entertain, and am working on my plans to rule the world.

No, seriously.

And yet, when you least expect it, life kicks you in the balls.

The beautiful, snarky woman that runs the flower shop is perfect to help me pull off this wedding.

Just seeing her sends my head spinning with possibilities.

She's perfect. To play my fake wife for an event I have coming up as a side deal.

My ex-wife will be at the event, and I sure could use someone to show her how well I've done since she ripped out my soul.

So my curvy new friend gets my ring and a chunk of my wallet before agreeing to the deal.

Funny thing is, I'm not so interested in taking it back by the end of the adventure.

I'm willing to go all in on what might be the best decision of my life.

And I'm demanding the same of her. No maybes. No I-don't-knows.

No fear of what might be or might not be.

Open your pretty pink lips and utter the words.

Say you do.

I gotta have this!

Insider Group



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hey there. I'm Weston.

Have we met? No? Well, it's time to end that tragedy.

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, a dog, 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.

[Amazon KU ~ Insiders Group](#)

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[The Parker's Wicked Playground](#)

You and Me, Baby

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