



A MATCH
ME UP NOVEL

Pull
ME IN

WESTON PARKER

PULL ME IN

A MATCH ME UP NOVEL #2

WESTON PARKER

STAR KEY PRESS

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FIND WESTON PARKER



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DESCRIPTION



In the business of matchmaking and can't find love? That's me.

It's always fun to find that special someone for our client, you know, the one they ride off into the sunset with.

But me? I just get burned by the sun, stung by bees, and wind up sea sick from the boat ride.

Unfortunately my twin sister and I made a pact when we were kids regarding this 'love' thing.

If we were unmarried at thirty, we'd really go ham on trying to find Mr. Right.

So thirty showed up. Go figure. But my should-be husband is apparently lost in the universe and refuses to stop and ask for directions.

Lucky for me, my firm (the matchmaking one) is going to make me go through the process of finding my forever guy for a documentary that'll prove we're legitimate.

I'd rather swim in the sewer, but that wasn't an option.

The minute I start our 'dating in the dark' process, my mind opens to something I've never realized.

My best friend, the one that has been there all along, suddenly looked perfect. And hot.

Disturbing for sure. But soooo hot.

Now I'm stuck in the middle. Falling for my blind date and my best friend at the same time.

When it rains it pours. Apparently, men.

I have no clue who I should choose or even how I should do it.
Love has pushed me out for thirty years and now it's decided to pull me
in.

Help?!?!

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](#)

1

PORTER

Moments that changed your entire life were exceedingly rare, but as I sat there, staring at the man clacking away at his keyboard at the other side of the desk, I knew that this was one of those moments. With nothing more than a few keystrokes, he was making me a *multi-millionaire*.

As I watched, he hit enter and then it was done.

I blinked hard, entirely unsure how I was supposed to feel right now. I'd just sold the patent I'd spent the last nine years working on, and now I was richer than I'd ever been able to imagine.

David grinned as he looked away from his computer and extended his hand across the desk to shake mine. "It was a pleasure doing business with you, Porter. If you ever happen to come up with something else you'd like to sell—"

"I know who to call," I said, sliding my palm into his, knowing that I was interrupting him, but I needed to get out of here.

I didn't even know why. I just knew that I needed to *not* be sitting here anymore. "Thank you, David. I'll be in touch."

Rising quickly as soon as he released my hand, I managed to shoot him a polite grin before I strode out of his office with my head swirling and my stomach in knots. *Because seriously, what the fuck do I do now?*

What did other people do when they found out they'd just become a few dollars short of a *billionaire*? My head spun again at the thought, and I suddenly reached into my pocket for my phone. *Maybe he lied. Maybe it's not true. Maybe—*

But no.

As I stared down at the screen after logging into my bank account, the amount of zeroes staring back at me were staggering. But they also confirmed that it was real.

Unless I'm dreaming.

Reaching down, I pinched myself but the pain searing through me meant that it was not, in fact, a dream. *This is happening.*

I blinked rapidly a few times in quick succession, swallowing back the nerves that were threatening to choke me. *Hope. I need to call Hope. She'll know what to do.*

My best friend always did. Whenever anything happened in my life, she was the person I called first. It seemed only natural that I did the same now.

Feeling like I was moving in a haze, I scrolled to her number and brought my phone to my ear after hitting dial. Hope answered a few seconds later, a smile in her voice even if I knew she was probably too busy at work to make small talk with me in the middle of the day.

“Hey, you,” she said happily. “What’s up? I’m just about to run into a meeting, but—”

“I sold it,” I said, interrupting her too but needing to speak those words out loud before she disappeared to go into her meeting. “The patent, Hope. I sold it.”

Stunned silence met my announcement. Then the sound of clapping burst out from her end of the line. “Congratulations, Porter! I’m so proud of you. Wow. That’s incredible.”

“Thank you.”

She giggled softly. “You sound like you’re in shock. Can’t say I blame you, but maybe you should sit down for a minute?”

“Can’t. Need to get out of here. I...” I swallowed hard past the itchy dryness of my throat, still sort of stumbling as I tried to find my way to the street. “I don’t really know what to do right now. Tell me what to do, Hope.”

“That’s funny, you usually hate it when I tell you what to do,” she teased lightly. “If you’d really like suggestions though, you can always go get that piece of shit car of yours fixed now.”

“Hey, leave Trudy out of this. She’s innocent.”

Hope laughed. “Trudy needs to be put out to pasture before she kills you, my friend. I was going to tell you to drive her to a dealership, buy a new car, and leave her right there, but I thought I’d ease you into it. Besides, you’ll get

more for her if you patch her up a bit before you sell her.”

“I’m not selling her,” I said immediately. “Stop bashing on Trudy. That car is built on memories and dreams. She’s been there for all the big moments in our lives. I’m not getting rid of her.”

Hope sighed. “Trudy is a death trap. I know she means a lot to you, so keep her, then. Just get a new car to actually drive around in and do your daydreaming in Trudy. Just do it in your garage and, you know, maybe lose the keys in case you get tempted to take her out.”

“She’s not that bad,” I argued, but *this* was why I called Hope. Only a couple minutes into our conversation, and I was feeling more like myself than I had all day.

My mind cleared, the weird black spots disappeared from my vision, and the feeling crept back into my legs.

“She *is* that bad, Porter. That car should’ve been off the road at least half a decade ago, but I don’t know. If you don’t want to go have her fixed, why don’t you go grab a drink? Or a nap? You can probably afford to retire now, right? That’s what I would do, a nice long nap on a Thursday at noon. Sounds like heaven to me.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. Maybe I’ll have a few drinks and then grab a nap. It’s been a long-ass day, even if it is only noon.”

“Great, it’s settled then. Just in time. Hey, I’m walking into that meeting now, but how about I take you out to dinner tomorrow night to celebrate?”

Sounds like heaven to me, but instead of repeating the sentiment back to her, I shrugged even if she couldn’t see me. Maybe she could hear it and I wouldn’t sound as excited as I was. “Sure. Tell me when and where, and I’ll be there.”

“I’ll text you,” she rushed out, her voice softer now. “I’m in the conference room, honey. I’ve got to go, okay? Congratulations again! Have a great nap.”

The line went dead before I could say goodbye, but talking to her had done what I’d hoped it would. It’d put a smile on my face and ripped me out of my funk. I was a multi-millionaire now. I could do whatever the hell I wanted and no one could say a word about it.

Putting things in perspective for me was a talent of Hope’s, but I wasn’t just going to go home and take a nap. I also wasn’t going to go day-drinking by myself. Instead, I just walked around for a while. With an extra pep in my step and my hands shoved into the pockets of my slacks, I roamed the streets

of Seattle for absolutely no good reason.

In the past, when I'd seen people just randomly walking around in the middle of the day, I'd always thought it must be nice to have that kind of freedom, and now I had it, so I figured I might as well give it a try. I bought a hot dog, then an ice cream, and then a few other things from street vendors, struck up conversations with a few, and then decided that being the eccentric billionaire type wasn't for me.

It turned out that aimlessly walking around at lunch time wasn't nearly as freeing or as fun as it looked, so I headed back to Trudy and called my brother. Foster answered after a few rings, his voice echoing like he was in a parking structure or something.

"I'm just about to get in my car," he said, confirming my suspicions. "I might lose you for a few when I go down the ramp, but don't hang up. Reception will come back as soon as I clear the boom."

"Good to know," I said. "So, uh, before I lose you, I sold the patent today."

He went quiet for a beat. "You did? I didn't know the deal was that close to being done."

"It wasn't, but then David called me back last night and said he'd spoken to some of their forecasters. Asked me to come in first thing this morning."

"You sold it?"

"I sold it."

He paused again, then started hollering and whooping. "Well-fucking-done, bro! That's awesome. I'm so damn proud of you. How much did you get? Was it worth all the years you put into it?"

"Uh, yeah." I cleared my throat and loosened my tie a little when I thought back to all those digits on my screen when I'd checked my bank account. "Let's just say that it was worth it and leave it at that?"

"Sure. Okay," he said excitedly. "I'm on my way home. Want to meet me there? I'm pretty sure I've got a bottle of bubbly somewhere. We may have to stick it in the freezer for a few before we drink it, but—"

"Yes," I said, and then I realized that I'd lost him.

While I waited for him to come back, I climbed into my car and turned over the engine, but it took a few tries until the old rust bucket sparked to life. No matter what Hope said, though, I could never just abandon Trudy.

"—you there in twenty minutes?" Foster said when he came back on the line. "Porter?"

“Yeah, sure. Twenty minutes.” I pulled out of my parking spot and frowned. “Why are you leaving work so early?”

“I’m done with everything that needed to be done at the office. You know Milena. She doesn’t micro-manage. I’ve got a few emails to send and stuff like that, but she knows I’ll get it done wherever I am.”

“Well, I mean, I don’t *know* her, know her, but sure, I know her from what you and Hope have said about her.”

He chuckled. “I’ll see you in a few.”

“See you.” I disconnected the call and focused on the road, but in the back of my mind, I realized that I felt a touch envious of my own damn brother. There was no mistaking the slight pang in my gut now that he’d brought up *their* boss and I’d been reminded that he saw Hope every day.

By the time I’d parked and walked into his building though, I’d managed to shove the jealousy back in its box in the deepest recesses of my soul. No one could ever know I felt that way—not even my brother.

My brother who, when he opened his front door before I’d even knocked, beamed at me and pulled me into a back-thumping hug. “I’m blown away, man. Completely blown away. Congratulations.”

He released me and motioned me into his place, then slammed the door behind us and handed me a beer that had been waiting on his kitchen counter. “I was wrong about the bubbly, but beer is the nectar of the gods. Nothing wrong with celebrating with it.”

I nodded and took the drink, once again feeling like I was having an out-of-body experience now that my big brother was raving about the sale. Foster’s green eyes were lit up like the lights on a Christmas tree and the soft creases around them were deep as he kept grinning like a loon.

“Seriously, bro. Who thought instant voice translating earbuds would make you a fucking millionaire?”

“Uh, me?” I waggled my brows at him, trying to fake my way into feeling normal again. “On the upside, you can retire now and join me on... a cruise around the world? Backpacking through the ancient cities?”

Foster laughed, his head of dark hair dropping back as he shook it. “No thanks. I’ll pass. I happen to like my job and it’s your money, not mine. I’m not taking it.”

He started walking to his living room and I followed him, trying again in the hopes that he might bite if I tried a different approach. “It *is* my money, but what if I want to spend some of it on you? It’s not like I’ve got anyone

else to spend it on and no one I know will blow off work for a few months to come traveling with me.”

He dropped onto his sofa and kicked his feet up, cradling his beer on his flat stomach as he smirked at me. “Now that, I can help you with. You’re rich now, Porter. Sign up with Sight Unseen and I’ll match you with a woman who deserves to have you spend your money on her.”

I sat down across from him, my head shaking hard and fast. “Nope. My turn to pass. Sorry, but I don’t want anything to do with those women.”

Sighing deeply, he brought his bottle to his mouth and took a drink, his gaze thoughtful on mine. “Suit yourself, but if you change your mind, you know where to find me. I would just like to remind you that we have a proven track record, though. Our algorithm really fucking works and if you’re serious about settling down, we’re the best people to help you find the person to do it with.”

I scoffed. “Who said anything about settling down? I’m talking about traveling, brother. Is your hearing diminishing in your old age?”

Flipping me off, he laughed again and took another sip of his beer, but obviously decided to let it go. For now.

Foster had been trying to get me to sign up to the dating agency where he and Hope worked for years. I knew he wasn’t going to give up for good, and they really did have a fantastic track record, but the fact of it was that I just wasn’t interested.

The woman I wanted wasn’t signed up for Sight Unseen either and unless or until she was, I was staying far, far away from it.

“**H**ope?” My assistant’s eyes were wide as she walked into my office. “Milena is calling an emergency meeting. She wants everyone there. Pronto.”

I frowned but rolled my chair away from my desk and stood up, grabbing only my phone before I smoothed out my skirt and started for the door. “Do you know what it’s about?”

She shook her head, her long ponytail swishing behind her head with the force of the movement. “Do you think we should be worried?”

“Nah.” I flashed her a reassuring smile. “Milena’s emergency meetings are usually about ideas she wants to throw around. I’m sure everything is fine, Liz. Just breathe, okay?”

“Okay,” she agreed, but as I passed her, she tugged her lower lip into her mouth and bit.

My heartrate sped up just a bit in response, but as I strode down the corridor to the big conference room where we usually had our meetings when the whole team was involved, I forced myself to calm down. Working at Sight Unseen was a dream come true and our boss wasn’t the type to drop some horrible bomb on a Friday afternoon.

Milena was an exceptional businesswoman and one I had mad respect for. Sure, we’d been getting a bit of bad press here and there, but it was nothing new. Despite Liz’s nerves about this impromptu meeting, I was all but convinced Milena simply had another creative idea for driving clients to our site that she wanted to run by us.

Until I walked in and saw the tight, drawn expression on her face.

My footsteps faltered and my heart started racing again, but I kept a smile on my lips as I moved into the conference room and took a seat next to Foster. He bent his head toward me immediately as we waited for everyone else to shuffle in and find a spot.

“Did I miss something? I left early yesterday and now this?”

I shrugged. “Not that I’m aware of.”

As I sat back in my chair and looked to our boss standing at the head of the table, anxiety bubbled through me, making my hands tremble and my heartbeat erratic. “Guess we’re about to find out.”

He nodded and turned to her as she cleared her throat. Some of our coworkers were still tracking down a place to sit, but everyone was here and she seemed eager to get started—which was odd.

The woman never had a hair out of place, was almost dressed immaculately, and her features were always smooth and calm. Today, however, her blonde braid was a bit sloppy, she’d shucked her jacket and literally rolled up her sleeves, and as she braced her hands on the back of the chair in front of her, her skin seemed a little pale.

“I’m sure you’re all aware of the bad press we’ve been getting,” she started solemnly and my palms got all sweaty. “Late last night, I received word about an interview that is going to be aired this evening calling Sight Unseen *fake*. Since people have already been questioning the validity of our results, this interview could potentially turn us into chum for a media feeding frenzy.”

“Who gave the interview?” Foster asked when she paused.

She sighed, dipping her head forward before lifting her gaze again. “A disgruntled client who got turned down after the second date. According to the notes on the system, her suitor felt she was too much of a loose cannon and that they were in two very different places regarding the relationship. Apparently, as early as their second date, she started talking about eloping with him after the reveal which was obviously supposed to happen only three dates later. It freaked him out and he declined her request for a third.”

“Those are valid reasons, though,” I said. “Why is she trying to blame it on us?”

Milena lifted one of her narrow shoulders and shook her head. “She’s accusing us of having planted one of our employees to pretend to date her. She says that she suspected it from the start because the dates were *too good to be true* and that they had *too much in common* for him not to have been

given information and talking points about her.”

“So the algorithm matched her with someone who was perfect for her, but she moved too fast and that’s somehow our fault?” I frowned. “That doesn’t seem right.”

“No, it doesn’t, but our confidentiality agreements preclude us from sharing this information with the public.”

“Can’t we reach out to the guy and ask him to do a rebuttal interview?” Foster asked.

Milena shook her head again. “She never saw the man, remember? For all she knows, it could’ve been you. Even if her actual date does an interview, she could just say it’s not the same man. He doesn’t sound the same, or he’s lying, or any one of a million other things that will only make us look worse.”

“Okay,” Alan, another one of the client account managers, said slowly. “What do we do? If we can’t tell the truth about what happened and we can’t ask him to come out and do it for us, what’s our next step?”

“That’s what we’re here to talk about,” Milena said. “We need to come up with some ideas to prove to the public that our process, matches, and results are real. We have to show that we don’t send in employees to fake interest or relationships and we have to convince an entire online movement of naysayers that we’re not full of shit.”

“I could ask Sharp and my sister to come forward,” I suggested. “They certainly had their ups and downs during the process, but they can attest to the fact that it was very real.”

She nodded, but then gave her head a swift shake. “Let’s think about it. It’s not a bad idea asking some of our former clients to speak up on our behalf, but I’d rather not put a microscope on those two.”

My stomach sank, but she was right. Certain rules were broken during the process—by them and by me—and Milena and I had agreed never to speak of it again. Grace and Sharp were as happy as could be and I was sure they would speak about how incredible the process had been for them, but it was better not to put the fate of the company—potentially—on a couple who would have to withhold certain things if they went public.

“Moreover,” Milena continued. “Showing off some of our successful cases from the past doesn’t mean we’re not tampering with the process now. In fact, some might say that it’s *because* we had so much success initially that we’re faking it now in an attempt to keep our reputation for finding perfect matches intact.”

The more I thought about it, the more I realized she was right. Our company had appeared on the scene with a bang, grown fast, and had gained a huge chunk of the dating market's clients within the first couple of years of operation.

Our methods worked, but a lot of people outside the process were skeptical. Frankly, though I wasn't an outsider, the skeptics included me in their number. I believed in what we were doing here and I'd seen the results with my own two eyes—for my clients and even for my twin sister—but it was difficult to believe it really worked quite as well as people said it did.

“What if we document one of our client's journey's from start to finish?” I blurted as the thought struck. “We show this person signing up and going through it date by date. We'd need to iron out the details with regards to privacy and so on, but it would prove that our clients really do go in blind, and if we do interviews after every date, it would show how the relationship grows every time the couple spends time together. Even if they don't see each other while they're doing it.”

“That could work,” she said, her head tilting as she contemplated it. “We can't just roll the dice on one of the clients, though. It could turn out to be a disaster, but let's think on it.” She looked around the table. “Any other ideas?”

No one spoke up and she nodded, then clasped her hands together. “Right, then let's get back to work. If anyone comes up with anything, please bring it to me. Any time. My door is always open, but that's more especially true for this.”

As we started pushing back our chairs, she motioned to me. “Could you stay for a moment, Hope?”

“Of course.”

Foster gave me a look that said he wanted me to let him know what happened here later, but then he left us to it, filing out the room after everyone else. As soon as we were alone, Milena finally sat down in the chair she'd been gripping and folded her hands on the table.

“That was a really good idea, but we'd absolutely need to find the right person to follow,” she said, and I nodded, but it was clear that she wasn't done yet, so I didn't interrupt. “How would you feel about being the person we document?”

My eyes widened and my heart skipped, eyelids out of control as I blinked at her. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” she said with a soft smile. “I trust you, Hope. You may be an employee, but you’re smart and you’re honest. I think you would resonate with people. I doubt they’d question your integrity simply for working here once they heard you speaking. Plus, you just broke up with your boyfriend recently, right? This would allow you to jump back into dating in a safe environment.”

Shit. I shifted in my chair, wondering how best to say this without saying it in so many words. “Well, I, uh, I’m flattered, but I may not be the best candidate. Don’t get me wrong, I know the process works for other people, but I’m not sure it would work for *me.*”

“You’re perfect, then.” She grinned and perked up even more, making surprise ricochet through me, but before I could ask why my doubts made me perfect for the job, she explained. “A real skeptic as well as someone I can trust not to ruin our reputation by acting nuts and suggesting elopement after spending a couple of hours with the other person.”

I almost grunted when it dawned on me that she was actually being serious. She wasn’t pissed at me for having doubts, and judging by the excitement brightening her eyes right now, she really did actually want me to be the one to publicly validate the company’s methods. “Can, uh, can I think about this over the weekend?”

She nodded. “Of course. Think about it and give me good news on Monday, okay?”

“Have a good weekend,” I said, rising so fast that my thigh knocked into the table and I winced. She chuckled but didn’t say anything as I spun around and hobbled out of the room.

Mind racing, I went back to my office and packed up to head out to my dinner with Porter. *Thank God she left that to the end of the day.*

There was no way I’d be able to keep working with *that* proposal on my mind. *Also, thank God I’m meeting Porter for dinner instead of anyone else. Even Grace.*

She’d encourage me to go for this so hard, we’d probably have signed me up together within the first hour of seeing each other tonight. Porter, on the other hand, had big news to celebrate. He was also the only person I could be completely myself around and who I wouldn’t have to pretend to that this didn’t scare the crap out of me—and that was *if* it even came up.

Considering what we were celebrating, it was unlikely we’d even get around to talking about what was going on with me. Which was perfect.

As I walked into the restaurant and caught sight of his copper-tinted brown hair, a relieved smile formed on my lips. My best friend and his easy smiles, sparkling blue eyes, and sharp wit were exactly what I needed tonight.

One day, I would set him up with the woman who would knock him right off his big feet, but for now, I was happy to have him all to myself. *Fuck knows, I really just need a friend right now.*

3

PORTER

“Hey, uh, did something happen to Hope at work yesterday?” I asked Foster as I handed him a freshly brewed cup of coffee. “She seemed off at dinner last night, but she just kept diverting the topic back to me and my plans for the future when I asked.”

He frowned, sitting down in my breakfast nook while I went to switch on the oven to reheat the food I’d ordered in. “Nothing happened with her specifically. We had a meeting and Milena asked her to stay behind, but I don’t know what they talked about. I tried calling her last night, but she didn’t pick up.”

Another ripple of jealousy ran through me. “What was the meeting about?”

He shrugged. “We’re getting some bad press. People don’t believe that the process or the matches are real, and it all came to a head with an interview that was broadcast last night. I think our track record speaks for itself and that this will all blow over, but we’re trying to come up with ideas of how to help it blow over faster.”

“What have you come up with?”

After swallowing the sip of coffee he’d just taken, he sighed. “Hope came up with the only real idea, which was to ask one of our clients to be part of a documentary that would follow them through the process and prove the legitimacy of it all.”

I frowned as I thought it over. “It’s a good idea, but what if the relationship doesn’t work out? Then you’ve got a documentary showing how the process failed.”

His nose wrinkled. “Yeah. That’s a good point. It didn’t come up in the meeting, but Milena let us go just after because no one had any better ideas. We’re supposed to think about it and go to her with anything that comes up. Hope did mention there would be issues to iron out before we went ahead with it. Maybe this was one of them.”

“Yeah, maybe.” *But why didn’t she mention any of this to me?* “It is a good idea, and if you knew for a fact you had a successful couple on your hands, that’d be great, but there are never any guarantees, and if it goes the other way, it seems to me like it could be pretty detrimental to the company.”

“Yeah, I know, but on the other hand, it would still show that it’s all real and that it doesn’t *always* work out, which is true. I’ll run it by Hope and Milena next week, though. Thanks, Porter.”

As I refilled my mug and bent over to check the bacon and omelets just starting to sizzle on the pan in the oven, I cursed under my breath. If Hope had just told me about this last night, I could’ve told her about my concerns already and I could’ve helped her try to iron them out.

While I was no genius, I did have a little something between my ears, and better yet, I was an outsider. Generally, we were the best people to soundboard this kind of thing with. We weren’t so blinded by the inside perspective that we couldn’t see the potential pitfalls.

Plus, as a skeptic of their whole business model, I’d have made for a pretty decent devil’s advocate. *So why wouldn’t she have told me?*

Instead, we spent the entire dinner talking about a whole lot of nothing. She just kept smiling and asking me about my plans. *Are you going traveling? Are you buying a new place? Have you looked at other cars yet?*

I sighed as I straightened up and grabbed an oven mitt to get our breakfast out. *I should’ve known something was going on with her. Hell, I did know something was going on with her.*

Hope only ever got quiet and noncommittal about talking to me about her own stuff when there were things she didn’t want to say. Otherwise, she gave me a full rundown of her entire week as soon as I asked how she was, down to every last detail of where she’d stopped for coffee and what the office gossip was.

Last night, those pretty green eyes had seemed almost faraway at times, and she’d simply shrugged whenever I tried to draw her into conversation about anything other than myself. *We’re celebrating you, Porter. This isn’t about me.*

Foster cleared his throat, yanking me out of my thoughts as he looked at me expectantly. “My offer stands, you know. If you want to sign up, I’ll make sure you get a great match regardless of what else we’ve got going on. I’d ask you to be the client we follow, but I know you’re going to say no.”

“Give it up already.” I gripped the pans tight as I slid some bacon and then an omelet onto each of our waiting plates. “I’m never going to say yes to this, Foster. Never. There isn’t a woman in the world I could spend every day with and not get annoyed. I—”

My phone rang and I set the pans down to pull it out of my pocket. I showed Foster I needed a minute as I took the call and pressed the phone to my ear. “Hey, Hope. What’s up?”

“Good morning,” she said, but she still sounded flat. “I wanted to apologize for being so boring last night. We were celebrating and my head just wasn’t in the game. I’m sorry.”

“No worries,” I said easily, even if there were worries. Lots of them. “Want to tell me what was going on with you? You seemed upset about something.”

She hesitated. “Well, I’m not upset, but that’s the other reason I’m calling. I need to give Milena answers on Monday and I was wondering if I could get your thoughts about something?”

“Sure,” I said. “Want to come over now? Foster and I are having breakfast at my place. I could make you a plate?”

“No, thanks. You guys do you. I’m going to a comedy-brunch with Grace and Sharp. I have no idea what it is, but she said it would be fun. Sharp loves the comedian who’s performing.”

“Sharp actually loves something other than Grace?” I joked. “Or is he trying to buy the restaurant and using the comedian as an excuse to get in?”

She chuckled, but even that didn’t sound right. “I don’t know. I suppose he could be trying to buy it, but with him, that’s always a possibility. What are you doing tomorrow? Could we grab a coffee and talk?”

“Only if you’re buying,” I teased, but then immediately conceded. “Actually, I’ll buy. I can afford the fancy cappuccinos now.”

“You’ve always been able to afford those, but fine. I guess you can afford the really fancy ones now. I’m still buying, though. You’re letting me pick your brain and I need to make up for being such bad company last night.”

“Agree to disagree. I don’t care that you were bad company, but I do care about whatever it is that’s bothering you. What’s going on? If you give me a

hint or two, I can think about it before we meet up.”

“I know, but I’d rather tell you in person. I want to see your face when I say it so that I can gauge just how crazy of an idea it is.”

“I literally just made a ton of money off a crazy idea,” I said. “I’m hardly the person who’s going to think any idea is *too* crazy.”

“Wait until you hear this one,” she muttered. “It’s insane. Your earbuds were genius-insane, and then innovative-insane when you started fine-tuning them to give them an edge over the others. This is just loony-bin insane. There’s a difference.”

“Are we supposed to be calling it a loony bin?” I joked in an attempt to make her smile even if I wouldn’t be able to see it. “Isn’t it just supposed to be called a psychiatric hospital these days?”

“Usually, yes, but this idea doesn’t deserve a hospital. It deserves a loony bin.”

“If it’s that crazy, why do you want to run it by me? Why not just turn it down?”

A brief moment passed before she responded. “Well, uh, there’s a lot riding on it and I came up with the basic premise, so I figure it deserves some thought and at least a conversation.”

I frowned as everything Foster said about their meeting flashed in my mind. “Work stuff?”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “So tomorrow morning?”

“Eight thirty,” I agreed. “Hey, Hope?”

“Yeah?”

I stopped moving for a minute and looked out at the gray sky outside, pondering Sight Unseen’s dilemma and squeezing my phone to my ear with my shoulder as I picked up our plates. “If it’s work stuff, don’t let it bother you so much. We’ll figure it out, but just have some fun with Grace and Sharp today, okay? This is business. It’s not personal.”

“You’d think so,” she sort of agreed eventually, not sounding at all convinced. “Say hi to Foster for me. Oh, and tell him I’m sorry I missed his call. My phone was in my purse the whole night and I didn’t see he’d tried me until after I got home, but it was too late to call him back.”

I nodded. “Sure, I’ll tell him.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.” I carried our plates to the breakfast nook before releasing the phone and letting it slide into my hand after setting my plate down.

My brother smirked at me. “What was that all about?”

“Hope wants to talk,” I said as I sat down. “I think it’s about that meeting you guys had, but I guess I’ll find out tomorrow.”

Foster arched an eyebrow, the corners of his lips curved slightly upward as he stared at me from across the table with a knowing gleam in his eyes. “So there’s not *one* woman in this world you could spend every day with and not get annoyed, huh? The statement would’ve packed a lot more punch if you didn’t drop everything to take that call before the words were even cold.”

I rolled my eyes at him and picked up a fork to jab it into my eggs. When I looked up as I shoved the bite into my mouth and found him still staring at me with that stupid look on his face, I swallowed hard and shook my head.

“She has no interest in a relationship with me, bro. Let it go.”

“And you with her?” he asked, forehead puckering as he kept his gaze on mine.

I didn’t dignify his question with a response. The point was that she wasn’t interested in me romantically. It was what it was, and we were leaving it at that.

4

HOPE

Porter knocked on my door at precisely eight thirty, holding up two takeout mugs of the fancy coffee from the place around the corner when I opened the door. “Surprise!”

I groaned, but stepped out of the way to let him in. “I thought I was buying. Wasn’t the plan for you to come here and then we’d take a walk to the coffee place?”

He shrugged, those ever-twinkling blues locked on mine as he brushed past me and handed over one of the coffees. “What’s the use of a plan if you can’t change it?”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure you misquoted that.” I smiled as I shut the door and turned to follow him. “A mind can and should be changed. A plan, however, is useless if it’s just going to change anyway.”

“Nah.” He ran a hand through that coppery-brown hair and turned to wink at me. “Plans have to be capable of evolving with the circumstances. It’s when they’re cast in stone that they’re often useless.”

He faced forward again and didn’t stop walking until he was in my living room. Setting his coffee down on the table, he dropped into the armchair he favored and kicked his feet up next to his coffee. “So, now that we have the obligatory caffeine, we can jump straight into it. What’s going on at work that made you shut me out the other night?”

“I didn’t shut you out.” I scoffed and pushed his shoes off my table before sitting down on the sofa next to the armchair. “Make yourself at home, why don’t you? You know the rules, though. No feet on my coffee table. Shouldn’t your mother have taught you that?”

“Well, I mean, she tried.” A grin broke out across his face as he wagged his eyebrows at me. “What are you gonna do, call her on me?”

“I just might,” I retorted. “I’m about due for a chat with her anyway. She and I need to talk about how we’re going to keep the gold-diggers away from you now that you’ve got a shiny new bank account.”

A strange look passed over his objectively handsome features before he blinked it away and smirked. “Nah, you don’t have to worry about that with me. I’m not interested in dating and I’m definitely not interested in dating someone who’s *suddenly* interested in dating me once news of the sale hits the airwaves.”

“The crazies are definitely going to start coming out of the woodwork now,” I warned. “You’ll be careful, right?”

He looked into my eyes for a long beat before he nodded. “Sure, I’ll be careful. Speaking of crazies, what did you want to run by me?”

As I looked back at him, I was torn between impressing upon him that I wasn’t just being overprotective or telling him what I needed to tell him. The thing about Porter was that he legitimately did not know how hot he was.

Again, that’s an objective fact. It’s really not just me.

If we hadn’t met and become friends a decade ago, I myself might’ve made a move on him, but just because he was only a friend to me didn’t mean other women wouldn’t try to take advantage of him. With that reddish-brown hair, the beautiful blues, and a tall, fit frame dripping with ink, the guy was a catch.

It certainly didn’t hurt that he was also the smartest person I knew *and* that he wasn’t obnoxious about how brilliant he was. With the considerable sum he’d made off selling his patent, he was definitely going to be in for a heck of a ride when he started dating again.

For the last few years, he’d been so immersed in his invention that he hadn’t bothered much with women, but now? I didn’t know, but he really did need to be careful.

Dating and more specifically, sex, were the only things we didn’t really talk about. We’d figured out early on that if we wanted to remain good friends and not let things become awkward or complicated, we needed to stick to safer topics. And that was exactly what we’d done for the better part of ten years.

So do I give him a quick lecture, or do I just move on?

“There’s steam coming out of your ears, you know?” he teased, and I

sighed.

Move on, it is. I can always circle back later.

“Did Foster tell you what’s been going on at work?” I asked, leaning back against the sofa and wrapping my fingers around the warm cup.

Porter dipped his chin in a nod as the expression in those blues sharpened the way it always did when he focused. “You mean the bad press?”

“Yep.”

“Then yes, he did. He also told me you came up with the idea of making a documentary of the process following one of your clients.”

“Yeah, I did.” I closed my eyes, saying the next part quickly since I figured it was better to just rip off the band-aid. “Milena wants it to be me that will be filmed. She wants it to be my experience with the program that we make a documentary of.”

When I opened my eyes again, he was gaping at me and I cringed. “What? Is it really such a bad idea? I mean, I know it’s crazy, but she said—”

His gaze swept thoughtfully across my face as he shook his head. “It’s not actually so crazy at all, but I guess I just didn’t expect you to sign up. When did you sign up?”

“Oh, no. I haven’t signed up. Really.” I made my eyes big at him. “That’s why this is so crazy. I’ve never even thought about signing up myself. Grace has been bugging me about it because of the pact, but—”

“Pact?” He frowned. “What pact?”

I felt the heat creeping to my cheeks as I sighed. “We, uh, we made this silly pact when we were kids that if we weren’t married by the time we turned thirty, we would really put ourselves out there and that we’d help each other do it.”

Porter’s eyes grew until they were just as big as mine. “That’s how you convinced her to sign up?”

“Yep, and the problem is that now that I’m single, it’s all she can talk about.”

His head rocked from side to side, his chiseled features strangely tight until he nodded and gave me a sympathetic grin. “To be fair, you bugged her about it too and it worked out pretty well for her. It makes sense that she’d be on your ass about it now.”

“Yeah, but I just got out of a pretty difficult relationship a couple months ago. It’s different for me. I *have* been putting myself out there. I just haven’t found the proverbial, elusive *one*. Meanwhile, Grace was always so caught

up in the gallery that she wasn't dating before at all."

He hooked his ankle over his knee and gave me a long, quiet look before he finally reached for his coffee. "You know I'm not a fan of what you guys do over there at Sight Unseen. It's fucking unnatural to expect people to fall in love with someone they can't see, but that set aside, if you're not ready to date again, just tell Milena."

"I can't." I groaned. "It was my idea and she's right that we can't trust just anyone with this. It's too important. If I thought she was going to ask me to do it, I don't think I'd have given her the idea at all, but I don't know. Maybe it will be good for me."

"To date someone in the dark, only see their face on the fifth date if you even make it that far, and have the fate of the company riding on your relationship?"

"Well, when you say it like that..." I huffed out a breath through my nostrils. "She wants an answer from me tomorrow and I have no idea what to do. I do need to put myself out there again at some point, and I know we don't usually talk about this stuff, but I can't just bury myself in work for the rest of my life. On the other hand, dating in the dark is crazy. It works for some people, but I don't know if I just can't care about what someone looks like."

My shoulders slumped as unhappiness and embarrassment set in. "Does that make me shallow?"

"No." He shook his head immediately as a scoff fell out of him. "God knows, I don't know either how people make that kind of time commitment to someone they can't see, but if you're ready to start dating again, you could always give it a try."

"But if it doesn't work out and they're making a documentary of it, the company looks horrible."

"Yeah, I had the same thought, but at the end of the day, at least people will see that it's real." He squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. "What do you want to do, Hope? We can go back and forth about this all day, but what is it that you actually want from me? Encouragement or a good excuse to turn it down?"

"I don't know," I mumbled, shaking my head as uncertainty clawed at my insides. "That's the thing. I don't have a solid answer. All I know is that I want the company to keep doing well and I want the critics to be shut up by a real experience, but I don't just want some random guy in the dark either."

Porter mulled it over, chewing the inside of his cheek until he waved the hand not holding his coffee. “I can’t tell you what to do here, babe, but I can tell you that this is the same company that has made the magic happen for hundreds of couples. Your sister and Sharp included, and they fucking hated each other outside of that room at first. If you want it to happen for you, then maybe you need to go along with this. Just like all your clients have done. Everyone is probably scared and skeptical going into this.”

“Yeah, but they’re open to giving it a try. I don’t know if I am.”

Bringing his gaze directly to mine, he dropped his head slightly to the left and got serious. “That’s probably the most important part of what you’ve said so far. If you do decide to do this, you have to give it a real try. You can’t go in there thinking that you’re going to fool anyone, especially if they’re going to make a documentary about it. Do it or don’t do it, but be honest. If you try it and your first date is a dud, say it. If you don’t want to try it with an open mind, tell Milena you’re not ready to put that kind of faith in the process.”

“I can’t do that,” I squeaked. “I love my job. I don’t want her to think I don’t believe in it.”

He snorted. “She knows that everyone is a skeptic, honey. That woman is a lot of things, but stupid isn’t one of them. She’s a damn good businesswoman and she’s standing behind her idea even if it’s an uphill battle to get other people to believe in it too.”

“I know, and the crazy part about it is that it does actually work. I’ve seen it work so many times.”

“Exactly,” he said, like that sorted everything out. “She also trusts you to be honest, and as long as you’re real, people will believe what you say. That’s why she asked you and that’s why I’m telling you that if you’re going to do it, then do it. But do it right.”

I inhaled a deep breath and held it in my lungs for a long minute. This was utterly insane, but he was right. About everything. Milena had asked me to do it knowing that I was a skeptic and somehow thinking that was a good thing.

Over and above all that, I was single, I had made that damn pact with my sister, and there was really nothing holding me back. “Okay, I’m going to do it.”

“You are?” Surprise flickered behind his eyes. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” I said as an unexpected smile broke free on my lips. “Thanks for putting things in perspective for me. I knew it would help to talk

to you, and again, I'm sorry about Friday. I didn't mean to make you feel like I was shutting you out."

"Hey, that's what friends are for, right?"

As he said it, I nodded my agreement, but that was also part of my problem. I was never going to find a guy I was as comfortable around as I was with Porter. I was also never going to find someone who knew me as well as he did or someone who just got me the way he did.

But no. I need to keep an open mind. He's right about that. If I'm going to do this, I need to be open to giving it a real try. And who knew? Maybe the company would find someone who changed my mind.

"While we're on the topic, why don't you sign up too? We could compare no—"

"No," he said categorically and without leaving any room for the debate. "If you are going to do it, do it, but leave me out of it. There is absolutely no way you're dragging me into this with you."

I sighed, but I didn't push him on it. Foster and I both loved working at Sight Unseen, but Porter just wasn't a fan. Not of our company and not of dating agencies in general.

Even though I knew he had casual hookups occasionally—not because he'd told me, but because he'd alluded to it every now and then—I also knew he preferred to meet people the old-fashioned way.

So while it would've been fun to have someone I could lean on during this process and compare notes with after our dates, I was barking up the wrong tree. At the end of the day, Porter was going to go about entering the dating pool in his own way, and me?

I was about to grab my lady-balls and jump in.

What the fuck is she about to get herself into?

As I left Hope's house, that was the only thing I could think about. *What is she getting herself into, and how do I make sure she doesn't get screwed over while doing it?*

Frankly, I'd been monstrously surprised when she'd said she was going to go through with it. When I'd met Hope at college, she'd had a boyfriend. Then again, Hope had pretty much always had a boyfriend, but by the time she had broken up with this particular boyfriend, we'd become friends and I hadn't wanted to risk losing her by making a move.

One time, while she'd been lamenting her status as the only single one in her group of friends, I'd suggested she join a dating app. She'd literally laughed at me.

When Foster had started working at Sight Unseen and I'd told her about it, she'd been fascinated by the idea, and since she'd taken a few classes in psychology, she'd been particularly interested in that aspect of the Sight Unseen model. My friend didn't have a creative bone in her body, but she had an uncanny knack for talking to people and really listening. Really hearing them and then devising ways to help them.

She'd majored in marketing, but she was never going to be the woman who came up with the actual campaigns. She was, however, the person you wanted devising the strategy to get people to buy into your campaign.

All of which was to say that when she applied for a job at a dating service even though she didn't believe in using them herself, it'd seemed like the perfect fit. She knew people and how to help them market themselves, as well

as how to help them nail down exactly what they wanted. She was strong with administrative work and she played well with others.

I did *not*, however, see this coming. Not ever. *Perhaps I should have. Work somewhere long enough and eventually, you're going to drink the Kool Aid, right?*

As I climbed into my car, I yanked my phone out of my pocket and practically punched my thumb down on Foster's number. When he picked up, I spun my tires out of my parking spot and raced down Hope's quiet, residential street.

"Hey, Porter," he said lazily. "What's up?"

"What's up is that I'm on my way to you," I grumbled. "Why didn't you tell me Hope was the person they wanted to make the documentary about?"

"What?" He yawned. "I didn't tell you because I didn't know. Look, I only just opened my eyes. Let me grab a shower and some coffee, and we'll talk when you get here?"

I blew out a breath. "Sure. I'll see you in a few."

Dropping the phone on my passenger seat, I gripped the gearshift in one hand and white-knuckled the steering wheel with the other. *This is a fucking nightmare. Why the hell would she put herself through this and why didn't I stop her?*

Unfortunately, I knew the answer to that last question. I hadn't stopped her because I thought she'd stop herself, and I hadn't wanted it to look like I was a jealous prick who was trying to keep her from possibly meeting the love of her life.

Fuck!

All the way to Foster's, I kept replaying my conversation with her in my head and trying to think up any scenario in which this worked out well for me. At best, I was the meddlesome best friend who wouldn't get along with any man trying to weasel his way into her life, and at worst, he pushed me out of it because of that.

But seriously, what kind of loser do you have to be to want someone to get to know you before they see you? I was the king of nerds and not even I had resorted to that. *Yeah, tell that to all the hundreds of people who have found love through this process.*

Logically, I knew that it wasn't only people who had hangups about their physical appearance who signed up for stuff like this.

But logic and reason had left the building at this point.

I was pissed off at myself for letting Hope get herself into a situation that had the potential of ending badly for her on all fronts. Personally, she could get her heart broken or look like a cold-hearted bitch on TV if she eventually turned the guy down. Professionally, she could get blamed for bringing the company down with her if her relationship crashed and burned.

Yeah, and sure. At least people will see that it's real and blah-fucking-bl

“Porter?” Foster frowned when he opened his door after I banged on it. “Uh, can I ask you a question real quick?”

I grunted, blinking myself out of my baleful thoughts. “What?”

“Why do you look like you want to kick someone?”

“Because I do,” I admitted as I marched around him and then scrubbed my hands over my face, breathing in and out until I felt a little calmer.

When I looked at him again once I'd dropped my hands, he gave me another questioning frown. “Is this about Hope being the client they're going to follow for the documentary? I didn't even know she was a client or I'd have told you, obviously, but she's a great candidate for this.”

“Sure.” I spun on my heels and headed for his kitchen. *Caffeine, I need caffeine or I'm never going to get through this without taking it out on him.*

Foster's footsteps padded after me, but he didn't say anything for a long minute as I banged around his cabinets finding a mug and the instant crap he liked. “Not for nothing, bro, but are you okay?”

“Fine.”

He chuckled as he cocked his hip against his counter and watched me stomp around, huffing and puffing and not fucking blowing anything down. “This *is* about Hope, isn't it?”

I braced my palms on his counter and screwed my eyes shut, breathing in and out again while I waited for his kettle to boil. “No, it's not. I was surprised, is all. She caught me off guard. I'm fine. She's fine. I wish her all the best. I hope it works out for her.”

“Bullshit.” He chuckled again. “Are you really going to make me pull it out of you, or are we just going to skip to the part where you finally admit how you feel about her?”

My arms flew up to cross over my chest as I spun to face him, but as I looked at my brother, I realized he already knew. He had known for a long time, and he was right. I wasn't going to make him pull it out of me any more than I already had.

“Fine. Okay? Fine. You’re right. This is about Hope. I really don’t like that she’s going to be part of this.”

His eyes narrowed slightly as he nodded. “Sure, but why? Hope’s dated before. A lot, actually. She’s a serial monogamist. She loves relationships like you love coffee. Why are you so freaked out about it this time?”

I glowered at him. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

I threw my arms out to my sides. “If she finds someone serious, I’m out, Foster. No man is going to let his future wife have a single guy as her best friend. A lot of her boyfriends have tried, but they didn’t succeed because they didn’t have the balls to follow through. If she finds someone who does...”

My heart hammered, my chest heaving on deep breaths as I trailed off and dragged a finger against the base of my throat.

Foster stared at me, nostrils flaring in surprise. “At least we’re finally getting somewhere. Why don’t you tell me how you really feel?”

I snorted. “It doesn’t matter how I feel. All that matters is that as much as I think it’s bullshit, she’s going to do it, and let’s face it, you guys have a decent success rate. I’m going to lose her because of this.”

“Or I could go in and make you her match,” he joked. “If you were interested in signing up, of course, which you’re not but—”

“Do it,” I said before I could even really wrap my head around what I was saying. All I knew was that desperation was swirling around my insides, making my organs feel like they were on fire.

Foster’s jaw dropped and his throat worked as he blinked at me. “What? Are you serious?”

“I’m serious,” I said. “Sign me up. Let’s do it. Where’s your laptop? Or is it a mobile-friendly page?”

As I reached into my pocket for my phone, he shook his head at me. “Aren’t most of these sites mobile-friendly? Anyway, ours is but let’s just stop and think for a second, shall we? I was joking, Porter. If we do this and she finds out, it could be the end of your friendship.”

“Yeah, but I’ve been worried about our friendship for so long that I might’ve already lost her. I’m not taking that chance again. I can’t. It’s time to pull my head out of my ass and fucking do something, and this is perfect. I will *not* lose her if I can help it, and if this is what I have to do to keep her, sign me up. For real.”

“Uh, okay. Little problem. As soon as you start talking, she’s going to recognize your voice. She may not be able to see you, but that won’t matter. She’ll know who you are as soon as you open your mouth and, uh, you kind of have to talk on the dates. There’s no way around it.”

“So I’ll change my voice,” I said, then lowered it as far as I could. “Like this?”

He shook his head and laughed. “No, you sound like someone trying not to be recognized and the thing is that when you’re deprived of one sense, the others kick into overdrive. If you can’t make it sound natural, she’ll know.”

“How about this?” I made my voice several octaves higher. “Does this work?”

“Only if you want her to think you’re sitting on your balls.”

I sighed. “Fine. Close your eyes. I’ll try a few and you’ll tell me which one is unrecognizable but natural.”

It took fifteen minutes and him giving me a lot of shit, but eventually, he snapped his fingers. “That one. It should be sustainable and it’s only a tiny bit lower than normal, so it doesn’t sound too unnatural.”

“Okay,” I agreed, shaking my hands out at my sides and bouncing on the balls of my feet. “Are we doing this, then?”

“I’ll take care of it, but if this blows up in our faces, I won’t hesitate to toss you under the bus.”

I sighed. “Thanks. Just do it, okay? If this blows up in our faces, I’m going to have bigger problems than you chucking me under the bus.”

Like losing my best friend. For good. *But what choice do I have? I could lose her either way.*

As I picked up my cooling coffee, however, my brain struggled to catch up with what I’d just agreed to. I’d met Hope ten *fucking* years ago and I’d had a crush on her for just as long. Hell, I’d started crushing on her before I’d even met her.

By the time we actually started talking, I’d been halfway in love with her if I was being honest. Since then, it wasn’t just halfway anymore.

Not that I’d ever told anyone that. I never thought I would, either, but something had changed today. Something drastic and scary.

I was forced to confront the prospect of life without her. Forced to put myself out there even if it wasn’t a pact making me do it.

For ten years, I’d hidden how I felt about her, and now, I had the chance to date her. To be the one who won her heart—possibly for good. And

besides, if it didn't work out, the only thing I had to lose was my best friend and my heart—and anyone who cared to watch would be able to see it happen.

“So, uh, the coffee is going to have to step aside,” I said as I set the mug down. “Have you got any alcohol around here?”

6

HOPE

Nerves skittered down my spine as I walked into Milena's office and shut the door firmly behind me. My palms were too moist for comfort—*urgh, I hate that word. Moist*—and my heart was beating so hard I felt a little sick, but I was here and I was doing this.

My boss smiled when she glanced away from her computer and saw me. “Hope? You're here early. I wasn't expecting you to come to me. I was quite convinced I was going to have to track you down sometime this afternoon to get an answer out of you. Just give me a minute to wrap this up, okay?”

“Sure,” I said, discreetly wiping my hands on my ass as I walked across her office and settled in the chair opposite her desk.

While she turned back to her computer and her fingers clattered across the keys, I tried to distract myself by looking around. It didn't work because almost every surface in her office was covered by flowers she'd been sent by grateful clients, all the walls held pictures of the weddings of those we'd brought together, and she even had framed letters of recommendation from some of the more influential clients we'd had.

Every inch of her office was an ode to her success and, with it, a reminder of what she stood to lose if I failed. I swallowed hard, but my throat and my mouth remained bone dry. *Maybe I should just—*

“So,” Milena said, cutting into my thoughts as she turned away from her screen again and gave me another smile. “What have you decided?”

The knots in my stomach grew knots, but if Grace had done this, then so could I. “I'll do it.”

“That's wonderful news,” she said happily, positively beaming at me as

she nodded. “Thank you, Hope. This is going to be amazing, and I promise you, it’s all going to be done very tastefully and very real.”

“Uh, okay.”

She was still smiling as she picked up her landline. “Let me get the film crew in here so you can meet them.”

My heart stammered to a stop. “The, uh, the film crew? They’re already here?”

She set the phone back down in the receiver and exhaled softly as she lowered her chin in a nod. “They’re taking a tour of the building at the moment. After the backlash from that interview over the weekend, I got advice from a few people and they agreed I should make this happen as fast as I can. One of my contacts put me in touch with this crew and they came in early this morning to do an interview with me.”

As I blinked at her much too fast and way too many times, I swore even my stomach dried up. “Shit. They’re already here.”

Milena gave me an understanding smile. “Let’s talk for a minute before I ask them to come meet you.”

“Okay,” I agreed, the dryness of my throat and mouth making my voice raspy.

Milena put two and two together and got up to pull two bottles of water out of the little fridge in the corner. She handed one over, then waved me to the sitting area against her floor-to-ceiling windows. As I joined her there, she took a sip of her water and waited for me to take a long swallow of my own before she spoke again.

“I’m sorry, Hope. I should’ve suggested that we talk before I mentioned the film crew.” For a moment, she looked exhausted and much older than her thirty-six years. “I got excited. It’s just been a really long weekend and I was hoping you would come through.”

“I stayed offline this weekend,” I admitted. “I knew it would only upset me if I looked and I have trouble not engaging with trolls.”

She chuckled, but it was a tired, almost halfhearted one. “I should’ve done the same, but I couldn’t. A few reporters called me for comment after the interview aired and even my lawyers set up a meeting to discuss it on Saturday morning.”

When she closed her eyes, I noticed the dark smudges underneath them, but as she opened them again, she smiled. “That being said, this isn’t your responsibility. If you’re not sure about this, I understand.”

“No, I want to do it,” I admitted. “I don’t think it’s going to be easy, especially with a film crew around, but I’m ready. My last boyfriend put me through the damn wringer and I want to meet someone I can build a future with.”

Her smile widened. “In that case, you’ve come to the right place.”

I laughed nervously and fidgeted with my hands in my lap. “I know. You’ll take it easy on me, though, right?”

“Never,” she promised with a glint of determination creeping into those weary eyes. “I will find you the right match, though. You’re a good person, Hope. I know you’ve been let down by your romantic partners in the past, but we’re going to do our best to find you someone who will take your heart and guard it with his life.”

“Sounds good,” I joked. “For the film crew, right?”

“No, not only for them,” she said gently. “You’re a client now and you’re about to find out exactly how much that means to us, but more than that, how much what you’re doing means to *me*.”

Sitting up a little straighter, I tried to keep my hands still as my stomach did its best to crawl up the back of my throat. “You gave them an interview already?”

She nodded. “First thing this morning, and you don’t have anything to worry about. You’ll only be filmed on the days you’re going on these dates. Other than that, you’ll only see them when you give interviews from time to time to update viewers about the experience so far.”

“Uh, okay. Sure.” *If my heart starts beating any faster, I’m going to faint.* “I guess you should call them, then. Let’s get this over with before I lose my breakfast all over your carpet.”

She chuckled. “You don’t have to be so nervous, Hope. I promise. The crew is nice and none of this is going to be broadcast live. I spent the entire afternoon yesterday preparing them. They know and understand what we need and they’ll guide you through the interviews. All you need to do is to be honest.”

“How was your interview?”

She shrugged. “It was fine. The next one will be better now that I know you’re onboard. As it was, this morning was just me giving them a snapshot of the company, them getting some footage of the rooms the dates happen in, and so on. Things will definitely start taking shape from here on out.”

I nodded as she rose and told her assistant to ask them to come back to

her office, and then I listened for the next few minutes as she explained what she'd already told them. I really hadn't expected things to move this fast, but at the same time, Milena wasn't one to let grass grow under her feet.

Once she decided on doing something, she made it happen. It made sense that she'd feel even more of a sense of urgency now. I, on the other hand, only felt sick. When I'd decided to say yes, I thought I had weeks to prepare myself and now the film crew was already on their way to her office.

They appeared a few moments later, a lot less intimidating than I thought they would be. The crew consisted of only two women, Tina and Tracy, and after Milena introduced me, Tina sat down and Tracy lifted the camera.

"So, Hope, you're an employee here at Sight Unseen, and given everything people have been saying about the company, you've decided to let us document your own journey through this process. Is that correct?"

"Uh, yes," I said, nodding enthusiastically as Milena grinned at me from behind Tracy. "I'm so excited for people to get to see how we work. They're saying we plant participants and arrange fake dates, but that's just not true. We introduce people to the loves of their lives, and I'm so ready to meet—"

"Can I interrupt for a minute?" my boss asked, looking at Tina who nodded in response. Milena cocked her head at me and sighed. "That was great, Hope. A touch overly enthusiastic, though. I get what you're trying to do and I appreciate it, but this is real. Be real. I don't want you saying anything you don't feel or anything dishonest. Our process will speak for itself once we get started."

I blinked too many times again, then swallowed the last tiny bit of spit I could find and glanced back at Tina. "Okay, yes. I am an employee here and I have decided to let you document my own journey through the process."

"How are you feeling about it?"

"Um, can I be honest?" She nodded even if it'd been rhetorical, and I dragged in a deep breath as I prepared myself to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. "I'm really nervous. Don't get me wrong, I love working here and I adore being part of the process that has seen so many of my clients fall in love, but I'm just not sure it's for me."

I let my lids slide shut for a moment and I drew in another big breath. "It's really scary to think that I'm about to embark on a journey where I'm going to be opening myself up to falling in love with someone I've never seen before."

Tina nodded, completely focused on me and not saying a word as she

motioned for me to carry on.

“It’s also scary to know that while I’m spending time with them, there won’t be any phones or distractions. The real world won’t be able to get in the way of us getting to know each other, and I know from my experience with my clients that the kind of intense one-and-one time people have on these dates makes the layers melt away a lot faster than they do in traditional dating. I’m not sure I’m ready to expose myself emotionally to that extent, you know?”

Milena shot me two thumbs up, grinning her approval before glancing down at her phone in her hand. Tina asked me a few more questions detailing my role here, how many clients I’d had. Then she moved onto my dating life, my past boyfriends, and what I was looking for now.

In the end, she grinned and turned to Tracy. “We got enough for now?”

The other woman nodded. “We’re all good.”

“Okay, Hope. Thank you,” she said as she got up and offered me her hand. “It was nice to meet you. We’re going to send some paperwork for you to sign, but other than that, we’ll see you soon?”

“See you soon.” I shook her hand and then Tracy’s, and then they left to continue getting shots of offices and the dating spaces while I turned to Milena. “Do we, uh, do we know who I’m going to be dating yet?”

“Foster is taking care of all that right now.”

I froze. “Foster?”

“Yes.” She frowned. “Do you have a problem with that? After you agreed, I texted him to let him know I’d appreciate it if he could be your account manager. You two have been friends for a long time, haven’t you?”

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “Yes, we have. I don’t have a problem with him managing our case. It was just a surprise.”

And it suddenly made things feel very real. Yelp!

“Excellent.” She smiled. “Then it’s settled. Foster will match you up and you’ll hear from him soon.”

No, he’ll be hearing from me right now, I thought after I said goodbye and left her office. I knocked on his door and raised my finger as I gave him a serious look. “If you fuck this up for me, you know I’m going to kill you, right?”

“Thankfully, you won’t have to worry about murder as much as marriage. I’ve got your back, Hope. Just trust me, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed, but as I pushed away from his door and headed to my

office to finally get my own day started, I wondered if it would be completely unethical to check the system at some point to see who he'd matched me with. I'd need his password and stuff, but I'd known him long enough to have several decent guesses as to what that might be.

I dismissed the thought almost as soon as I'd had it, though. Ultimately, Porter's words were what swayed me away from that option. If I was going to do this, I had to do it for real, which meant not cheating or breaking any rules.

As terrifying as it was, I was going to have to trust the process—and my best friend's brother—and then I was just going to have to hope that neither screwed me over. *Jeez, it's no wonder Grace tried so hard to get out of this.*

She'd known a lot less about the internal workings of the system when she went through this than I did, and as if she'd heard me thinking about her, my phone rang and her name appeared on my screen.

Right. I've told Porter and Milena that I'm doing this. I guess it's about time I tell my twin.

My eyebrows shot up when I opened my door early on Tuesday evening to find Hope standing on the other side. Her long blonde hair was pulled into a sleek ponytail that several tendrils had escaped from during the day, and since she was still in a navy blue pencil skirt and jacket, I assumed she'd come here straight from work.

"This is a surprise," I said as I waved her in. "On a school night, no less. What gives, Ms. Holland?"

She sighed dramatically, sashaying her gorgeous ass past me and then batting her lashes as she turned to look at me over her shoulder. "Well, since I have to deal with this thing at work that you talked me into, I thought the least you could do was cook me dinner."

"The least I could do, huh?" I chuckled, so damn tempted to spank that tight ass as I walked past her, but I held back. I was well versed in holding back around her, so even though it sucked, I just kept right on walking until I hit my kitchen. "That's funny. I don't remember talking you into it. The way I remember it, I asked you what you wanted to do and you chose to do this thing at work."

She scrunched up her nose adorably and groaned. "I know, but I might've bitten off more than I can chew. Dinner?"

"Sure," I said. "Next time, let me know you're on your way over, though. I might've had company."

"Do you?" she asked, gaze darting around as the playfulness melted from her pretty face. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"Nope. I'm just saying. I could've had company, or I could've had plans,

but you're in luck." Plus, I liked doing things for her, even if she might have caught me in a compromising position imagining doing things *to* her if she'd gotten here twenty minutes earlier.

Sigh. Maybe it's a good thing that I'm finally putting myself in the game. God knows, it's about damn time.

She'd been starring in my fantasies for so long I didn't even know how to think about anyone else that way anymore. At least now, if shit went south after we tried dating—even in the dark—I might finally be able to move on.

Hopefully, I won't have to, though. Fingers crossed.

"What did you do today?" she asked as I took some frozen Bolognese sauce out of my freezer and put the container in the microwave.

I shrugged. *Well, most recently, I jerked off in the shower to thoughts of you bent over that very counter in a skirt exactly like that.*

"Not much. You?"

"I tried to get some work done for my actual clients in between stressing about being a client and being as nervous about dating someone sight unseen as my clients usually are."

"You said the word client a lot in that sentence. Are you sure you want to do this? If you're that nervous, maybe it's not such a good idea?"

At this point, I didn't even know what I wanted her to say. I definitely wanted to have a shot at dating her, but if she decided against going through with this, maybe I could do it in a more honest way.

Hope sighed. "No, I want to do it. I've even given my first interview already and it's being edited along with Milena's interview, Foster's, and some footage of the dating spaces as we speak."

"Oh."

"Oh?" She arched an eyebrow at me. "Is that all I get?"

"No, it's just that it sounds like you feel you don't have a choice anymore rather than it being something you really want to do."

"I do want to do it," she repeated as I walked into my pantry to grab some pasta. "While I was giving my interview yesterday, I realized that right now, I'm exactly where all my successful clients have been, you know? I'm scared and I'm still skeptical, but I could be on the cusp of meeting the man of my dreams."

"Yeah, who knows?"

"Exactly," she said just before I emerged from the pantry. As our eyes met when I walked out, she shrugged at me. "It's just that I haven't had any

word on whether I've got a date lined up yet or not. Then there's the fact that the guy could be ugly or not my type."

I laughed at her joke, but I also didn't think it was a complete joke. "God forbid. Isn't that what this company is about, though? Connecting with people on a different level?"

"Sure, but what if I find someone that changes my life?"

I paused, hearing the fear in her voice, and I was genuinely puzzled about why it was there. "That may be exactly what you need. Besides, isn't that what you've been looking for literally since before we even met?"

"Yes, but it's an actual possibility now," she protested. "You forget that I've seen how well this algorithm works, Porter."

"Yet, you're still a skeptic?"

"Of course, I am," she said emphatically. "I'm about to spend hours with a person I can't see! What if I turn out to be the asshole who can't reconcile myself with the person I eventually find myself looking at with the person I connected with in the dark?"

"I'll do you one better," I said, curious about her response even if it didn't really matter anymore. "What if the person you meet tells you to stop hanging out with your male best friend?"

"Well, then he's not the guy for me, is he?" She looked right into my eyes. "You're my best friend and I don't want a life that doesn't have you in it."

The words made something ease deep down inside of me. Even if it didn't work out with us romantically, I was important to her. Sometimes, I didn't think I was as important to her as she was to me, but then she said stuff like that and I remembered that the door swung both ways.

Maybe I won't lose her after all.

What I was doing was still a risk, though. I knew it and I knew it was going to take a lot of groveling if it went sideways, but it was a risk I was willing to take. I was willing to grovel to get our friendship back if I had to, but I was also willing to put it all on the line for a shot at more.

Filling my lungs with air, I nodded and smirked at her, intent on easing her nerves now that she'd done exactly that for me. "You'll be fine, Hope. I promise. Any guy would be lucky to have you, and if you *are* the asshole who can't reconcile yourself with what he looks like and the guy you connected with in the dark, I'll get Foster to drive you home after the reveal and then I'll smash the cameras to make sure there's no video evidence."

She chuckled and pressed a hand to her heart. “You’re the best, Porter.”

“Nah. I just love you.” *Truth, but hey. We’ll get there.* “You’re good with spaghetti bolognese, right? It’s pretty much all I can whip up without any notice.”

“I love your bolognese.” Her gaze tracked me as I reached for a pot and filled it with water before setting it down on the stove. “Are you sure you don’t want to sign up with me? You deserve to have someone fall in love with you, you know. For who you are and not just for your bank account.”

I let out a low groan. “This again?”

“This again,” she confirmed, unrepentant. “You don’t want to see me get hurt, but it’s the same for me. I don’t want to see you get hurt either.”

“When did we start talking about this stuff again?” I asked, wrinkling my nose as I turned away from the stove to face her. “I think I preferred it when we steered clear of dating.”

“Why? Are you jealous?” she teased.

“Terribly.” I made a show of rolling my eyes and she laughed, making my heart skip about a million beats.

But I was getting ahead of myself. Right now, Hope was just my friend and I was still trying to ease her nerves. “How are Grace and Sharp doing? How was your comedy-brunch the other day?”

“Oh, it was great.” Her eyes lit up just like they always did when she was talking about her sister, and I smiled as she told me all about what those two had been up to.

With her features animated and excitement in her voice, she spoke about Grace’s gallery and Sharp’s ideas for it. She talked about how they were starting to think about trying for a baby and she practically went cross-eyed at the thought of a little niece or nephew.

I tossed the pasta in the pot and leaned against the counter as I listened, suddenly fantasizing of the day when she’d be so excited about us having babies of our own. And I knew I was getting ahead of myself again, but I couldn’t help it.

It’d been so fucking long that I’d suppressed all this shit that now that I’d cracked open the lid, I was like a human can of Pringles. I’d popped and now I couldn’t stop.

“Wouldn’t it just be the greatest to have a little baby to cuddle?” she cooed. “The best part is that you can give it back when it poops or screams, right? We’ll just get the cuddles.”

“Right,” I agreed absently, turning to reach for a slotted spoon instead of letting her see the dreamy look on my face. *What if I want the screaming and poop with you?*

“Anyway, enough about me,” she said eventually. “How’s life as an almost-billionaire treating you?”

“It’s fine,” I said nonchalantly. “It’s, uh, it’s been a bit of an anti-climax actually, to be honest. I spent practically my entire adult life designing those things and now they’re just gone. There’s a lot of money to show for everything I put into them, but I don’t know. I guess I thought I’d just feel more *something*. Maybe I thought I’d be lying on a beach somewhere by now.”

“Why aren’t you?” she asked curiously. “I mean, obviously, I’m glad you’re here, but that’s a really good point. I’m pretty sure I’d have been on a tropical island if I was you.”

I laughed. “Yeah, it just doesn’t hold the same appeal to take off on my own as it used to, you know? I looked up flight tickets to Mauritius the other night, but I just couldn’t get myself to click *Buy now*.”

She smiled. “You know what would help with that?”

“What?”

“A girlfriend,” she said coyly. “Sign up with me, Porter!”

“Never,” I said firmly, hating that I was lying to her and taking my guilt out on the poor pasta as I poked it, but once it was ready, I dished it up and added some sauce. Then I shoved my guilt down before I handed her bowl over. “What would you say to a cheesy horror movie while we eat?”

“I’d say you’ve read my mind,” she said happily, taking the bowl and following me to the TV room.

As we sat down, she took the same seat she always did—right next to me. But then she snuggled up to my side, which was also normal but felt like a much bigger deal tonight.

“Hey, Porter?” she said as she rested her head against my shoulder and swirled some spaghetti around her spoon. “I’m really scared.”

“There’s nothing to be scared of, sweetheart. The movie isn’t real.”

She lifted her hand to hit me. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do.” I turned my head to kiss the top of hers. “Don’t worry. I won’t let anything bad happen to you. Not ever.”

She snuggled closer to me as the movie got started and we ate, and all the while, I ached to let her know right here and now how I felt. But Hope had

friend-zoned me a long time ago, and maybe that was why this felt like such a huge opportunity.

Sure, I would be deceiving her in a way by not telling her who I was while she couldn't see me, but I was also getting a chance I didn't have right now. A chance for her to see me as a man she might actually have feelings for rather than just her old buddy. A chance for her to realize what's been right in front of her all along. A chance for us to have the start we might've had years ago if what's-his-face hadn't been in the picture when we'd met.

Our timing had never been right before, and this felt like a gift. One I couldn't destroy by telling her about it before we'd even had a peek at what was inside.

Even if one of us decided not to go ahead with the process and move on to the fifth date, which was when the reveal happened, I still intended on telling her it'd been me. At least we'd both know then that it just really wasn't meant to be.

But until then, I was keeping this card—and her—close to my chest. Maybe it was a mistake and maybe it wasn't, but I was about to start *dating* Hope Holland—and there wasn't a fucking thing in the world that could stop me from grabbing this opportunity with both hands and hanging on just as long as I possibly could.

8

HOPE

Laughter and chatter filled the air when I walked into the restaurant where I was meeting Terri. The vibe was laid back. Soft rock music played over vintage speakers on the walls, and almost none of the furniture matched any of the other furniture.

Exposed and graffitied brick walls and high, raw-wood ceiling beams gave it a modern, trendy feel, but that clashed with the worn furniture and old speakers. The bitter scent of brewing coffee wafted to my nostrils as the door swung shut behind me, the scent mingling then with those of garlic and hot oil.

The whole place was an interesting but discombobulating mishmash that made my head spin for a moment. Blinking as I took it all in, I spotted my friend sitting on a high-backed armchair fit for a villain and sighed.

Of course, Terri would pick someplace like this. She had a real knack for sniffing out places that didn't make sense to me. I liked order. She didn't.

As soon as she saw me making my way toward her, she pushed her multi-colored hair out of her face and tossed her hand up to wave enthusiastically. I smiled, returned her wave, and then sat down on a villainous armchair of my very own.

“What is this place?” I asked almost breathlessly as I took another look around while I got settled in. “More to the point, please tell me they have regular food on their menu? It's not as contradictory as the décor, right?”

She chuckled. “Where's your sense of adventure, Hope? Don't worry, though. Their deep fried dumplings are to die for and the lasagna's not bad either.”

“Deep fried dumplings and lasagna on the same menu? Good god, what fresh hell is this?”

Terri laughed and wriggled her nose at me. “There are plenty of places that do both.”

“Maybe, but that doesn’t mean they should. Restaurants should pick a cuisine and stick to it.” I leaned back in the armchair, rubbing my hands together, waggling my eyebrows, and giving her my best bad-guy grin. “What would you say to some light world domination this evening?”

“Depends. What have you got in mind?”

“We write a blog post about how the restaurant world has made chefs lose their minds in an attempt to set themselves apart from the others.”

She arched a brow at me. “Neither of us have a blog.”

“We’ll start a blog,” I said decisively. “Then we’ll write the post.”

Terri cracked up laughing as she shook her head at me. “Your idea of world domination is to start a blog?”

“The internet makes the world go round.”

Still laughing, she shrugged and signaled the server with an exaggerated point at me. “Fair enough, but I don’t think that’s the kind of thinking that deserves an evil armchair.”

“So you saw it, too? It’s not just me? The chairs really are villainous.”

“Nah, I think these are pretty comfy, but I saw the way you were looking at them. I knew immediately that’s what you were thinking. Your poker face is nonexistent, girl.”

The server came by and Terri grinned at him. “Now that my partner in everything *but* crime has arrived, we’ll have two Dirty Little Virgins please.”

He nodded and took off, and I made big eyes at her. “Dirty Little Virgins?”

“Relax.” She waved a hand at me. “It’s practically a fruit salad, but the alcoholic version. It’s got peach schnapps, coconut rum, lemon-lime, and orange juice. With a bit of white rum, but you’ll like it. I promise.”

I nodded slowly. “Yeah. Okay. If you say so, but you’re driving me home if that’s as strong as it sounds.”

“I’ll personally put you in a cab,” she countered jokingly, then leaned forward and cocked her head as she smiled at me. “So, what’s been happening at work? I heard your company is *fake*.”

“It’s not fake,” I protested, sighing as she laughed. “That woman went on a real date. She’s just miffed because it didn’t work out. All those people

saying we've been setting clients up on bogus dates have no idea what they're talking about."

"They're just jealous, huh?" she teased. "Makes sense. Sight Unseen's name has been everywhere for so long now, I don't even remember what other options are out there if you want to join a dating agency."

"Do you want to join a dating agency?" I asked as excitement exploded in my belly. "We could do it together. I'm going to be going on a date soon. It's for a documentary to show that the process is real, but I've been trying to convince Porter to do it with me. Not the documentary, the dating. He doesn't want to, but you could. Come on, it'll be fun."

She snorted, her head shaking so hard that it was possible she was about to give herself whiplash. "I'd walk through fire for you, but I won't do that. You're really going on a date? Wait, through Sight Unseen, right? Like, you signed up and now they're going to film you?"

"Yep. Long story short, I came up with idea of viewers getting to follow one of our clients through the experience so people can see that it's real, and then Milena asked *me* to be the client."

Terri winced. "Way to go above and beyond for your job. Better you than me, though. What did Porter say?"

"That he won't do it with me, either."

"No, I got that part, but how does he feel about you signing up with the company? I bet he tried to talk you out of it."

"Uh, no?" I frowned. "Why would he?"

She arched both eyebrows at me before her chin lowered and her eyes narrowed. "Uh, I don't know? Maybe because he's been in love with you for *forever*."

I scoffed, laughing as I waved her off. "No, he's not. That's ridiculous. He's never even wanted a relationship—let alone a relationship with *me*. He's so not interested that he won't even talk about it. I tried just warning him the other day that there are going to be tons of women out there now who are only going to be after him for his money, but he shut me right down."

"Of course, he did," she said like it should've been obvious. "He doesn't want to talk to you about dating other women because he only wants to date you."

"Are you not listening to me? He doesn't want to date at all."

She shook her head at me as the server delivered our surprisingly innocent-looking cocktails. We ordered food before he left us again. Well,

she ordered food. A massive basket of fried dumplings to share.

Meanwhile, I was fixated on what she'd just said. It really was ridiculous. *Porter's not in love with me. Is he?*

Just as the server left and I was about to ask her if she really thought that was true, my phone beeped, and when I checked it, my heart did a flip-flop in my chest. Terri must've seen the blood draining from my face because she suddenly leaned forward again, gaze locked on mine.

"Hope? What is it? What happened? Is everyone okay?"

"Uh, yeah." I turned my phone to show her my screen. "It's the confirmation of my first date. Foster must've found a match for me because it looks like we're going out tomorrow night. The guy has already agreed."

Terri frowned at my screen. "Who are Olivia and Parker? They're going on a date, babe. I hate to burst your bubble, but I don't see your name anywhere on there."

"Olivia is the name I've been assigned for the dates and Parker is the name they've given the guy," I explained. "No real names are used until the reveal happens at the fifth date, remember?"

"Uh, no?" Her frown deepened. "Why can't you just use your own names? There are lots of *Hopes* running around out there. It's not like he'd know *you* were the Hope he's been seeing."

I blinked at her. "How have you missed that? It's one of the fundamental rules at the agency. No real names."

"Fundamental rules?" She stared at me for a moment, then laughed when she realized I was being serious. "I honestly didn't know there were rules. I thought it was all just about not being able to see the other person during the date. It's right there in the name. *Sight Unseen*."

"Not being able to see the other person is the premise, but there are other rules to ensure that our clients can't track each other down until they get to the fifth date. If they get that far."

Amusement sparked in her eyes. "Seriously? They're not allowed to track each other down if they want to? Why not?"

"It's all part of Milena's method. How did you not know about this? I've only been working there for years and, like you said, it's a pretty popular agency at the moment."

"Sure, but that doesn't mean I've looked into it. I mostly just see the ads on TV and the billboards. As for you, we've never talked about how the process actually works. We just talk about how your job is going. We've

definitely never talked about any rules.”

“Okay, well, no real names is one rule. It prevents people from tracking each other down, but it’s also to keep them from looking each other up on social media. The whole idea is about not knowing what the other person looks like, either connecting with them on a deeper level or not. Regardless of whether you find them physically attractive.”

“So you’re not going to know what this guy looks like *at all*?” she asked disbelievingly. “Like, you don’t even get a clue?”

“Nope. I won’t have any idea until I see him at the reveal.”

Her face scrunched up. “It definitely doesn’t sound like my cup of tea, but different strokes, I guess. What’s to keep people from just telling each other their names during their dates?”

“We thought of that, which is why it’s another rule. No exchanging of personal information.”

“Wow,” she muttered. “How have you guys survived this long with so many rules? It’s dating, not rewriting the law.”

I laughed. “There aren’t so many rules, and the four we have make sense. They’re there to protect the integrity of the process.”

“Okay,” she mused. “So no real names, no seeing each other until the reveal, and no exchanging personal information. What’s the fourth rule, then?”

“No touching,” I said, wishing I had something to chuck at her head when her jaw dropped open. “What?”

She snorted. “No touching? What is this, elementary school?”

“If people were allowed to touch each other, we’d have ended up as a quasi-escort service for everyone who wants to get their rocks off with a stranger in the dark. Our clients are people looking for their soulmates, not a casual hookup.”

“Shit, Hope.” Terri peered at me with concern tightening her features. “This is a huge risk, do you even realize that? You’ve got a date with a guy who could turn out to be an ogre, and they’re going to be making a documentary of you going through all this with him. Are you really sure you want to do it? It seems like a lot of risk with not much reward to me.”

“The reward is finding love,” I objected. “I know you’re not looking for it, but I am. It’s worked for my clients and even for my sister. Why can’t it work for me?”

“Because you work for the company, and if you wind up making it look

bad, you're probably going to be fired?"

"I won't be fired. Milena and I talked about it and she knows how I feel about this. As long as I'm honest and real, she's happy. She's been very clear about that."

"If you say so," Terri muttered before she brightened up a bit. "On the plus side, at least you don't have to put on makeup or a dress for this date. You could just go in your pajamas for all this guy knows."

"I'm going to be filmed, remember?"

She sighed. "Well, you may want to put on some makeup then."

I laughed. "Thanks for the tip. Okay, so now that we've covered what's been going on with me, what's been happening with you?"

As the server brought our food, I took my phone to put it in my purse, but before I stowed it away, I quickly clicked "Accept" on the email. And that was it. I was officially going on my first date with a man I wouldn't see until I'd spent eight hours—at least—talking to him.

Please don't let this end in disaster, and if it's not too much to ask, please don't let him turn out to be an ogre. I didn't need an oil painting and I wasn't the girl who was going to end up with the most beautiful man in the world, but if I wasn't attracted to him at all when I saw him for the first time, I was screwed—and so was Sight Unseen.

“What are you supposed to wear for a date in the dark?” I asked Foster over the phone as I pulled on a sweater. “I mean, it’s still a date, but she’s not going to see me, so does it even matter?”

“Oh, good,” he replied in a whisper. “We’re at the part where we’re having the *if a tree falls in the forest, does it even make a sound* conversation. Are you really that nervous?”

“Well, I’m about to go on a date with my best friend without her knowing about it. Of course I’m fucking nervous. Why are you whispering?”

“Because I’m at the office. This is my case and it’s a pretty big one around here, so I’m staying until you’re in that room.”

“Is Hope there too?”

“Yeah, she’s here. She went home to change, but she’s getting interviewed right now. I’m up next in front of the cameras to talk them through how the system makes a match and what I do as an account manager.”

“Right.” I swore under my breath. “How is she? Is she okay?”

“She’s nervous as hell, but yeah. She seems okay. Actually, I’m pretty sure she’s feeling a lot like you are at the moment, except that you know who she is and she doesn’t know who you are.”

“Is this a mistake?” I asked suddenly before stepping away from the mirror and deciding that jeans and a sweater were fine. “Seriously, should I call it off? It doesn’t seem fair that I know and she doesn’t.”

“It’s not fair, but this was what you wanted.” He let out a harsh breath. “Look, you’re going to have to make a decision right now. We’re out of time.”

If you want to back out, this is the time to do it.”

“I’m not backing out.” I was going to pay for this in a big way—probably with shit karma for the rest of my life. *But God help me, I’m going through with it.*

“Good,” Foster said. “The car is already on its way to pick you up. It should be there soon. Are you dressed yet?”

“Yes.”

“Great, then get your ass downstairs and remember not to say anything that will make anyone question whether you know who you’re not seeing tonight.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m not stupid,” I muttered.

“Says the guy who’s about to go on a date with his best friend and doesn’t want her to know,” he retorted, still whispering. “I’ve got to get back out there. You’re sure you’re going to show up, right?”

“Yes.”

“Great. Have fun.” He hung up, leaving me to my nerves and guilt as I grabbed my stuff and headed out the door.

Honestly, I didn’t know how to feel right then. My heart was pounding, my palms were covered in a layer of sweat, and my stomach was somehow cold and hot at the same time. I was excited about finally getting to see where things could lead with Hope, but I was also feeling guilty as shit about doing it like this.

All those conflicting emotions and feelings threw me off my game, and when the car stopped at the curb and a man stepped out holding a blindfold, my eyes widened. “Whoa. Uh, no?”

“This is how it works, sir,” the driver said. “You won’t have to put it on until you’re getting out of the car, though.”

“Are you serious? I’m going to be blindfolded for this?”

“Yes, sir. As soon as you arrive. It’s to ensure you don’t accidentally see your date.”

My date is already there. “Oh, cool. Cool. Cool. Uh, okay. I guess that’s fine, then.”

“Before we leave, I’ve been asked to give you a waiver to sign. Your account manager did tell you this was going to be filmed, right? The crew will be waiting when we get there to get shots of you exiting the vehicle and entering the building, so you’ll have to sign the paperwork before you get out of the car.”

“Right. Yeah. Yep. He told me.” *Shit, what is going on with me?*

The driver tipped his fancy hat and then pulled a folded sheet of paper out of his inside pocket. After handing it over, he opened the door for me, and as I slid into the leather interior of the town car, he passed me a pen as well. “Just in case you need it. Ms. Kress said to tell you she’s in her office if you have any questions about the waiver. Your account manager and her lawyer are there as well if you’d like to talk to them.”

“Great. That’s comforting.” My heart was going nuts and my hand trembled when I took the pen, but I signed on the dotted line as he climbed in behind the steering wheel, and then we were off.

Neither of us said anything as he drove me to the Sight Unseen offices. Thanks to Hope and my brother, I knew they had a series of *date rooms* here. From what they’d said, I also knew that the rooms each had two doors so that clients entered from opposite sides to each other, that the interiors were set up to be like a comfortable living room, and that most everything in there was soft in case you walked into it.

Foster had also mentioned that although people’s first dates often took place in restaurants that had private areas and had agreed to letting blindfolded people dine there, ours would be here. For the sake of the film crew, it was easier this way *and* wouldn’t draw as much attention as cameras and blindfolded patrons moving through a restaurant.

As we pulled up at the curb, the driver twisted in his seat to face me. “Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.” I held up the waiver. “Do I give this to you or...”

“To me.” He smiled and nodded at the blindfold I was still holding. “You can put that on now too.”

“Guess I’m about to find out what it feels like to be kidnapped in a different country, huh? At least you’re nice for a kidnapper. Very straightforward.”

He chuckled. “I’ve been called worse.”

“I suppose I’ll just have to try harder then,” I said as he climbed out the car and I slid the blindfold on. My nerves had already been getting the better of me, but once I’d fitted the soft material over my eyes, I was completely on edge.

My stomach swirled and I even jumped a little when I heard the door opening. The driver—at least, I assumed it was him—took the waiver from my hand and then guided me out of the car. “Watch your step, sir. The

surface is flat between here and the doors, and once you're inside, there will be someone waiting to show you upstairs."

I nodded to let him know I understood.

Carefully hanging onto the door, I groaned when I finally ran out of metal and realized that this really was it. "Are the cameras here yet? I'm just checking to make sure that it's going to be immortalized when I fall flat on my face."

"It will be, sir. They've been filming since before we even parked."

"Are they hearing this?" I asked in a hushed whisper, and he chuckled.

"No, you haven't been fitted with a microphone and they're standing just up the street to get a good shot of you exiting the car and walking into the building for the first date. You might want to smile, though."

"Oh. Right. You're right. How does one do that again?"

He chuckled some more as he took a gentle grip of my arm and walked me up the sidewalk. "Easy. You forget what you're about to do and that it's on camera, and then you just let your lips do their thing."

"Wonderful. Thanks for the advice. Quick question, though, how am I supposed to forget about all that?"

"Just breathe, sir," he suggested kindly. "You'll be inside in no time. As soon as you're in the right elevator, they'll take the blindfold off. It's a precautionary measure and you won't need it once you start ascending. You'll emerge on the other side of the room that will be used for the date, so there won't be any possibility of catching sight of your match."

I nodded jerkily, wondering how the hell people put themselves through this when they *didn't* know who they were doing it for. I wouldn't have. That was for fucking sure.

Once I was in the building though, things got a little better. Just like the driver had said, someone else took me from him and walked me to an elevator, and as soon as we started going up, I was told to take the blindfold off.

Unfortunately, I didn't have my sight back for very long. Only long enough to see the inside of an elevator, a drab corridor, and a wooden door that the young guy who was with me rapped his knuckles on. "You can go in now, sir. They would've heard that knock through the microphones inside, so they'll know you're going in."

"They? Who—"

Instead of letting me finish, he pushed the door open and motioned me

into the room, then firmly shut it behind me. I blinked against the sudden inky blackness, the nerves crashing back into me at full force as my hands shot out on instinct.

“Hello? Is anyone in here? Is it just me, or is it really, really dark in here? I mean, I know we’re not supposed to see each other, but this is ridiculous.”

When no one answered, I realized Hope wasn’t in here yet. Clearly, no one else was either. Blindly feeling my way around, I let out a relieved sigh when my fingertips brushed against something soft, and I followed it until I realized it was a sofa.

As I was sitting down, I heard the door on the other side of the room open, and my head jerked in that direction, but the lights were off in the corridor she was coming in from and I couldn’t even see so much as her silhouette.

Shit. Milena really has thought of everything. Nothing was left to chance, and evidently, she was super serious about people really not getting even a glimpse of each other before the grand reveal.

The door shut again and my heart leaped into my throat. *Well, here we go.*

“Hello?” Hope called, her voice small and uncertain. I hated hearing her sound so vulnerable and unsure, and it occurred to me then that I wouldn’t have wanted anyone else in this room with her.

Maybe I was an asshole for not telling her it was me, and maybe I was going straight to hell for misleading my best friend this way. But right now, it was all worth it.

At least with me, I knew she was safe. I knew there wasn’t some creep sitting here, waiting for her in the dark, and I knew that I would do whatever it took to make this the best damn date she’d ever been on.

And for that, I’d take whatever consequences came my way after this was all over. So I thought back to practicing voices with Foster that day and dragged in a deep breath. “Hello, Olivia. It’s nice to sort of meet you.”

HOPE

“Tonight is the night of your first date,” Tina said gently once I was sitting down in the conference room they’d chosen for my interview. “How are you feeling?”

Nervous laughter bubbled out of me and I lifted my hand to show the camera how shaky I was. “To be honest, I’ve been better. I’m really excited, but I’m also really scared. This is all much more intimidating when you’re the one going into the room rather than the person who set up the date.”

She chuckled and inclined her head in a nod. “For the sake of viewers who don’t know much about how this process works, why don’t you tell us how much you know about the person you’re going on a date with?”

“Oh, uh, okay. Well, I don’t know anything about him, actually. I don’t even know his name. The system has called him *Parker*, but that’s just a random name that has been automatically generated and assigned by our account manager’s computer.”

“Is there any way to figure out his real name based on the name that was assigned to him?”

I shook my head. “Not at all. How it works is that once we’ve loaded our clients’ profiles into the system, the algorithm starts looking for a match. When it finds one, it links up the two people in question and spits out a name that each party will use during the process.”

“So to be clear, it’s completely random.”

“Yes, completely random.”

“Interesting. Alright. You mentioned loading a client’s profile to your system. What kind of information are we talking about here? Let’s say I’m at

home right now and I'm considering signing up, what am I expected to tell you that will help you find my perfect match?"

"Well, all we really need is everything," I tried joking, but it also wasn't really a joke. Tina chuckled, but since she also motioned for me to keep going, I explained. "The questions that you'd have to answer are comprehensive. The more you give us, the more likely it is that we'll be able to find your match made in heaven, so to speak. It covers the basics, like how old you are and what you do for a living, but it also goes into quite a lot of detail about what you're hoping to find, where you see yourself going in the future, and what you value in a partner."

Tina nodded before giving me a coy smile. "Do you want to tell us a little bit about what you answered when you were filling out your questionnaire?"

I blinked, twisting my fingers in my lap as my throat went dry. "Uh, sure. Okay. I, uhm, I said I was looking for someone motivated and kind. Someone who stands on his own two feet and is independent, but who is also considerate in relationships and is willing to make time to spend together. I also like a man who has a sense of humor and who doesn't take himself too seriously, but is able to be vulnerable and real when the situation calls for it."

"Wow. That's not much, is it? So there you have it, folks. With Sight Unseen, the sky is the limit. You ask, and if they can, they'll deliver." She smiled. "Well, we'll let you go for now, but I hope you find everything you wanted waiting for you in that room."

"Thank you. So do I." The light on Tracy's camera blinked off and I inhaled deeply as I got up. "Wish me luck."

"We really do," Milena said. "That was a great interview, Hope. We'll see you for the debrief interview after."

"Sure thing," I agreed, my heart in my throat as I left the conference room and then went through the motions by myself. I'd asked not to have a handler in the corridor with me, mostly so that my coworkers wouldn't see me sweat.

I'd never felt like this before, a bundle of nervous excitement with a deep-seated fear that this was the biggest mistake I'd ever made and that everything was about to go up in flames. As I breathed through it, I hit the lights when I reached the door leading into the room we'd be using. I closed my eyes and reached for the handle.

Here goes nothing. "Hello?"

I walked into the room on wobbly legs, reaching out in case someone had left something standing in my way, but there was nothing. "Hello, Olivia. It's

nice to sort of meet you.”

My heartrate shot through the roof at the sound of the unfamiliar voice speaking out in the dark and I blinked hard, knowing it was useless. *But damn. Why does it have to be so very freaking dark in here?*

“Uh, hi.” *Why am I so squeaky?* “It’s, uh, it’s nice to sort of meet you too.”

I had no idea who this man was, but I was still afraid I was going to sound like an idiot. If the system matched me with him, he had to have a lot of the qualities I’d said I was looking for. We rarely set people up if they weren’t at least a ninety-two percent match, and Foster would’ve tried for better with this.

“Have you, uhm, have you managed to find a seat yet?” I asked, blinking some more as I stumbled around and tried to remember the layout of this room. “I’m still kind of feeling my way around over here.”

A deep, rich chuckle rang out. “Yeah, I know the feeling. If it helps, I found a sofa slightly to the right of the door. Assuming a mirror-image, yours should be just to the left.”

As I veered in that direction, I realized he was right. The rooms were set up so that the furniture was easy to find and there wasn’t very much in here. Suddenly feeling a little more confident, I found the sofa and carefully sat down.

“Thank you. That helped a lot.”

He chuckled again. “No problem. So, uh, this is weird, right? Do you have any idea what we’re supposed to say to each other?”

“Nope. Not a one. I, uhm, I think I was too nervous about coming in here to think very much about what was going to happen once we were here.”

“Same,” he agreed easily, and the more I heard of his voice, the more I liked it. I didn’t recognize it at all, but that was a good thing. It meant Foster hadn’t accidentally set me up with an ex or something.

Unfortunately, my mind was already racing ahead, trying to put a picture together of what he looked like—and it was unfortunate because the only images it was giving me were of *Porter*.

Ever since Terri had said what she had, I just kept thinking about him. *Stop that, Hope. You’re on a freaking date, for God’s sake.*

“Do you think we should just talk and see where it goes?” he asked, and I nodded until I remembered he couldn’t see me.

“Sure. Let’s do that.” I kept nodding, trying to think of the kind of thing

people usually spoke about during first dates. “How about this, are you close to your family?”

“Oh, wow. Okay. I thought we were going to start with favorite colors or most hated songs, but sure. Family.” He laughed. “Uh, yes, I am close to mine. You?”

“Same,” I said, chuckling at his joke and finding that the longer I was in here, the more comfortable I was getting.

It really wasn’t so bad now that I was seated and the dark wasn’t quite such a shock anymore. Plus, I hadn’t been expecting to find someone I clicked with right off the bat, but it definitely felt like I could potentially click with this guy.

“For the record, I don’t hate any songs,” I said. “Obviously, there are those that I like less than others, but hate is a strong word. I wouldn’t say there are any that I *hate*.”

“Really? There isn’t one song that you’d rather turn the radio off if it came on than to listen to it?”

“Oh. Good point. Okay, I retract my previous statement. There are a lot of songs I’d rather not listen to. Most of them are Trance, Rap, and Dance. I’m just not a fan. I prefer songs I can sing along to easily and really get caught up in.”

He laughed. “Same here. For that reason, I’m a fan of rock, pop, and some punk and alternative music.”

“Oooh, I’m the same,” I said. “Okay, favorite colors, then. Mine are turquoise, hunter green, and sea blue.”

Like Porter’s eyes. Stop it!

“No pink?”

“No pink,” I confirmed. “You?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say pink is a favorite,” he joked. “I like green too, but not quite as deep a shade as hunter. I’d say more like fresh basil leaves.”

Like my eyes? Wow. That’s a coincidence. “Oh. Uh, basil leaves? That’s weirdly specific.”

“I know.” He groaned. “It was the first thing that popped into my head. I went grocery shopping this afternoon and I bought one of those *living herbs* plants for my kitchen. It’s a baby basil, and I guess it stuck.”

“That’s pretty brave of you, Parker,” I said. “Unless you have green thumbs, which I don’t.”

“Oh, shit no. It’s probably going to have shriveled up before I even get

home tonight, but I keep trying. Incidentally, do you know if those have to be watered on the day you get them? I figured they didn't need to be, but now I'm worried."

"Honestly? I have no idea. I probably would've thought the same thing you did, though. I mean, they'd have to have watered them in the store to keep them looking pretty and perky so someone would buy them, right?"

"Exactly," he agreed. "Okay. I think Basie will be fine, then."

"Basie?"

"I just named it."

I laughed. "Do you usually name your herbs?"

"Uh, not since the days of Mary Jane, no." He chuckled before he suddenly sucked in a sharp breath. "Mary Jane and I haven't been friends for a while, though. I should've clarified that."

"Good to know," I said lightly. "What else did you do today, other than acquiring Basie, I mean?"

"That's a very nice way of asking whether I have a job and what it is," he teased. "To answer, I'm self-employed at the moment. I'm an engineer of sorts and I'm working, but my hours are pretty flexible."

"That's cool. My best friend is an engineer too. I don't understand much about the details of the work, to be honest."

"What do you do?" he asked. "I know we're not allowed to give company names or anything specific, but ballpark?"

"I'm a matchmaker," I said, giving the answer Milena had told me to. "A matchmaker who hasn't been successful in finding love for herself. Ironic, right?"

He chuckled again. "Most experts in any field aren't quite as smart when it comes to themselves. Doctors don't operate on themselves, right? Lawyers aren't advised to represent themselves. The list goes on and on."

I smiled. "That's one way of looking at it."

For the rest of our date, the conversation kept flowing naturally from one topic to the next, and by the time the five-minute warning came, I was honestly surprised at how fast it'd gone. It seemed we were on the same page about that, too.

"You know, Olivia. I wasn't sure how I was going to feel about this, but I'm glad I got to spend time with you tonight. It wasn't half as awkward as I thought it was going to be."

I kept quiet because that was exactly how I felt about it. As the buzzer

sounded to signal that the doors were about to open, we said our goodbyes and I stumbled back out of the room, confused about why this had happened so fast.

Porter had been on my mind constantly, but at the same time, I'd really hit it off with Parker. He was the only other person I'd ever been so comfortable around that fast, and that was why I was so confused. Grace had mentioned that during her dates with Sharp, everything had just been so easy and they'd gotten along so well that she'd been in love with him almost right away.

I wouldn't go as far as to say I was in *love* with this guy, but as I did my quick follow-up interview, I was at a loss for words. That had been far too easy, and for the first time, I understood what Grace had tried to explain to me so long ago.

Only she was now married to the man she'd gone through this with. I'd come into this looking for a serious relationship, but damn. *Is it really even possible to feel this way after only one date?*

It probably shouldn't have been, but the feedback I'd received from my clients was proving to be very true. Alone in the dark with zero distractions, things sure felt a lot more intense than they usually did—and it suddenly occurred to me that I really might've just had my first date with the man I could end up marrying.

Eeeep! If that's not a mindfuck, then I really don't have any idea what is. The craziest part of it all was that it didn't matter to me now what he looked like as much as it had before. Parker and I had connected and now I had absolutely no idea how to feel about it.

PORTER

“Hello?” I mumbled into my phone with my eyes still closed.

“Porter?” Hope’s voice woke me all the way up and I sat bolt upright in bed.

“Hope? Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Why? Are you awake?”

I groaned and finally focused enough to realize that the sun was already sitting high in the sky outside. “Well, I am now. What’s up?”

“I’m going to that park near your place and I was wondering if you wanted to come with me?”

“Sure,” I said easily. “Just, uh, why?”

“For a walk. You don’t have to. I just...”

When she trailed off, my heart stammered. “What is it, baby? Is this about your date?”

“No,” she said, but her voice was so small that I knew she was lying. “Are you going to meet me there or not?”

“Yes. I’ll bring the coffee. When are you going?”

“Now?”

“Okay. I need to grab a shower, but I’ll be there. See you soon.”

“See you soon.”

Rolling out of bed, I raced through the shower and got dressed, thinking back to last night and wondering if she’d figured it out. I’d done my best to disguise my voice and I hadn’t said anything that I thought would’ve tipped her off, but she did know me pretty well.

It wasn’t impossible that she’d picked up on something that had clued her

in. It really had been a great date as far as I was concerned, though. One of the best I'd ever been on, and that would've held true even if I *hadn't* known it was with her.

On the other hand, conversation between us had come so easily that also it wasn't impossible I'd given away more than I'd thought. Hope was smart—and she also had a tendency to overthink things. I had no doubt that she'd stayed up at least half the night replaying every minute of that date. It was entirely possible that at the very least, she suspected I was the guy she'd been with last night.

By the time I took off down my block at a brisk walk, I was feeling almost as nervous as I had been when I'd walked into that room. Forcing my nerves down when I saw her waiting for me on a concrete bench near the park entrance, I grinned and tried not to look like I had a nest of angry hornets in my stomach.

“Good morning,” I said cheerfully when I reached her. “So, how was it? Did you meet Mr. Right?”

Hope turned those gorgeous green eyes up to mine, her gaze searching for a beat before she smiled. “I told you that wasn't what this is about. I just wanted to go for a walk with my best friend. Can we not talk about the date. Please?”

“Uh oh. Why not? Was it horrible?”

“No.”

The hornets turned into butterflies as she stood up and took my arm, starting down the path that led to the duck pond in the middle of the park. “If it wasn't horrible, why don't you want to talk about it?”

“Because I'm confused,” she admitted softly. “I don't really know what to say, so I'd rather not say anything.”

I looked down at her and saw that she was still smiling, her expression more relaxed than it had been for these last couple weeks. “You enjoyed it, didn't you? If you didn't, then I'll go fetch my baseball bat and we can go beat up Foster's car.”

“We're not doing that,” she said quickly. “I owe him flowers. Or whatever you get a guy who did something nice for you.”

“Well, to be fair, he didn't really do much, did he? The computer matched you with this guy.”

She rolled her eyes at me and playfully shoved my shoulder. “We do more than just feed information into the system, you know?”

“Do you?” I pretended to be shocked, pressing my hand to my heart in the hopes that if I could get her to ease up, she’d let me in. “All this time, I thought you guys just sat in your offices all day, doing nothing more than pressing *Enter*.”

She giggled, and the sound was like music to my ears. “We do press *Enter* pretty often, but we also help our clients to prioritize their answers. We help them to identify not only what’s really important, but also what they really don’t want. We talk them through the process and we’re there to help manage expectations or debrief those who need it. We—”

“Okay. Okay.” I put my hands up in surrender, careful that her fingers didn’t slide off my arm in the process. “I get it. You do more than just feed the machine. Are we going to talk about your date yet? You haven’t stopped smiling since I got here and you seem pretty relaxed this morning. Is that because of the guy?”

“Yes,” she admitted eventually, a faraway, dreamy look passing behind her eyes before she blinked it away. “To be honest, I thought Sight Unseen was a company for the desperate, but I’m far from that and I felt like the match was pretty spot on.”

My heart skipped a dozen or so beats. “It was?”

“Yeah, it was.” She inhaled deeply and looked out at the pond when we reached it, smiling some more before she finally shook her head. “It was really weird, Porter. I can’t quite describe it, but I almost felt like the guy could’ve been your twin for how comfortable he made me feel.”

“Well, that’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“It was, but I’m not sure about continuing with it. It’s just... it got real.”

I moved around until I was standing in front of her, my gaze sweeping across her suddenly pinched features. “If it went well, why wouldn’t you keep going? Real is what you want, isn’t it?”

Those green eyes drank me, and for a moment, it looked like she was going to say something completely different. She’d never looked at me quite like that, but then she closed her eyes and when she opened them again, the strangely soft, yearning expression was gone.

“I do want real,” she said finally. “It’s just that I’ve never been able to speak to men I’ve never met before like that. Not that fast, at least, but he made me feel, I don’t know. Safe, maybe?”

“Correct me if I’m wrong here, but that sounds like a good thing, Hope. If he made you feel safe and comfortable, then what are you so confused

about?”

Her chest rose as she dragged in a deep breath, her gaze still locked on mine. “I guess I wasn’t expecting to feel that way right from the start. Back when Grace had her first date, I remember thinking that it sounded insane when she told me how easy it was to talk to the guy, but now I don’t know. It just caught me off guard.”

“What did she say when you talked to her about it?”

Hope flushed and yanked her eyes away from mine to study the ducks floating on the surface of the water instead. “I haven’t told her.”

“What?” I frowned. “Why not?”

She sighed. “Because when I do, she’s going to start planning my wedding to a man I’ve never even seen before. Do you have any idea how weird this is? I can’t be feeling like this after one date with some guy I’ve never met.”

“Feeling like what?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Like I have a crush, maybe? A big one. You don’t get it, Porter. It’s just not supposed to be this way. My heart keeps fluttering when I think about being in that room with him and the first thing I did when I opened my eyes this morning was to check my phone. Our time together went by so fast and all I want right now is to spend more time getting to know him. It’s weird. I’m weird. I’m calling it off. I can’t do this.”

“No,” I said immediately, my mind racing just as fast as my heart. “You can’t do that. You need to see it through.”

“Why?” She turned away from the water to look at me again. “Why does it matter to you if I call it off?”

Fuck. Good question. “I want you to be happy, Hope. If you call this off, there’s no way for you to get any closure and I know you. The what-ifs would drive you crazy. Plus, it went well. You said it yourself that the match was spot on, and for the company, that’s a great thing.”

Her eyes moved slowly from one of mine to the other. “I know it’s a great thing for the company, but do you really want me to keep seeing this guy? What if I end up marrying him?”

As I stared back at her, I had the strangest feeling that she *knew*. She knew how I felt about her and she was silently asking me to tell her. This was the first and only time she’d ever given me an opening like this, and if I was a better man, I’d have taken it.

But I wasn’t. Because right now, she had a crush—a big one apparently—

on the guy she'd spent time with last night and *I* was that guy. After all these years, she had a crush on *me* and if I threw a monkey wrench into my own works right now it could ruin everything.

"If you end up marrying him, then I'll be right there," I said confidently, neglecting to mention that I'd also be the man waiting for her at the end of the aisle. *When the hell did my life get this complicated?*

She blinked back the surprise flickering in her eyes. "You think I should keep seeing him, then?"

My heart constricted, but I nodded. "Yes, I do. I mean it, Hope. Even if this is the guy you end up marrying, it doesn't have to happen tomorrow. You can take as much time as you need, but I don't think you should run away just because it's getting real. Real is good."

"Real is good," she repeated quietly after me, her eyes once again snagging on mine. "You're right. Real is good. I guess I should just talk to him about it, huh?"

"Yeah, you should."

"You know," she said thoughtfully. "He even sounds a little bit like you. Not exactly, obviously, but a bit. Maybe that's why it's so easy to talk to him."

"Yeah, maybe." A completely irrational stab of jealousy speared my gut. I was the guy she was talking about, obviously, but if it hadn't been me, would she still have been saying this? Would she still have had a big old crush on a guy she'd never seen?

I didn't know, but I sure as hell hoped not because after last night, I was more in love with her than ever. She wasn't the only one who'd left that room eager to spend more time together. The only difference was I knew we already were, and yet it wasn't the same.

She was thinking about another guy right now and me? As always, I was only thinking about her. *Sigh. The more things change, the more they stay the same.*

For now, anyway. Soon, I supposed they really would change. By the fifth date at the very latest. I just didn't know yet if that change would be for the better.

HOPE

After Porter and I left the park, he said goodbye and took off, and I headed over to Grace's art gallery. Talking to him had made me realize that the only person in the world who knew exactly what I was going through and who I could actually discuss this with was my sister.

While my clients also knew what I was going through, I could hardly call them up out of the blue and ask them to talk me through it. My sister, on the other hand, knew me better than even Porter did and since she'd been through this herself recently the experience would still be fresh enough for her that she'd understand how I was feeling right now.

When I walked into her gallery, I smiled at the amount of people who were browsing through it and then walked straight through to her office. Sharp had gotten her a couple of assistants to be on the floor, and while she still enjoyed talking to people about the artists and the works the clients were interested in, she didn't have to do everything herself anymore.

Honestly, it was still pretty unbelievable how much things had turned around for her since she'd met him. When I'd convinced her to join Sight Unseen, she'd been on the brink of losing her business, she hadn't been on a date in a long time, and she had all but given up hope—personally and professionally.

And then Danny Sharp had happened and everything had changed.

Outside of Sight Unseen, they'd hated each other. He'd been trying to buy her business and she'd thought he was the most hateful man on the planet, but in that room, they'd made magic together. They'd even broken the *No Touching* rule, which I was still a little bit pissed off about.

On the other hand, I also now had a much better sense of why she'd done it. When I walked into her office and she looked up, I smiled. "I have a confession to make."

"Oh." She frowned, and it was like looking into the mirror when I did the same thing.

Grace and I were identical in every way except for our eye color. Where mine were a light, bright green, hers were the same, but a light, bright blue instead. She raised her blonde eyebrows at me as she got up and came over to give me a hug.

"What have you done?" she asked as she squeezed me. "Also, is this the kind of confession that usually gets made in police stations? Because if so, I'm going to have to tell Sharp I helped you hide a body. He gets so prickly when he thinks I'm keeping things from him."

"First, it's not that, but if I ever do ask you to help me hide a body, you absolutely cannot tell Sharp about it. Second, I'm okay with you telling him about this, but you both have to remain calm."

"Okay," she said slowly as we broke apart. "Next, you're going to tell me to remain seated and to keep my arms inside the ride at all times, right?"

"Yep."

She smiled. "Great. I can't wait. It's been a long time since the rollercoaster in our lives has been because of you, so hit me. I'm tired of always being the one who provides the excitement."

I rolled my eyes as we walked to her sitting area and sat down. "Again, this isn't as exciting as you're going to think it is, okay? It's really not such a big deal, but I went on my first date last night."

"Your first—" She got cut off by her own squeal. "Your first Sight Unseen date, you mean! Hope! Why didn't you tell me? I would've come to help you get ready. How was it?"

"It was amazing," I said after pausing for a beat, then groaned. "I think I finally understand what you were talking about when you and Sharp were in the program, but I have no idea how to deal with it. How did you just accept that it was so easy to talk to some guy in a pitch black room?"

She frowned at me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, didn't you feel like it was crazy to get along with someone so well when you'd never even met them?"

"Of course, I did, but I still don't really understand the problem. It just takes a minute to adjust, is all. You just have to remind yourself that it's all

about connecting with the person he is and that he's probably feeling the same way."

"Well, that doesn't help." I blew out a breath, realizing that I was starting to feel really miserable about all this.

"What's wrong, Hope?" Grace asked, her voice quieter and gentler now. "Why don't you look happy?"

"Because I feel guilty," I admitted. "I just spent all morning with Porter, talking to him about my date."

"Why does that make you feel guilty?"

"Because Terri told me that she's always thought he was in love with me, but now, there's another guy that I might be developing feelings for and I don't know. It just feels like a mess."

Grace didn't seem surprised at all. "Sharp and I think the same thing Terri does, but you've never felt the same about him and he's never done anything to confirm our suspicions, so why is it a mess?"

Because I may be realizing that I could feel the same about him after all. I didn't want to say it out loud, though.

Grace's head tilted slightly as she stared at me. Then she blinked a few times in quick succession and suddenly sat up straighter. "Oh. That's why."

"What do you mean *that's why*?"

She pursed her lips as she shook her head at me. "What Terri said made you think, didn't it? You've always thought that Porter doesn't have feelings for you and isn't interested at all, so you've never let yourself think about him that way, but now, you've finally realized that your best friend is a gorgeous, red-blooded man who has muscles in all the right places, is smart, and makes you laugh."

"How did you know that?" I narrowed my eyes at her. "Our twin-tuition hasn't morphed into mind-reading as far as I know."

She laughed and winked at me. "Not as far as you know."

I sighed, dragging my hands over my face as I let my head drop back. "So what do I do now?"

"Well, you said you spent the whole morning talking to him about it, so what did he say?"

"He said I should follow through and keep seeing this guy," I said, feeling that same stab of disappointment as I had when he'd first told me to keep going. "Obviously, he doesn't feel that way about me, so you were all wrong about him and now I'm looking at him in a way I shouldn't be."

“I’m sorry, honey,” she murmured as she got up and came to sit next to me, pulling me in for another big hug. “That sucks. I’ve never said anything because I thought it was better to let you guys figure things out on your own. Sharp wanted to mention it to you a few months ago, but I told him not to. Then he wanted to corner Porter about it at our engagement party, but I told him I’d swear off sex if he interfered.”

I chuckled, hugging her back as hurt spiraled through me. “Thanks for staying out of it. I guess it’s just that, for a second, I thought that maybe there could be more, but at the same time, I had this incredible date with another guy and now Porter is telling me to go for it, but how can I if I think I may have feelings for someone else?”

“Look,” Grace said as she put her hands on my shoulders when she pulled out of the hug and stared right into my eyes. “If Porter doesn’t feel the same way, then you can’t dwell on that moment when you thought there could be more between you. You need to move on from him before you get hung up. Porter has been your friend for years and there’s never been anything other than friendship, so keep it that way and give yourself over to the program. Open mind, open heart, and eventually, open legs.”

She winked.

I laughed and punched her shoulder as my cheeks flooded with heat. “Grace!”

“What? It’s true.” She smiled, finally withdrawing her hands and leaning back against the sofa. “All I’m saying is that your boss is a genius and her methods work, but not if you’re not going to let them. I know that it feels crazy to let someone in and to accept how natural it feels to be with them when you don’t know who they are, but you need to just let it happen.”

“It just feels very real right now and I don’t know how to deal with that. I wasn’t expecting it to feel so real. I just thought you talked a bit of shit with someone in the dark and then went home.”

“Funny how being deprived of your sight makes you dig deeper, huh?” She slung her arm around me again. “When you can’t see the other person, it makes you focus on other things and because there are no distractions it forces you to pay attention to those things. None of that is bad.”

“I know.”

She smiled. “So tell me about the guy. What name have they given him?”

“Parker.”

“Oh, I like that one. Maybe if you guys have a son, you could name him

that,” she teased. “What’s he like?”

I drew in a breath and really thought about it before I answered the question. “Don’t make a big deal about this, but he’s a lot like Porter, actually. He makes me feel safe and heard, and we didn’t talk about anything important but it was still the most fun I’ve had talking to anyone in a long time.”

“Awkward silences?”

“No, not really. Except for the few minutes at the beginning.”

She faked a shudder. “Yeah, those first few minutes are tough, but after that?”

“We talked nonstop.”

“Excellent.” She grinned as she turned her head to me. “I’ll start planning the wedding, then.”

“I knew you were going to say that.” I groaned and dropped my face into my hands. “Don’t get your hopes up, okay? Parker and I are not you and Sharp.”

My phone beeped and I grabbed my purse and feverishly searched through it for my phone. “Oh, god. What if that’s it? What if that’s the email saying he doesn’t want to keep going?”

“I’m sure Foster would’ve called you,” Grace said but scooted closer to look at the phone over my shoulder when I finally found it. “Well, would you look at that? Not only does he want to continue, but he’s already requested a second date.”

I stared at the screen, my teeth sinking into my cheek. “I won’t lie. I’m a little bit shocked that he asked for it so soon. What do I do? I’m really not sure if I should before I’ve sorted out my feelings for—”

Grace swiped the phone out of my hand and tapped on “Accept.”

“There. Now you don’t have to worry about it. You’re welcome.”

My heart sped up and swelled when I thought about spending more time with Parker, but I couldn’t help wishing that Terri had never said anything about Porter. He obviously didn’t have any feelings for me, and until she’d said it, I hadn’t had any for him, but now, the genie was out of the bottle and I didn’t know how to put it back in.

PORTER

S ight Unseen sure worked fast. Just a couple days ago, I'd requested the second date after I got home from the park and now I was walking back into the dark room. I didn't know if things always went this fast or if Foster had made it happen for me, but either way, I was grateful.

Hope spoke to me differently in this room. She was a little bit coy, a little bit playful, and a little bit curious. She hadn't spoken to me as Porter like that in, well, ever.

"Olivia?" I said eagerly as I felt my way to my sofa, once again careful to get in the zone in order to disguise my voice.

"I'm here." *Is it just me, or does she sound excited?*

Nervous, but excited.

"Hi," I replied. "It's good to see you. You look just as good as you did on our last date."

She chuckled. "Thank you. So do you. Are those your regular pajamas, or your going-out pajamas?"

"My Sunday best," I joked. "I got them especially for the cameras."

"I'm sure the viewers are going to love them. I myself chose this ballgown for the sake of the cameras, too. It's a pity a girl can't just whip out a ballgown to wear to work in the morning."

I laughed. "Well, you could, but you'd probably have to take a job as a princess somewhere. Disney, maybe?"

"That's the dream," she joked as I got settled in. "So, uh, have you done anything like this before? I don't only mean with this agency, but with any other? You just seem really relaxed and comfortable about it."

“I’m not,” I said honestly. “It’s nice to know it’s coming across that way, but I’m nervous as shit, and no, I’ve never done anything even remotely like this before. To tell you the truth, I haven’t even dated much the last few years.”

“Well, you don’t sound nervous,” she said politely. “Why haven’t you dated much?”

“I’ve been busy with work.” At least that was partially true. “To me, if you’re going to be in a relationship with someone, you need to be able to prioritize them in your life. You need to be willing to make time to spend with them and to make things work, and I haven’t been able to do that.”

“And now?”

“Now, I can,” I said as my heart pitter-pattered in my chest. Thankfully, Hope and I never really talked about this stuff, so it wasn’t a response I’d given her before. “How about you?”

“I’ve never done anything like this either,” she said quickly. “I have dated a bit, though. As it turns out, I’m just really bad at choosing people for myself. Eventually, I realized it might be time to let someone else make the decisions for me.”

“Have you ever been in love?” I honestly didn’t know the answer to that. At times, I’d thought I had, but I hadn’t. Not really.

As it turned out, that might’ve been because she didn’t seem to be sure either. “I’ve been asking myself that question a lot the last few days. I have wanted to be in love, that’s for sure, but I just don’t think I have been. Not in the way I want to be, at least.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, uh, my sister recently got married and what she’s got with her husband is just so different from anything I’ve ever felt. They fought hard to get to where they are, but it’s the first time that I’ve really seen what people mean when they say they complete each other, you know?”

“Like that meant-to-be, movie kind of love?”

“Exactly. The kind where you just know they’re going to be together forever because they can’t *not* be.”

“I think I know what you mean, but I haven’t had a relationship that has come even close to that either.”

She chuckled. “I’d hope not, or else I’d be wasting my time here.”

I grinned. “True. Is that what you’re looking for?”

“Ideally,” she admitted after pausing for a beat. “How about you?”

“Yeah, that’s definitely what I’m after.” *Except I happen to think I’ve already found it. All of this to find out if she could feel the same damn way.* “What did your sister say when you told her you were doing this?”

“To embrace the process, forget about everyone else, and just let it work its magic,” she said. “Do you have any siblings?”

“A brother.”

“Does he know you’re doing this?”

“Yep. He told me to be careful, to keep it real, and to see it through.” All of which was true, but he’d also told me not to hurt her but I couldn’t exactly say that. “How do you think it’s going so far?”

She hesitated. Then the sound of a soft chuckle drifted to my ears and I smiled. “I think it’s going well. Better than I expected actually. I’m glad we both agreed to the second date.”

“Think you’ll agree to the third?” I asked. “Or are you seeing someone else outside of this?”

“I’m not,” she said quickly. “Are you?”

“Nope.”

“Before I tell you that I’ll agree to the third date, how would you feel about me having a guy as my best friend?”

My breathing hitched and I didn’t reply immediately. I knew I couldn’t just be all for it, but at the same time, I also didn’t want to push her away or make her think that *Parker* didn’t want her spending time with *Porter*.

“I wouldn’t want you to change for me,” I said slowly. “If we’re going to be together, we’ve got to trust each other, right? This guy is your best friend, which means he’s important to you, and I wouldn’t want to get between you two.”

“That’s the right answer,” she said after pausing for a beat. “So yes. I think I will agree to a third date. Unless you tell me something really weird about yourself while we’re still on this one.”

I chuckled. “Give an example. What could I tell you that is so weird that you wouldn’t agree to see me again? Or *not* see me, I suppose.”

“I don’t know,” she mused lightly. “Where do you clip your toenails?”

“What?” I let out a bark of laughter. “The sofa is the wrong answer here, right?”

“Definitely.”

“Well, I live alone at the moment, so I haven’t really given it much thought, but I do it in the shower, to be honest.”

“In the shower? How?” She laughed. “Is that true? Remember, we’ve got to be able to trust each other.”

“It’s true,” I admitted grudgingly. “This is one of the weirdest conversations I’ve ever had, by the way, but I sit down in the shower, clip them, and then let the water do the clean-up for me.”

“Practical.” Although I couldn’t see her, I knew she was rocking her head right now, considering what she’d just learned. “Are you like that with other things? Practical, I mean.”

“I think so. I’m a pretty logical person most of the time. My decisions aren’t often based on emotions. How about you?”

“I’d like to think I’m the same, though I will admit that some of my decisions are definitely emotional. In general, I like things to be organized and logical. It drives me nuts if something doesn’t make sense logically, but like I said, I have been known to let my emotions get in the way occasionally.”

“Oh, good. You’re not a robot, then,” I joked. “Neither am I, in case you were wondering.”

She laughed softly. “Good to know. Okay, tell me more about yourself. We’ve already talked about basic things like colors and music, but what about values? You said you’re close to your family, but does that mean you’re a family man or does it just mean you’re a mommy’s boy?”

“One day when I have a family of my own, I’m absolutely going to be a family man. I can’t wait for the dad jokes and to go to every game or dance recital. I fully intend on being the dad that has matching T-shirts made for the family that will be worn on all appropriate outings.”

“I like that,” she said, and I heard the smile in her voice. “I’d wear your T-shirt with pride and I’d be right there next to you, being the embarrassing Mom who takes a million pictures of everything and cheers from the front row. Can I assume you want children, then?”

“You don’t have to assume anything. I want as many kids as you’ll let me put in you.”

She paused again. “Me, huh? You seem pretty confident about where this is going.”

“I am. Obviously, it’ll take time to get there, but I definitely think it could. You don’t have anything to worry about, though. I’m not the type to propose at the reveal and insist on chucking you over my shoulder and carrying you home.”

“Aww, well, that’s a disappointment,” she joked. “I was looking forward to being dragged back to your cave by my hair.”

I laughed. “While we’re on the topic. Let’s say I was to drag you home by your hair, whose home would I be dragging you to? If everything goes well and we eventually decide to move in together, would you insist on me moving in with you?”

“Oh, God no. My place is way too small for two people. It’s perfect for me alone, but if we’re going to move in together, we’d have to do it someplace else. You?”

“Well, my place has enough space, but it would depend on whether you like it. If you don’t, I’d be amenable to us looking for a different place together.”

“That sounds good,” she said. “You’re giving all the right answers, you know?”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“No, but it does make me wonder if it’s true or if you’re just saying what you think I want to hear.”

“Lying in here would be counterproductive, wouldn’t it? We both signed up for this process looking to find someone to settle down with. If I don’t tell the truth, you will eventually find out, we won’t work, and we’d both have to start all over again.”

“I like the way you presented that argument,” she said. “I also happen to agree with your reasoning. What’s your biggest flaw, then? You can’t be as perfect as you sound.”

“I’m definitely not perfect. Right now, I’d say my biggest flaw is I’ve recently made some emotional decisions, and while I’m not regretting them, I do think they could cause trouble down the line.”

“Why is that?” she asked.

My knee started bouncing. “It’s just that, uh, I did something I usually wouldn’t and I’m worried about the long-term consequences.”

“Well, that sounds ominous,” she teased, and I knew she was trying to lighten the mood, but I also knew I had to give her something about the decision I’d made or else she’d jump to the worst possible conclusions.

“Look, it’s not as bad as it sounds. I didn’t get married in Vegas, I didn’t make a terrible investment that’s going to wipe me out, and I didn’t take a job on the other side of the world just before I signed up for this. It’s more about having actually signed up for this.”

“Oh!” She suddenly gasped. “I get it. You’re worried because this isn’t something you would usually do and it may well have long-term consequences.”

“Yep.”

“It’s the same for me,” she said, sounding relieved. “I’ve been so, so scared about all this. It’s just crazy to me that I feel so connected to you and I’ve never even seen you.”

“Grates against the logical part of your brain, huh?”

“Absolutely,” she agreed. “Is it bothering you that we’re hitting it off so well? In a lot of ways, I feel like we’re the same person. It’s weird to think I could walk right past you on the street and not even know it.”

“I wouldn’t say that it’s bothering me, but I am a little concerned about the reveal.” My heart thudded against my ribs. “Not because of my appearance, I’m pretty confident about that, but simply because I won’t know what’s going on in your head when you see me.”

“Yeah, I think I know what you’re talking about.” The red light to warn us that we only had five minutes left came on and she sighed. “I wish we could stay a little longer.”

“I wish I could give you a hug before we leave. Maybe I’ll get to soon, though.”

“It may just happen,” she said coyly. “I’ll *not* see you soon, right?”

“Definitely.” I got up and scrubbed my hands over my face. “Hey, Olivia?”

“Yes?”

“You trust me, right?”

There was a long pause before she finally responded. “I’m trying to, Parker. I really am trying.”

Fuck. I had a feeling she might not believe everything I’d told her tonight. Every single word had been true, and if I hadn’t known who I’d been in this room with, my answers would’ve been exactly the same.

This was a side of me Hope didn’t know, but now I was worried that when she found out who I was, she was going to think that I’d only said it because I knew what she wanted in a significant other. There was a solution to that problem, though.

If only she would give me a chance once we were on the other side of this thing, I would prove to her that it had all been true. That was one of the things that made me so sure we could work if we just gave it a try.

Everything Hope had been looking for all along had always been right in front of her. In me. Now, I just had to hope that I could make her believe it.

HOPE

In my interview after the date, I was sitting on the edge of my chair in Milena's office. My fingers wouldn't stay still in my lap and my mind went to a hundred different places all at once.

"Hope?" Tina said gently. "Is everything okay? Did the second date not go as well as the first?"

"No, it's not that," I said, speaking too fast but unable to help it. In this instance, the interview was going to be a good debrief. I desperately needed to say what I was thinking out loud so I could see if it made sense. "One of the things that has always puzzled me about this process is how you're supposed to know if the person in there with you is a big old liar."

I dragged in a deep breath, aware that even though I was using the camera as a sounding board, this was still an interview and I couldn't just ramble on about everything. "Usually, when you're sitting across the table from someone, you can get a sense of whether they're being dishonest. Even when they're a really good liar, you're looking right at them."

"Right," Tina agreed. "Body language is a very real indicator. Is it difficult not to have those cues during these conversations?"

I nodded emphatically, my eyes wide. "For me, it absolutely is. I'm no expert in body language, but it's really difficult not to be able to even picture what the person might look like while they're talking to you. Do you know that feeling when you're on the phone to someone you know, and you just know when they're rolling their eyes or fidgeting or whatever?"

"Sure."

"Well, I'd imagined this would be like that, but without knowing the

other person at all, it's proving to be really hard to get a sense for what their body language is saying when they're talking." I sighed. "In other words, the date went really well, but I can't help but wonder if it went *too* well."

"You seem really torn about this one," she said, and I nodded, my eyes going wide as I stared into the camera.

"Everything Parker and I spoke about tonight was so real. We didn't waste any time on anything superficial and we're starting to dig into the bigger issues. My problem is that I'm not sure if he was just saying all the right things. It's just that you know what they say. If something seems too good to be true, it probably is."

"To be fair, he was saying things that *you* felt were right. Someone else might not have felt the same way. His answers wouldn't have been so right to just anyone. It would have to be someone he matched well with that felt like he was saying everything they wanted to hear."

"I know. We definitely are a very solid match and our minds work very similarly, so it would make sense that what he said resonated with me. It's just hard to believe I've found someone who genuinely wants everything he says he does, which is everything I want, too."

"I see how that could be a cause for concern, but you work here, Hope," she said gently. "You know better than anyone how well this algorithm works for finding people for each other that have the same values and who want the same things out of life."

"True," I said, smiling as I nodded at her. "Thanks. I needed to hear that."

"Thank you for being so honest with us," she said. "Good night, Hope. We'll see you for date number three."

"If there is a date number three."

She smirked at me. "Judging by everything I just heard, there's definitely going to be a date number three."

Tracy switched off the camera and stepped out from behind it, and Milena grinned as she rose from her perch on her desk and came over to me. "Your interviews are becoming more and more real. I love it. Thank you for that."

"You're welcome," I said, but my mind was still spinning.

Tina's comment had made me feel a bit better because what she'd said was true. I'd made a lot of excellent matches in my time here and most of my clients had mentioned at one point or another that they'd been astounded by how much they had in common with the other person.

That was what I was feeling right now, but at the same time, I didn't

know if I could just trust that a perfect stranger had been able to say exactly what I wanted to hear. Maybe if I'd been able to see him, it would've been different.

But under the circumstances, I just didn't know if he'd been feeding me a bunch of lines and bullshit based on what he thought would be the right answers for me. On the other hand, however, he had a good point about lying being counterproductive during this process.

He'd signed up for this of his own accord, without his boss having asked him to do it, so he obviously really did want to find someone to settle down with. He wouldn't be going through the agency otherwise.

I just didn't know, though.

Between my uncertainty about Parker's honesty and Porter's feelings, I needed a damn drink. Fortunately, Porter had already invited me to his place after my date. If I played my cards right, I might be able to suss out whether he really had zero feelings for me or whether Terri was onto something.

If I could figure that out, then maybe I'd be able to move past one of the things that was still making me feel so torn about this process. Grace had told me that I needed to move on from Porter before my own feelings could take root, and I was trying to do just that, but I needed to know for sure.

Without a shadow of a doubt.

When I got to his place, he grinned as he opened the door and spread his arms out wide at his sides. "Congratulations for surviving date number two. Look at you, officially vacant-eyed about a date." He suddenly frowned. "Wait, why are you vacant-eyed? Didn't it go well? I was expecting at least a twinkle."

I nudged him with my shoulder as I walked past. "It went very well, actually. I'm pretty sure we're going to go on another date."

"Well, that's great, babe. I'm happy for you. Maybe this blind-dating thing isn't such a bad idea, but where's the twinkle?"

There's no twinkle because I want you to care!

Outwardly, however, I shrugged. "It's not such a bad idea at all, but it feels like things are getting pretty serious. I was just up in my head about it when I got here. That's all. It's not a lack of twinkle so much as a thoughtful stare."

"Oh, I get it," he said. "It feels like things are getting serious? Why?"

He shut the door and followed me into his condo, and as I turned to look into those blue eyes, I searched for a single hint that this bothered him, that

he was upset about me saying that things were getting serious about me and another guy.

I didn't find the hint I was looking for, though. His eyes were as sparkly as they always were, but they were also filled with excitement and genuine happiness.

Terri was wrong. This man definitely isn't in love with me, and I shouldn't care, but I do. When did that even happen?

What was it about wanting something you didn't even think of as a possibility before as soon it became a possibility? Had I had errant thoughts of being with Porter or idle fantasies during all the time we'd known each other? Sure. Not often, but it had happened on occasion. Mostly after I'd been out drinking with him.

I'd chalked it up to simply having had too much to drink with a man who was objectively attractive. It'd never been about anything more than that, but now that Terri had opened my eyes to the possibility of an *us*, things seemed to have changed.

I need to get over that, though. Because the reality is that nothing has changed. He's not in love with me and I'm not in love with him.

I just had to put all this madness behind me and get his take on Parker, the man who was actually interested in me and who'd made my heart skip about a thousand beats tonight. I'd thoroughly enjoyed spending time with him, but more than that, he'd made me feel tingles.

Tingles. Butterflies. All the good things.

Frankly, if it wasn't for this whole mess with Porter, I'd have been giddy right then. I probably wouldn't even have been overthinking everything Parker had said so much because I wouldn't have been looking for a flaw.

As things were, though, I *was* looking for a flaw. Because I couldn't be falling in love with him and thinking about Porter all the time. It wasn't possible.

Unfortunately for me, Parker was making me think of Porter even more. In a way, he really did feel like he could've been Porter's twin—just the one who was actually interested in dating, relationships, and *me*.

They had so much in common that I even suspected spending time with Parker was what was making me wonder about Porter in a whole different way. "Hope?"

I refocused on my best friend to find his brow furrowed and his head cocked. "Did something happen on your date? You really do seem dazed.

You also haven't answered my question."

I blinked hard. "What question?"

"Why does it feel like things are getting serious, and as a follow-up, why don't you look happy about that?"

"I *am* happy." I sighed and shoved my hands into my hair before groaning and running my palms over my face. "I'm just confused, is all. I'm still not sure how it's possible to click so incredibly well with someone you can't see, and more than that, I'm worried that he's too good to be true. Some of the things he said tonight, it was like he'd plucked the answers right out of my head."

"Isn't that a good thing?" he asked again.

I tightened my grip on my purse. "Sure, it's a great thing if you trust that the other person is being genuine. If you think they might not be, it becomes less great. Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

"Where are we going?"

"A bar. Any bar. Are you in?"

Since we were still in his spacious entrance hall, he reached for his wallet and keys and grinned. "Of course, I'm in. Only if you promise to stop spacing out on me, though. Seriously, everything you're saying about this guy sounds good. Stop overthinking it."

"I'm trying. That's why we're going to a bar," I said. "We're starting with tequila. I hope you don't have any plans early tomorrow morning."

He laughed as he followed me out the door. "If this is a job for tequila, you're the one who'd better not have any plans for early tomorrow morning. You don't handle that stuff well."

I turned my head to stick my tongue out at him. "That's exactly why I want it tonight. I need to shut off my brain. Are you with me?"

"Always," he promised, and it sounded like the word was loaded, but I didn't ask. I had too much to think about as things were. I just needed to stop thinking, not pile more onto the load.

Pronto.

PORTER

My mission for tonight was to help Hope turn off her brain. Our date had gone damn well, and while I was worried about the same things I'd been before, I really didn't want her getting in her head about this.

It was already happening, but if I knew her—and I did—she was going to sabotage her relationship with Parker simply because it'd gone *too* well. Hope wasn't usually a saboteur, but something about this was really getting to her, and with the state of mind she was in right now, she wasn't going to accept the third date.

She was going to convince herself that Parker was lying and decline to see him again. Obviously, I couldn't let that happen.

Plus, she really should be enjoying this. We'd had two great dates and we'd both expressed that we were looking forward to the next. Nothing bad was happening, and even if I hadn't been the guy she'd been out with, I'd have been trying to get her to relax and stop getting in her own way.

"So, tequila, you say?" I glanced at her once we were seated at the counter of a bar down the block from my place.

It was nice and quiet this time of night, with the after-work crowd already having moved on. Not that we were the only people left. There were still about half a dozen tables that were all full, but it wasn't so loud that we wouldn't be able to have a conversation.

"Tequila," she confirmed with a smile, shaking her head as she looked at me. "What?"

"Nothing. It's just that you know you're supposed to be happy, right? Good dates usually don't have this effect on people. I mean, if you're like

this after a good date, what the hell are you like after a bad one?”

“Relieved,” she joked before letting out a long breath. “It’s not that I’m unhappy. I am happy. I just can’t help but feel like I need to be cautious here. Let me put it to you this way. What would you do if you thought you might’ve met the girl of your dreams, but not only do you *not* have any idea what she looks like, but you also have no way of telling if she’s full of shit?”

“Did this guy give you any reason to be feeling this way?” I asked, wracking my brain for anything I might’ve said that could’ve shaken her up.

“No, he didn’t. On the contrary, he made some pretty good arguments for why he *wouldn’t* be lying.” The bartender placed our shots on the bar and she reached for hers, not even waiting for me to pick mine up before she raised her little glass at me and tossed it down the hatch.

I chuckled, shaking my head at her as I brought my tequila to my mouth and shot it. “Now I’m the one who’s confused. If the arguments he made were good, why don’t you believe him?”

“I want to believe him. I just don’t know if I should.” She turned to me, those green eyes wide and filled with trepidation. “What if I fall for him and he’s making all this stuff up based on what he thinks I want to hear? What if I let myself feel things for someone who’s not genuine?”

“You’re really overthinking all of this,” I said just as Hope turned and signaled the bartender again. “He didn’t say anything that made you doubt him, so I would take him at face value.”

“I would have loved to take him at face value, but I can’t,” she muttered unhappily. “I’ve never seen his face.”

The bartender filled up our glasses again, and once more, she shot her drink like it was the elixir for eternal life. I drank mine down too, then ordered us a couple beers in the hopes that two tequilas would be enough hard liquor for her.

I hadn’t been joking earlier. She really didn’t handle the stuff well, and while I wanted to help her get out of her head, I also didn’t want to have to carry her out of there. “Let me ask you a simple question.”

She nodded. “What?”

“Do you like this guy?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s all you need to know for now. Just keep getting to know him and see how it goes. Can we talk about something else now?”

“Sure, what do you want to talk about?”

“I took an online cooking class today,” I said. “My parents are coming over on Sunday and I wanted to surprise my mom with something homecooked for a change. What do you think?”

She took a sip of her beer. “I think you should get some basil. It’s essential for adding flavor to so many dishes. Parker has basil.”

I sighed, laughing as I shook my head at her. “You’re out with me and you’re only thinking about him. That says great things about my company, doesn’t it?”

She took another sip of her beer and turned to me, reaching out to put her hand on my forearm as she looked at me with big eyes. “Well, actually, I was only thinking about you when I was with him.”

“That’s the tequila talking,” I said, but my heart had kicked into a whole new gear. “You were definitely not *only* thinking about me when you were with him.”

“No, I really was,” she admitted, but she was clearly getting tipsy. “I need to pee.”

As I watched, she slid off her barstool and strode across the room to the restroom. Meanwhile, my chest was on fire. *What the hell was that all about? She was thinking about me, as in Porter, while she was with Parker? Why?*

My heart was doing flips and my mouth had gone dry. *Maybe she had the right idea about drinking fast.*

Picking up my beer, I chugged a generous amount before she emerged from the bathroom. She was still walking fine, so she wasn’t drunk yet, but her eyes were shiny even from a distance. I sighed. *I’m going to have to get her some water.*

A guy stepped into her path, smirking and pointing at the table he’d come from. Hope shook her head, clearly not interested in joining him, but he didn’t give up.

I was off my stool in a heartbeat, striding up to them and sliding my arm around her shoulders as I tugged her possessively into my side. “Is there a problem here?”

The guy glanced at me, realized I was at least half a head taller than him—and much bigger—and then looked at my arm around her. “There’s no problem. Sorry, I didn’t realize you were together.”

“Well, we are,” I said firmly. “We’re very much together. You have a good night now.”

Hope giggled as I guided her away from him, strangely not pulling out of

my grip as we headed back to our spot at the counter. “We’re together, huh?”
“Yep. While we’re here, we are.”

She suddenly stopped walking, turning her head to look up into my eyes. There was an expression in hers I hadn’t seen before, something weirdly soft and almost longing. “Maybe we shouldn’t be here anymore then?”

“You want to go home?”

“To your place,” she said, still looking at me as she tugged her lower lip into her mouth and released it slowly. “If that’s okay.”

“Of course, it’s okay, but for the record, I don’t have any tequila at home. There might be some vodka, but no tequila.” My gaze hooked on hers, desire coursing through me as she kept biting that damn lip.

“That’s okay. I think I’ve had enough alcohol for now.”

“Lightweight,” I teased, but it didn’t do anything to break the sudden tension between us.

We’d never been this close to each other for this long, and we’d definitely never looked at each other this way. Hope nodded, still not letting go of me as we left the bar.

“You told that guy we were together,” she said as we walked into my place. “Why?”

“He asked. Besides, you weren’t interested, were you?”

“No.” She bit her lip again when I finally released her and walked over to the bowl on my table to drop my keys. “Porter?”

“Yeah.”

When I turned to face her again, she’d closed the distance between us and she was no more than a foot away. My eyebrows twitched, but since it looked like there was something on her mind, I didn’t say anything. “What if this guy is the one for me?”

“Isn’t that what you’re hoping for?”

“It is, but if he is, I don’t want to have any regrets.”

My brow furrowed. “What would you regret?”

“Not being with you at least once.”

Shock slammed into me, but she didn’t suddenly crack a smile or tell me that she’d been joking. In fact, the longer I stared at her, speechless and blinking, the more serious it seemed she was. Maybe I should’ve stopped to ask questions. Maybe I should’ve offered her some water or asked if she was sure it wasn’t just the tequila talking, but I didn’t do any of that.

Instead, I reached out, wrapped my fingers gently around her wrist, and

pulled her into me. My head descended at the same time hers tipped back. Our mouths met in a passionate, urgent crash and I slid my arms around her waist as she wound hers around my neck.

What we were doing was utter insanity, but I wasn't putting a stop to it. She'd initiated it. She was holding my neck like she would never let me go, and I was here for it.

When her mouth suddenly broke away from mine, I was sure she'd come to her senses. My chest was heaving and disappointment surged through me, but then she spoke.

"This could ruin our friendship," she murmured against my lips, her fingers toying with the short hairs at the back of my head. "Do you think we could just do it and not make a big deal about it after?"

I looked into those gorgeous green eyes and images of all the fantasies I'd had of her over the years crashed into my head. Parker could be the one for her, but when she found out that he was me, I might not get this chance again.

Besides, she said she'd regret not being with *me*. Like, here and now. In the *before*. And while she was right that it could ruin our friendship, I didn't think it would. "If that's what you want, we'll never speak of it again."

She nodded, then smiled and pressed her mouth against mine. And me? I couldn't believe this was happening, but I definitely wasn't about to let this opportunity pass me by.

HOPE

Holy hell.

Best friends were not supposed to kiss like gods or get your panties damp in under thirty seconds, but it looked like mine had a few talents I hadn't known about before. I'd thought kissing him would be weird, but it wasn't.

Not with the way his mouth was dominating mine, his body hard and firm as he held me tight against it. With his hand on the back of my head and his thigh between my legs, it felt more like a claiming than a kiss.

My heart was pounding in my ears, my skin hot and my worries melting away. This wasn't awkward. It was awesome. Porter O'Brien was making me forget my own name, and not even the consequences of what we were doing were enough to make me pull away.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, it occurred to me that he hadn't hesitated. Like, not at all. As soon as I'd said that I would regret not being with him, I'd seen the heat flaring in his eyes and then he was all in.

I'll overthink it later.

As Porter's tongue swept into my mouth, I decided that I wouldn't hesitate either. I gave myself over to the intensity of his kisses and just went with the flow. Porter groaned when he felt me surrender, holding me even closer as his kisses became harder and more passionate.

Soft sounds were escaping from me, but I didn't care. I wasn't embarrassed about letting him know what he was doing to me and how much I wanted him right then.

His tongue was already in my mouth and his cock was rapidly growing

against my belly. We were past the point of embarrassment—for now anyway. I was sure that would come again after, but I wasn't about to let it ruin this right now.

Porter's hair was soft and thick between my fingers, and the harder I tugged, the more I let my nails scrape against his scalp, the louder he got.

So Porter likes things on the rougher side. That's a surprise.

It also wasn't the last one I got from him. In all the years I'd known him, I'd never let myself think too much about what he might be like in the bedroom or what his turn-ons might be. I didn't know what I'd been expecting, but it sure hadn't been this.

Not only was his mouth setting me on fire, but it was like his entire personality had changed. My easygoing, fun-loving friend was gone and in his place was a dominant, confident man who knew what he wanted, and right now, that happened to be me.

I hadn't even quite completed the thought when his hands moved down to my ass, squeezing it before he gripped it hard and used it to lift me against him. A surprised squeal tore out of me, but not even that was enough to snap him out of this alternate persona.

He didn't laugh, didn't make a joke about it, and didn't tease me about the sound. Instead, he smacked my butt and sealed his mouth back over mine as he carried me to his bedroom. I knew his condo well enough to know that was where he was taking me and he knew it well enough not to have to stop kissing me in order to get us there.

When we reached his half-closed door, he turned slightly to nudge it open with his shoulder before he marched us right to his bed. I was expecting him to drop me on his mattress, but he didn't. Instead, he set me down on my feet, keeping hold of me until he was sure I was standing and steady. Then he finally broke the kiss to look at me.

His fingers were firm on my hips, those blue eyes filled with lust and his jaw slightly slack. He'd looked at me thousands of times before, but it'd never been quite like this.

"Last chance, Hope," he said as one of his hands came up to caress my cheek. "Are we doing this or what?"

"We're doing this." I didn't hesitate as I pushed my fingers back into his hair. "Unless you've changed your mind?"

"Fuck no." He dropped down to his haunches, tapping first my left ankle and then my right to let me know when he wanted me to lift my feet.

Sliding my shoes off with ease, he stayed on his haunches as he reached for my belt and deftly undid it. The button of my jeans and my zipper followed, and his gaze traveled slowly across the length of my body before it came all the way up to meet mine.

I dipped my chin in an encouraging nod, giving him the permission he was silently asking for. His long fingers curled around my waistband, his eyes still on mine as he started pulling down. My panties went with my jeans, but he didn't break eye contact with me until both garments were off and had been tossed away.

My nipples were aching hard and I was tempted to take off my shirt and bra, but I had a feeling he'd want to do it, so I kept my hands at my sides. My chest rose and fell fast as I sucked in breath after breath, trying to keep my heartrate in check.

As it was, my pulse was throbbing in my clit, and if I didn't calm down, I was going to jump him. Porter seemed content to take his time, though. He groaned when he finally lowered his gaze to my pussy.

More heat flooded my cheeks when he glanced up at me. "Bare?"

"Grace," I muttered as my hands went back to his head, my fingers toying with his hair to give them something to do other than touch myself. "She's been making appointments for us to get waxed."

"I'll have to remember to thank her." As he said it, he brought a hand to my mound and ran a single finger through my slit. A jolt of electricity shot through me when he touched me, my knees buckling and threatening to give out.

Porter grunted when he realized it, taking me by the hips again and pushing me back until I hit his mattress. "Sit down."

I did what I'd been told, once again surprised by him but beyond turned on. As soon as my ass hit the mattress, he pushed my knees apart, his face level with my most intimate part.

He studied it like he'd never seen one before, but judging by how confident he was about all this, I knew better than to think this was his first time. My suspicion turned out to be true when he brought his head forward and inhaled deeply before he licked me from bottom to top, immediately finding a rhythm that made my toes curl.

Yep. Definitely not his first time.

My muscles tensed, pleasure rushing through me as I tightened my grip on his hair and moaned. "Oh, God. Porter. That feels so good."

“Lie back for me,” he demanded, and I did. “Good girl. Keep your legs spread, okay?”

“Uh huh.”

“Such a pretty pussy,” he murmured almost like he was talking either to it or to himself, but not to me. “I knew it would be.”

I blinked in surprise, but before I could ask how exactly he’d known that or when exactly he’d thought about it, he was licking me again and my thoughts scattered. Heat built between my legs, my entire body trembling within the first few minutes as an orgasm started building in my core.

Porter’s fingers pushed into me, working with his tongue to bring me closer and closer to the edge. “Don’t stop.”

“Never.” His slight stubble scraped against my thighs, reminding me that this wasn’t just another dream. It was really happening, and it was better than I ever would’ve been able to imagine.

As the thought struck, the orgasm crashed into me and I screamed his name, shaking and pulling his hair as pleasure flooded my senses and left me trembling in the aftermath. Panting and still seeing spots of light when I opened my eyes, I smiled and glanced down at my best friend.

“All good?” he asked, his voice breathy and his pupils dilated.

I nodded. He pushed to his feet, his breathing labored as he put a knee on the mattress to join me. I sat up, still shaky, but I didn’t want him on top of me right now. He’d gotten to look his fill, and now it was my turn.

When I reached for his belt, he froze, those eyes locked on my hands as I undid his pants as quickly as I could. Then he pulled his T-shirt off in that hot guy move where it came off smoothly when he gave it a tug from behind his head.

I’d seen him do it countless times before, but I’d never really let myself appreciate it until now. As he revealed his washboard abs, broad chest, and inked skin, my mouth dried up when I finally took the time to really look at him.

Porter spent a lot of time working out, and every one of his muscles was defined, strength rippling under his skin with every move he made—no matter how slight. “Fuck, Hope.”

At his muttered curse, I tore my gaze away from his abdomen to look up into his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Wrong?” His eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch. “Nothing’s wrong. It’s just not really right either.”

My heart skipped. “What? Why not?”

“Do you really want to know?” he asked, eyes intent on mine. “You might not like what I’m about to say.”

“I’ll deal with it.”

A devilish grin spread on his lips, easing some of the fear that had been building in me that he’d changed his mind. “What’s not right is that your mouth isn’t on my dick.”

“Oh.” I lifted his waistband over his erection without looking away. “Why wouldn’t I like that?”

“I wasn’t sure you enjoyed being spoken to that way.” He sucked in a sharp breath when I pushed his pants down and sent his underwear to his ankles with them.

From the corner of my eye, I saw the movement of his legs when he toed off his shoes and kicked off his pants, but neither of us broke the lingering eye contact we had going on. I was dying to look, though.

Before I did, I cocked my head at him. “I’m enjoying all of this. Stop worrying.”

“Fine,” he all but hissed as I reached up and wrapped my fist around his surprisingly thick, surprisingly hard length. “In that case, I need to fuck your mouth. Right now.”

More surprise flickered to life in my chest, but at the same time, my inner muscles clenched and everything south of the border grew hot all over again. “Who knew you were into dirty talk?”

He smirked as he brought his hands to my hair and gripped it hard. “There are a lot of things you don’t know about me, Hope.”

“I’m starting to realize that,” I murmured as my free hand moved to his hip and I finally lowered my eyes. “Holy shit. How did I not know about *that*?”

Seriously. That thing is huge. Part of me felt like I should’ve known what he’d been packing all along, but I hadn’t. I also hadn’t expected him to have the most perfect cock I’d ever seen. *A prize dick.*

It was all long and hard, thick and veiny with a shiny, mushroom-shaped head. Like him, there wasn’t an ounce of extra flesh on it, and it curved strong and proud to his belly button.

Porter let out a dark chuckle, waiting until I’d lifted my eyes again before he replied. “I don’t know how you didn’t know, but now you do.”

“Yeah,” I said hoarsely as I moved my head forward, my lips parting to

take him in as my hand started moving up and down. He swore beneath his breath when I sucked him into my mouth, his grip on my hair tightening almost to the point of pain as his hips started moving.

He was careful not to gag me, but it was also clear that he was really into this, his head dropping back as he groaned and his breathing became ragged. “This wasn’t a good idea.”

I couldn’t ask why not without releasing him, but thankfully, he didn’t make me. “I’m not going to last like this, Hope.”

I moaned, my hand and my mouth moving faster as I tried to let him know that he didn’t need to. My own need was driving me nuts again already and I’d just had an orgasm. I couldn’t even begin to imagine how he had to be feeling.

When my free hand moved between my legs, he growled and withdrew from my mouth. “Nope. The next time you come, it’s going to be on my cock.”

I was still recovering from the shock of him having not only withdrawn but saying something like that to me when he strode to his nightstand and grabbed a condom. He tore it open without any fanfare and rolled it on, then came back and lay down beside me, holding out his hand to help me get on top of him. I went without question finally ripping off my shirt and bra, trembling as I lifted myself up. He positioned his broad head at my entrance.

He hissed again, screwing his eyes shut for a moment before opening them and thrusting into me at the same time. I cried out, but used my hand in his for leverage as I started moving with him. He caught my nipple in the fingers of his free hand, squeezing it with just the right amount of pressure as his gaze hooked on mine.

For a few long minutes, we just looked at each other as we moved together like we’d done this a hundred times before and knew exactly what the other needed. I circled my hips as he rolled his, and when I eventually couldn’t hold myself up anymore, I tucked my hair behind my ears and leaned down to kiss him just as the pleasure started building again.

When it did, I squeezed him and he growled into my mouth, kissing me hard before speaking against my lips. “Come with me.”

“Yes,” I whispered as my body tightened and I watched his expression contort into one of intense concentration. The next thing I knew, I was barreling over the edge and he was right there with me, moaning my name as his cock swelled while I went off like a freaking firework.

It took ages before my ears stopped ringing and my vision cleared, and he kissed me one last time before rolling us over and withdrawing from me. “I’ll be right back.”

“Sure,” I muttered, pressing my hand to my chest and wondering if my heartbeat was ever going to return to normal as I closed my eyes.

Unfortunately, alone and with the moment now past, reality crept back in and I wondered if I’d just ruined what Porter and I had. A spray of something wet hit me and I shrieked, my eyes flying open as I shot up to find him standing at the edge of his bed with a water gun.

“What are you doing?”

He winked at me. “Breaking the ice. I’ve got a spare. You up for it?”

I nodded, catching the extra gun that he produced from behind his back in one hand just as I rolled off the bed. Porter had zero regard for not getting his furniture wet. He never had. He’d always claimed that being allowed to have water fights inside was the best part of being an adult, and right now, I appreciated his attempt at us having fun together instead of talking about the elephant in the room.

We’d probably have to talk about it eventually, but for right now, this was just as perfect as the sex had been. I wasn’t going to let anything get in the way of just us being us. Exactly like we always had, even if we might just have made a giant mistake that I wasn’t sure there would be any coming back from.

“Ready to go fishing?” Foster asked when I climbed into the passenger seat of his truck.

The door slammed shut behind me and I rolled my eyes at him. “What kind of question is that? I’m always ready to go fishing and you know it.”

He grinned. “Good, because I got a new rod this week and I’ve been dying to take it for a spin. Be prepared to have your ass handed to you.”

“Since when is fishing a competition?”

“Since now.” He pulled away from the curb and was heading for the highway while I tried to force myself to stop thinking about Hope.

Being with her had been both the best and the stupidest thing I’d ever done. Going in, I’d known it was going to be hard to go back to being *just friends* after having sex with her, but fuck. This wasn’t just hard.

Programming and designing cordless earphones that had the ability to instantly recognize and translate any language to the wearer had been hard. This was fucking impossible.

Hope had been every dream and every fantasy I’d ever had of her come true, and for the rest of my natural life, I would never forget the sounds she’d made or the way she’d tasted on my tongue. It’d been at the front of my mind for days now, and I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

If it had been up to me, I’d still have been in bed with her. In fact, I’d have bought a villa somewhere on a secluded beach, taken her there, and spent the rest of my life not doing anything else. Last night, I’d even gone online and found the perfect house on a realtor’s website. It was in Fiji, had a

strip of private beach, and it was being sold fully furnished with a massive, gorgeous four-poster bed in the master bedroom.

I'd come very close to making an offer, but in the end, I'd managed to convince myself that it was a bad idea. For now, Hope and I were still *just friends* and she thought that another guy might be the one for her.

Guilt had been sitting like a pool of festering sludge in my stomach since that night, so much worse now than it had been before. No matter what I did, all I could think about was sex and telling her the truth. At this point, I had basically become a guilt-ridden hard-on. It was less than ideal, that was for sure.

"Porter?" Foster said, sounding like it hadn't been the first time he'd said my name. "Hello? Are you in there?"

"Uh. Yeah. Sorry."

He glanced at me with a deep frown furrowing his brow. "Are you okay? That was, like, the tenth time I tried to talk to you."

"It was?" I considered playing it off as nothing, but eventually, I dragged my palms over my face and groaned. "I didn't hear you. What did you say?"

"Nothing important. What's going on?"

I exhaled heavily, screwing up my nose before leaning my head back against his seat. "I, uh, I might've done something bad."

"What did you do?" he asked before cutting me a sharp glare. "Please tell me that what you did wasn't Hope."

"It was," I admitted, wincing when he pounded his fist against the top of his steering wheel. "How did you know and why are you pissed off?"

"I knew because she's been out of it too. I was hoping it was just because your last date had gone well, but as soon as you zoned out, the pieces clicked into place."

"Okay, but why are you pissed?"

His eyebrows shot to his hairline. "Are you kidding me? I'm pissed because Hope and I both have our careers riding on this, and she doesn't even know."

I shook my head. "It's not that bad."

"No, it's not. Not for her, anyway. If she or Milena find out I matched you with her without running her through the system properly, *my* career could be over, though."

"You said she and I were a ninety-eight percent match anyway, so what's the problem?"

“That there might’ve been a ninety-nine percent out there for her,” he snapped. “It’s unlikely, but it’s not impossible.”

I snorted. “Unlikely? I happen to know you’ve only ever had one ninety-nine percent match. It’s more than just unlikely.”

“I know, but what are you doing, Porter? You’ve finally got a shot with a girl you’ve been in love with for years. Why are you trying to confuse her when you’re the other guy she’s seeing?”

“I’m not trying to confuse her.” Although now that he’d said it, I realized that it might just happen that way regardless. “She said she’d regret it if *Parker* turned out to be the guy for her and we’d never been together.”

“But you *are* Parker,” he snapped irritably. “Ergo, if you don’t fuck things up between her and *Parker* by being Porter, then you’d possibly have gotten to be with her anyway.”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t know that.”

“Since you do know, you should’ve just said no.”

“Are you crazy?” I glanced at him again. “Can you honestly tell me you’d have turned her down if you felt the way I do about her?”

He thought it over for a beat before he sighed. “No, probably not, but I really fucking hope you know what you’re doing, bro. I’ve watched the interviews she’s given so far. Things were going really well as far as she’s concerned. If you confused her, she may not accept the third date with Parker and then you’re fucked, she’s fucked, and I’m fucked.”

“That’s not going to happen because I have a plan,” I said. “I’m going to ask her out on a date as Porter, and then I’m going to tell her the truth. Problem solved.”

“Uh, no. Hard no, in fact. You can’t do that.”

“Why not?” I frowned. “We could still keep going on dates for *Sight Unseen*, but she’ll know the truth. I think it could be fun.”

“Was the sex really that good?”

“It was better, but why do you ask?”

His hand shot away from the steering wheel and he smacked me upside the head. “Because it scrambled your brains, idiot. If she finds out the truth, do you really think things are going to keep being the way they were in that room? Do you think her interviews will be the same?”

“No.”

“Exactly. She needs to do this for her job. For a company that’s already being accused of setting up fake dates. If it comes out that I set her up with

my brother and her best friend, do you think anyone is going to believe that any of it was real?”

“Not until you tell them we were such a good match,” I said. “You’ve got my permission to share our paperwork with the press if you have to and I’m sure Hope will give you hers too.”

“It doesn’t matter.” He released a long breath as he shook his head. “The process is supposed to be anonymous. The rules are designed for the people who are dating not to know who the other person is until the reveal. We’ve already broken the rules for you. If Hope finds out too, then the whole thing really does become fake.”

“So, what do you want me to do then?”

“Easy. Don’t tell her.”

“I don’t know if I can do that.” The pool of sludge turned rancid. “She needs to know, Foster.”

He gave me a long look when we stopped at a traffic light, his eyes serious on mine as he nodded. “I agree, but both of us knew when we started this that we were going to have to keep it from her until the fifth date. Nothing has changed on that front.”

“Except that we slept together. Puts a different spin on most things, and it definitely puts a different spin on this.”

“Sure, but you also knew when you slept with her that she had to see this dating thing through for the sake of her job and our company. You’re going to have to live with this for a little while longer for her sake. If it gets out that she knew that the dates were with her best friend, it’s really not going to look good for any of us.”

“What if I give an interview admitting that I asked you to set it up and that she didn’t know, but that our relationship grew so much during the dates that we just couldn’t stop ourselves?”

“Are you hearing yourself right now?” he asked incredulously as the light changed and he pulled away. “Over and above the fact that touching is against the rules, people aren’t stupid and they’re never going to believe that this happened the way it did. It’s going to look like she was in on it and that she just didn’t want to play by the rules.”

“No, but—”

“There are no buts here, Porter. What happened doesn’t have to be catastrophic, but if you tell her now, it could be. Milena wanted Hope to do this because she needed someone she could trust. How do you think she’s

going to react if Hope tells her now that she's been seeing her best friend all along? She knows Hope and I know each other because of you. I went to her and offered to be the one to set up Hope. She's going to think we orchestrated the whole thing. All of us together. Hope included."

"As long as it works out okay, will she care?"

His brows twitched. "Will she care that the person she trusted to save her company's reputation conspired with a coworker to put her best friend in that room with her?"

"Well, when you put it like that..."

"Exactly," he said. "That's exactly how people are going to look at this. Hope won't get fired if it doesn't work out, but ultimately, if people think she's part of this whole *fake* debacle, you can bet your ass that hers might be on the line."

"What if we end up getting married and letting them film it?"

He blew out an exasperated breath. "It still won't happen soon enough. By the time you finally make it to the aisle, she'll have been fired, the company could've gone under, and no one will believe it's real anyway. You're playing with fire here, Porter. The process needs to be followed for real for this documentary to work. Like I said, we've already broken a rule. We don't need to break any more if the integrity of the process is going to hold."

"Yeah, okay," I muttered eventually, not liking it but knowing that he was right. I still believed that she needed to know, but I would move mountains to keep her from losing a job she loved and a company she'd worked so hard to help build up.

I was the one who had made the mistakes here. First by not being honest with her before, then by asking Foster to set me up with her, and then by sleeping with her knowing that it was only going to complicate everything. If anyone was going to pay for those mistakes, it had to be me.

Hope had to come out of this squeaky clean and I would move heaven and earth to make sure she did. Even if ultimately, it meant having to keep lying to her knowing that every day I did was another day she might end up hating me for it in the end.

HOPE

For the past three days, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about Porter. Not while I was at work or at home, not while I cooked or cleaned, not while I was in meetings or even when I'd given another follow-up interview about Parker.

I just could *not* believe that this was happening now, when I'd met a man who was everything I'd ever wanted and more, and yet I was suddenly obsessed with my feelings for my best friend. It wasn't right, but I had no idea what to do about it.

Terri plucked a cocktail dress off the rack in the department store we were browsing through, holding it up against her body and narrowing her eyes as she looked for the nearest mirror. "What do you think about this one?"

"I think it's gorgeous if you like skulls and neon colors, but what do you need a cocktail dress for?"

She wagged her brows at me. "I need it to know I have it. A girl never knows when the opportunity to break out a new dress might pop up, and this way, when it happens, I've already got the dress."

I eyed the price tag dangling from the label. "You'd pay that much for a dress you *might* need *if* an opportunity presents itself?"

"Well, I've been watching those interviews you've been giving. I might just keep this in my arsenal for your engagement party."

I groaned as I broke out in a cold sweat. "Don't remind me, but also don't buy the dress if that's what you think you'll need it for."

"Why not?" She frowned and checked the size before adding the dress to

the rapidly growing pile hanging over her arm. “I’ve been following Sight Unseen’s social media channels religiously. It sure looks like it’s going well with you guys, unless you’ve finally realized that relationships are bullshit and you’re considering coming over to my side of the fence on that.”

“Uh, no,” I said decisively. “Relationships in general are not bullshit, and things really have been going well, but I messed up and now I feel like a fraud even talking about Parker.”

“You know, I thought you looked a bit nervous during that last clip they aired yesterday. What happened?”

“How could you tell I was nervous? They’ve been blurring out my face to keep him from seeing what I looked like.”

She rolled her eyes at me dramatically. “I’m your best friend, honey. I don’t need to see your face to know that you’re nervous, but also, they haven’t been blurring your whole body. I saw your knee hopping. That, and you were literally sitting on your hands to keep from fidgeting.”

I sighed through my nostrils. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. There is that.”

Glancing at me as we moved to the next rack, she lifted her brows in question. “Well, I’m listening. What have you done that’s so bad it’s made you feel like a fraud?”

“I slept with Porter,” I blurted in a stage whisper, my eyes darting from side to side to make sure no nosy fellow shoppers were listening in on the conversation. Sure, my face had been blurred out and no one knew who I was—if they were even following the web show to begin with—but I didn’t want anyone else to hear me either way.

Terri, however, didn’t seem to have the same qualms. Her eyes went as round as I’d ever seen them, her chin dropping along with her mouth. “You slept with Porter?”

My hand shot up to my lips to show her to shush. “Do you want to go up to the rooftop so you can shout it from there?”

She shrugged at me as she laughed. “I just might. It’s only been ten years in the making. How the hell did that happen?”

“I, uh, we were drinking tequila and I haven’t been able to get what you said out of my head. Hearing that you thought he might be in love with me kind of made me look at him differently, and when I did, I realized that I might have a feeling or two about him myself.”

She mimed applauding me. “Well, bravo. It’s about damn time you admitted there was something there. Jeez, I’ve been getting old waiting for it

to happen. How was it?”

“Amazing,” I said before I shook my head. “Not that it matters because it’s not happening again and it should never have happened in the first place.”

“It shouldn’t? Why not?”

“Uh, I don’t know? Maybe because I’m seeing someone else.”

Terri stared at me for another beat before she snorted. “Oh, that’s it? I was waiting for a big revelation.”

“Seeing someone else isn’t a big revelation?”

Her eyes narrowed like she was genuinely confused. “You’ve been on two dates with Parker, honey. You’re hardly married to the guy. Shit, I mean, you don’t even know him. Please tell me you haven’t been beating yourself up about this.”

“Of course I’ve been beating myself up about it.” I lowered my voice to a harsh whisper. “I *slept* with Porter. Who isn’t the guy I’m seeing. I *cheated* on Parker. I’m a horrible person and—”

“Come off it, babe,” she said, cutting me off as she rolled her eyes at me. “You didn’t cheat on anyone. In order for it to be considered cheating, you’ve got to be in a relationship with another person. You’re not in a relationship with Parker. Unless I missed something.”

“No, you didn’t, but that doesn’t change what I did. Just because we haven’t defined what we are doesn’t mean we can sleep with anyone we want to.”

“Actually, that’s pretty much exactly what it means,” she argued gently. “Until you’re committed to someone, you’re single, and when you’re single, you get to sleep with whoever you want. Those are the rules.”

I scoffed. “Those are *not* the rules.”

“As the one with the most experience in casual hookups, I’m going to have to veto you. You’re single until you’re not single. Two dates do not equal a relationship unless both parties have agreed to be in one so soon. It’s early on for you and Parker. You didn’t cheat on him.”

I sighed. “Okay, but I still did something really bad. It may be early on in the relationship, but I’d be hurt if I found out he’s slept with someone else.”

“So don’t tell him,” she suggested. “Or do, because he may well be sleeping with other people too.”

“I’m not sleeping with Porter. I *slept* with him. It was a one-off.”

She smirked. “Why? If it really was amazing, why wouldn’t you want to do it again?”

“I didn’t say that I didn’t *want* to.”

She moaned softly as she covered her eyes with her free hand. “I’m so confused. Does he not want to?”

“I don’t know. We haven’t talked about it, but we agreed not to make a big deal out of it and I’m trying really hard to stick to that agreement.”

“Uh, I beg to differ,” she said, dead pan. “You may not be making a big deal of it to *him*, but a big deal is being made. If it wasn’t, we wouldn’t be having this argument right now.”

“We’re not having an argument,” I protested. “I’m telling you that I did something bad and you’re not going to convince me that it wasn’t bad.”

“It wasn’t, though,” she said immediately. “Choose any random stranger in this store. I’ll go up to them and ask them if it makes you a terrible person to sleep with someone when you’ve been on two blind dates with someone else, and then we’ll see how bad it is.”

“We’re not doing that.”

She shrugged. “Suit yourself, but I guarantee that no one will say you’re a horrible person who’s done something unforgivable. Unless we ask a really old person. Some of them might think you’re a lady of loose morals, but other than that, we’re good.”

“I doubt it, but I’m not interested in more social experiments. I’m already part of one for now. That’s my limit.”

“For now?” She suddenly stopped walking and gave me a stern look. “You’re not dropping out of the program, Hope.”

“Yes, I am. I’m opting out first thing on Monday morning.”

“No, you’re not,” she said firmly. “You’re not that person. You don’t just quit something when you’re almost halfway there.”

“You’re right, I’m not usually that person, but I also don’t want to spend the rest of my life wondering what might have been with Porter. I can’t knowingly string Parker along when there’s someone else I’d like to explore things with.”

Terri didn’t say anything for a moment, simply staring at me with confusion furrowing her brow all over again. “How would you be stringing him along? And why couldn’t you find out what could happen with Porter at the same time? I really don’t understand.”

“You want me to date two men at the same time?”

“No, not if you don’t want to, but that’s not the point. The point is that you’re not dating Porter and you’re not committed to Parker. For God’s sake,

Hope. It's been two dates and you haven't even laid eyes on the guy. Seriously, stop beating yourself up over this."

"How?" I asked unhappily. "Look, maybe it wouldn't be a dealbreaker for other people, but if I found out Parker had slept with someone else, it would be a dealbreaker for me. I'm opting out of the program and I'm going to tell Porter how I feel."

She paused before she inhaled deeply and then nodded. "I'm not going to try to talk you out of it, but I think you're making a mistake. At least talk to Porter before you drop out of the program."

"I can't. Parker shouldn't be anybody's backup plan. He deserves better than that and Porter needs to know that I'm serious enough about this to have chosen him."

Terri squeezed her eyes shut, dragged in another deep breath, and exhaled slowly. Then she opened her eyes again and shrugged. "I'll be here for you when you need me and I really won't try to talk you out of this, but at least give it some thought before you light a stick of dynamite and toss it into your own life."

"I've already done that," I muttered. "What I'm trying to do now is clean up the wreckage. Thanks for trying, but I've made up my mind. I need to do this."

"I'll keep the wine in the fridge for you," she said decisively. "Actually, I'll do you one better and keep the tequila in the freezer too. I think you're going to need a few drinks real soon and I have a feeling you won't be going to Porter when you need a friend for at least a little while."

"Thanks," I said, my voice small. "I think you might be right about that, which is exactly why I need to do this."

It sucked that I didn't feel like I could turn to Porter as a friend right now, but I could hardly ask for his opinion about dropping out of the program because of what had happened between us. It would only make him feel guilty too, and the last thing I needed was an extra helping of that particular emotion.

I was already feeling horrible about letting Milena down. Now all that was left for me to do was to tell her what I'd done. And then there was Parker. The innocent, perfect guy who was stuck in the middle through no fault of his own.

Tears stung the backs of my eyes, but I blinked them away. I had made this mess. What I had to focus on now was cleaning it up—and to hope that it

would all be worth it in the end.

“David?” I said when I picked up my phone, wondering why on earth the man who had bought my patent was calling. “How are you? Is everything okay?”

“I’m afraid we’ve run into a little snag,” he said. “My people assured me they could fix it, but they’re not getting anywhere and I don’t have time for them to reinvent the wheel.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, my stomach cooling down fast as my heart rate spiked. “I’m assuming the snag you’re referring to is with my earbuds?”

“My earbuds,” he corrected lightly before he sighed. “The short answer to your question is yes. We’ve run into a problem with the earbuds, but only after my team fiddled with them.”

“Fiddled how?” Annoyance zapped through me, but I tamped it down. “What did they do?”

“They were trying to add an auto-transcribe function from the recording of a conversation, but they appear to have scrambled something.”

“Transcribing is not the same as translating,” I said, doing my best to keep my voice even. “There are hundreds of speech-to-text programs out there. Why not just use one of those once you have a recording from the earbuds?”

“That’s why I called you,” he said. “It’s also why I was talking about not having time to reinvent the wheel. One of our clients requested the auto-transcribe function and our deadline is next month. We can’t afford to lose this client, Porter. I’m willing to pay you for your time, of course.”

“Of course,” I said, sighing as I mentally ran through the programming on

my patent and what I knew about the other programs that were out there. “I can’t make any promises, but I can try.”

“Can you try right now?” he asked. “My team is already gathered in the conference room. It would be a big help if you could come take a look at what they’ve got.”

“I’m on my way.” I stood up from behind my desk and closed out the Thai realtor’s website I’d been scrolling through. David was the reason I could afford to look at properties in Thailand. For what he’d paid me for the patent, the least I could do was take a look at this issue they were having and try to fix it for him. “I’ll see you in about an hour. Make sure they’ve had their coffee, and food, and whatever else they need before I get there. We’ll roll up our sleeves and get to work.”

“They’ll be ready,” he promised before he disconnected the call and I strode out of my study. Thankfully, I hadn’t slept in today and I’d already showered. I grabbed a coffee and some food myself before I headed out. Then I drove directly to his office building.

As he’d promised, he had a team of engineers gathered in the conference room I was shown to, and they had everything ready that we needed to get started. The project manager walked me through what they’d done, and it didn’t take me long to realize that they’d gotten a lot further than David had thought.

They’d also already purchased the software they needed and the only thing that was really left to be done was connect all the dots they’d already put in place. A few hours later, I declined David’s offer for payment and shook his hand.

“This wasn’t really me,” I said. “I only helped get them over the line. I hope your client is happy. If they’re not, give me a call and we’ll see what we can do.”

“Thank you, Porter. It was a pleasure doing business with you again. I owe you one for this. You may think you only helped them over the line, but you weren’t in there this morning. They were stumped.”

“They’d have figured it out,” I said as I took a step back. “You have a great team in there.”

He smiled and gave me a questioning look. “You wouldn’t be interested in joining it, would you?”

I chuckled. “No, but thank you for the offer.”

“You can’t blame me for trying,” he said. “Thanks again for all your

help.”

“You’re very welcome.” I gave him a wave, then spun on my heels and walked away before I took him up on the offer.

It was very tempting and it’d been fun using my brain again for something other than thinking about Hope, but I was enjoying my freedom. Maybe I’d eventually ask if I could consult for him occasionally or something, but for now, I liked where I was at.

For years, I hadn’t made time to focus on anything other than my invention. While I’d admit that I’d made my fair share of mistakes after I’d stepped well and truly back into living life instead of just working through my life, I wanted to see where it went without any restrictions on my time. For now.

As if he’d heard me thinking about my mistakes, my phone rang and Foster’s name came up on the screen. I didn’t really feel like another lecture, but I took his call anyway. “Hey, bro. What’s up?”

“Hope is meeting with Milena today,” he said, keeping his voice low. “Have you spoken to her?”

I frowned. “No. Is everything okay? Why do you sound so worried?”

“Because Hope looked really upset this morning. Are you sure you haven’t done anything else? Now would be the time to tell me about it, Porter.”

“I swear I haven’t done anything else,” I promised, my heart in my throat as I got into my car. “Did you ask her what was wrong?”

“Yeah, but she kind of blew me off.” He sighed. “Have you logged into the *Sight Unseen* app recently? I haven’t gotten a notification that she requested another date, but maybe the system has a glitch in it or something. Maybe she thinks Parker has decided against another date and that’s what she’s upset about.”

“I haven’t logged in, but I’ve been keeping an eye on emails and I haven’t gotten any notifications about another date. I’ll check again and let you know if I missed something, but I don’t think it’s that.”

“Fuck.” He was quiet for a moment. “I haven’t received a notification about you requesting another date yet either. Why is that?”

Shit.

My pulse spiked when I just thought about it. I cleared my throat. “It could be because I haven’t put in the request yet.”

“Well, that might explain why she’s upset. I thought you were going to

follow through with the program, Porter. What happened?”

“I am going to follow through. I just needed a minute, okay? I haven’t even spoken much to Hope as Porter since, and I have no idea what to say to her as Parker.”

“Parker and Porter have to get their heads out of their asses,” he whispered furiously. “If that’s what their meeting is about, Hope may be considering pulling the plug on the process because she thinks her date has lost interest.”

My gut tightened. “I definitely haven’t lost interest. I was just trying to work through some stuff. This has gotten a whole hell of a lot more complicated than I was expecting, but I’ll fix it.”

“Do that,” he said insistently. “As soon as possible. Please and thank you.”

“I will. As soon as we’re off the phone, I’ll log in and make the request.”

My brother paused. “You haven’t changed your mind about this, have you? If you have, just be honest with me, Porter. Hope will need closure from Parker if he’s decided not to continue with the program. Our clients aren’t always willing to give each other that, but we do always try to get it for them. You sure as shit owe her that much if you don’t actually want to go on another date.”

My head spun like I’d just stepped off an out-of-control carnival ride. In his own way, Foster was giving me an out. People dropped out of this program all the time if it wasn’t working for them. I could be one of those people, and I could choose to leave a message with him for Hope.

The problem was that I *did* want another date with her. I wanted more of her, not less. I also didn’t want her to think that Parker had lost interest. If anything happened between us again, I already knew I’d keep wondering if it was only because Parker ghosted her.

The other aspect of it was that at this point, she still thought Parker was *the one* and that I was just her best friend who she hadn’t wanted to have any regrets about. If I dropped out of the program, I could tell her the truth. I could tell her that I had been Parker all along and hope that the romantic connection we’d been building in that room would translate into real life.

Or I could go back into that room just two more times. I could keep showing her that I really was the one for her and we could keep nurturing that connection *before* I dropped the bomb that could destroy it all. I wanted to tell her the truth. I really did, but at what cost?

Her job? Our budding relationship?

If it had just been about me, it would've been one thing, but it wasn't. I had to think about her, and frankly, I had to think about my brother too. He'd put his ass on the line for me with this, and their documentary was gaining traction. Hope had already agreed to see it through and I had a suspicion that even if she was probably feeling bad about sleeping with me, she was going to fulfill her obligations to her boss.

Unless this was bugging her more than I thought it was, but there was no way of knowing that right now.

As much as I wanted everything out in the open, I didn't want it to come at the cost of either of those things. I wanted her to keep the job she loved and I wanted to keep building our relationship. If, at the end of all this, she was in love with me, I needed her to know that I'd shown her all of me. Every single part. And I wanted her to know that I knew, accepted, and loved every part of her.

"I haven't changed my mind," I said to Foster when I finally surfaced from my thoughts. "I'll log into the app as soon as we hang up, okay? I want another date with her and I'll request it in a minute."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. I got us into this and I need to fix it. I don't know how she's feeling right now, but the last thing I want is for her to be so upset that she's going to Milena about it. I'll fix it, okay?"

"Okay," he said. "Good luck, bro."

"Thanks. I have a feeling I'm going to need it." Even so, I kept my promise.

When we hung up, I requested another date with Hope and then I sat right there in my car for the next thirty minutes, waiting for a reply that didn't come.

Shit. What if I've already waited too long?

HOPE

When I walked into Milena's office, I was covered in a layer of sweat, and even though I'd showered only a couple hours ago, it felt like I needed to again. My boss looked up when I walked in, smiling as she leaned back in her chair and turned her attention on me instead of whatever she'd been doing on her computer.

"Good morning, Hope. Did you have a good weekend?"

I nodded, but all my movements were jerky and unnatural, like I was either constipated or the complete opposite. "It was fine. Thank you for asking."

She frowned as she looked back at me and waved me into the chair opposite her desk. "Are you okay? You're not coming down with something, are you? You're very pale."

"Uh, no, I'm fine. I mean, I'm not sick." I sat down right at the edge of the chair she'd motioned me into, my spine ramrod straight and my stomach doing uncomfortable turns that were making me nauseated. "Thank you for agreeing to see me."

"Of course," she said easily, though she still seemed concerned. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"No, I'm not. I'm not sick either, but I need to talk to you about something."

"Okay. What's up?" She slid her elbows to her armrests, her posture and expression open but concerned as she swept her gaze across my face. "You really don't look well, Hope. Maybe you should've taken the day off."

"I can't do the program anymore," I blurted instead of telling her again

that I wasn't sick. I wasn't. Not physically anyway. I felt sick, but that was my own fault instead of some bug's. "I'm really sorry that I'm letting you down and I know you're counting on me, but I can't keep seeing Parker."

She blinked hard a few times, completely taken aback before she cocked her head at me. "May I ask why you want to put an end to it? It doesn't seem like you to do something like this completely out of the blue."

"It's not, but I couldn't go on in good faith knowing what I've done."

"What have you done?" she asked gently, her gaze fixed on mine. "Tell me, Hope. I'm sure it's not that bad."

"I, uh..." Humiliation spread like wildfire through me. I couldn't believe I was about to tell her this, but I owed her the truth. "I slept with someone else last week. I'm so sorry, Milena. I don't know what I was thinking. I—"

"That's it?" she asked, interrupting me as the intensity melted out of her eyes and a small smile appeared at the corners of her lips. "You slept with someone and that's why you look like you're about to have an aneurysm?"

"No. Well, yes."

The smile grew a little bit bigger. "Is that why you think you have to drop out of the program?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Hope. That's not the end of the world. So what if you slept with someone else? Have you and Parker spoken about being exclusive?"

"No."

"Then I don't see why you suddenly want to pull out of this," she said. "You like him, don't you?"

"Of course, I do." I averted my gaze, shifting on my butt as I eyed the chipping nail polish on my thumb. "It's really not that I don't like him. He's great. Perfect, actually. It's just that I can't lead him on."

"Have you committed to a relationship with this other man?" she asked. "The one you slept with."

"No."

"Help me understand this then, Hope," she implored. "Are you in love with the other man? Have you lost interest in dating other people?"

"No, but I can't keep seeing Parker when I know that I might be interested in exploring things with someone else."

When I looked up again, she was sitting back against her chair, her expression soft but somehow still firm. "First things first, you're not backing out now. People are way too invested after seeing what has been happening

between you and Parker. If it doesn't work out, then that's fine, but we can't leave them wondering what on earth could have changed so drastically after the second date that you didn't even make it to the third."

"Our clients often end the process at this point," I reasoned. "Two dates are enough to know if things are working or not."

"Absolutely," she agreed. "The last they saw of you, though, things were great. It was definitely working and he'd given all the right answers. We can't just stop."

"I would give another interview," I offered. "We won't just be leaving them on a cliffhanger. I'll just explain that life happened and that I met someone else."

Milena was quiet for a long moment as she thought it over. Then she shook her head. "You haven't dated much casually, have you?"

"No. Why?"

"I haven't either," she said thoughtfully, her gaze slightly unfocused before she blinked and looked at me again. "I do think I have a bit more experience with it than you do, though."

"You do?"

"Yes." She smiled. "I'm not that much older than you, and even though I'm busy, I do want companionship on occasion."

My brows shot up, but I nodded like I knew exactly what she was talking about. I didn't. Milena was a great boss, but I honestly didn't know all that much about her outside of work. She chuckled when she realized how confused I was about why she was telling me this.

"These last few years, I've been focused on the company and not particularly interested in finding my own perfect match," she said. "With that said, I'm not a robot. I work hard, but every once in a while, it's nice to have a meal with a human being instead of my computer."

"I understand," I said, but I didn't really, not until she explained herself a bit more.

Milena smiled. "I've even hooked up with a few of those human beings I've shared meals with. My point is that sex isn't reserved for people who are in serious relationships and that people sleep together all the time. Even those who have signed up with dating agencies and are interested in settling down."

Finally, it started making a little bit more sense to me. "You don't think I betrayed Parker by sleeping with somebody else?"

She shrugged. "Not unless you two have discussed being exclusive. Have

you spoken at all about seeing other people while you're doing this?"

"No. Just that neither of us were seeing anyone when we had our first."

"I don't understand why you're feeling so guilty that you want to quit, then. If you want to tell him what happened, you can do it but you need to see this through. For all you know, he's done the same thing. We also don't require clients to disclose if they're signed up with other agencies. They don't have to stop dating completely during this process. He may be going on dates with other women every night that he's not with you."

A pang hit me in the gut like someone had taken a sledgehammer to it. When I flinched, she gave me a knowing look. "If the thought of it is that hard, imagine how he's going to feel if you just suddenly put an end to it without even talking to him about why you're doing it."

Fuck! She's got me there. "Do you really think there's any point? I hear what you're saying. It's very much the same thing my best friend said, but I honestly don't know how I feel about this other guy just yet and I want to explore it."

"So explore it," she said gently. "Until you've discussed exclusivity with Parker, you're free to see as many other people as you want. That just doesn't mean you can't keep seeing him. You've only had two dates with him, Hope. I know those dates have gone well, but that's kind of the point of dating someone before you commit to them. Not every relationship has to turn into something serious."

"What if I hurt him?"

"What if you spend the rest of your life wondering what if?" she countered. "You said yourself that you don't know how you feel about the other man. What if you explore things with him, realize that the sex was hot but that you have no emotional connection, or that your emotional connection with Parker was stronger? What if the other guy starts seeing someone else? What if Parker does? We can play this game all day, Hope."

"What are you really saying? I know you don't want me to quit, but I can't string someone along. I won't."

"So don't," she said firmly. "Tell Parker the truth. Talk to him about it, but this documentary is going to be the real version of what happens here. No matter how it ends."

"Why aren't you mad at me about this?"

"Why would I be?" She frowned. "I'm your boss, not your mother. If you want someone to make you feel guilty about having sex, you knocked on the

wrong door. You won't find any of that here."

"But I messed up."

Her frown deepened. "How? You're young, single, and beautiful. I don't care who or how many people you sleep with, Hope. As long as you see the documentary through in an honest, real way, your romantic life has nothing to do with me."

"It wouldn't feel right to accept another date with Parker, but you've also got a point about telling him the truth. And the only way to see him again to do it is to accept another date."

Milena didn't say anything as her eyes searched mine. Then she leaned forward and put one of her arms on her desk like she was trying to reach for me. "You're beating yourself up about nothing, Hope. I understand that you're feeling guilty, even if I don't understand why it's made you feel so guilty that you still feel sick. I also understand that you've always been a relationship person and that you're not well versed in casual *anything* when it comes to romance, but let me put it to you this way."

She got up and walked around her desk, sitting down again in the seat beside mine before turning to face me. "If I came to you as a friend and you knew I'd been on two dates with one man and slept with another, what would you say?"

"That it's no big deal," I replied immediately. "As long as you're not in a rel—Oh."

She smiled and reached for my arm, giving it a gentle squeeze before she nodded. "Exactly. If anyone else was in your position, you wouldn't think it was a trainwreck at all, yet you're putting yourself through the wringer because of it. Show yourself a little bit of that same grace you would anyone else. We're all our own harshest critics."

My phone beeped with an alert, and when I pulled it out of my pocket once I finally left her office, my heart constricted and my palms got sweaty all over again.

Parker has requested another date with you. [Click here to accept.](#)

I slid the device back into my pocket without clicking on anything, feeling like even my own damn phone was pushing me to accept the damn date now. I'd heard what everyone had said and I really had listened, but as of right now, I still wasn't sure what I was going to do and I wouldn't be

pushed into making a decision.

Especially not by my own damn phone. *I paid for you, asshole. Watch it, or you're going to be replaced.*

Sitting in front of my computer, I stared at the list I'd made of ideas for my next invention. I didn't need the money, but that wasn't what I'd done it for before, and it definitely wouldn't be this time around.

It'd just been nice to use my brain the other day and I wanted to keep using it before it shriveled up and died. I'd spent the day making a list of things I'd thought of over the years and now I had to pick one to commit to.

Some of the ideas were better than others, but I still couldn't seem to choose. In fact, I'd been staring at the damn screen for so long that my head was starting to hurt.

Groaning as I rolled my chair away from my desk, I shook my head at myself and decided that I deserved a scotch. *Maybe looking at this through amber-tinted glasses will make something jump out at me.*

As I was striding out of my study, my phone beeped and I pulled it out to see a text from Hope. My heart went from zero to hero instantly, doing gymnastics in my chest like it was competing for the championship title.

Hopeless: Do want to come over tonight? We can watch a movie.

I sighed. I'd changed her name in my phone to that years ago. She thought it was a dig at her lack of ability to be spontaneous when the truth was that it was because my situation with her was hopeless—and because I was hopelessly in love with her.

The mind of a nineteen-year-old boy... Thank God that part of my life is over.

Me: Be there in thirty.

After pocketing my phone again, I headed up to my bedroom and

changed into jeans out of my sweats, but I left my long-sleeved shirt and hoodie on. This wasn't a date. I wasn't getting dressed up for it. I'd known Hope long enough to know that she had enough time to stew on it and now she wanted to talk about the other night.

When I got to her place, I was relieved that I hadn't misread the situation. She wasn't dressed up either, which meant she really hadn't intended for it to be a date. Her hair was piled into a messy bun on top of her head with tendrils of it escaping and beautifully framing her face. She wasn't wearing any makeup, and unlike me, she hadn't even bothered to change out of her sweats, but when she smiled at me, I swore the butterflies in my stomach woke up.

Aaaand now I'm thinking like a nineteen-year-old girl... At least it's got to be better than the mind of a nineteen-year-old boy.

"Hi," she said and stepped aside to wave me in. "Thanks for coming."

"Always."

It wasn't just something I was saying either. When Hope called, I would always come running. *Maybe that's why none of my other attempts at relationships have worked out.*

"What's up?" I followed her to her kitchen and watched as she fixed two cups of cocoa. She hadn't asked if I wanted one, but she knew she didn't have to.

She shrugged but didn't turn to look at me. "What if nothing's up? What if I just asked my best friend over for a movie?"

"Did you?"

"No."

I chuckled. "Exactly, so I'll repeat the question. What's up?"

After filling the mugs with cocoa, she picked them up and finally turned to face me, handing one over before she led me to her living room. "Do you think I'm a terrible person?"

"Say what now?"

She sighed as we sat down on either side of the three-person sofa facing the TV, but instead of looking at it, she crossed her legs underneath her and turned to me. "We slept together while I was supposed to be seeing someone else. Milena and Terri don't seem to think that it makes me a terrible person, but I still feel horrible about it."

"Is it going to help if I tell you that you're not a terrible person? Or has that part been sufficiently covered already? Because you're not, you know."

“I *slept* with you, Porter. It was a mistake, but I still did it. How am I supposed to keep going through the program like nothing happened?”

Okay. I don't know how to respond to that. She thinks it was a mistake? I mean, sure, it might've been, but ouch. That hurts.

“Do you want to keep going through the program?” I asked, my eyes locked on her down-turned greens. “If you're feeling so bad about it even after speaking to Terri, Milena, and now me, maybe it's not really about what we did. Maybe it's just that you don't really want to keep going.”

Nothing stings quite like hearing that the love of your life thinks she made a mistake by sleeping with you and now doesn't want to keep seeing your alter ego. Shit, maybe I should just crawl back into my cave. Inventing hurts a hell of a lot less than this—even when things go wrong.

Hope stared back at me, considering what I'd said before she shook her head. “It's not that I don't want to keep seeing him. I do, but I don't know how to face him after what I did. I know we've only been on two dates, but I essentially cheated on him and I don't know how to get past that. I feel terrible, but it may be better just to let him go.”

“First, you didn't cheat on anyone. Second, you're no coward. Stop pretending like you were ever just going to walk away from this guy without saying anything to him. Third, you've always been an honest person, which is why Milena asked you to do this. Just be honest with him. Tell him what happened and see what he says.”

Something bright flared in her eyes, and I knew it wasn't pain, but it sure looked a lot like it. “You... you want me to keep seeing him?”

I frowned. “Uh, yeah? Why wouldn't I?”

Her gaze bounced from one of my eyes to the other, and she didn't say anything for a few long moments before she finally nodded. “I guess you're right.”

“I'm always right.” I smirked, but I wasn't really feeling it. I wasn't really feeling anything but hurt.

Nothing had really changed, but somehow, it felt like it had. That comment about it having been a mistake had shaken me up. It was one thing to think it might've been a mistake myself, but another to hear it from her.

The context was too different. For me, it might've been a mistake because I should've told her the truth before we slept together and I felt like shit for not having done so. For her, it'd just been a mistake. Something she now probably wished she hadn't done.

“Do you think he’ll be able to forgive me?” she asked softly, those eyes still sad as she cocked her head at me. “I know that technically, I didn’t cheat, but at the same time, I don’t want to hurt him.”

“If he really is the one, he’ll be able to move past it,” I said slowly, feeling a little hollow. At the risk of being dramatic, I couldn’t help feeling a bit like she’d ripped some of my insides out.

Oh, God. I am a nineteen-year-old girl.

“Would you have been able to move past it?” she asked.

I shrugged. “If a girl I’d been on two dates with fucked someone else? Sure. As long as we hadn’t made each other any promises. Hell, I’m pretty sure a lot of the women I’ve been out with *were* fucking other people. They just didn’t tell me about it.”

“Just because you haven’t made someone any promises doesn’t mean it won’t hurt them,” she said. “I think you might be right, though. If he is the one, and I still think he might be, then we’ll be able to move past it together. If not, then I guess he’s just not the one.”

“Sure.” I took a big sip of my cooling cocoa. “I’m so—”

“I’m sorry,” she said at the same time that I started saying the same thing. Then she smiled and motioned for me to go ahead. “You first.”

“I’m sorry this is giving you such a headache, is all.”

She frowned. “Why are you sorry? I’m the one who propositioned you, which is why I’m sorry. I guess tequila really doesn’t make good decisions, huh?”

So I’m a mistake and a bad decision. Good to know.

I nodded. “A lesson most of us learned in college, but welcome to the club.”

She laughed. “Thanks, Porter. And thank you for talking to me about this. I’m glad things aren’t weird between us now.”

“So am I.”

My phone chimed, and I knew what that sound meant. It was a push notification from my favorite online retailer. Probably telling me that the new fishing rod I’d ordered was on its way, but Hope didn’t need to know that.

“Ah, shit,” I said as I pulled the device out of my pocket. *And yep. The new rod has been dispatched for delivery.* “I’m sorry, Hope, but I’ve got to go. I completely forgot plans I made to grab a beer with a friend tonight.”

“Oh.” Disappointment flickered across her features, but she nodded and got up, giving me a tight smile as she walked me to the door. “We’ll take a

raincheck on the movie?”

“Definitely,” I agreed, though I wasn’t sure I’d be able to sit next to her in the dark for two hours right now, with her cuddling into my side and treating me exactly the same as she always had. “I’ll see you soon, babe. Enjoy the movie.”

“Enjoy the beer,” she replied as she opened the door and smiled at me, a more relaxed one this time. “Thank you for your help. I think I’ve finally made a decision.”

“That’s great.” *Fuck.* “Bye, Hope.”

“Adios.” She waved as I walked out, then firmly shut the door behind me.

It turned out that making up an excuse to get out of there didn’t help me forget that comment about it having been a mistake—and also didn’t ease the resulting sting.

That night had been the best night of my life. I’d been on a date with her, and then I’d finally gotten to be with her. Memories of having her on top of me still kept me up at night—in all the ways—and being able to have fun with her after had made me feel like maybe, just maybe, I could have everything I’d ever wanted.

Everyone wanted to be married to their best friends, as far as I knew. Life would be a fucking ball, and I wanted that. I wanted the comfort and familiarity of sitting on the sofa with a cup of cocoa I hadn’t asked for. I wanted the wicked hot passion and the water fights after. I wanted it all, and I wanted it with her.

As I got to my car, my phone chimed, and this time when I checked it, I saw that she had accepted the date I’d requested. *Shit, I should’ve taken the out when Foster had given it to me.*

I was in too deep now. My head was spinning, my heart was smarting, and I really just wanted to go back in time to that first conversation we’d had about her joining her program. I should’ve told her right then and there how I felt about her.

Right. I’m moving “time machine” to the top of my list. As soon as I got home, I was going to look into how I could make it a reality. I mean, it’s worth a shot, right?

HOPE

In my pre-date interview, I had to fight to hold back my tears as I looked into the camera. “So, uh, there’s something I have to tell him tonight. Something I’m not proud of, but that I have to take responsibility for. I guess I just felt like I should warn you that this might be our last date.”

“How does that make you feel?” Tina asked.

The tears threatened to choke me, but I refused to let them fall, dragging in a deep breath instead and lifting one of my shoulders in a shrug. “Honestly? Not great. Parker is one of the best guys I’ve ever met, and I know I’ve had my doubts about whether he’s genuine, but I’ve also realized that I was overthinking it. He seemed too good to be true, but the more I’ve considered the points he made, the more I’ve come to believe every word he said. That’s what makes this so much harder.”

“Well, good luck,” she said. “We’re rooting for you, Hope. Honesty is always the best policy. Whatever you need to talk to him about, I’m sure he’ll appreciate that you’re telling him the truth.”

I raised my hands. “Fingers crossed. I’ll speak to you guys later.”

“We’ll be waiting,” she promised as I got up and left Milena’s office.

Walking to the date room by myself, I tried to focus on my breathing and calm the turbulent emotions rolling through me. This past week had been awful. *Talk about a freaking see-saw.*

I’d been up and down so many times, but ultimately, this was the right thing to do. Porter had made it crystal clear that he wasn’t interested in exploring things with me, and more than that, the *Parker what-if* would’ve made it impossible for me to give anything else a real shot anyway.

My obsessive need for order told me that I needed to see things through with Parker first. We were dating, and if tonight went well, there was only two more dates to go before the big reveal. Getting along the way we did didn't necessarily mean we were going to wind up together, but if we were meant to be, we would.

If it didn't work out and life threw another curveball that put Porter in my path romantically, then I would give that a chance in turn—if he wanted to give it a chance, which didn't seem likely.

At the end of the day, however, he was my best friend. He always had been and he always would be. There didn't have to be anything else between us. I loved him as a friend, and if things developed organically into more if Parker and I didn't work, then that was what happened.

For now, however, I was going to focus on the man I was dating. So far, he'd been incredible and I really did want to see where it went. I just had to put Porter behind me. *Which is easier said than done, but I'm doing it.*

"Hi," I said when I walked into the dark room, not knowing whether he was already there or not.

"Hey," he said, and I smiled as I shut the door behind me and made my way to my sofa. "How're you doing, Olivia?"

"I'm okay. You?"

"Yeah. I'm great." He paused. "So, uh, I was starting to wonder if you were having second thoughts about this."

Crap. Out of the frying pan and into the fire right off the bat. This is going to be fun. I sat down, stretching my legs out in front of me on the sofa. "It's not that I was having second thoughts. I really do enjoy the time we spend together. I'll even admit that talking to you is like talking to the other side of myself, but after our second date, I did something that I wasn't sure how to handle."

"Uh, okay?"

I sighed, dropping my head back and covering my face with my hands as the words rushed out of me. "I slept with someone else, Parker. I shouldn't have done it, and I really am sorry. I never meant to hurt you at all, and maybe I'm being silly, but I don't know what we are or where we're going. Part of me feels like I cheated, which I've never done before and never will, and another part of me feels like you and me don't really know each other and that it probably won't even matter to you."

After my rambling monologue ended, he was quiet, but I hadn't heard the

door open, so I knew he was still in here. Shutting up to give him time to process, I sat there silently with my heart pounding and regret and embarrassment coursing through me.

Our dates were being filmed, but only snippets of what we said were being used for the documentary. This wasn't a reality series where viewers would get to watch every second of us being together. *Although on the other hand, I suppose what we see on those dating shows is only a fraction of the time those people spend together too.*

Parker's throat clearing snapped me out of my thoughts. "Look, Olivia, I won't say that it was great to hear that, but I understand. This is a crazy process. I'm having trouble soaking it all in myself."

"So you're not mad at me?" I asked, and I couldn't keep the spark of hope out of my voice. "You're not about to storm out of here and never look back?"

A soft chuckle drifted to my ears. "No, I'm not. If we were dating out there in the world, maybe I would've felt differently. At the same time, if we were dating out there, our connection wouldn't have been as strong at this point as I feel like it is now. All of which is to say that this is entirely new territory for us both. It's only natural that what we have in here feels a little surreal when we go out there."

"You're really not like anyone I've ever met before," I admitted, my voice strained as I tried to hold back even more tears. *Jeez, at this rate, I'm going to have to invest in a Kleenex factory.*

"Thank you for understanding," I said quietly. "I want you to know that this is not who I am. Cheating isn't something you'll have to worry about with me. That being said, I would like to know where we are right now. I think it might help make it feel more real out there if we're clear about it in here."

"Depends," he said after hesitating briefly. "Are you going to do it again?"

"No," I promised. "If we decide to move past this together and to see where this goes for real, then you can trust me not to touch another man again."

I heard a soft groan I didn't quite understand, but it was overshadowed by what he said next. "I want to see where this goes, Olivia. I want to be with you and I want you to be with me, even if that's not *being together* physically right now."

My heart gave a joyful little skip and I breathed out a sigh of relief. “I want to be with you too. I really feel like there could be something here, and I’m sorry that I jeopardized that. I’m sorry that I almost ruined it. That’s really not who I am and it won’t happen again.”

“Good,” he said after another short pause. “I don’t have a problem with it, Olivia. Just so you know. I don’t think of what you did as cheating, even if it’s not great to know that it happened. I will take you at your word that it won’t happen again, though. I also believe that it’s not like you.”

“Thank you for trusting me,” I said sincerely. “It means more to me than I can possibly say that you’re willing to give me another chance.”

“You told me the truth. Not everyone would’ve come in here and come clean. That says a lot more about your character than you might think. If you were honest about it when I wouldn’t even have thought to ask, then I feel like I can trust you.”

“You can,” I said immediately. “What about you? Are you okay with not being with any other women for the time being?”

“I haven’t even really thought seriously about another woman since I met you. You’re constantly on my mind and I think that sometimes, we do things in the spur of the moment that we don’t always know how to get ourselves out of. We’re human, Olivia. The way I see it, it’s not just that I’m okay with not being with any other women for now. I’m more than okay with it. I’m all in on you for as long as you’ll have me.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously,” he said, then chuckled. “I might’ve gotten a touch intense for a second there. Did I scare you off?”

“No.” I smiled even though he couldn’t see it. “I like intense sometimes. At least it means the other person is passionate and honest about what they’re saying. Both of which are qualities I respect and admire in people.”

“Let’s talk about something else,” he said suddenly. “I need to be distracted or I’m going to get even more intense. I might not have scared you off that time, but if I start saying more, that might change. Let’s keep the intensity to a minimum for the rest of this date.”

I chuckled. “Sure, what would you like to talk about?”

“Uh.” There was a long pause. “How about animals? How do you feel about them?”

“I love them,” I said. “Dogs more than cats, though I know some people would slay me for saying that. I also love horses, but I’ve never ridden on

one. Getting to see some of the animals we usually only see in zoos in the wild is a bucket-list item for me. You?”

“I feel exactly the same. Although I have been horseback riding and I wasn’t a fan. I realize a lot of guys do it and love it, but to me, it just felt like my balls were crushed the entire time. I don’t know. Maybe I was doing it wrong.”

Surprised laughter bubbled out of me. “You know, that sounds exactly like something my best friend would say. I think you two are going to get along well.”

“That’s, uh, that’s good news.” He cleared his throat. “What other items are on your bucket list? Skydiving? Scuba diving? Rock climbing?”

“I prefer to keep my feet on solid ground,” I said, working hard not to mention my best friend again. Porter always made fun of me for being born without a sense of adventure, but I doubted Parker wanted to know about that. “My bucket list mostly includes places I want to see and cultures I would like to immerse myself in for a bit. I also want to learn another language, get a dog from a rescue place, and keep a houseplant alive.”

“Yeah, I should probably add that last one to my list too. Sadly, Basie didn’t make it.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, smiling into the dark as I shook my head. “At least you didn’t get your hopes up with him.”

“True.” He sighed. “I would also love to learn another language, but I just don’t know if there’s ever going to be enough time to become fluent in it. Maybe we could learn one together eventually.”

“Maybe,” I replied. “That could be fun. I actually really like that idea. What else is on your bucket list? Do you want to do all the adventure sport stuff?”

“I’ve done some of it and I enjoyed it. I would like to do more, but I don’t mind doing it by myself. The only thing I’d really need a buddy for, literally, is scuba diving. All the rest are kind of solo sports for amateurs anyway. You can do them with other people, but you don’t need anyone else to do them. Except for an instructor. Jumping out of a plane for the first time without one is probably a bad idea.”

The red light came on, signaling the end of our date was near, and I groaned. “Damn it. Why does that always happen so fast?”

He chuckled. “I don’t know, but I’m looking forward to not having it tell us when to stop talking.”

“So am I,” I said. “Hey, uh, thanks for tonight. I really thought this wasn’t going to work out because of what I did, but I’m really glad you didn’t storm out. I’m really starting to feel something for you and I think I would’ve been a little bit crushed if we’d never gotten to see where it went.”

“We’ll make it through this,” he replied a few seconds later. “We just need to hang in there, right?”

“Right,” I agreed, then got up and walked to the door, but I only left the room after I heard the door on his end shutting behind him.

It really did suck that our dates were so short, and I honestly couldn’t wait until they wouldn’t have to be. Now I just had to find a way to put what had happened with Porter behind me for real, and then I’d be well on my way to my happily ever after.

Now if only someone could tell me how I was supposed to move on, that’d be great. Anyone? No. Crap. I honestly don’t know either.

PORTER

Why did I feel like I'd split into two separate yet similar people? *Oh, that's right. Because I just spent another hour with Hope as Parker.*

Everything I said as him was what I would've said as me. I honestly wasn't feeding her lines or bullshit, but she sure seemed to be falling for him fast. I'd heard the relief in her voice tonight when he'd forgiven her. I'd also heard all the smiles and the honesty when she'd said she was glad he hadn't run.

So why am I feeling a little bit fucking jealous of the guy right now?

Since I was him, it made no sense to be so torn up about how well it was going for him with her, but that didn't change the fact that I was. She'd just promised what she thought was another guy that she wouldn't touch me again, and that sucked.

I blew out a heavy breath as I walked to my front door after she'd knocked. I knew it was her because one way or another, she always wound up with me after her dates and I realized it was because I'd always been her friend first, but it was getting a bit difficult.

Regardless of what Foster had said it could do to both of their careers, it was time to tell her the truth. Parker and Olivia had been on three dates, and we'd both been brutally honest during our time together and in our interviews.

That ought to be enough to prove to people that Sight Unseen was real.

In my next Parker interview, I could always just say that while I'd told her during the date that I was okay with what she'd done, I'd realized after that I couldn't get past it. To make sure she didn't get any backlash about it, I

could add that I didn't blame her and that I honestly didn't feel like she'd cheated on me, but it was time for me to step out of the program.

Done and dusted.

As I turned the door handle, I opened my mouth to tell her the truth, but once I saw her, the words died on my tongue. Because I'd never seen her looking quite like this before. Her eyes were sparkly and excited, her smile radiant and disbelieving.

"I told him the truth and he understood," she said happily, seemingly not even registering that I'd been about to say something. "Can you believe it? It went so much better than I ever would've imagined. He's just so damn great."

"That's, uh, great. I guess." I shut the door behind her and felt my spirits sinking. "I'm glad you decided to be honest with him after all, but, uh, what are you doing here?"

She spun to face me, the smile fading a bit as she looked right into my eyes. "I wanted to talk to you in person about what happened the other night."

"No need," I said tightly. "We agreed to not let it come between us and not to make a big deal, so let's stick to that. I'm good with sticking to that."

"So am I, but I also wanted to let you know that I promised Parker it wouldn't happen again. It can't happen again, Porter. No matter what. I can't do that to him again. I've never done anything like it before and I never will again."

"Okay." I nodded. "I thought we were clear about that before, but fine. We're good. Anything else?"

"No," she said, then smiled dreamily again. "I mean yes. Stop me if you don't want to hear this, but we had a really good date, Porter. Like, one of those dates when everything just comes together and it feels like it's written in the stars."

"Written in the stars, huh?" I rolled my eyes. "Have you been drinking again?"

"No." She giggled. "I feel a little like I could be drunk, though. I don't think I've ever felt this way after a date."

"That's great, Hope. I'm happy if you're happy."

"Yeah, but are you?" she asked as she took a few steps toward me, staying far enough away that I wouldn't be able to touch her if I tried but coming close enough that I could see how serious she was. "I mean it, Porter."

Are you honestly happy about this?”

I swallowed hard. “Yes, I am. Nothing will make me happier than if he is the guy for you and you decide to stay with him no matter what.”

At least that was true.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, like she was trying to figure out if there was anything I wasn’t saying. “You’re sure? Like absolutely, one hundred percent sure?”

My head lowered slowly to one side as I looked back at her. “What do you want from me here, Hope? I said I was happy for you, didn’t I? Why does it even matter to you what I think or how I feel?”

She blinked hard, her head jerking a bit in surprise. “Uh, maybe because you’re my best friend and we slept together last week by accident?”

“It wasn’t an accident,” I ground out. “I didn’t trip and fall dick first into you.”

Her cheeks flushed. “Fine. I didn’t phrase it properly, but if you’re happy for me, then why does it feel like we’re suddenly fighting about something?”

“We’re not fighting,” I said, exhaling heavily before bringing my hand up to pinch the bridge of my nose as I squeezed my eyes shut. “Look, Hope, there’s something I need to tel—”

Her phone started ringing, and when she checked it, she put up her hand to show me she needed a minute. “It’s Milena. I need to take this.”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

Shit. Could the timing of that have been any worse? It’s like the universe itself is working against me telling her the truth.

“Hi, Milena,” she said as she pressed the phone to her ear, walking away to take the call and leaving me to boil in my self-created turmoil a little bit longer.

I shoved my hands into my hair as I watched her retreating back. Then I let out a long groan. If I had any idea how this was going to go once I told her, that would’ve been damn nice. I’d had so many opportunities tonight to find out, but I hadn’t wanted to take advantage of the situation.

While it’d been on the tip of my tongue to ask her so many times how she felt about the guy she’d slept with and if she was interested in him at all, I just hadn’t been able to force the words out. It would’ve felt too much like I was tricking her into telling me things she didn’t want me to know.

But I’d been dying to ask her anyway. How she felt about the guy. Why she’d slept with him. Frankly, I’d even almost asked her how it’d been and if

she wanted to do it again even if she'd said she wouldn't.

The thing was that I knew it'd been as good for her as it had been for me. Our sexual chemistry had been off the charts and we'd complemented each other in every way. I tended to like control and being vocal and blunt, and she'd eaten it up, getting wetter and more wound up than anyone I'd ever been with before.

There was no way she could tell me she didn't want that again. Fuck, I was getting hard just thinking about it and I was pissed at her right now. Why, I didn't really know. She'd come here to tell me to my face that we couldn't hook up again, which I respected.

It would've been way easier for her to just shoot me a text, but she'd taken the time to come over and talk to me about it face to face. I shouldn't be angry at her about it, but I kind of was. *How can she think it was a mistake? How could she promise another guy that she wouldn't touch me again when all I wanted was to get my hands on every part of her?*

And also, why the hell was I still angry about all of this when I was the other fucking guy? Rational thought had gone out the window, but when she got back, I was going to get this whole thing over with. It was time.

"Guess what?" she asked as she walked back to me, her cheeks flushed with joy and her chest slightly puffed out. "Milena invited me out for drinks with her tonight."

"She did? Tonight, like, right now?"

"Yes." Hope grinned. "She called to tell me how great I did tonight and that Tina thinks the footage of this last date is really going to put the company in a much better place once the videos come out."

"What? Why?"

She shrugged, still looking so damn happy that it somehow just pissed me off even more. "Apparently, allowing people to see Parker and me working out such a big, real-world issue when we've never even seen each other is going to show how strong our connection has become. They think it'll prove just how real the bonds are that our clients form in that room and that there's nothing fake about what we're going through."

"Well, I guess that's great." I nodded and motioned for her to go. "You should go join her, then. It sounds like a celebration is in order."

"It definitely is. It also takes the pressure off me for now. If this footage does what they think it's going to do, then I'm basically home free. I can stop worrying that I'm somehow going to sink the company's entire reputation if I

mess up and I'll finally be able to focus only on Parker and what we're becoming."

"Being home free sounds like a dream come true," I muttered. "Go meet up with Milena, Hope. I'm sure she's waiting."

"She is, but you're welcome to join us. Foster might be going too. She said she invited him but that she hadn't heard back from him yet."

"No, that's fine," I said, sighing as I shook my head. "You should go celebrate. I have some stuff I need to do anyway."

Like not out myself and my brother in front of his boss. But if I went and they kept going on and on about Parker, I couldn't guarantee that I wouldn't explode. Foster would never forgive me if that happened, and I would completely understand.

There was a time and a place for everything, and celebratory drinks with the boss and the owner of the company you were trying to save was not the time or the place for this revelation. As Hope hugged me goodbye and left though, I wished I could've told her.

But I hadn't. And now, I was going to have to live to lie another day.

HOPE

Milena smiled when I walked into the bar they were at, raising the glass of champagne in her hand in my direction. “There she is, ladies and gentlemen, the woman of the hour, Hope Holland.”

I blushed all the way to the roots of my hair, really not sure how to handle it when several of my coworkers burst into a round of spontaneous applause. Milena joined in, passing me a glass of bubbly of my own as I sat down in the space they’d made for me in their booth.

“I’m so proud of you, Hope. What you did tonight took a boatload of courage, and you did it anyway.”

“It was the right thing to do,” I said in a small voice, ducking my head as I tucked my hair behind my ears to give my hands something to do. “Parker was great about it, though. It’s not me you should be thanking, it’s him.”

“Oh, and I will, but he’s not here and you are. Besides, I know how you were feeling about all this. I realize how hard it must’ve been for you to walk into that room and tell him the truth, but I’m beyond grateful that you did it.”

“Tina is expecting the engagement on these videos to be fantastic,” Harper, Milena’s assistant, said. “She called as soon as she started editing the footage to say that this is going to be the best webisode yet.”

“I’m glad, but I still don’t really understand why,” I said after taking a small sip of my champagne. “We’re both real people. Obviously, we’re going to talk about real issues.”

“Yes, but there has always been a certain subset of the community that has believed that any match made through a dating app or agency is superficial. And now, we’ve got it on camera that two people who have never

even seen each other have formed a connection so strong that they not only talk about one party having had sex with another person, but that they could move past it.”

I stared at Milena, realizing that I’d never seen her looking so passionate, but her eyes were alight and her features were animated. “It was a potential pitfall of my method before I even started the company. Many researchers believe that the reason anyone falls in love with a specific other person all boils down to looks. Not necessarily looks in the sense of traditional beauty or attractiveness, but on a deeper level than that. Critics of the idea of dating in the dark and falling in love have always believed that there is no way two people can come to care so deeply about each other when they don’t know what the other person looks like.”

“You proved them wrong,” Harper added excitedly. “Or at the very least, you’ve proven that the connection you’ve formed is not superficial and that, even though you’re not in a real-world environment, you are able to tackle very real issues together that crop up in relationships.”

I nodded slowly, but before I could say anything, Milena gulped down the rest of her champagne and leaned forward. “This documentary idea of yours was great, Hope. Really great. We should’ve done it a long time ago. There may be a promotion in the works for you yet.”

“Really?” I widened my eyes at her.

She laughed, shaking her head at me. “Yes, really. Don’t sound so surprised. It was exactly what we needed to combat the rumors that are doing the rounds and we’ve had an influx of new client requests already. A lot of people who didn’t sign up before have now seen what they’d be getting themselves into, and it’s made them more comfortable about giving it a try.”

“Wow.” I didn’t even know what else to say. “That’s wonderful, Milena. I’m so glad.”

She smiled and squeezed my hand. “It’s all thanks to you.”

They went back to talking about how we were going to juggle all the new clients, and I sipped my champagne slowly. I didn’t want to drink much because of what had happened the last time I did, and when I finished my glass and said my goodbyes, they protested until I told them that I was leaving so I wouldn’t have another confession to make to Parker tomorrow morning.

When I got home, I had a quick shower, changed, and got into bed, but once the lamp on my nightstand was off, I was still wide awake. Usually, that

was my brain's trip switch. The lamp went off, and almost immediately, I started getting drowsy, but it didn't happen that way tonight.

My mind was far too busy, swirling with all the things that had happened earlier. *The amazing date. The almost-fight with Porter. All Milena's praise.*

I was confused as all hell about what had been going on with Porter, though. While he'd said that he was happy for me, he hadn't been. Which was why I'd pushed. The guy thought he could hide things from me, but he had a crappy poker face and it'd been clear as day that he'd been upset about something.

I wasn't naïve enough to believe the *something* he'd been upset about was me. It might've been a whole host of other things, like the fact that I knew he was annoyed about not being able to decide which of his ideas he wanted to tackle next, but I had a sneaky suspicion that it had been about me.

As I lay there, I realized that I should lay off talking to him about my dates for a while. Sure, he was my best friend and I valued his opinion above almost all others, but he was also a man who'd been inside me a week ago.

One of the few men who had ever been inside me.

He'd confirmed again and again that it hadn't meant anything to him, but maybe it was grating that fragile masculine ego that I was talking about another guy so soon after. Even if Porter himself was encouraging me to pursue things with said other guy.

I sure as hell wouldn't have been able to listen to him talking about another woman, but I'd also established that my feelings toward him were a lot more complicated than his toward me. I was still determined to stop thinking about him *that* way, but like Parker had said, I was only human.

And as a human, it wasn't just as easy as making the decision and having it happen just like that. The fact of the matter was that I cared about Porter a lot. Deeply. As a friend, of course, but there was definitely the potential within me for something more.

Porter and I just had that special something that not everyone had. We'd clicked as friends and we'd remained as that, but especially now that he'd become the fifth person I'd ever slept with—and that included the clumsy encounter that had cost me my virginity at eighteen—it was becoming more and more difficult *not* to think about how good we could be together.

Then there was Parker. The dreamboat. My perfect match. The only other man who'd managed to set me at ease instantly and with whom talking to was as natural as talking to my sister, myself, or Porter. It was insane that we

got along as well as we did.

Part of me was still scared that we wouldn't be attracted to each other when we met, but I was also starting to understand so much better why Grace had said that she eventually hadn't cared. At this point, I couldn't imagine myself seeing Parker and *not* being attracted to him.

They were blurring him out in the interviews too, so even though I had sneaked a peek, I couldn't make out at all what he looked like. I was, however, really not as concerned about it as I had been at the beginning.

Maybe we would have a hard time reconciling the person in front of us with the person we had made the connection with, but I had no doubt that, in time, we would manage to get past it and rediscover that connection while looking at each other.

At some point while I was stuck in my racing thoughts, I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew, there was a head between my legs and I instinctively knew that it was Parker. I moaned when he grazed his teeth against my clit, my nerve endings suddenly awake and my body begging for release.

I hadn't even been thinking about sex, but I supposed it must have been there, lurking in my subconscious when I'd been considering whether we'd be attracted to each other. Either way, it was happening now, and even though I was ninety-nine point nine percent sure I was dreaming, I was more than okay with the way this was going.

I was practically panting for him already and he'd only just gotten started. As I thought it, he lifted his head off my soaked flesh and turned his mouth to the inside of my left thigh, spreading my legs apart as far as they could go and teasing me as he ran his fingers along my legs.

"Parker," I begged, my hands on his head over the sheets he was hiding beneath. "Please, baby. I need you."

He groaned but didn't speak, continuing his slow and torturous teasing between my legs. The fact that I couldn't press them together made it even worse and it wasn't long before I was burning for him, out of my mind with need before he finally pushed a finger into me.

I cried out, so wet that he wasn't met with any resistance whatsoever. He moaned loudly before murmuring words of dirty encouragement against my skin. "That's it, baby. Squeeze my fingers. I want to feel you come for me, Hope."

Trembling as the orgasm kept building and building, I writhed underneath

him, and as soon as he sucked my clit into his hot mouth again, I came apart at the seams, screaming his name as he saw me through. When I collapsed back against the mattress, I smiled lazily and pushed the covers down, running my fingers through his hair.

“Come here, you,” I said. “We’ll see how much you like it when you’re on the receiving end of the teasing.”

“Bring it on,” a familiar voice said. “I can handle it, Hope. Always.”

I glanced down and looked into the eyes of the man who was in bed with me. My heart raced, I gasped, and I suddenly woke up. Sitting bolt upright in bed, I was still gasping for breath and I was covered in a sheen of sweat.

Porter? What the fuck? Why the hell was I dreaming about him when it was Parker whose name I had been screaming?

PORTER

“Thank you for coming,” I said as I opened my front door and let Hope in. “Welcome to the breakfast spread that dreams are made of.”

Her brows twitched as those greens bored into mine, a curious smile spreading on her lips. “That sounds great, Porter. Quick question, though. Why am I here for the breakfast spread dreams are made of?”

“I was an asshole the other night,” I said as I shut the door behind her and led her to my dining room. “You went on a great date, you came to talk to me, and I was in a not so good mood. I’m sorry, so I wanted to make up for it.”

“You didn’t have to do that.” I barely heard her pumps falling against the tiles, but I could feel her behind me. As we turned the corner and she saw the elaborate charcuterie board I’d set up for us, she sucked in a quiet gasp. “You really didn’t have to do this, but since you already have, I’m just going to say thank you.”

“That’s the spirit, and you’re welcome.” I walked up to the table and pulled a chair out for her. Once she was sitting, I picked up the two mimosas I’d made just before she’d gotten there and handed one to her before taking my seat across the table.

Between us, there was a mountain of cold cuts, fruits, cheeses, crackers, bagels, and croissants. Hope surveyed it all like she was afraid it might eat her instead of the other way around. Then she looked up at me, her eyes filled with disbelief. “Should we wait for the army before we eat?”

“We are the army.” I grinned and held up my mimosa. “Do you know there are guys who think this is a girly drink?”

She chuckled as she raised her glass to mine. “It’s not?”

“It’s not,” I said firmly. “It’s the best breakfast punch out there that packs an actual punch. Here’s to making up?”

“To making up.”

Our glasses clinked together, and something deep inside eased when she flashed me a relaxed, happy smile.

“So, have you decided what you’re going to be working on next?” she asked.

“Nope. I have, however, decided to scrap my entire list and start a new one.” I reached for a bagel and spread some cream cheese on it before topping it with salmon and capers from the board.

Hope stared at me with a piece of cheddar halfway to her mouth. “Are you serious? You’ve been working on that list for years and you just scrapped it?”

I shrugged. “Out with the old and in with the new. A lot of those ideas have now already been invented by other people and some others just weren’t great ideas to begin with.”

She raised her brows but nodded slowly. “Wow. I didn’t know you were so ruthless.”

I laughed. “When it comes to my work, absolutely. Whatever I do next has to be something I believe in as much as I did the earbuds. Otherwise I’ll never see it through and I’m not interested in wasting my time.”

“What about your money?” she teased. “Have you wasted some of that on trying to fix your car?”

My hand flew to my chest and I gripped it like I was about to rip my shirt off. In retrospect, probably not the greatest idea but I only realized that when her gaze dropped to my hand like she was waiting for me to expose some skin.

I lowered my arm back to my side and decided just to roll my eyes instead of the theatrics. “It’s not a waste, but no. I haven’t. She’s perfect just the way she is.”

“Have you given any thought to getting a new car to actually use?” she asked, then made her eyes big as she showed me her palms. “I don’t mean any offense to your *precious* car, but I *am* worried about your safety in that thing.”

I sniffed, fighting a smile as I swallowed the bite I’d just taken and washed it down with the breakfast punch of champions. “She’s always

treated me well. I'll be fine. I've looked around at other cars, but none of them speak to me."

"They're not supposed to," she joked. "If they did speak to you, I'd be worried you'd accidentally stumbled upon a transformer."

"Now that, I would buy," I said. "In fact, I've just decided to hold out on a car until I find a transformer."

She chuckled. "Maybe I'll have to look into getting you a fireman's outfit for your birthday, then."

"You want me to dress up as a fireman?" *Oh, the fun we could have with that.*

Hope suddenly turned beet red and she groaned. "Not like *that*, Porter. I meant so that you'd be safe when that hunk of junk exploded with you in it."

"Oh." I thought it over and shook my head. "Nah, I liked it better the way I had it."

"Porter!" She ducked her head behind her hair, her chest rising as she pulled in a deep breath before she looked at me again. "Unless you meant that we'd dress you up as a fireman and then we walked around looking for cats you could save out of trees? That would be pretty cool of you. You know, if your car hadn't gone up in a ball of flames yet."

That's not what I meant. "Sure, that's what I meant."

She arched an eyebrow at me knowingly, but then let it go, her expression growing serious again. "It must be scary to start all over. I mean, you gave pretty much your entire adult life to your earbuds and now they're gone."

"I've had jobs," I protested, waving a hand around my condo. "Good jobs, and good consulting positions. In fact, I was offered another job just a couple weeks ago."

"You were?"

"I was," I said. "With the guy who bought the patent, but I turned him down."

"Why?"

"I like the freedom I have now, so I might be starting over, but it's not scary. A little boring maybe, but not scary."

She smiled. "Do you know what wouldn't be boring?"

"What?"

"If you signed up with Sigh—"

"Nope," I said without hesitation. "My mind remains unchanged, but thank you. Speaking of which, though, when is your next date?"

“I, uh, I don’t know, but we don’t have to talk about it.” The words came out quickly, like she just needed to get them out there. “We’re talking about you, remember?”

I frowned. “We were, but we don’t have to keep doing it. What’s going on, Hope? Why do you suddenly not want to talk to me about it?”

“It’s not sudden. It’s just that, uh, I realized that since this has come up, I keep talking your ears off about it and I don’t want to do it anymore.”

Realization dawned, and I gave my head a soft shake. “If you want to talk to me, I’m here. No matter what. Always.”

“I know. We just don’t have to talk about this anymore.”

“But I’m invested,” I complained. “I’m interested in the continuing saga that is your blind-dating life.”

She laughed, then her brows swept up. “Do you really want to know?”

No, but also... “Yes.”

“Okay, in a nutshell, I’ve been back and forth about accepting the fourth date. It’s the penultimate one, and I don’t know. I just think I need to get away a bit. I mean, it’s not a realistic option, but I feel like I need to take a step back and just try to assess this whole thing objectively.”

“Well, I’m rich now,” I said as my mind spun. “Let’s go to Florida?”

“What?”

I shrugged. “You heard me. Both of us need to take a step back and evaluate where we’re at. Why not do it in Florida?”

“Do you really want me to count the reasons?” I asked on a soft sigh. “I have to work, the next date will be coming up once I accept it, you and I probably shouldn’t go away together alone right now and—”

“So we’ll go for the weekend. Milena will give you the day off tomorrow and we’ll be home by Monday. We could be back before your fourth date and there’s absolutely no reason you and I shouldn’t go away together. We’re still friends, right?”

“Right.”

“Then what’s the problem?” I pulled my phone out of my pocket. “While you think about more arguments to make, I’ll check flights. That way, once I’ve knocked down your arguments one by one, we’ll only be one click away from being on our way.”

“Porter...” She trailed off. “You’re a nut, do you know that?”

“I’m not a nut. I’m for real. Come on, I’ve had all this money burning a hole in my pocket for ages. Let me take you to Florida. Oh, or Fiji. How do

you feel about—”

“Florida is perfect,” she interrupted. “We’re not going to Fiji.”

“Thailand?”

“Florida.”

I let out a dramatic, disappointed sigh, then winked at her. “Fine, but then we’re actually *going* to Florida. No backsies.”

“Porter—”

“No. Backsies.” I scrolled to a flight that left at a decent hour and selected it. “We’ll be back before your fourth date, I promise. Call Milena and tell her you won’t be coming in tomorrow. You can explain when you get to the office later.”

Hope’s green eyes were locked on mine, filled with incredulity, doubt, and unless I was very much mistaken, a whole lot of excitement. She wanted this trip with me and I was going to give it to her. *The trip, not my dick. She was clear about that.*

I sighed internally as I checked out the hotel the booking site suggested on the beach. *This trip will, sadly, be purely platonic, but the next one? It won’t even matter where we go because we’re never leaving our hotel room. Hopefully. Fingers crossed and all that.*

We only had one more date to go before the big reveal, and my heart pounded so hard when I thought about it that my stomach was thrumming. I needed to use the time on this trip wisely, and then, I probably needed to tell her that it had been me all along.

HOPE

Parker and I landed in Florida, and even though it wasn't Fiji or Thailand, it was like a whole different world out here. As soon as we disembarked from the plane, a wave of wonderful humidity washed over me and I looked up at the clear blue skies, smiling as I felt all my uncertainty about this idea melting away under the deliciously hot sun.

He grinned and nudged me in the ribs with his elbow. "Huh? Huh? What did I tell you? Best. Idea. Ever."

"It was," I admitted reluctantly, wishing that the fact that I was here with him wasn't both the best and the worst part of it.

While there was no one else I'd rather have had by my side right now, I was still trying to forget all the things he'd made me feel that night we'd spent together. Honestly, I had no idea how such a large portion of the population regularly engaged in no-strings-attached one-night stands.

If there was one thing I'd learned from all this, it was that I liked strings. I wanted strings. No strings was *damn* hard, especially when the person who had rocked your world harder than anyone else ever had brought you to paradise just a couple weeks later.

Porter grunted and put his hand on my shoulder, literally shaking me out of my thoughts. "Earth to Hope. We're not thinking right now. We're Florida-ing."

"Florida-ing?" I repeated with a smile touching the corners of my lips. "Okay, Mr. Travel Agent. Pray tell, what does Florida-ing entail if not thinking?"

"Beaching," he said as we headed to the carousel to collect our luggage.

“Yes, beaching. A lot of beaching. A lot of cocktails. Maybe some reading. You brought your e-reader, right?”

“Yes.”

“Good. So did I. What did you stock up on? I got beach reads.”

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye, still watching the carousel while we waited for our suitcases to come out. “You know most of those beach reads are romance, right?”

“Yep,” he said happily, waggling his brows at me before slowly sliding his sunglasses from the top of his head to his eyes. “I looked for the spicy, smutty ones too. How about you?”

“Wearing sunglasses inside makes you look like a douche,” I said instead of letting myself think about Porter lying on the beach beside me in nothing but a pair of swimming trunks, reading a spicy romance novel that was sure to get him all hot and bothered.

And now I'm hot and bothered. Damn it. “True crime.”

“You stocked up on true crime?” he asked disbelievingly. “You hate true crime.”

“I don't hate it. It just creeps me out sometimes.”

He chuckled and reached for my suitcase when it came past. My hand got there a fraction of a second after his, and as soon as I touched him, it was like I could see the sparks flying between us. I pulled away immediately, flushing as I thanked him instead of commenting on what had just happened.

Porter released a long but barely audible sigh, but he perked up again once he grabbed his own luggage and loaded it up. “We're in fucking Florida and she brings true crime. Thankfully, I got us a rental car. If we pass a bookstore on the way to the beach, we're getting you something you'll actually enjoy.”

“There are bookstores online, you know.”

“Ink and paper, Hope. There's nothing like it.” He smirked at me. “I'm curious about the looks I'm going to get when people see the covers of some of the books I brought.”

“Wait, you meant you stocked up on actual books and not just on your e-reader?”

He shrugged. “I brought both.”

“How long are we staying again?”

Porter laughed. “Just a couple days. Don't worry. I was just ambitious.”

We joined the line at the rental car place, but thankfully, it didn't take too

long before we were getting into a luxurious sedan. I gave him a look that said this was what he should be driving at home, but he rolled his eyes and got us on the road instead of arguing about it.

“Where to first?” he asked. “Beach or hotel?”

“We should probably go to the hotel, but I want to say beach.”

He grinned. “My type of girl.”

My heart skipped as I waited for him to clarify, but he didn't. He simply turned up the radio and rolled down his window, smiling like a loon as the warm air blew through his dark hair and he sang along to an old pop song.

In profile like he was now, clean shaven, relaxed, and with those aviators covering his eyes, he was so damn sexy. I knew I shouldn't have been thinking it, but it was a fact. An observation. Nothing more.

Yeah, keep telling yourself that.

We got to the beach just as the sun was starting to sink toward the horizon, the sand soft and still warm between my toes when we got out to take a walk. Neither of us said much as we took a platonic, absolutely non-romantic walk on the beach as the sun painted the sky in the most beautiful hues of orange, pink, and purple.

By unspoken agreement, we stayed at least a foot apart at all times, both lost to our own thoughts as waves crashed to the shore and we made our way up to a beachside restaurant for dinner. “What do you want to do tomorrow?”

I contemplated his question while we waited for our server to bring the cocktails we'd ordered. “Lunch at Bayside Marketplace, maybe? We could also visit Jungle Island, but mostly, I just want to relax.”

“Same,” he said. “Do you want to do a Millionaires' Row cruise tomorrow too? You can help me pick out a house.”

“You want to buy a house here?”

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

Icy tentacles of fear wrapped around my veins. “Are you thinking about moving out here?”

“Well, I wasn't, but now that we're here, I am.” He wrinkled his nose at me. “Relax, Hope. Jeez. You look like you've seen a ghost.”

“Maybe that's because my best friend just told me he's thinking about moving to Florida.”

Porter's bright blues clouded over with thought as he looked back at me. Then he blinked it away and gave his head an almost imperceptible shake. “I'd never move here permanently. You can't tell me it wouldn't be amazing

to have a place to escape to when the weather gets miserable back home.”

“No. You’re right. Of course, you’re right.” I closed my eyes for a beat to clear my head. “It’s just really weird to think you’d be able to afford something like that now.”

“I know.” He grinned, and when the server brought our cocktails, he raised his glass to mine. “To having family and friends’ privileges if I ever buy a beach house?”

I smiled. “I’ll drink to that.”

With the palm trees swaying in the breeze and the sun disappearing over the glittering ocean, it was so beautiful here that it was almost painful. My mind flashed to Parker and I wondered if he’d ever been. If he wanted to come. *If it would feel as right to be here with him as it did with Porter.*

Our seafood platter he’d ordered for us to share arrived soon, and once again, I was bowled over by the sheer amount of food he seemed to think I could ingest. I eyed the piles of fish, fries, calamari, and a bunch of other delicacies. “How are we going to eat all that?”

“Slowly,” he said decisively, a sparkle in his eyes as he stared at me from across our table. “We’ll just take our time and make our way through it. It’ll be fun.”

“We’re going to pop, but it’ll be worth it. Seriously, the aromas wafting around this place are incredible.” I was going to have garlic seeping out of me for the next week, but I was strangely okay with that.

Porter tucked in with gusto, and instead of marveling over how much food he could eat and remain as well built as he was, I simply shook my head and paid attention to my own portions. By the time I was bursting, he had finished the last of the platter and smiled, sticking the straw of his cocktail between his perfect teeth.

“Okay, now I’m really thinking about moving here,” he joked, or at least, I hoped he was joking. “This is the life, Hope. That view. The food. The cocktails.”

You, I wanted to add, but didn’t. “Yeah, it’s pretty amazing.”

“Pretty amazing?” He scoffed. “How do you feel about going out? The night is still young and I bet we could find someplace to dance around here.”

“You want to go dancing?” I couldn’t stop the giggle that slid out of me. “The last time we went dancing, you sprained your ankle and ended up with a dick drawn on your face.”

“That was because the last time we went dancing was in college. I doubt

anyone is going to draw a dick on my face now. Unless we find a frat to pass out at later.”

“As fun as that sounds, we should probably stay away from the frats. We’re the old people now. They’d call the cops on the creepers who are spying on them.”

He laughed. “We’re not that old, but you’re right. I ate too much to dance. Want to be the boring old people who just go back to their hotel and sleep it off?”

“Please.”

“Done,” he agreed immediately. “Thank God. I wanted to put it out there, but I doubt I’m even going to be able to walk fast right now, let alone shake my ass.”

I smiled. “Don’t worry, Porter. I got you. We’re not kids anymore. It’s okay to want to crawl into bed rather than go out and sprain your ankle.”

“Should I get the check?” he asked. “We still need to find our hotel and check in, so we should probably get going.”

“Good idea.” I dragged in a deep breath after he signaled to our server, my heart fluttering as I thought about what I had to ask. “So, uh, I’m okay with whatever, but are we sharing a room?”

Those blue eyes flared wide open as he shook his head. “I didn’t want you to be uncomfortable, so I got you your own.”

“Oh,” I said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I tried to pay when the check came, but he waved me off.

When we got to our hotel, I realized that he really had sprung for this trip. First-class plane fare, the fancy car, and now, a swanky hotel right on the beach. I sighed but didn’t bother telling him again that it hadn’t been necessary to book the nicest everything.

Once we got up to our rooms, he stopped at the door next to mine and smiled. “Good night, Hope. See you in the morning.”

“See you in the morning,” I repeated before letting myself in, immediately feeling lonely when I shut the door behind me after hearing his do the same.

The room was amazing, with a great big bed, a huge balcony with a fantastic view of the dark ocean, and a small sitting area with a TV, but as nice as it was, I wished that Porter was with me. As I kicked off my shoes and set my suitcase down on the perfectly tucked white comforter, I pulled

my phone out of my pocket and stared at the notification for Parker's request for a fourth date.

The "Accept" button was right there, and yet I couldn't bring myself to push it. How I'd found myself with such strong feelings for two amazing men, I didn't know. Nothing like this had ever even *almost* happened to me.

I set the phone down without accepting the date.

I was liking my time with Porter too much, and although nothing had or would happen between us, I needed to get my head on straight. All I knew right now was that I desperately wanted both of them, and since I couldn't have that, I was going to have to sleep on it.

PORTER

First thing the next morning, I was at Hope's door with breakfast. We could've gone downstairs to eat the buffet, but I was feeling weirdly protective of the little time I had alone with her. As soon as I knocked, the door opened—almost like she'd been waiting for me—and I grinned as I waved at the room-service cart behind me.

“Your breakfast is served, madam.”

Those eyes lit up on a wide smile as she waved me in, already wearing a swimsuit under a light blue sundress that was doing things to me it shouldn't have. Her blonde hair had been pulled into a braid that swayed slightly between her shoulders as she moved, showing me to the tiny square dining table that was identical to the one I had in my own suite.

Once again, the skies were clear outside, the bluest of blue. The ocean beckoned to me, shimmering in the early morning sun. I could hardly wait to get out there, and yet, at the same time, with the scent of Hope's shampoo still hanging in the air in here and her attention solely on me as she smiled, I didn't really want to go anywhere at all.

“I can't believe we're leaving tomorrow,” she said as she sat down. “If I'd known it was going to be like this, I would've begged Milena for at least a week off.”

My brows shot up. “Why don't you call her? It couldn't hurt to ask.”

“It must be nice to have money now,” she teased. “You can stay, but I need to get back. Unlike yours, my bank balance needs me to be at work.”

“Just take a few days,” I said, not wanting to sound like I was begging, but that didn't make it untrue. “She owes you that for what you're—”

“Let’s not talk about that. We’re here now, and it costs money to change the flights you’ve already paid for, so we’re not changing them. Don’t get me wrong, I’d have loved to stay longer, but for now, let’s just make the most of the time we have.”

“Okay,” I grumbled before pouting at her. “Just five more days?”

She laughed. “Five more minutes and five more days is not the same thing. What do you want to do first this morning?”

You. “Go to the beach. I’ve been watching the people out there practically since the sun came up. It looks amazing.”

“The beach, it shall be,” she said happily, then gave me a curious look. “Did you get any reading done last night?”

“I did. Why?”

She shrugged, but I saw the smile she was trying to hide. “I was just wondering how you were liking your books.”

“The one I started is great,” I said, then realized why she was being so coy about it. “You’re wondering if it’s hot, aren’t you?”

She flushed. “I didn’t say that.”

“No, but you didn’t have to.” I stared back at her, wondering why I was getting the feeling that she was flirting with me without wanting to flirt. “It’s hot, but that’s all I’m saying about it.”

“What’s the book?” she asked. “Maybe I could read it too.”

“Nope.” I groaned. “Not telling you that while we’re here. You can read it on your own time once we get home. It’s very manly, though. It’s about sports.”

“You’re reading a sports romance and that makes it manly?”

I pretended to flex my muscles and grunted. “Super manly. It’s about football, and marines, and there’s a war.”

“Sounds super manly.” She chuckled. “I’m not judging you, Porter. In fact, I think it’s kind of cool that you’re reading it and enjoying it.”

“Oh, well in that case, the marines aren’t at the war for this story and there’s not a lot of football involved, but it’s still good. I’ll give you the name when we get back to Seattle.”

“Deal,” she said, then glanced at the food after I lifted the lids off the trays and sighed. “I’m going to be fifty pounds heavier by the time you give me this mysterious, hot book recommendation.”

“Nah. We’ll go for another walk later, and I’m planning lots of swimming. Hey, did you see there’s watersports downstairs? We can make

reservations through the hotel if you're interested."

"I could be interested. What did you have in mind?"

"Parasailing and water-skiing, but we could also look into surfing lessons if you want."

Hope picked up her cutlery and shot me a sad smile. "That would've been great, but we've only really got today. I'm not sure I'm coordinated enough to learn how to surf in one morning, especially if we still want to do lunch at Bayside and go on the cruise later."

"And explore Jungle Island." I gave my best puppy eyes. "Are you sure we can't stay longer?"

"We're making the best of the time we have, remember?"

I exhaled heavily through my nostrils. "Yeah, I remember."

Yet, for the rest of the day, I really fucking wished our return flights weren't a problem for her. If not for them, maybe I'd have been able to convince her to stay. The entire day, she almost never stopped either laughing or smiling. Whenever I looked at her—which was often—she was already looking back at me. There were even a few lingering touches, and though neither of us said anything about it, I was seriously starting to wonder if she had the same kind of feelings for me as I had for her.

"Ooh, Grace would love that," she said as we strolled through Bayside Market, not holding hands but sticking so close together that I could feel the heat of hers on my skin. "I should get them for her."

"Earrings shaped like Florida? Which is shaped like a gun?"

Hope smiled. "She loves quirky stuff like that."

"Yeah, you're right. And they're multi-colored and they have features hanging from them. That's Grace right there."

"It still surprises me every once in a while that you know her so well. I'm definitely getting them for her." She grabbed my hand and dragged me to the souvenir stand, glancing at me as she handed over an obscene amount of money for the purchase. "Would you like something?"

"Like what?" I looked at what else was on offer on the table, skipping past the bottle opener shaped like a cock and balls even if I was curious to see what she'd say if I chose it.

Instead, she pointed at a fridge magnet of a female torso wearing a bikini with the word *Florida* emblazoned on it. "Like that? It'll remind you of our trip and all the good food we've been eating here every time you go to your fridge."

It'll also remind me of spending the entire morning trying to keep my eyes in my head and my hands to myself while you were in your bikini, but okay. “Nah, that would only make anything I take out of my fridge taste disappointing. What about that?”

I pointed at a plain metal keychain shaped like a surfboard. Hope picked it up, running the pad of her thumb over it almost lovingly as she nodded. “Yeah, that’s kind of perfect for you. Plus, if it’s on your keys, you’d always have a reminder of our trip with you.”

Why would you want me to? “True. As well as a reminder that we need to come back for the surfing lessons. What are we getting for you?”

Her gaze skimmed across the table before it went back to the fridge magnets. To my surprise, she picked one with the logo for the local football team. “To remind me to get the book recommendation for your very manly sports romance.”

“Sold,” I said.

She gave me a cutting look when I tried to reach for my wallet, so I let her pay the man way too much money for our mementos.

“Selfie?” she asked later, as we stopped in front of a tree with a brightly colored parrot in it while we explored Jungle Island. “We need to commemorate this moment, I think.”

“Sure.” I moved in close to her side and pressed my face to hers, grinning as she raised her phone and started snapping away.

We did a few smiling ones and then pulled funny faces, and at one point, when I turned my head to hers, I found my mouth only inches away from her own. The moment suspended in time, dragging out as I locked my eyes on hers and my cock swelled against the stupid velcro holding my swim trunks shut. Which reminded me that sporting a semi in flimsy material—in public—with Hope, wasn’t exactly going to help my cause of pretending not to be in love with her.

Yanking my gaze away, I could’ve sworn I heard a disappointed hum coming from her when I started striding down the path. *Shit. Maybe she was right about not going away alone together. It was messing with my head.*

I also knew that I still had to tell her the truth. The only reason I hadn’t done it yet was because I was really enjoying this trip and I hadn’t wanted to ruin it, so I’d decided to do it in the morning before we left the hotel.

As I strode down that path though, with confusion swirling around in my head and my dick refusing to get the message that it needed to behave, I was

itching to tell her that I was in love with her. That I always had been and that I was pretending to be Parker to have a shot of finally proving to her that I was the person she'd been looking for. Her perfect match.

The strangest thing of all was that I had a growing suspicion that she was in love with me too, and that it was simply a case of neither of us wanting to admit it to each other. Then again, that was probably just the confusion and the fact that most of my blood still hadn't returned to my head.

During the cruise, she stuck close to my side again, looking beautiful with the strands of hair that had escaped from her braid blowing in the breeze and her face sun-kissed after the day. I stared down at her standing next to me, so much fucking longing building in my very soul that I decided to just do it. This was ridiculous.

"Hope, I—"

At the same time, she said, "Thanks for this, Porter. I really just needed to get away from it all. You're a really good friend."

She blinked when she realized I'd started saying something too, and she smiled. "Sorry. I just needed to say that. What were you going to say?"

"Uh, nothing. Just that I wanted another drink. Do you want one?"

"Sure." She handed over her empty glass. "Thank you."

"Of course." *I'm a really good friend, right? Fuck my life.* "I'll be right back."

While I was at the bar, I glanced over my shoulder and saw Hope intently staring at her phone. I also saw her dragging in a deep breath and closing her eyes before she tapped at the screen. I frowned, wondering what was up.

But once I got back to my hotel room—going in alone—I finally got around to checking my own phone. And right there at the top of my list of notifications was one from Sight Unseen.

Hope had accepted the fourth date. *How the hell am I supposed to feel about that?*

After the day we'd just had together, she still wanted to be with Parker. Blind-date Porter instead of real Porter. They were both me, but she only knew that about one of us, and I'd just spent the day thinking that she might've fallen for me as me. And again, that was true about both of me. I was me as Parker too, but...

Shit. This really is just getting ridiculous. Come hell or high water, I'm telling her tomorrow. First thing.

I collapsed on my bed, staring at the ceiling fan spinning above and

wondering which version of me she was thinking about right now. If she was even thinking about me at all, but one thing was for sure, I couldn't stop thinking about her.

Just her. And it was going to drive me insane if I didn't figure out a way to stop doing it—or to make her mine for good. For real. As Porter and as Parker, and then made sure she never needed to think about another man ever again.

HOPE

When I opened my door early the next morning, Porter was there again—and so was our breakfast. He gave me a gorgeous, cocky grin and ran those bright blue eyes down the length of my body in a way that sent tingles traveling through me in their wake.

“You’re looking ready for another morning on the beach,” he said casually as I stepped aside and he rolled the room service in with him.

Why am I even still doing this dating in the dark thing? Parker is amazing, but I have the perfect guy right here. The perfect guy who wasn’t interested in me that way, I reminded myself. That’s why I accepted the fourth date.

Well, that and because I’d promised Parker I would. Unfortunately for me, this trip had served to jumble my already complicated feelings into the world’s most confusing emotional smoothie. I couldn’t tell one thing from the other anymore, and I’d had another dream last night in which Parker had turned out to be Porter.

I knew it wasn’t realistic, but at this point, that was the only thing that would allow me not to feel like I was being torn right down the middle. Parker was everything I had ever wanted, but it turned out that Porter was too.

I honestly hadn’t realized it was possible to feel so strongly toward two different, yet very similar men. *Maybe that’s what’s still messing with me. Parker reminds me too much of Porter, but once I meet him and I have a face to put with everything else, that will change. It has to.*

“Penny for your thoughts?” he said as we sat down beside each other at

the little table so we could both enjoy the view one last time. “Whatever you were thinking, it looked pretty intense.”

“It’s silly,” I said, and it was because there was no way to make Parker and Porter the same person. The person who was right next to me right now. “What about you? You’re not particularly chatty this morning either.”

“Yeah, uh, I was hoping we could talk about something.”

“Sure.” I tore my gaze away from another amazing day outside and glanced at him, noticing that his features were hard and determined. “What’s up? You can talk to me about anything. You know that.”

He dipped his chin in a curt nod. “It’s about Sight Unseen and your blind ___”

“Anything but that,” I said quickly. “We’re not talking about that today. It’s our last few hours, and the last time we talked about that, we got in an argument. I don’t want to get in an argument with you right now.”

“It’s not an argument. There’s just something about the dates I need to t ___”

I reached up and clamped my hand over his mouth, ignoring the sparks I felt flying as a result of the contact as I looked at him with pleading eyes. “Just hang out with me. Porter. Please? I have to go back to all that tomorrow and I just really want to enjoy this last day with you.”

Those blues burned into mine, a swirl of emotions in them I couldn’t quite make sense of, but I also really didn’t want to talk about Parker or the dates right now. Every time he told me to go for it with Parker, it hurt.

I knew he was just trying to be a good, supportive friend, but I didn’t want to hurt right now. Not when the last two days had been the best I’d had in a long, long time.

He stared at me for a minute before he raised his hands in surrender and nodded. When I removed my palm from his mouth, he sighed. “Yeah, okay, Hope. Let’s just hang out.”

“Thank you,” I said sincerely as I gave him a soft smile. “We can talk about everything you want to talk about later in the week, okay? After the date and the glow of the trip has worn off.”

He nodded, but he didn’t look happy about it. We finished our breakfast in near silence and then went down to the beach. Porter lay down on his towel on the sand beside me, pulling his e-reader out of the beach bag after passing me my own.

Instead of ogling all those ripped muscles on full display and obsessing

more about whether, just maybe, Terri had been right and Porter just didn't want to tell me how he felt, I opened the book I'd started on Friday and immersed myself in the story. I'd lied about the true crime. It was a best friends-to-lovers romance—because I loved torturing myself with false hope.

We spent the morning sipping mimosas and reading, saying very little to each other and staying on the beach for as long as we could. Occasionally, I glanced over at Porter and found him not reading at all but staring out at the ocean with a thoughtful look on his handsome face, his features all tight and drawn together.

Eventually when it was time to go, instead of offering me a hand up, he took my e-reader and worked on stowing it away with his before shaking out his towel. It was odd. Not that I couldn't get up by myself, obviously, but he was usually very good about stuff like that.

Foster and Porter both liked to joke about how their mom beat gentlemanly behavior into them in a very unladylike manner. It was a joke, but still, I knew how strongly they both felt about it.

“Are you okay?” I asked as we walked back up to our rooms.

He nodded and offered me a quick smile, but his cocky grin was long gone and so were all of his jokes and teasing. “Yeah, sure. Just sad about going home.”

“I know what you mean. This was an amazing trip. Thank you.” I turned to face him once we reached our doors, but before I could say anything else, he offered me another half-smile and then disappeared into his room.

We only had about twenty minutes before we had to leave. I raced through a shower and packed the last few things I needed to. Then I met him outside just as he emerged from his room. He took my suitcase from me seemingly without even thinking about it, but he still seemed distracted.

A fact that remained true all the way back to Seattle, but I was too afraid to ask what was on his mind. The shift in his demeanor had begun when he'd tried to talk to me earlier about my dates, and since I still didn't want to talk to him about it, I let it go and tried to engage him in conversation about other stuff instead.

“Did you finish your book?”

He nodded. “Yep.”

“How was it?”

“Uh, it was fine. Predictable, but good.” He shrugged. “I didn't get much sleep last night, so I'm going to try to get some shut-eye on the plane.”

In other words, shut it, Hope. I sighed, watching as he reclined his seat once we were airborne and closed his eyes.

“I can feel you staring at me, you know,” he mumbled a few minutes later. “If you want to say something, just say it.”

“Nah, I’m good.” *I’m in love with you, I think, but no biggie.* “Get some sleep. I haven’t finished my book yet anyway and mine isn’t as predictable as yours was.”

The friends in my book also weren’t sure what they were right now, and since no happily ever after had been guaranteed, it could go either way. Frankly, I had a hell of a lot in common with the female main character I was reading about.

The only difference was that her best friend was doing all this amazing stuff for her, trying to win her heart and get her to pick him over the other guy, and my best friend was telling me to shut it so he could sleep.

Which reminds me.

“Why didn’t you sleep well?” I blurted. “My bed was like a cloud. It was so damn comfortable. If yours was bad, you should’ve just come to sleep with me.”

“Hope.” He groaned, cracking open one eye as he blew out a heavy breath. “It wasn’t the bed, okay? The bed was great. I just couldn’t quite get my brain to shut up.”

Excitement fluttered to life in my belly. “Are you finally on track to decide what you’re going to invent next or something?”

That actually made a lot of sense. Back when Porter had been inventing his earbuds, he retreated into himself like this all the time. He got so caught up in his head sometimes that it was like he didn’t even know where he was.

“Or something,” he mumbled before shutting his eyes again. “Aren’t you reading?”

“Not yet, but I’ll leave you to it now. Happy mental designing.”

“Thanks,” he grunted, folding his hands on his flat stomach and drawing my gaze down to them.

Strangely, it wasn’t even thoughts of that stomach with all the sexy blocks on it that held my attention there. It was his hands, and also not because I was remembering how good he was with them, but because I suddenly really wanted to take one and hold it.

I stared at those long fingers entwined with one another and wished they were entwined with mine instead. When I had a brief flash wondering if our

children would have his fingernail shape, I finally snapped myself out of it.

Get a life, Hope—and it's not going to be with Porter, so stop it already.

Before I could catch myself, tears were stinging the backs of my eyes. Just in case he opened his eyes and saw it, I followed his example and reclined my seat in the hopes that it would be like I was trying to sleep too. The truth was that I felt terrible about all this. More terrible now than before even.

All this time alone with him had been a terrible idea, and now I'd accepted another date with a man who actually wanted me back. And the worst part of it was that I knew as soon as I walked into that room, everything was suddenly going to seem like sunshine and rainbows again.

Parker was going to make me feel like he was the only man in the world and I was the only woman for him. He was going to say all the right things and I was going to walk out of there feeling like I was walking on freaking sunshine—and then I was going to see Porter and it would all come crashing down all over again.

It felt like my life had become a rollercoaster ride since I'd started seeing Parker, and I had no idea why, but I didn't like rollercoasters. Too many ups and downs and sudden twists made me feel sick, just like I was right now.

This wasn't fair to any of us—even if Porter didn't even know it. I didn't know if he ever fell asleep or not, but he didn't open his eyes again until we started our descent back into Seattle.

“Good luck on your next date,” he said after I thanked him for the trip once more. “I'll see you, Hope.”

With that, he tossed his hand up in a wave, spun around, and walked away, leaving me wondering why there had been a definite hint of jealousy in his voice when he'd said it. I also got the sense that he was angry about something, but I didn't know what.

Since he hadn't told me anything, I had to assume that I was wrong. I hadn't done anything that could've made him angry and we'd just spent an entire weekend alone together. It stood to reason that if he did have feelings for me, he'd have said something.

But as much as it hurts to even think it, maybe I shouldn't see him for a while. It was probably for the best if he and I gave each other some space, but at the same time, I had no clue how to even do that. I didn't want to lose him and we'd never given each other space before. *We've also never had a reason to, though.*

Right now, I definitely had a reason to. I had to get over my best friend, and I only had twenty-four hours before my next date to do it.

PORTER

Reluctantly getting ready for the fourth date, I went through the motions of getting in the car, smiling for the cameras, and then having a blindfold tied around my eyes as I headed into the building. Despite my cheerful mask, I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt this dejected.

Hope and I had had a near perfect weekend together, and as we'd been sailing around in the sunset, she accepted a date with another man. I just still didn't know how to feel about that.

I'd tossed and turned the whole of Saturday night. Then I'd scraped together all the courage and confidence I needed to go over there and make the big announcement, and she'd shut me right the fuck down. I should've just said it anyway, but that look in her eyes when she'd asked me just to hang out with her had gotten to me.

The pure, blatant desperation in that gaze had been too much. I hadn't been able to turn her down and push on, and so, I'd relented. I hadn't said much of anything else all day, but I also hadn't said that.

If it were up to me, I would march into that room tonight and tell her the truth, but it wasn't up to me. There were cameras in there with us, and if I did that, the entire spectacle would be filmed and available for public consumption—which couldn't happen.

Hope would never forgive me, and frankly, neither would my brother. For one last night, I had to go through with this pretense of being the other guy, and then I would finally have my moment.

As the door shut behind me and darkness flooded my senses, Hope's voice reached out to me in the dark. "Parker?"

“Yep. Yeah. Hi. It’s me.”

“Oh, good,” she said, clearly relieved. “I knew it was going to be you, but it’s always disconcerting for that first few seconds until you hear the other person’s voice, isn’t it?”

“Sure.”

“How are you?” For some reason, she sounded almost as cautious as I felt.

I sat down, idly wondering if I could get Foster to show me a picture of my sofa when this was all over. It was damn comfortable. But I had bigger fish to fry right now. “I’m okay. You?”

“Okay,” she replied. “You sound... different.”

Shit. I cleared my throat. “Just distracted. With work.”

I added the last bit on admittedly to throw her off. We were in the home stretch of this thing and I needed to bring it home.

“Oh,” she said. “Seems like all the engineers in my life are distracted with work right now.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, do you remember I told you about my best friend? I think I mentioned that he’s an engineer too, right?”

“Oh. Yeah. Right.”

“We spent a lot of time together yesterday, and in all that time, he barely said a hundred words to me.”

“Uh, yeah. That sounds familiar.” I cleared my throat again. “Sorry. Tickle. It can be hard to get out of the zone when you’re trying to work something out.”

“He’s mentioned that.” There was a long pause before she continued. “Last date before the big reveal. Are you excited, or are you going to leave me hanging?”

I grinned, more relieved than she could possibly know. “No, I’m excited. Definitely.”

“Good, I’m glad. So am I. I think it’s going to be nice to have a face to think about when I’m thinking about you.”

My jaw tightened. *So she has been thinking about him. Fuck.* “I hear ya.”

“It’s been a little bit difficult for me to believe that you’re for real without a face to put to your voice,” she admitted with a slightly guilty undertone that I didn’t understand at all. “I think it’ll get easier once we’ve seen each other.”

Easier? I almost snorted. *Or it could end because you’ll realize I’m a*

lying bastard who shouldn't have let you get to him yesterday.

“Hey, Olivia?”

“Yes?”

“I need you to promise me something.”

“Sure,” she said. “What do you need?”

I screwed my eyes shut. “I need you to promise me that at the reveal, you'll give me a chance.”

“You know, this isn't the first time you've said something like that,” she said nervously. “Do you, like, have like three eyes or something?”

I chuckled darkly. “No, it's not that. It's just that, uh, I've read that sometimes at these reveals, things can feel pretty overwhelming and people tend to jump to conclusions. I'd just like you to take a minute to remember everything we talked about in here, to remember that it was all real, and then we'll talk face to face.”

“Yeah, I think I know what you mean.”

Of course, you do. It's your sister's situation I'm referring to. I'd read about it, alright. In a text from Hope the night Grace and Sharp had had their big reveal. In real life, those two had been complete dickheads to each other, and Grace had hated him with every fiber of her being. When Hope had told her that her mystery man was Sharp, I didn't even know why she'd continued but she had.

At the reveal, however, Sharp had *not* taken kindly to the person he found himself looking at. He thought she'd been fucking with him all along.

Hope was going to be Sharp real soon, and I just needed to remind her that just like in that scenario, things weren't what she was going to think they could be. She hesitated again as she thought it over. “Okay, Parker. I'll try my best not to jump to any conclusions.”

“Good. Thank you.”

It always seemed to happen in this room—as we spoke, I forgot about everything else but her. The turmoil I'd walked in here with had settled, and with the rest of the world at bay, there was only the two of us.

I won't lie, I am going to miss that part of this process. Regardless of what happens from here on out.

“Do you tend to get distracted with work a lot?” she asked suddenly. “Just want to know what I'm preparing myself for.”

I chuckled. “Uh, not as much these days. On occasion, though. Yes. What you're preparing yourself for is a man who's going to keep you in bed for at

least a week once we get there.”

Why the fuck had I said that? It was true, but I hadn't intended on saying it out loud.

She let out a surprised chuckle. “Is that so?”

“Yeah, that is so.” I'd already admitted it, so now, I was going to roll with it. “We haven't really talked about that much.”

“What, sex?”

“Yep.”

“No, I suppose we haven't.” She fell silent for a beat. “What is there to talk about? That's the kind of thing one *does*, isn't it? Rather than something one talks about?”

“I guess that depends on your preferences, but sure. I'm definitely a fan of doing it too. I was just wondering if we should talk about it.”

“Okay,” she said hesitantly. “Talk about it how?”

“Let's start with the simple stuff. Do you have rules about how long you wait once you're in a relationship with someone?”

“No, not really. It just has to feel right.”

Thought so, and it felt right with me. I grinned into the darkness. “I'm the same. Okay, next question. Are you a once a month, once a day, or once a week kind of person?”

“Gosh, are we really talking about this?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, uh. To be honest, I used to think of myself more as a once a month person. It just never really bothered me much.”

“Used to?”

“Yeah, that seems to have changed recently.”

This conversation was making my pants really tight, but it really was one of the only things we still had to talk about. While I knew she had a good time the other night, when she walked out of here tonight, I wanted her to walk out knowing that Parker was the complete package. That way, maybe she'd think twice about dumping both him and Porter at the reveal.

I already knew she felt comfortable with us both, that she felt it was really easy to talk to us both, and that we clicked regardless of my name, but this was important too.

“What are you now?” I asked.

“I, uh, I'd say now I probably think about it once a day.”

Booya! Because I rocked your world. Yes! “Same here.”

“Parker?”

“Yes?” My voice was definitely huskier now than before, and it really wasn’t helping that the same could be said about her.

“Have you ever been to Florida?”

I bit back a groan, pressing my palm down on my crotch as I tried to get my head back online. “Uh, yes. Why?”

“I went for the first time recently and wondered. Did you like it?”

“Sure. It’s great. Beautiful.”

“Do you prefer a beachy kind of vacation or a mountainy kind of vacation?”

Drawing in a deep breath, I rolled with the subject change, sensing that she’d gotten just as worked up just as fast as I had and that she was trying to distract herself. “Both. It depends on the season and my mood, but I can spend at least a week reading on the beach and swimming in the ocean before I even start thinking about the other things I’d like to see wherever I am.”

“Same,” she said, her voice more normal now as my heartrate finally started slowing. “I’ve never done it, but I’m also pretty sure I’d be able to spend a week reading next to a fireplace in the mountains. Or going for walks during the day and reading by a fire all night.”

“We should plan a trip like that,” I said. “What do you like to read?”

“I’ve been on a romance kick recently. You?”

True crime, my ass. I knew she was lying. “Yeah, I’ve been taking a break from thrillers myself, but that’s generally my favorite genre. Well, that and fantasy.”

As we kept talking, the minutes raced by just like they always did. We’d moved from books, to food, to our preferences for garden size before the red light finally came on.

Before I even knew it, the date was over. As I walked out, the rest of the world trickled back in and I was once more left with the knowledge that I hadn’t told her the truth. I hadn’t planned on it this time, but I also hadn’t done it.

As I climbed back into my car, though, I knew I had to do something. The cameras would be at our official fifth date, the reveal, and I really did want to save Hope from having all that caught on film.

Back when I’d asked Foster to match me with her, I hadn’t thought we’d actually get this far. I also thought I’d have told her before we did. I simply hadn’t been focused this far into the future.

My immediate worry had been not to lose her and I hadn't. Now, however, I needed to fix it—and fast. Before the greatest shock she was ever going to get was filmed and broadcast for anyone who cared enough to watch.

HOPE

When I walked into the post-date interview, my prediction about feeling like I would be walking on sunshine came true. Tina smiled when she saw me, an approving look in her eyes as I sat down. “You look happy tonight.”

“I am,” I said easily, returning her smile as I got comfortable. “I’m very happy that I get to be doing this with Parker, actually.”

“How so?” she asked.

“Honestly?” I thought back to the date we’d just had with little bubbles of excitement rising in my blood and making me feel like I could float right now. “I feel bubbly over him again. I couldn’t have asked for a better match than him.”

“Can you tell us why you feel that way?”

I could, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to put this out there for the whole world to hear—and eventually see, once Tina removed the blurring effect she’d been using on both of us so far.

One of the things I’d been wondering about Parker was sexual chemistry. Going in, I knew it would be difficult to determine without being able to see him, but Grace had also told me that she’d felt it with Sharp almost right away. Parker and I hadn’t touched the subject before tonight—except for when we’d spoken about me having done it with Porter, which wasn’t really the same thing, but it also was what had given rise to this particular worry.

When I’d started this process, sexual chemistry had simply been one of many things I’d worried about, but I also hadn’t been overly concerned with it because I’d never been an especially sexual person. At the beginning, it’d

been more about the emotional chemistry than sexual chemistry.

In the past, I'd thought of sex as more of a chore or a pure physical release kind of thing. After that encounter with Porter, however, I'd realized why people made such a big deal about it.

I liked sex now. A lot more than I used to. Obviously, it still really wasn't everything, but it was like this previously undiscovered part of me had come out to play and now I wanted to explore that part. I'd worried that Porter held the key to it.

A sexual awakening of sorts is a good thing, right? According to my sister, and Terri, and even Milena if that last conversation about it had been anything to go on, it was a good thing. A natural thing. People were allowed to like sex. To want it.

The problem for me was that I'd only ever really felt that building ache between my legs when I'd been with Porter, and only recently. It'd never been as intense with any other man—until I'd spoken to Parker about it tonight, however briefly.

“It’s just that I’ve realized that Parker is the whole package. For real. Now that I’ve gotten over the shock of how well we fit together, I honestly don’t believe anymore that he’s just saying what he thinks I want to hear. He’s kind and caring, and he’s forgiving and interesting. I feel like I could spend days and days just talking to him and knowing that he’s really listening to what I’m saying, and then like I could spend days and days just really listening to him talk.”

“Well, that sounds good,” Tina said. “Are you nervous for your next date, when you’ll finally get to see who you’ve spent all this time talking to?”

I nodded. “Absolutely. I’m beyond nervous, but I’m also just really excited. Somehow, I don’t think his looks are going to be a problem for me. I feel like no matter what he looks like, it’s just, uh, it’s going to be really good to see him.”

And touch him. And kiss him. Sooo much kissing.

She asked me a few more questions and I answered them honestly, explaining my feelings about the things we'd talked about—the nonsexual things—and once she'd let me go, the bubbles still hadn't dissipated.

I was starting to think of this as the Parker effect. After our dates, I felt like I was riding a high and it never just went away as soon as I left the room. The man just did things to me, and now that I knew he did them to *all* of me, I was more convinced than ever that everything was going to be fine.

Surely, once I had an actual face to put in those dreams, I would stop picturing Porter. And once I stopped picturing him in my dreams, surely I would stop thinking about having sex with him again. And surely once that happened, eventually, I would start seeing him as only a friend once more and everything would go back to normal.

It has to happen, right?

As I walked into my apartment, I had the urge to talk to him about it all. He was the only person that could make sense of things for me right now. Even if I didn't speak to him about it in so many words, I was sure he would be able to reassure me that our friendship remained intact and that I'd simply been overthinking things too much.

He hadn't made a big deal about what had happened at all, and frankly, I was sure he would be relieved that I wasn't planning on making it a big deal anymore either.

When I called him, it took him longer than usual to answer.

"Hope? What's up?"

"Porter?" I frowned. "Are you out of breath?"

"Uh, yeah. Just working out. Is everything okay?"

"Yes," I said excitedly. "I just got home from the fourth date. Do you want to come over? I'd really like to run some things by you."

"Actually, I'm just going to turn in early tonight, Hope," he said. "You sound happy, though. I'm happy you're happy. Why don't you call Terri? You can run whatever you want to by her, I'm sure."

"Oh, uh, right. Of course." I cleared my throat and hoped that I could hide the disappointment in my voice. "Good night, Porter."

"Night, Hope."

Pain streaked through me and knocked me right off that ray of sunshine I'd been riding on since I'd gotten out of the date. *I'm losing him. I'm losing Porter.*

Sure, I'd decided that we should probably take some space, and it was probably still better if we did that, but he'd never blown me off like that. Feeling numb, I kicked off my shoes and headed to my bedroom, wondering if a warm bath would make me feel better.

Halfway there, my phone rang and Terri's name came up. I smiled. "Were your ears burning?"

"Yep," she said. "How was the date? Just thought I'd check in."

"The date was great. The conversation I just had with Porter, not so

much. How are you?”

“Oh, I’m fine, but I don’t have two hunks in my life fighting for my heart.”

“That’s only because you don’t want to give your heart to anybody.”

She laughed. “Yeah, it could be that. What happened with Porter?”

“Well, you know how I went to Florida with him for the weekend?” I asked as I walked into my bathroom and opened the faucets.

“Sure. Of course. The world’s shittiest idea, but no one asked me. Did something happen there between you two?”

“No.” *Not really, anyway.* “We had an amazing time, but then yesterday, he tried to talk to me about the program. I promised myself I wouldn’t talk to him about it so much and I really didn’t want to ruin the trip by talking about it then, so I shut him down and then he kind of just shut down.”

“What do you mean?”

I sighed. “I mean that he hardly said a word, and when I called him a few minutes ago, he said he was turning in early tonight and to call you to talk instead.”

“Asshole, treating me like I’m the second-choice friend here,” she teased. “Look, I know you don’t think he’s in love with you, but he is and he’s probably realizing that he’s losing you.”

“That’s funny because I feel like I’m losing him.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a reason boy-girl best friends hit a bump when one of them enters into a serious relationship,” she said. “At least, I’ve heard it happens. Thankfully, I wouldn’t know. None of my friendships have ever had to hit a bump.”

I sighed. “What do I do about it?”

“That depends on how you feel, babe. Are you still confused about them?”

My teeth sank into my lips and I bit hard. I wanted so badly to say that I wasn’t, but the Parker effect was wearing off and reality was sinking back in. “Yes.”

“Well, then I would suggest you start by making a decision,” she said, sympathy creeping into her voice. “Do you move on with the program and Parker, or do you make a push for Porter?”

That was the million-dollar question. I *still* couldn’t have them both, and I needed to figure out who I had stronger feelings for. It felt impossible, but there had to be some way to find out. I just didn’t know how to do it quite

yet.

PORTER

With the sun rising behind me and the early morning light still soft and hazy, I jogged to Foster's place. It was a few miles but not a bad run there and back. I needed it to clear my mind before I spoke to him.

Sleep had eluded me last night, and I'd spent hours slamming my fists into the punching bag hanging in my guest bedroom/home gym. As my sneakers smacked against the pavement now and jarring metal blasted from my earphones, I focused on my breathing and soon found a rhythm, my thoughts finally quieting and my guilt fading to the background.

The city was coming to life around me with store lights coming on as I passed and restaurants' tables being carried out if they had seating outside. Long lines were already starting to form in the coffee shops and other pedestrians were clinging to the cups they emerged with like a lifeline.

In the zone, I was hardly aware of any of it as I passed them by, only paying attention to the extent required not to run into anyone. Foster's place appeared too soon, and I briefly considered passing it to keep going. I could double back later, but no.

If he was willing to help me with this, I wanted it done today, and the earlier we got started, the better. Sweat ran down my spine and coated my forehead when I stopped to press the button at his intercom. I wiped my brow with my forearm but there wasn't much I could do about the rest.

After he buzzed me in, I pulled the earbuds out and stopped the music, then took the stairs up to his apartment on the fourth floor. When I got to the landing, his door was already open and he was waiting for me.

"When you said you were coming early, I wasn't expecting the crack of

dawn,” he said, bleary-eyed and still in his pajama pants and a T-shirt as he waved me in and padded over to his kitchen. As he pressed the button on his coffeemaker, he yawned and then glanced at me over his shoulder, looking me up and down. “Did you run here?”

“Yep.” I followed him to the kitchen and leaned over the sink to drink some water from his faucet before I splashed some on my face. “Want to run with me when we’re done talking?”

“No, thanks. I don’t have any demons or bad decisions to get away from.” He leaned a hip against the counter and folded his arms across his chest. “That is what this is about, right? You’re trying to outrun your guilt?”

“Yep,” I admitted, not seeing any point in trying to deny it. “I have to tell Hope the truth, Foster. Today. If possible.”

For a change, his head didn’t start shaking immediately when I broached the subject. “I saw a part of her interview last night. I don’t know how you did it, bro. She seems really into you as Parker. Are you sure you don’t just want to ride this thing out?”

“We’re seeing each other on our next date anyway. I’ve taken this pretending thing as far as I can. All I’m asking is that the reveal happens with no cameras. I don’t…” I trailed off and pushed my hands into my hair, linking my fingers on top of my head as I shook it. “I don’t want her to find out while she’s being filmed. It’s not fair.”

“None of this really has been.”

“I know.” My arms dropped back to my sides and I braced my hands on his countertop instead, letting my head drop between my shoulders as I groaned. “That’s the fucking problem. She’s already going to think I was playing her. I just want her to be able to react without the cameras being an issue.”

“Yeah, I get that,” he said after a brief pause.

When I looked up at him again, his eyes were slightly glazed over and he was chewing the inside of his cheek. “Have you got ideas for how you want her to find out?”

“Yeah, but they range from going to her place straight from here, to setting up an elaborate dinner tonight to out myself. I thought I’d come talk to you about it because, as far as possible, we need to stay within the Sight Unseen process. It’s already going to come back to bite us all that I knew who she was.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” he said, eyes still hazy with

contemplation. “I’m in trouble either way, but I think Milena will understand. All she wanted out of this documentary was to show that what we do is real. This is about as real as real can be. You’ve been in love with your best friend for a decade and you went above and beyond, risking it all just so you didn’t lose her.”

“You and I know that, but no one else does,” I said as anxiety spread through me like wildfire. “Right? It’s still just you and me? You haven’t told Milena?”

“Of course not.” He scoffed. “I will, though. Once you and I have figured this out, but I think there might be a way to do it within the parameters the company allows.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, feeling a shred of hope for the first time in at least twenty-four hours—if not more. “What are you thinking?”

He rocked his head from side to side before he dragged in a deep breath and focused on me again. “The set process is five dates, right? The fifth being the reveal.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So sometimes, a couple is almost there after the third or fourth date, but they’re just not quite sure yet. When that happens, the system allows us to arrange a ‘secret’ date. An extra hour together to help our clients make their decision.”

My gaze snapped back to his, my heart flopping as I narrowed my eyes. “Would this secret date have to be on film?”

“No, that’s the beauty of it. Milena has had the film crew on call for the official dates, but since this would be happening through the system but in the background, she won’t be on the lookout for it. It’d just be another of the dozens of dates the system has set up this week. It wouldn’t be flagged as one she needs to call the crew about.”

“That could work,” I said slowly, heart now properly thrumming. “I think it would help her make sense of things if I go as Parker and then step into the light and I’m Porter. She might not believe me otherwise.”

“True. If you tell her as Parker and then the blindfold comes off and she sees you, things will click together easier than you just showing up at her door this morning.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m thinking too. Either way, it’ll help both of us with closure to have that one last date through the company, even if that is where it ends.”

“About that,” he said, expression firming. “If we do it this way, I’d still have to set up the fifth date and you’d still have to go. For the cameras. If Hope doesn’t show up, that’s fine, but there has to be something to end the documentary in a concrete way and not just you two both suddenly saying you decided not to carry on.”

“Okay,” I agreed, jaw grinding. “I can see why you’d need that, but I don’t like it.”

“You don’t have to. Sight Unseen needs it, and since you inserted yourself into this process, you’re going to do it.”

“I already said I would.” I brought a hand up to squeeze the back of my neck. “They’ve only been airing snippets of us so far, right? Do you know what the plans are going forward for this thing?”

“It’s picking up momentum,” he admitted. “At first, the idea was just a web series on our social media that allowed people a glimpse into the process, but they’re thinking bigger now. The film crew is working on putting it together as a full, reality dating docuseries now.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh. That’s why I’m saying you’d still have to be there for the fifth date. It’ll be the viewers’ first time seeing you without the blurring and we need that shot to make this thing work. Otherwise, it really might as well have been me or any other guy pretending the whole time.”

I sighed. “Okay. Yes. You’re right. Of course, you’re right. I’ll do it, as long as we can leave Hope out of it. Let me tell her the truth as Parker at this secret date tonight, and then set up the fifth. No one will have to know there was another in between.”

“Tonight?” He arched his eyebrows at me. “The fourth date was only last night.”

“I know.” I rolled my eyes at him. “I can’t sit on this any longer, Foster. It needs to be tonight. As early in the evening as it can be. I just need to get it done.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said as the coffee pot started filling and he turned to get two mugs out of his cabinet.

As he fixed our coffee, I shook my hands out at my sides and bounced on the balls of my feet like I was some kind of fighter getting ready for the showdown of his life. In a way, that was exactly what I was doing.

Back when I was willing to put everything on the line for this, the grand finale had felt so far away. Since I hadn’t even been sure we’d ever get there,

it just hadn't seemed as important but now the truth was less than twelve hours away from coming out—hopefully.

I was ready, but shit, I had never been more nervous. And this was coming from a guy who spent years of his life working on an invention that he then had to put out into the world to sell. That had been nerve-wracking, but this?

This was on a whole other level.

Once Foster was done with the coffee, he handed over my mug and went to get his phone from his bedroom. He was back a minute later, fingers flying across the screen as he typed furiously. The next thing I knew, my own phone dinged in my pocket, and when I checked it, there was a notification from the Sight Unseen app as well as an email alerting me that another date had been set up.

“Wow, you're quick,” I commented as I opened the app, my thumb hovering above the “Accept” button.

I knew I had asked for this, and I also knew there hadn't been any turning back for a while now, but this was it. Tonight was the night. Whether Hope accepted this secret date or not, I was telling her tonight.

Fuck.

Foster frowned at me. “Are you going to accept that, bro, or did you just want to wake me up nice and early this morning to put my job on the line for nothing?”

I dropped my thumb on “Accept” and tossed my phone down on the counter when it was done. “Now the wait begins, huh?”

“Now the wait begins,” he said, hopping up on the counter and picking up his mug. “Have you given any thought to what you're going to do if she never talks to you again.”

Dry laughter tore out of me as I shook my head. “Nope. I'm not going there. Not unless I have to.”

And I really, really hope that I never have to.

HOPE

As I walked into my office, my phone chimed with a notification. Sliding my purse off my shoulder and setting it down on my desk, I stuck my hand in to rummage around for the device while also sitting down and reaching for my computer's power button.

If I'd managed to get three hours of sleep last night, it'd been a lot. My eyes were burning, my body lethargic, and my head in a million different places—and I still had no idea what to do.

What got to me the most was that neither of these men deserved to be anyone's second choice. I didn't even know if Porter was a choice, but the point was that both of them deserved to have one lucky lady's entire heart.

It made me feel like an asshole not to be able to give either of them that right now. Even if I did go to Porter and pointblank ask him how he felt and even if he did tell me he felt the same, I just didn't know how to simply stop feeling something for Parker and, on the other hand, how to go back to having only platonic feelings for Porter.

My brain was like a broken record, stuck on repeat, and I had no clue how to get it off this tune it had been playing for weeks now. I'd decided that today, I was only going to focus on work. Hopefully, that would help me come up with a solution.

When I finally managed to find my phone though, my plans to stick to work were decimated. Completely.

A notification for a secret date was staring up at me and I frowned. Secret dates were usually reserved for couples who were uncertain, and Parker hadn't seemed uncertain to me on our last date. In fact, we'd explicitly talked

about seeing each other for the reveal at our next date.

Puzzled, I wondered if perhaps this was about the documentary. A way to show that the process could be tailored to a specific couple's needs and maybe even to have an opportunity to get some extra footage.

Sighing as I pushed my hands through my loose hair, I stared at the notification for another beat before I got up again. There was no way I was going to be able to focus on work while I didn't know what the secret date was about.

"Is she in?" I asked Milena's assistant when I got to her desk, and she nodded.

"Sure. Go right ahead."

"Thanks."

I gave a brief knock at her door, then went into her office after she called, "Come on in."

She looked up when the door opened, pleasant surprise flicking across her features when she saw me. Her lips curved into a soft smile and she leaned back in her chair, giving me her full attention as she waved me into a seat.

"Good morning, Hope," she said. "If this is about the fifth date, I don't know why it hasn't been requested yet. I was expecting either you or Parker to make the request last night as soon as you were done. It certainly looked like it'd gone well."

"It did." I lifted my phone and unlocked the screen before showing her the notification. "I just got this, though. Do you know what it's about?"

She narrowed her eyes to read the notification, then shrugged and leaned back again. "No idea. It didn't come from me. Are you going to accept it?"

"What? Are you sure? I thought it may be a way to get some more footage for the docuseries before the reveal. Do you think it came from Tina?"

"No, it definitely didn't. I spoke to her just this morning. She's quite happy with the footage they've got and they can't wait to follow you getting ready for the fifth date and then the date itself, obviously. This had to have come from Parker."

I released a breath through my nostrils and nodded. "Yeah, I guess so. It's just weird because he seemed really confident about everything."

She gave me a soft smile. "This isn't a bad thing, Hope. He just wants to spend some more time with you. It doesn't mean he's not confident. It just means he wants another date."

“Maybe. It’s just that you and I both know the couples who are really sure about each other don’t usually request this, but anyway. I wouldn’t mind another hour with him myself, so I suppose I should accept.”

“You two are once again on the same wavelength then. Go spend another hour with him this evening. I’ll call Tina to make sure they’re there.”

“Thanks,” I said as I got up. “The venue confirmed is the rooftop.”

“The rooftop?” Surprise flashed across her features once more. “That’s interesting. I wonder how Foster is planning on managing a dark date up there.”

“I really think this has something to do with the cameras,” I reiterated. “It’ll give them some different angles if we do it there. Maybe I should just ask—”

“No,” she said firmly. “You’re not asking him. In this case, you’re the client, remember? What’s happening behind the scenes isn’t any of your concern. Or mine, for that matter. Foster is the case manager and we need to let him do his job.”

“You’re really not going to talk to him about this?”

“No, I’m not.” She leaned back in her chair again. “I trust him, Hope. I never would’ve agreed to put him on this if I didn’t. If he’s set up another date, it’s because his client asked for it and he’s doing his job. I’m not going to interfere. We need to be as transparent as possible, and when we start having closed-door meetings about surprise dates, transparency flies out the window and so does the credibility we’re building up.”

In that moment, I admired her more than I ever had. She was really determined to let this thing run its course without any scripting or manipulation at all. She’d put her faith in me and Foster, and she wasn’t budging from her decision.

Taking it as a sign that I needed to do the same, I accepted the date and headed back to my office. Parker asking for an extra date was a good thing. I’d been completely uncertain about how to proceed, and now I had the opportunity to have another hour speaking to him before I absolutely had to decide.

Given how many hours I’d had with Porter—even if I just counted our trip—it seemed only right to spend another with Parker. It was comforting to know that he clearly felt the same way about needing more time.

For the rest of the day, I did my best to put both men out of my mind, and since I didn’t hear from Porter and I knew I would be seeing Parker later, it

was easier than I'd expected it to be. I had a bunch of new client portfolios to get through and I set up meetings with those I'd need to speak to in order to get a clearer idea of what they wanted.

With so many new clients on our books, we were all working hard and our matches were being made faster than ever. After setting up no fewer than five first dates—a personal record for me in a single day—I was feeling good. Hopeful.

Since I didn't have to worry about being seen during this date, I didn't even bother going home to change. I simply kept working until it was almost time to go upstairs. Then I popped into the ladies' room to freshen up.

There would be no pre-interview tonight because of the short notice, and so I wouldn't even have to worry about what I'd look like on camera for when they stopped blurring me. It wasn't impossible that they'd ask for a post interview, but if they did, I'd ask for a few minutes just to apply some makeup.

As it was, this was the date with the least pressure to get ready for it, and it was great. Less pressure meant less nerves, and less nerves meant that I went up there with a smile on my face.

Sure, I was still nervous, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it usually was. When I got off the elevator at the level just below the roof, Foster was waiting for me with a blindfold in his hand.

"What's this?" I asked as I took it from him. He gave me a smartass smile and I rolled my eyes as I clarified. "I meant the setup, not the blindfold. Why do you want me to wear it?"

"He's already here," Foster said. "We don't want you seeing him as soon as you walk out there, do we? I've left all our lights up there off, but it's the roof, and ambient light is a real thing."

"Okay, but why arrange it at a reveal space at all?"

Our rooftop was gorgeous, with several areas where we could arrange for the fifth date if that was the kind of couple we had. There were gazebos, private enclaves, dozens of strings of fairy lights, and even a hot tub with a hammock next to it.

Everything depended on our couples and where we thought they would be most comfortable, but I'd never arranged a blind date up here myself. We didn't even do all our reveals here. A lot of them happened offsite. Again, depending on the couple.

Foster shrugged. "Change of scenery. Are you ready?"

“No, but I never am.” I followed him up the last flight of stairs, and once we got to the door that led outside, I pulled the blindfold on and then held out my hand. “You’re going to have to help me navigate this.”

He folded a large hand around mine in a strong grip and I heard the door open. “I won’t let you fall, Hope. Just, uh, don’t hate me for this, okay?”

“Hate you for what?” I asked, but he didn’t respond, but then I remembered he’d said Parker was already here. *Right. He can’t know that I work here yet or that I know our case manager.*

If he found out, it would make it too easy for him to narrow down the young, female employees at Sight Unseen and look us all up on social media. I sighed but accepted that I’d have to wait until later to get an answer from him.

I allowed him to walk me to wherever the date was going to happen, and when he released my hand, I smoothed out my navy dress on instinct. “Hello?”

“Hi, Hope,” a way too familiar voice said and my blood ran cold. *What the fuck is this?*

That voice didn’t belong to Parker, and he didn’t know my real name, so I knew I wasn’t just imagining things. The voice belonged to Porter, who shouldn’t have been here.

Before I could ask and still in too much shock to even reach for the stupid, unnecessary blindfold, he started explaining. “So, uh, I guess you’ve got a lot of questions right now, and I’ll answer them all, but the most important thing to know is that I’m Parker. I’m the guy you’ve been seeing, or not seeing, all along.”

Shock trickled through me, rendering me speechless and gluing my limbs into place simultaneously. Not for one moment did I think he was lying, though. In fact, it all suddenly made too much sense.

Why I’d felt so comfortable with Parker right from the start. Why his answers had been so perfect. Why he hadn’t walked away when I told him I’d slept with another man. Why he’d been so distracted at the start of our last date.

And even why they’d had so much in common that my dreams had been all jumbled up. In a way, my subconscious even seemed to have known they were the same person. *Why else would I suddenly have been having sex dreams about two different men being one man?*

Tears burned the backs of my eyes as my body started trembling. The last

couple weeks, I'd wished so hard that I wouldn't have to choose and that they would just be the same person, and all along they had been.

Which would have been a dream come true if it hadn't been for just one little problem. Parker didn't fucking exist.

That perfect man had been my best friend playing me all along. I didn't know why, but I did know it had all just been a big fucking joke to him.

That thought freed me from my shock and I ripped the blindfold off, throwing it at Porter as tears started streaming from my eyes. "How could you do this to me, Porter? How could you make a fool of me in front of the whole fucking world?"

My vision was blurry as I spun around and ran back to the door, and neither Tina, nor Tracy, and not even Milena tried to stop me. They were all standing right at the edge of the rooftop, obviously having just arrived and wanting to stay well away to give us as much privacy as they could, but the fact was that they were here and that the blinking red light on the camera told me it was on.

That had been recorded, and a sob tore through me as I covered my face with my hands and looked down, hoping to all that was holy that at the very least they'd edit out this part before they aired my greatest embarrassment for the world to see.

PORTER

I yanked off the blindfold I'd put on at Foster's insistence just in time to see the door slamming behind Hope as she stormed away. And the cameras beside it.

Fuck.

I had no idea how they'd found out about this date, but evidently, my attempt to protect her from having this moment captured on film had failed miserably. *I should've just gone to her place and told her this morning. Shit.*

My heart felt like it was cracking into hundreds of bloody shards in my chest and the world spun around me. I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing I needed to breathe before I passed right the hell out.

As I slowly reopened my eyes, I saw Milena striding toward Foster with a furious expression on her face. One of her hands was already raised, a manicured finger pointing at his chest as she trembled.

"What the fuck have you done, O'Brien? What is the meaning of this?"

Foster's eyes hit the ground as he blew out a deep breath. "It's not what it looks like, Milena. Well, actually, it's exactly what it looks like. I set Porter up with Hope. What he said is true, though. He really has been Parker all along. We're not messing with her."

Milena stumbled back like she'd been shot, blinking rapidly as her expression crashed. "So she was right? He really was just telling her everything she wanted to hear? Jesus, Foster. The whole point of this was to prove that our dates *aren't* fake. Do you have any idea what you've done?"

"No, Milena!" I strode over to them as fast as my legs could carry me, aware that the camera was still on but not giving a shit if they filmed what I

was about to say. “It wasn’t fake, okay? It’s also not Foster’s fault. It’s mine. I asked him to do this.”

“Why?” She turned slowly to face me, her eyes full of tears as she waved her hands. “Why would you do this, Porter? I know you’ve never believed in what we do here, but why would you intentionally try to destroy the company? That’s what is going to happen now, do you know that? Even if we take down all the snippets we’ve posted of you and Hope, your story is out there and we’re going to have to explain what happened.”

“I’m not trying to destroy anything.” I narrowed my eyes at her and slammed a fist into my chest. “I’m in love with Hope, okay? I asked Foster to set me up with her when she said she wanted to make this documentary for her because I was afraid that she was going to meet the love of her fucking life and that it wasn’t going to be me.”

Milena stilled. “Is that true?”

“Yes, it’s fucking true. Just because I didn’t want to sign up before doesn’t mean I don’t believe in it, Milena. My own brother works for you. Every time I see him, he carries on and on about how many couples he’s helped find love and how good your algorithm is, so when I found out Hope was signing up, I lost it. I’m sorry, but this isn’t Foster’s fault. Don’t take it out on him.”

She spun to face my brother. “Did they match?”

“What?”

“You heard me,” she snapped. “Did. They. Match? Or was it you?”

He swallowed hard, his throat working before he nodded. “It wasn’t me. They matched. I wouldn’t have put them together if they didn’t, but Parker signed up just like everyone else and I put him in the system just like I would any other client. You can check the records. I didn’t manually override anything. I promise.”

She swiped her tongue across her lips and dragged in a deep breath, releasing it slowly as she closed her eyes. “You better be telling me the truth right now, O’Brien. Both O’Briens. I’m going to check our system myself. On film. With Tracy and Tina in the room with me as soon as I leave here. I’m also going to get an independent person to check our system to ensure it hasn’t been tampered with, which will also be happening on film. Before I incur any further expenses, is there anything you two need to tell me?”

“I’ll pay for it,” I said immediately. “Double of whatever any expert you need to bring in to prove that this was all real. I mean it. Send me the invoices

and I'll pay them double their usual rate. That includes the film crew."

"Porter." Her voice came out as a low warning, but I didn't need it.

"I'm serious. Look, I'm going to go find Hope now, but I mean it. Whatever you need from me, it's yours. I'll do a full interview tomorrow or whenever you're ready to explain it all, but for now, you need to know that this was my idea, not Foster's, and everything I said in that room was true. I wasn't feeding her what I thought she wanted to hear and I never lied."

Her gaze met mine, still shiny with moisture, but at least it didn't look like she was going to explode in a ball of furious tears anymore. "Promise me it was all true. Every single word."

"Every single word." My breathing was labored as I frantically looked around. "Do you know where she went?"

"My guess would be home," Milena said. "You and I are going to have a meeting tomorrow morning. In my office at eight a.m. On camera. Don't be late."

"I won't."

"Go get her then. Good luck."

I frowned, but since she was clearly letting me go, I kicked into action and headed for the door I'd seen her storm out of. She was long gone, though, and as I ran down the stairs, I prayed I caught her before she left.

Milena might've thought she was heading home, but I doubted it. I knew her better than that. Hope wouldn't go home alone after something like this, and since she obviously wasn't on her way to talk to me about it, that left Grace and Terri.

Both of whom would tell me to go fuck myself if I tried to call them to find out if she was with them. Those two were like fierce lionesses protecting a cub when it came to Hope, and for good reason. Hope was the best of us. Her heart and soul were made of pure gold, and while Grace tended to follow her own heart, Hope followed the rules.

Without fail—except for that one time when she'd told Grace that Danny was Sharp. And that had only been because the only thing that was more important to her than following the rules was loyalty. I'd known from the start that she wasn't going to be happy about this. *I guess I thought love would conquer all.*

It might've too, if it hadn't been caught on camera. Right now, I knew she felt like her world was falling apart. I was desperate to put it back together again before the snippet of tonight even aired. In order to do that though, I

needed to find her.

Jumping down the last few steps to the level her office was on, I practically flew around the corner but she wasn't there. All that stared back at me from her workspace was empty darkness. I paused for a moment to listen, in case she was crying in there somewhere, but I didn't hear a sound.

I tried Foster's office too, and even Milena's, but she wasn't in there either. Fueled by frantic energy, I ran down the stairs, jumping and skipping where I could and had to, but when I reached the parking lot, her space was empty.

Her name was on it, so I knew she hadn't just been allocated a different space. This was where she parked, but she just wasn't here anymore.

"Fuck!" I cried out as my fingers tugged at my hair. Despair well and properly sank in. I stood there for a few long minutes, just turning in a slow circle with my hands linked behind my head and my chest heaving.

Dozens of ideas flickered in my mind for what to do next, but I couldn't decide on any of them. They were there one second, and then they were gone, like my own fucking brain was trying to play keep-away with them just to piss me off.

Eventually, as I focused on calming my breathing in an effort to calm my mind, I dropped my hands back to my sides and strode toward the elevator. First things first, I needed to get out of here myself. Once that was done, I'd call Grace, and if she hadn't spoken to Hope, I'd try Terri.

I still didn't think they'd give me any answers, but at least I'd know from how they treated me whether she was with them or not, and at least once I knew she was with one of them, I'd know she was safe. That was my first priority right now, making sure she was safe.

She'd been in no state to be driving, and if something happened to her because I'd upset her that badly, I'd never forgive myself. Not ever.

When I walked into the guest parking area, Foster was standing against my car. His skin was pale—and it wasn't just the neon lights. His arms were crossed, his jaw tight. He heard my footsteps racing toward him and looked up, fixing me with a serious look as he cocked his head.

"And?"

"She's gone," I said, my voice strained and harsh. "I looked everywhere, but there's no sign of her."

"Fuck." He inhaled sharply through his nostrils. "Have you tried Grace?"

"Not yet." I slid my phone out of my back pocket and scrolled to her

number, but there was no answer. Terri didn't pick up either.

Panic gripped my insides as I unlocked my car, intent on going after her until Foster plucked my keys out of my hand. "Nope. No way. We've already got one person we love driving when they shouldn't be. I'll take you home."

"No, I'm not going—"

"Porter," he said firmly, grabbing my shoulders and giving them a hard shake. "Look at me, bro. Just look at me."

I did, blinking hard as I tried to concentrate through the panic, despair, fear, and desperation swirling around inside. "What?"

"I'm taking you home," he repeated insistently. "You know Hope. She can't rest until she's talked something to death."

Protectiveness bristled inside me. "She just likes having a soundboard because her self-esteem has been shot to shit by all the assholes she's been with."

"Yes, I know that, but that's my point. She wouldn't have gone home alone to stew in all this. My best guess is that she's gone to Grace. She and Sharp have been through this. Almost exactly this, actually. They are going to be her first stop, and once they've talked her down from the ledge, where do you think she's going to go?"

"To my place," I breathed as the realization dawned. "She's going to come looking for me at home to demand an explanation."

"Exactly. So I'm taking you home, and if she doesn't go there at some point tonight, you and I will figure it out tomorrow. The only thing I know for sure is that you're not driving right now."

"Okay," I agreed, still not breathing properly since my lungs felt like they were stuck in a bear trap, but rational thought was slowly returning and he was right. I shouldn't be driving and I needed to be at home.

Even if there was only the faintest possibility that Hope would go there tonight, I had to be there. I had to be waiting, and I'd better be fucking ready to explain if and when the time came.

HOPE

Grace took one look at my face when she opened their front door, and she spun around to call to Sharp before she even stepped aside to let me in. “We’re going to need scotch, baby! The good stuff.”

Opening her arms, she pulled me into a hug and held me tight as he yelled back from somewhere inside their monstrosity of a home. “Okay! Why? How many glasses?”

“Two. Unless you want to join us, but there are tears.”

“Two it is!”

I trembled in her arms, a wild giggle escaping through the tears as I hiccupped. “God, I love you two. Why can’t I have this?”

“Uh, you can?” She gently pulled me into their foyer without releasing me, then hugged me for a few minutes longer as she waited for the fresh wave of sobs to subside.

Grace had the patience of a saint with me, simply stroking her fingers through my hair and standing there uncaring of the snot I was probably getting on her. I tried to stop crying, even if it was just long enough to tell her what had happened, but I couldn’t.

I felt like my heart had been ripped out and tossed into a puddle of utter humiliation. My very best friend in the world, who I also happened to know now for sure I was in love with, had betrayed me. He had not only betrayed me, but he had been playing me for a fool for more than a month.

Why? I didn’t know. Maybe he was just bored or maybe he was just trying to prove his point that Sight Unseen was for stupid, desperate people and that our methods didn’t work. But the *why* didn’t even matter.

Only the end result did. None of it had been real. Not with Parker, and not with Porter. I'd woken up this morning thinking that the hardest thing I'd ever have to do was decide between two perfect men, but I'd been wrong.

The hardest thing I would ever have to do was to come to terms with the reality that it hadn't been real. That Parker didn't exist and that Porter had been responsible for embarrassing me in front of my boss and the world—and breaking my heart all in one fell swoop.

When I started crying harder, Grace held me tighter, murmuring that everything was going to be okay and that Sharp had our drinks when I was ready. Eventually, God only knew how much time later, I finally managed to let go of her.

“What happened?” she asked as she led me to their living room.

Sharp wasn't in there, but two glasses filled with amber liquid were waiting on their coffee table and he'd left the bottle and a bucket of ice behind. He'd also lit a fire in their fireplace for some reason. It wasn't even really cold, but I had to admit that the warmth was comforting.

Oh, maybe that's why.

Grace pulled me down onto a sofa with her and handed me my drink. Then she waited patiently for me to tell her why I was such a wreck. I finally managed to find the words, but they sounded hollow. Then again, I felt hollow too. Like my soul had been ripped out through the empty cavity in my chest.

“Porter was Parker. Or Parker was Porter. Either way, one and the same.”

“Oh.” She blinked hard and then frowned. “Really? All this time?”

I nodded. “Yep. He asked Foster to set up a secret date for us tonight and told me.”

The lines between Grace's eyebrows became deeper as she searched my gaze for something she obviously didn't find. “At risk of sounding a little stupid here, isn't this a good thing? This was what you wanted, right? Not to have to choose. To be able to have them both. For neither of them to be your second choice.”

“I know, but he made me feel like a cheater, Grace. A cheater and a horrible person. Oh, and a complete slut for—”

“Nope. You're not slut-shaming anyone in my house,” she said firmly. “Especially not yourself. Go on.”

“Fine, but I wanted two men. Two different men. At the same time.”

“Sure,” she said. “Still doesn't make you a slut. I thought sex with Sharp

could be pretty hot while I was seeing Danny. I mean, I was thinking about hate sex at the time, but hot is hot. Don't beat yourself up over that. Just tell me why this is so bad. It seems to me that it's the best possible outcome."

"He still made me feel like a cheater," I muttered, swiping at the tears that kept leaking from my eyes. "He also confused the shit out of me. I thought I was in love with two different people, Grace. I've been so worried that I haven't been able to sleep. I've hardly eaten since we got back from Florida. I've been feeling like I've been on a rollercoaster and you know how much I hate those. And then to top it all off, he embarrassed me on camera."

"I hear you," she said. "I'm not sure *you're* hearing you, though. You're in love with him, Hope. Only with him. He is both guys. This is good news."

"No, it's really not," I said miserably. "Porter doesn't believe in dating sites, Grace. He was fucking with me. Parker doesn't exist. It's not just that he's a part of Porter. Porter made him up. All those things he said? None of them were true, and as for Porter as Porter, he's not interested in me that way."

Grace snorted—loudly. "Okay, I get that you're upset about this and I'm definitely going to be tearing him a new one because of it, but I don't think you're right about any of that. I don't know why he chose to do it this way, but I think he did it to prove that he's the one for you. There's no other reason a hot, single, rich guy was going to put himself through all that."

"If he was in love with me, he just would've told me," I said. "I don't know why he decided on such an elaborate prank, but Porter wouldn't have done all that just to let me know how he felt. He's always been honest with me."

She frowned, her gaze growing faraway as she nodded. "That's true. He has always been honest with you. Are you sure he didn't try to tell you about it at any point?"

I started shaking my head, but then that morning in Florida suddenly leaped out in my mind. The blood drained out of my face as I thought back to that look in his eyes, the desperate determination before I literally stopped him from saying what he wanted to say by clamping my hand over his mouth.

"I think he might have tried to, actually," I whispered as tears blurred my vision. "Maybe more than once, but definitely before we left Florida. He was trying to talk to me about the dates, and I shut him down. Hard. I begged him just to hang out with me instead."

"Ah." Grace smiled as she sipped her drink and looked at me. "That

makes sense. I thought he might've tried to tell you the truth before."

"That doesn't change what he did, Grace. He had hundreds of other opportunities to tell me about this. I've been going to him to talk about every one of our dates. Hell, he even encouraged me to sign up in the first damn place."

"I think there's more to this," she said softly. "If you ask me, there has to be. I've never been as close to him as you are, but he's a good guy, Hope. Do you honestly think that the Porter you know—the Porter you talk to about stuff you don't even talk to me about—would have done this just to fuck with you?"

I didn't respond. Now that she'd put it that way, I was pretty sure she was right. Porter didn't have a deceitful bone in his body. *Maybe the why does matter.*

Grace's eyes took on that hazy, thoughtful quality again. "Didn't you mention that he seemed really nervous how you were going to react when you saw him?"

I blinked a few times fast. "Yeah. Yes, he did. He made me promise to give him a chance at the reveal."

She made a gun with her fingers and pretended to fire it. "There it is. I really don't think he was fucking with you. There's only one way to know for sure, but that means you need to give him that chance you promised. You did make the promise, right?"

"Of course, I did. I never thought it would be this, though. I thought that maybe he just didn't think he was a good-looking guy. This is..."

"I know," she said, and as she did, I knew that she really meant it. "As a person who has been on the other side of this, I think you should go talk to him and clear it up one on one. No cameras, no bosses, no audience. Just the two of you."

"It wasn't the same for you, Grace. You didn't know who he was, going into it."

She scoffed. "I wouldn't have been there if I had, but that's not really relevant here. What's relevant is that I saw the real him while I couldn't see him at all, and that we fell in love in that room because we were both blatantly honest. Neither was afraid to say what was on our minds. We weren't afraid of consequences like losing our best friends, and we weren't wearing our armor like we did in every other interaction."

"What are you saying?"

“I’m saying that I don’t think he lied to you in there. I think he spoke to you honestly about stuff he couldn’t speak to you about as your best friend. I think for the first time, he didn’t have to be afraid of consequences. You and Porter may not wear the same armor that Sharp and I used to, but in a way, yours is much more bulletproof because you’ve been shielding yourself from your feelings for so much longer.”

“Do you really think that’s true?”

She nodded. “I do, but I also think the person you should be talking to right now is him.”

As she said it, Sharp strode into the room and leaned against the doorway, arms folded loosely over his chest as he looked at me. “I know what you’re going through right now. You know I do, but I can tell you with a completely clear conscience that hearing your sister out after was the best thing I could’ve done.”

“Okay,” I said, setting my untouched drink back down on the coffee table. “You’re right. You’re both right. I need to talk to Porter.”

Grace grinned. “We’ll be here later if you want to come back. If not, then at least let me know you’re safe, okay?”

“I will,” I promised before I hugged them both and walked back outside to my car.

I had no idea if this was going to end well or even what *going well* might look like. But if I didn’t speak to him, I was never going to be able to let this go. I also wouldn’t be able to sleep without knowing, and I wasn’t one to let things simmer.

Putting myself through days of uncertainty and emotional anguish over answers I could have if I just spoke to my best friend wasn’t like me. Porter could help me make sense of this, and that was what I needed. I didn’t mean I was going to forgive him, but I needed to make sense of things and I needed to know why he’d done it in order to do that.

PORTER

The melancholy strands of a rock song about not being able to sleep or dream tonight flowed from the speakers in my living room. I lay on the sofa, clutching a bottle of bourbon and thinking about how I'd ended up here.

Heartbroken, depressed, and alone on the night I'd finally admitted my feelings to my best friend after a fucking decade of secretly falling in love with her.

It wasn't right. This wasn't me, this sad creature who was unable to move and was drowning his sorrows in alcohol to a tune that would make angels weep. I hadn't ever been *this guy* before, and I didn't like it.

If only those cameras could've seen me now, they'd have changed the finale of the docuseries into a real-life example of what a sad sack looked like. A cautionary tale for kids to watch if any needed to prove that money did not, in fact, guarantee happiness.

I released a shuddering sigh and pressed my burning eyes closed. As I did, my front door banged open and I jumped about a foot off the sofa before I twisted to see Hope storming into the room. She was still wearing the pencil skirt and jacket she had been in earlier.

There was barely a trace of makeup left on her face except for faint, telltale black smudges under her red-rimmed eyes. She was trembling where she stood in the doorway to the living room, her hair loose and slightly messy like she'd had her window open on the way here and it had gotten windblown in the car.

"Are you going to shoot me?" I asked as I reached for the remote and hit

pause on the heartbreak hits.

The question knocked some of the wind out of her sails as she stood there staring at me, disbelief shining from the bottomless depths of those vivid green eyes. “I might kick you, but I don’t have a gun, so you won’t be dodging any bullets tonight.”

“Want a drink?” I held the bottle out to her as I sat up properly and swung my legs off the sofa to pat the space beside me. “There are glasses, obviously, but since it comes in glass, I decided not to dirty anything I’d have to wash at some point.”

She eyed the bottle of bourbon for a moment, then nodded and drifted deeper into the room, eventually collapsing down next to me but at the complete other end of the sofa. She didn’t look at me as she took the bottle and brought it to her lips for a long swallow.

I watched as the column of her throat bobbed one, two, three times before she finally passed the bottle back over. She winced a little as she swallowed the last drops, then leaned back and kicked her feet up on my coffee table, reclining her head against the backrest.

“So,” she said softly. “Are you going to tell me why you did it?”

The question punched me in the balls, but I had known it was coming. I shrugged even though her gaze was still fixed on the city lights outside my window and not on me. “I was going to lose you to some guy who would’ve been perfect for you and who might not have liked our friendship. I couldn’t lose you, Hope.”

I took another long sip of the smooth liquid while she swallowed and closed her eyes, a small furrow appearing between her brows like she was in pain. “Is that the only reason? You didn’t want to lose our friendship?”

She held out her hand, still without looking at me, and I gave back the bottle as I stared at the side of her face. “Uh, no. As much as I hate to say it, it wasn’t about our *friendship*. I didn’t want to lose you at all, and if you had fallen in love with another guy, I might’ve lost even that, but that’s not what I was after.”

Taking another big gulp, she shook her head and finally turned to look at me, her gaze intent on mine. “What were you after then?”

My brows twitched as I searched those beautiful eyes. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“No,” she said, completely dead pan. “I’m not even sure I know my own name right now, so you’re going to have to spell it out for me, Porter. Nice and slow like I’m four years old. I’m so confused and I’m trying real hard to

give you the benefit of the doubt, but I don't want to make any assumptions."

"Okay." I sat up straighter, leaning over to set the bottle down before I turned to face her fully. "I did it because it killed me to think about you falling in love with someone else when I've loved you for almost half my life. The timing has never been right for us and I've always thought that our time would come. Eventually. I waited patiently in the wings, doing my own thing and giving you space to do yours, but then you said you were going to sign up for this and I lost it."

As I watched, she squeezed her eyes shut in a few hard blinks, her tongue coming out to swipe nervously across her lips before she swallowed hard. "That's not true. It can't be true. If it was, why didn't you say something sooner? Why do it like this?"

"Because I've been in the fucking friend-zone for a decade?" I suggested gently, imploring her to look at me again. "I didn't know if you'd give me a chance if I just came right out and said it, so I wanted to prove to you that I was the guy you were looking for. The program gave me the opportunity to do that without our friendship or any preconceived ideas getting in the way."

Hope's lids slid shut again, her head still back against the sofa as her cheeks flushed with a deep red stain. "Why didn't I recognize your voice? I know you inside out. I know your jokes, your laughter, the tiny little snorts of amusement. I should've realized it was you."

I keep looking straight at her in the hopes that eventually, she would finally face me again and see that everything I was saying was true. I'd never been more honest with her, and if she'd just look at me, she'd see it.

"I practiced different voices with Foster until we settled on one that was close enough to my usual register to be sustainable but different enough that you weren't likely to pick up on it immediately. As for the rest, I guess your brain just wouldn't allow you to consciously question if it was me. You were in that room with a stranger. It's not like it would've been searching for signs of your best friend in your perfect match."

A scoff tore out of her and she suddenly sat up, her eyes narrowed to slits when she spun toward me. "Do you really think I didn't do that anyway? Shit, Porter. I spent probably at least a third of every date thinking about *you*! My conscious mind might not have allowed me to make the connection, but my subconscious sure as hell did. Do you have any idea how *tormented* I've been? How guilty I've been feeling."

"I'm sorry," I said, my voice an octave or so lower as I silently begged

her to understand. “I didn’t mean for you to feel that way. If anything, I wanted you to feel happy. In love and like your best friend supported you. I didn’t realize how complicated things were going to get and I sure as shit wasn’t expecting you to ask me to be with you.”

Pain streaked behind those eyes, her tone strained as her gaze hit her lap. “Why didn’t you tell me after? Why put me through feeling like I’d cheated when it was with you all along?”

“Hey, look at me.” Against my better judgment, I reached out and cupped her chin in the crook of my thumb and index finger, applying gentle pressure until she complied, slowly lifting her gaze back to mine. “I didn’t think about it as cheating from either perspective. You were way too hard on yourself about that, but irrespective of my views on it, I’m sorry. I am. I should’ve told you. I even wanted to tell you, but your job and Foster’s were tied into my bullshit and I didn’t want to take any chances with your careers. It’s not an excuse, but it’s the reason.”

Her eyes bounced from one of mine to the other, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip and tugging it into her mouth in a way that made me want to suck it into my own. But that wasn’t an option.

“Why did you do it, then? Why not just turn me down? I was tipsy and confused. I was starting to realize that I’d had these underlying feelings for you for a long time and I threw caution to the wind, but why did you?”

I stared at her, working hard to keep my eyes from bulging or a snort from escaping, but she was serious. Unable to help myself, I brought my hand to her lip when she sucked it in again and tugged it free before swiping the pad of my thumb over her flesh and allowing my gaze to lower to those plush lips.

“I did it because I’ve been dying to make love to you since the first time I saw you, Hope. Before we even spoke in that coffee shop, every night we were both in there, you were laser-focused on your assignments and studying and I was laser-focused on you. The one and only quiz I ever flunked was because I couldn’t concentrate for shit once you walked into that damn coffee shop.”

Before she thought I’d taken advantage of the situation, which I kind of had, I looked deep into those eyes and made an admission I never thought I would make out loud. To anyone, but least of all to her.

“You are the only woman I have fantasized about in ten years, Hope. Fantasized about. Dreamed about. And there you were, saying you’d regret

not being with me. I knew even then that I shouldn't do it, but fuck. I'm only human. I had no idea how any of this was going to turn out, but I couldn't say no. You might not forgive me for saying yes, but I'd never have forgiven myself for saying no. Maybe I'm selfish, but if I am, then so be it. I had my dream girl, the girl I've been in love with forever, standing in front of me, alone in my apartment, asking me to be with her. Be honest with me. If the roles had been reversed, would you have said no?"

"No," she said after thinking it over for a beat. "Here's the thing, Porter. I've realized that I've loved you for a long time, and while that night has made me feel the worst I ever have, I don't regret it. Not really, and especially not now, but this is hard to come back from."

"I know." My throat was so dry it was burning as I looked back at her. "You love me?"

She held my gaze, hers misting over as she dropped her chin in a nod. "I do. I'm in love with you, but I don't like you very much right now. I also don't know how to trust you after all this."

The words did all kinds of bad things to me, like ripping my soul to shreds and making my heart crack in my chest, but I wasn't giving up. "I'm going to go on our fifth date. I'll be there, ready to meet you for the first time. If you show up, I hope it can be a fresh start for us, but if you don't, I understand. I deserve it. The ball is in your court, beautiful. Whatever decision you make, I'll respect it."

I won't necessarily like it, but I will respect it.

Hope nodded slowly and then reached for the bottle again, taking another long drink before she stood up. "Thanks for the drink. I'm going to go home now."

"Driving?"

"No. I'll pick up my car in the morning and get a cab now." She set the bottle back down, then gave me a sad little wave before she turned and walked away.

And for the first time in ten years, I didn't know if or when she would be back. I didn't know if that little wave would be the last I ever saw of Hope Holland, and the thought that it very well might be had me restarting the music and the sad song. I lay back down on the sofa and turned the song all the way up.

It'd only been a few seconds, but I missed her already. If she didn't come back, there would always be a Hope-shaped hole in my life and there wasn't

enough bourbon in the world to fill it.

HOPE

“**Y**our fifth date is in less than an hour,” Terri said helpfully. She leaned back in the villainous armchair and sipped at another Dirty Little Virgin.

I stuck the straw of mine between my teeth and sucked down a generous amount of my alcoholic fruit salad. Once I’d swallowed it, flinching slightly at the tangy, syrupy sweetness, I nodded. “Thanks for reminding me.”

She lowered her chin and peered at me with a dubious expression on her face. “See, I know you have to be joking because I know you didn’t really need the reminder, but you looked pretty serious there.”

“I know. That’s because I was being serious. I didn’t really need a reminder, but I do need to make a decision.”

“I’d say,” she joked before she realized I wasn’t in the mood. She let out a heavy sigh before she scooted to the edge of her chair and folded her arms on the table. “Okay, level with me, babe. Where’s your head at right now? We’ve been here for over an hour and we’ve talked about everything except the date you should be getting ready for. What gives?”

“I can’t make myself go,” I said, misery sinking in all over again. “Urgh! I hate this. I hate feeling like this and I hate that I can’t talk to Porter about it. I’m not this insecure little ball of confusion, but this is what he did to me. He turned me into a—”

“I understand that you’re pissed,” she interrupted me gently before she shook her head. “Trust me, you have every reason to be, but some might say that what he did was a good thing.”

“How?” I scoffed. “I’ve never felt so bad about—”

“He had to break down your walls, Hope,” she said. “He had to challenge your world view when it came to him. He had to make you question where he fit in. The last time we were here, you literally laughed when I said he’d always been in love with you. If he hadn’t shaken the foundations your friendship was built on, you might never have examined your feelings toward him.”

I sighed, dragging my palms over my face as I let out a soft groan. “You’re probably not wrong.”

“I’m definitely not wrong,” she countered. “Look, I know it’s not a fairy tale, but this is life, you know? Sometimes, the perfect person is right there in front of you and they’re the last person you’d expect them to be.”

“I’ve had that thought a few times recently,” I grumbled. “That’s not the point, though. There were so many other ways he could’ve let me know how he felt. He could’ve just told me, for starters.”

“What would you have done if he had?” she challenged, arching a brow as she sat back. “Have you really even thought about how it would’ve gone down if, that day, it’d been him saying he was in love with you instead of me saying how I’d always suspected he was?”

Her words were like a harsh, truth-telling mirror that she was forcing me to look into, and when I did, I didn’t like what I saw. “I probably would’ve thought he was fucking with me. I’d have laughed and told him to stop being an idiot.”

She inclined her chin. “And then?”

“And then he would’ve thought I’d rejected him or he just would’ve rolled with it for the sake of our friendship.”

Something sparked to life in her eyes. “Exactly. And now?”

“Now I know that he’s not fucking with me and that he’s been waiting a long, long time for this.”

“Finally, we’re getting somewhere.” That spark turned into a sparkle as she smiled. “We don’t have as much time for this as I’d have liked, but how does it make you feel to know that he’s in love with you and that he’s been waiting for you for such a long time?”

“What are you, a fledgling therapist?”

She shrugged. “I prefer to think of myself as the straight-shooting, honesty-inducing best friend who needs you to stop being distracted by all the noise. In your heart of hearts, what was the first thing you felt when you realized that Parker was Porter?”

“Shock,” I replied without even having to think about it. “Shock, disbelief, embarrassment.”

“Sure, I get that, but what was underneath all that? Be honest with me and really think about it.”

My eyes closed as I found the truth she was after. “Relief.”

“Ah. Let’s examine where that came from, shall we? Was it because you’re not really ready for a relationship and you really thought he was fucking with you, thereby absolving you of the responsibility you felt about seeing things through with Parker? Or was it because you didn’t want to admit to yourself that you’re head over heels in love with your best friend and you didn’t really want anyone else, regardless of how perfect he was?”

“You’re really not pulling any punches today, are you?” I muttered as my heart pounded in my throat and my head suddenly felt like it had been stuck in a vacuum.

Terri lifted one shoulder in a *what-are-you-gonna-do-about-it* shrug. “I might’ve been able to pull some punches if we started talking about this when we got here, but we didn’t. Right now, every minute counts and there aren’t enough minutes for pulled punches.”

A thin layer of sweat broke out across my palms and the back of my neck, and my heart fluttered uncomfortably. “If I have to be completely honest, it was the latter. I wanted Parker to be Porter because I wanted both of them and I didn’t really want to lose either.”

“You know, I’m not seeing an insecure little ball of confusion right now.”

I snorted. “Then you’re not looking properly. Just because I can admit that I wanted them to be the same person doesn’t mean I know what to do about it. He embarrassed me, Terri. Not only that, but he jeopardized the whole documentary. A documentary which, by the way, might just mean a promotion for me.”

“Yeah, that’s not ideal,” she said on a long exhale before she fixed me with another serious look. “There is another way of looking at it, though.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“That he ensured the documentary had a happily ever after. If you really think about it, it’s kind of romantic that he loved you too much to let anyone else stand a chance of being yours. He believed in his love strongly enough for both of you, even before you realized you loved him back, and he rolled the dice on an algorithm to prove how perfect of a match you were.”

The air slowly left my lungs as I stared at her, blinking nonstop as the

truth of what she was saying filtered into my brain. From my perspective, this was an embarrassing shit show that was going to make me look like a fool on the world wide web.

However, I was the only person in the world with my perspective. From the outside, it could look the way Terri was saying. A true friends-to-lovers story that people would eat up. He fell for me first and he put it all on the line to open my eyes.

People would eat that up.

It didn't change the way I felt about it, but it did allow me to look past the sting of the embarrassment to what I truly wanted. Terri had implored me to look into my heart of hearts, and if I did that, all I wanted was everything.

I wanted the career I'd worked so hard for at the company I genuinely loved. I wanted to be the poster child for our program working, but I wanted it to be because my story was real. I had fallen in love with my best friend in the dark when I'd been missing what had been right in front of me for the better part of a decade.

I wanted the happily ever after with Porter, my sexy as sin, smart as hell best friend who understood me better than anyone else. My other half who supported me, challenged me, and had my back. The guy who had recently opened my eyes to a part of myself I hadn't even known I had but who would also pull out a water gun after and force me to live in the moment.

How the hell did it take me this long to really see him? Why did it take me so many years to acknowledge that I'm in love with him?

The sound of Terri's throat clearing yanked me out of my thoughts and she turned her wrist to show me the time. "Clock's ticking, babe. I like the introspection and I think it's a great thing, but you don't have time for a Hope-style overthinking spree. You need to follow your gut. Or your heart. Or maybe even your vagina, but you need to make a decision soon."

"I know." I swallowed past the desert in my throat and tried to ignore the ringing in my ears. "What if it doesn't work out, Terri? What if we give it a try and we break up?"

Her expression softened. "What if you give it a try and you *don't* break up?"

"Really? What happened to not believing in love or relationships?"

She shrugged, sincerity on her smooth features and shining from her eyes as she looked back at me. "I don't have to believe in it to know that it does work out for some people. You and Porter click in a way most people just

don't. You understand each other better than anyone else and you've already been there for each other through thick and thin. He's your person. The shoulder you cry on and the one you turn to for advice. The only thing that would really change is that you'd also have sex, and from the sounds of things, that went pretty well for you guys too."

It really had. "I don't think it's quite that simple."

"You can't argue with the fact that he is your person, though," she countered. "Most people want their partner to be their best friend. In your case, that would never have been more true. You've got the emotional stuff covered, you've got a more solid foundation than pretty much anything else, and I've seen you two together enough to know that the chemistry has always been there. You just didn't want to see it."

She gave me a sympathetic smile and then signaled the waiter for the check. "We've got to get going. Your time is up, Hope. Whatever you decide, just make sure it's not going to be something you're going to regret. Don't worry about what the world is going to think. The camera crew are professionals and they want to tell a good story. Leave it to them to do that. All you need to think about is how you feel and what you want."

"Oh, is that all?" I asked. We paid when our check came. "If I knew how to feel or what I wanted, that would've been fine, but I don't."

She rolled her eyes at me and tapped her chest. "That's bullshit. You do know both of those things. Listen to this thing, girl. You won't be able to live with yourself if you don't. Shut out all the noise, and just listen to what it's telling you to do."

It was good advice, but as I got into my car and turned over the engine, I still didn't know where I was headed. *What am I going to do?*

I couldn't just forgive Porter, could I? On the other hand, showing up for our date didn't have to mean that I forgave him. It could just mean that I was finishing what I had started. It could also mean that I was willing to give us a try.

What Terri had said had been true, though. If I shut out all the noise, I did know how I felt and I did know what I wanted. I just didn't know if I was brave enough to go for it.

PORTER

Since our secret date had been at one of the usual *reveal* venues, Foster had set up our official fifth date someplace else. Someplace that held a great deal of history to Hope and me, and even I had gotten a little choked up when I'd walked in here.

Back in college, Hope and I had both lived in the dorms and we'd both had roommates who hadn't shared our nocturnal study habits. We'd met here, in a small, affordable coffee shop off campus but close enough to walk from our respective dorms.

Now that Milena knew the truth, she'd wanted to tell our story the right way, and she'd thought that it was only right to bring us full circle. Back to the place where it had all started. Back to where we'd missed our first shot because she'd had a boyfriend and I hadn't had the balls to tell her to dump the deadbeat asshole who'd dropped out soon after.

I waited in the same booth I'd been sitting at all those years ago when I'd spotted her for the first time. When she'd walked in that first night, I'd sworn I'd died and gone to heaven. She'd looked like an angel with all that blonde hair shining like a halo as she stepped inside out of the cold.

A soft tinkling of the bell above the door snapped me out of my memories. I refocused on reality, my stomach sinking when my brother walked in instead of her. He looked around the dimly lit space that Sight Unseen had rented for the evening, then came up to me and dropped into the seat across from mine.

"How are you feeling?" he asked without any niceties. The tic in his jaw and the way he kept glancing at the door told me he was nervous as hell too,

but he could join the damn club. “Have you spoken to her at all since that fiasco the other night?”

I nodded. “She came over just like you thought she might, and we talked.”

“How did it go?” His voice was quiet, but I saw the camerawoman turn the zoom on her lens, obviously trying to capture this moment of my brother and me talking before the date started.

I turned my attention on him and tried to ignore the cameras. This was what I had agreed to, the price I had to pay for what I’d done. “Well, we didn’t get into it, so that’s good, but I honestly don’t know if she’s going to show up tonight.”

“She’s still pissed?”

“Yep.” I breathed out through my nostrils and stared at the two takeout cups of coffee that had been brought over to me when I’d sat down. “Are you sticking around?”

“Yeah.” He scrubbed a palm over the day-old stubble on his jaw, and I heard the soft scrape of his skin against it. “Milena, Tina, and I will be right outside. Tracy is staying in here with you, but we’ll be watching from their van. Full disclosure, you’re going to have an audience for this. I tried to buy you a few minutes alone, but I lost that fight.”

“It’s okay,” I said, forcing a smile as I glanced back up at him. “I’m sorry I almost got you fired and I knew it was all going to be on film. Doesn’t mean I would’ve preferred if it wasn’t, but it is what it is.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” He fidgeted with his hands before he sighed. “Good luck, bro.”

“Thanks.” I watched as he got up, then stopped him just as he was about to walk away. “Hey, Foster?”

“Yeah?” He turned to me again, that nervous glint still in his eyes as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “What’s up?”

“I didn’t mean for anyone to get hurt through this. You know that, right? I just... I love Hope so much and I couldn’t let her go without a fight, but I am sorry that I dragged you into this.”

He nodded curtly. “I’ve been in this from the beginning, bro. You didn’t drag me into anything. Just don’t fuck it up if she shows, okay?”

“I’ll do my best,” I promised, but as I sat there after he left, I knew she wasn’t coming. I was waiting for the sake of the cameras, sipping my coffee as hers grew cold.

Milena had informed me earlier that I needed to give her at least half an hour after the start time before I left, and I watched as every one of those minutes ticked by. Just when I was about to get up, the door opened and she walked in, her small hands curled into fists at her sides as she stopped just inside the door.

She spun to me without having to search the interior of the little coffee shop, knowing exactly where I would have chosen to sit. Tracy was behind her camera in a darkened corner, but while I knew she would be aware of the little red light, Hope ignored the camera as she marched over to me.

“I’m so mad at you,” she said, her voice shaking as she stared me down. “I’m so, so mad at you, Porter. It’s not even about being embarrassed anymore. It’s about how you made me feel about myself. I’ve always known who I am, and you made me question that. I know it wasn’t your intention, but that’s what happened anyway. I’ve never felt so vulnerable or so insecure. I’ve never felt like such a horrible person and I’ve never, ever been a cheater, even if no one else seems to think about what I did as cheating.”

Her chest was heaving, and when I opened my mouth, she held up a hand. “I’m not done yet. There are a few things I need to say to you and I need you to listen.”

I nodded but didn’t even try to interrupt her again. Blowing out a long breath, she got into the booth with me, taking up the same space she’d been in when we’d had our first ever conversation. I saw the nostalgia glimmering in her eyes as her nostrils flared.

She blinked past the tears and put her head in her hand, dragging in a few deep breaths before she looked at me again. “I don’t like the way you made me feel these last few weeks and I don’t appreciate the position you put me in. That being said, I’m not so stubborn that I’ll refuse to acknowledge that I wouldn’t have had the courage to do what you did. For years, I’ve been refusing to let myself examine so many little things about the way you made me feel. I’ve been ignoring the way my heart skips sometimes when we look at each other and how much I’ve wanted to stay in your arms when you hugged me. I haven’t allowed myself to think about the stab of jealousy when I’ve known you’ve been out with another girl, and I haven’t stopped to think about how you’ve always felt like my other half.”

My heart nearly stopped when she paused. This was it. Whatever her decision had been, I was about to find out. Regardless of how good this was sounding so far, there could be a *but*.

“But,” she continued, and my spirits sank as my eyes slid shut. “I am in love with you, Porter. Thinking back on it, I think I have been since the first time we sat here together. I just didn’t know what to do about it and eventually I shoved it so far down and I refused to dig it up again. I would’ve kept refusing to dig it up if you hadn’t done all this, so I’m mad at you, but here I am.”

When I opened my eyes and found her really still sitting there, smiling a little even though she still looked utterly miserable, it was like someone had injected me with a big old shot of pure joy. “You’re in love with me? You weren’t just saying that the other night?”

She shook her head. “I would never just say something like that.”

“I know, but…” I trailed off, disbelief barreling through me before I was out of the booth and pulling her up as well, wrapping her in my arms and holding her so tight, I wasn’t sure I would ever let her go. On the other hand, I didn’t want to let her go.

Not now, not ever.

We stayed that way for ages before she finally pushed softly at my chest, making me pull my head back just far enough that I could look into her eyes without releasing her. “We have a lot to talk about.”

“I know.”

“Should we do that now?”

I sighed, my lips curving into a slight smile as I lowered my forehead to hers and just breathed her in for a moment. “Can you give me a minute to wrap my head around the fact that you just told me you’re in love with me?”

“How could I not?” she murmured as she touched her hand to my cheek. “You’re you. I think that’s always been part of the problem. I didn’t think you’d ever really be interested in a girl like me.”

“What? Why?” I frowned, lifting my head away from hers before I shook it. “You’re the one who’s never been interested in me, baby. Can we just be clear on that?”

She smiled sadly. “That’s the thing, isn’t it? We’re definitely not clear on that. I just never thought you wanted to be more than a friend to me.”

“Well, you were wrong.”

“So were you,” she shot back, her hands winding around my neck to play with the hair there. “Where does this leave us, then?”

“With me about to pour my heart out and apologize to you and everyone else. I’m sorry that I made you feel so bad about yourself. I know you know

it wasn't my intention, but the fact is that I did make you feel that way and I will spend the rest of my life making absolutely fucking sure I never let you feel anything about yourself other than how awesome you are."

When she opened her mouth, I shook my head to let her know that this time, I was the one who wasn't quite done yet. "You came up with an incredible idea to showcase how real the work you do is, and you were willing to put your heart on the line for it, and I nearly messed it all up. I did it so I wouldn't lose you, but at the time, I didn't take into consideration what you, or Foster, or Milena stood to lose. It was selfish, but if I had to do it all over again, I would if it meant being here with you right now."

"I love you, Porter," she murmured before tilting her head back and wetting her lips.

I groaned. "I love you too, and I'm going to kiss you now. If you don't want that on camera, you should stop me. Right now."

She didn't stop me, and as my mouth descended to hers, the relief that spiraled through me was fucking dizzying. I knew we had an audience and I knew that I couldn't let this kiss get out of hand, but my head was spinning and the relief drove me to kiss her deeper. Harder. To pour everything I had into that kiss and to prove to her—and to the entire fucking world—that I really was hers. That none of this was bullshit and that she was mine.

We kissed until Tracy cleared her throat, and then Hope had to be the one to pull away, but she smiled against my lips and slid both her hands into mine. "Should we go now?"

"We should definitely go now," I growled my response against her mouth, tightening my grip on her fingers as I spun her around. I kept my arm around her waist as we walked out with her tucked to my front.

Partially to hide the very prominent bulge in my jeans from the camera, but mostly because I was done with having any space between us. Just holding her hand or having an arm over her shoulders wasn't going to cut it for me right now.

I needed as much contact with her as I could get for as long as I could get it.

As soon as we were alone in my bedroom, I finally released her but only for the time it took me to undress her.

Unwrapping her slowly like she was the most treasured gift I'd ever received—which she was—I started with the ankle boots on her feet, dropping to my haunches to pull them off. Her stockings followed, then her

jacket, her shirt, her skirt, and finally, her bra.

By the time she was only in a pair of black cotton boy-cuts in front of me, I was diamond hard and right on the edge, and I hadn't even touched her yet. Being with Hope was going to be the death of me. But fuck, what a way to go.

HOPE

That first time Porter and I had been together had been incredible, but it had nothing on what was happening between us right now. He was looking at me like I was responsible for lighting the stars at night and sending the sun into the sky in the morning, those blue eyes adoring and filled with more love than I'd ever seen before.

His touches were gentle and unhurried as he undressed me, running his fingertips slowly along the insides of my ankles after removing my shoes and stockings. As he rose to his feet to take off my jacket and shirt, he dropped soft kisses on my throat and groaned as he nibbled on my earlobe.

It was slow and sensual, and it was freaking killing me, but I didn't want to rush him. Heat pooled between my legs and my pulse pounded in the swollen flesh there, my nerve endings alight with the anticipation by the time he finally hooked his fingers into the waistband of my plain panties.

In retrospect, I should've gone shopping for lingerie, but it didn't seem to matter to him. Twin flames flickered in the heat of those blues even as he kept looking at me like I was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

I didn't think he even noticed that my underwear wasn't the sexiest, finest lingerie out there. As he peeled my panties off, I stepped out of them and then kept my eyes on his as I reached for the hem of his long-sleeved Henley.

If he touched me right now, I would forget all about him and I didn't want to. I wanted to be a part of this instead of just being devoured the way he seemed to want to devour me. The expression in his eyes was ravenous to the point of pain, but I wouldn't be deterred. Not right now.

I wanted him just as much as he wanted me, and he might've fallen first,

but I'd fallen just as hard and I wanted him to know it. As I pulled his shirt off over his head, he helped by taking it from me when I couldn't reach the tops of his hands, and flung it clear across the room.

Before I got distracted by all those delicious abs and the fuck lines of his hips, I kept my eyes locked firmly on his and reveled in the heat of the moment stretching between us. Lowering my hands to his belt, I pulled the leather strap free from the loops and then unbuckled it, leaving it in his jeans as I reached for his button.

He sucked in a sharp breath when I pushed just the tips of my fingers into the waist to get a good grip on the fabric, and a soft moan escaped him when I ran that fingertip against his skin just once before I slid the metal disk out through its hole. Not wanting to tease him too much, I wasted no time lowering his zipper and then lifted all the fabric I could get my hands on over his impressive erection.

He pushed it off with me and then stepped out of the mess of material just as I had stepped out of my panties. Finally completely naked in front of each other and completely sober, I expected to feel somewhat awkward about it but I didn't.

Instead, I simply took his hands as I took a small step back and lowered my gaze slowly, raking it over every inch of him in a way I hadn't really been able to do before. All the while, I held his hands, silently letting him know that I wanted him to stay right where he was as his own heated gaze caressed me the same way I was doing to him.

Able to appreciate him properly for the first time, my nipples were hard as rocks as I raked my gaze over his broad chest with the lightest smattering of hair right in the center. His shoulders and arms were strong, bulging with toned definition in all the right places.

Further down, I lingered on the blocks on his torso and drank in the dark patches of ink that had surprised me so much when I'd first realized he'd gotten tattoos. Reaching out, I traced the outline of the beautifully shaded butterflies on his ribs.

"You never did tell me what these meant," I murmured as I glanced up into his eyes. "You always just shrug and change the subject."

"Do you know what butterflies symbolize?" he asked, his voice husky as he covered my hand to press it to the images we were talking about. I shook my head, and he smiled. "Hope."

"Yes?"

“No, I meant they symbolize hope. They go through a long and difficult process to reach the full, beautiful potential of what they could be. A caterpillar waits for ages before it grows colorful, gorgeous wings, so it symbolizes patience, endurance, and hope for the future. And since it also happens to be your name...”

When he trailed off, I gasped. “This was the first tattoo you ever got.”

He nodded. “Yeah, it was, but my patience and endurance paid off big time.”

Tears filled my eyes as I surged up on my toes to kiss him, pressing my lips to his as I cupped the back of his neck in my palms. “I can’t believe I never knew.”

“You do now.”

“We’ve wasted so much time,” I murmured as I pulled him ever closer, feeling his concrete shaft pressing into my stomach. “Why did we waste so much time?”

“We weren’t wasting time. We were laying our foundations and it was worth it.”

I breathed him in, then kept holding on to him as I walked us back to the bed. Sitting down when my legs hit the mattress, I brought my hands to his hips and pushed him away just an inch or so before I moved my eyes down again, this time shamelessly focused on that length I’d just felt pushing into me.

Porter’s cock was a work of art. Seriously, if I had a sex store, I’d model a damn dildo after this thing. If I was willing to share it with others, which I wasn’t, but that didn’t mean that it wasn’t worthy of having instruments of pleasure modeled after it.

Long, lean, and proud, but thick enough that I remembered how it’d stretched me open and touched all those deep dark places inside that’d sent me skyrocketing to places I’d never been. Right at the top of the shiny tip, a shimmery wetness caught my eye and I moaned before reaching to wrap my fist around the base and leaning forward to take him into my mouth.

He gave a strangled shout when I took him all the way in, wetting his skin before I started moving my hand in time with my mouth. Porter groaned and brought his hands to my hair, gripping it tight as his hips started thrusting like he just couldn’t help himself.

Guttural sounds of pleasure spilled freely from his lips and I couldn’t get enough, working him over faster in response to the noises he made. His cock

swelled in my mouth and he tried to withdraw, but I wouldn't let him.

"Hope," he warned breathlessly, sounding halfway agonized. "Baby, I—"

I sucked him deep, humming around his shaft as I held on to his hip with my free hand. Another moan slid out of him. His hand came back to my hair and his hips started moving again, thrusting but careful not to gag me as he chased his release.

A few moments later, he found it, filling my mouth with the salty, musky ropes of his release. I swallowed it all down, then waited for him to stop moving before I finally released him from my mouth and glanced up at him.

He seemed slightly dazed, chest rising and falling fast and a deep sexy red flush on his cheeks before he looked down at me, his gaze on fire as he fixed it on me. "Scoot back and lie down for me, baby."

I did what he'd asked, suddenly too aware of my own pulsing need now that I'd taken care of him. Porter climbed on the mattress with me, claiming my mouth with his own and groaning at the taste of himself on my lips. The kiss was hard and fast, and then his mouth was gone, kissing me everywhere before his head landed between my legs just where it'd been in all those dreams I'd had.

And just like in all those dreams, he licked me expertly, touching me with just exactly the right speed and pressure until I came undone underneath him not nearly long enough later. He didn't stop, either, just slowed down and then continued at his leisurely pace until another orgasm encased me in that blissful white-hot heat.

Shuddering as I came down, I opened my eyes to see Porter rolling on a condom. Despite the two exquisite orgasms I'd just had, my insides clenched around nothing as I anticipated what it was going to feel like to have him in me again.

Thankfully, I didn't have to wait too long. Porter wasted no time with the protection. Then he settled between my legs with his broad head resting at my entrance. "I love you, Hope."

"I love you too, Porter." I pushed my fingers into his hair and kissed him as he fed himself into me torturously slowly.

It shouldn't have been like this. The need shouldn't have been so urgent anymore, the air not nearly as filled with crackling electricity and insatiable desire, but it was. At this rate, I wasn't sure how we were ever going to leave his bedroom.

We'd both gotten off. It should've subsided a little by now, but it just

hadn't. Porter kissed me like the ship was going down, his breathing already labored again as he made love to me, pushing into me like he was coming home and then withdrawing slowly, rolling his hips against my pelvis before he sank back in like he just couldn't stay away.

I relished every moment, moving with him and kissing him back just as deeply. My nipples brushed against the hot skin of his chest, every brief burst of contact sending tingles through me. All the while, he held my hands, only lifting his mouth away from mine to kiss my eyelids, my nose, my jaw, and then coming back to my mouth.

I had never felt so cherished, so adored, so loved, as I did in that moment, and if it stayed this way, I knew Terri had been right. I shouldn't have been so worried about us not working out. I should be thinking about what happened if we do.

As we reached our next peak together, I cried out and crushed my lips against his, absolutely certain that I was never going to let him go. After, however, as he collapsed on top of me but was careful not to crush me with his weight, he gave me another kiss and then let out a regretful sigh.

"I need to go take care of the condom. I'll be right back."

I nodded, but instead of waiting for him where I was, I got up on numb, shaky knees and darted to his dresser where we'd stowed the water guns after our last time together. Relieved to find them still there, I waited for him to emerge from the bathroom and then tossed the blue plastic in his direction.

"Heads up," I called just as I did, and he blinked, his hand flying up lightning fast to grab the thing out of midair.

He grinned as he looked at me. "God, I love you."

"I love you, too," I said, smiling as I slipped into his bathroom and shut the door firmly behind me. "You'd better find someplace to fill up, Porter. This tap is mine."

With laughter ringing out from the other side of the door, I smiled and opened the faucet to fill up my gun. Terri had been right about this, too. Being in a romantic relationship with my best friend was the best thing I ever could've asked for, and now that I knew it, there was no going back.

PORTER

A month after our official fifth date, Hope and I settled in to watch the final product of our journey together. Tracy had offered to let us watch it before it aired, but we'd wanted to see it with everyone else.

Apart from a few teasers, no one had seen anything of the secret date or the reveal yet, and our names and faces were being made public for the first time tonight as well. Hope was practically thrumming with nervous energy at my side, but I pulled her down with me on our sofa and massaged her shoulders.

"It's going to be fine, love. I promise, and if it's not, we'll buy that house in Fiji and you can start a branch of Sight Unseen there."

"We're not moving to Fiji," she said, as resolute as she had been every time we talked about this—which had been about a dozen times so far. "Oh, look. It's starting."

She pressed her face into my neck, unable to watch as the introductory music came on along with Sight Unseen's logo on the screen.

I glanced at the camera on my phone, grinning into the lens and pointing at her. It wasn't live or anything. I'd simply set it to record and mounted it on a small tripod on our coffee table. Tracy had asked if we could do a quick live interview later if need be, and while we'd wanted to watch this alone, I'd told her I would record us watching it and that we could always do one last interview after.

To my surprise, it wasn't my face or Hope's that came up first. It was Foster's. He must've given this interview after everything had gone down because they were using him as a narrator of sorts, it seemed.

Tracy said our names and pictures of us came up onscreen, and then the pictures faded as her voice asked the questions off camera and Foster answered on the screen. “Tell us about Hope and Porter.”

“Oh, uh, okay. Well, let’s see. They are the very best of friends and they have been for ten, or maybe closer on twelve years now. I don’t know, but it’s been forever.”

“Where did they meet?”

He smiled. “In college. They were both night owls back then and they found this little coffee place off campus that was mostly quiet where they’d go to get their caffeine fix while they did their studying and whatnot.”

“Have they ever dated before?”

He snorted, his eyes going wide as he shook his head. “Nope. There hasn’t even been any of those will they, won’t they moments. They met, they hit it off, and they became fast friends. Hope was involved with someone else at the time and things just never progressed in any different direction.”

“How long have you known that your brother, Porter, was in love with Hope?”

He pulled a face, then laughed. “Uh, pretty much since the first time he told me about the chick he kept seeing in that coffee shop at night, but officially? I’ve only known for a couple months. Since just before you started filming, actually.”

“Okay, let’s back up a little bit. You and I have been doing interviews all along, but things have changed, and just in case we have some newer people watching who might’ve missed this before, tell us about you.”

“Uh, sure. Okay. My name is Foster O’Brien, and I’m a client-relationship manager at Sight Unseen.”

“And what’s your relationship to this couple we’ve been watching as they fell in love?”

Foster flushed. “Well, uh, Porter is my brother and Hope is my friend and coworker.”

“Just to be clear,” she interjected. “Hope, or Olivia as we’ve known her so far, works at Sight Unseen?”

“Yes, she does.”

“Thank you. I’d like to back it up just a little bit further. Parker and Olivia, or Porter and Hope, both signed up as clients of Sight Unseen. How did that happen and why?”

He scratched the side of his face as he leaned back, his eyes taking on a

slightly unfocused, faraway quality. “Well, uh, a few months ago, I’m sure you remember the company was in a bit of a troubled spot.”

“If by troubled spot, you mean trending on social media as *fake* and *fraud*, then sure.”

He sighed. “Yeah, that’s what I meant. The thing is, uh, people have been giving us a hard time since Milena Kress founded this company, but we’ve always kept our heads down, worked hard, and let our success speak for us. It wasn’t always easy, but we ignored our critics and kept doing our jobs to the best of our ability.”

“When did that change?”

“Well, I mean it hasn’t changed. We’re still doing that, but a few months ago, things kind of came to a head. A jilted ex-client gave an interview accusing us of hiring someone to pretend to date her. She said a whole bunch of things, all of which were untrue, and because of the fact that our boss is a woman of impeccable integrity, she didn’t want to come out with the truth.”

“There were legal and privacy issues surrounding this as well, am I correct?”

Foster nodded. “Sure, yeah, but Milena didn’t want to get caught up in a he said/she said type mudslinging match when the woman was always just going to keep saying we were lying. We needed to find a way to prove to people that what we did was real, and Hope came up with the idea of filming one of our clients’ journeys.”

“So how did she end up being the client who was followed?”

He smirked. “Our boss asked her. She knew Hope was single and interested in settling down, but she also knows that Hope is painfully honest and that she’d tell the truth, no matter how things turned out.”

“Okay,” she said. “How about Porter? How did he end up in that room?”

Foster let out a deep sigh as a blush colored his cheeks. “See, that’s where things got a little more complicated. After Milena asked Hope to do the documentary, she went to her best friend for advice. Hope was skeptical of the process insofar as it working for her, and she wasn’t sure she would do it, so she turned to Porter.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “So, uh, good friend that he is, he knew that she wanted to find love, so he encouraged her to go for it, and then he realized that this time, he might lose her for good. After he left her place, he came to mine, looking all wild and desperate.”

Foster paused. “That day was the first time he admitted to me that he was

in love with her, and eventually, after he learned she had signed up, he told me to sign him up too.”

“To what end?”

“To match with her,” Foster admitted before licking his lips. “This is probably where people are going to say, *see, it’s all fake*, but like I said, this is where it gets interesting. I ran his information through our algorithm, same as I always do, and she popped up as his match without me having to do anything at all.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Look, I was hoping it was going to happen and I won’t lie. I was willing to help him. I probably shouldn’t admit this, but shit. The guy is my brother and I had watched him being hopelessly in love with this woman for a decade. I had to do something, but I also knew that they’d always been like yin and yang. They completed each other and complemented each other in a way that was hard to miss, and everyone who had ever seen them together knew it.”

“Okay, so what happened next?”

“Well, uh, you saw what happened next. The system matched them up and we’re about to watch the full journey of how they wound up together.”

“So just to be clear again, they are still together?”

Foster smirked. “Yep. They moved in together two weeks after their reveal, just like they talked about in the dates you’re about to see, and although they almost didn’t make it, they got it together in the end.”

Our interviews—the unblurred versions—were aired interspersed with segments of our dates and conversations. Terri was interviewed about how she was the one who had told Hope I’d always been in love with her. Grace spoke about how shocked Hope had been and how she and her husband had eventually convinced her to come to talk to me.

I watched it all in a state of semi-disbelief, almost unable to believe how well it had all come together. I squeezed Hope’s shoulders and dropped a kiss on top of her head. At some point, she’d turned her face out of my neck to watch as well, and she squealed as she saw the number of viewers who were tuning in, the amount getting bigger by the minute.

“I might be working late for the foreseeable future,” she murmured in a shocked whisper. “We were already getting more clients than we know what to do with, but it’s probably going to get worse from here.”

“Or better,” I said against her hair. “I’m still sorry for what I did. You

know that, right? I was wrong and I will always be sorry for hurting you.”

“We’re together now,” she replied, turning to smile at me before she leaned in and pressed her lips softly to mine. “Nothing is wrong when we’re together, and now, the world knows it too.”

I glanced back at the screen. “Yeah, it looks like people are loving our story, so I’m pretty sure you’re a shoo-in for that promotion now.”

Her smile widened as she pressed her lips to mine, the kiss firmer this time. “The only promotion I really needed was to go from friend to girlfriend. I’m all good, no matter what happens.”

“I’m still sorry,” I said between kisses as I sat back when she crawled into my lap. “I love you, Hope.”

“I love you too, Porter.”

I circled my arms around her, already getting hard as her lips crashed into mine over and over again and she forgot all about what was happening on my laptop.

Frankly, so did I. I’d just have to remember not to send the video to Tracy as it was. For now, I kissed her back and rolled my hips into hers, still unable to believe that I got to do this whenever I wanted now, and whenever I wanted was all the damn time.

We lived together—had been for two weeks—and I still hadn’t gotten tired or bored of her for even a second. I never would. Having her by my side, in my arms, and in my bed was everything I’d ever wanted, and even though I already knew what I had to do to make sure she would always be mine, we weren’t quite there yet.

It had only been a month, but the ring had already been bought, and if I got my way, I was going to give it to her sooner rather than later. As much as we’d had our ups and downs these last few months, and even though I’d almost lost her, I hadn’t, and as I laid her back, kissing her mouth like I was never going to get enough of her, I sent up a silent prayer thanking every god out there for Sight Unseen.

I had been their biggest skeptic, and right now, I was their staunchest supporter. Their program really worked. Hope and I were living, breathing proof of that, and if anyone ever dared speak out against them again, I would be the first to jump in front of a camera to prove them wrong.

Just, you know, later... Once we’re done here. Both of our phones were ringing off the hook when the documentary ended, but I was lost in Hope, and the rest of the world could wait. We’d already given them our story.

Surely, they could give us a few hours—or days—to celebrate our success now that the program was finally, completely over.

EPILOGUE

HOPE

One Year Later

“**W**hen did Milena need this again?” I asked as I looked up at both of our assistants sitting in my now much larger office, both with their notepads perched on their knees and their pens in hand. “Oh, right. Tomorrow. I hope you guys have had lunch because we’re going to be here a while.”

My assistant nodded enthusiastically. “We’ll be here as long it takes, but Tina and Tracy are going to be here in two hours, remember?”

I groaned. “No, I didn’t remember. Shit. Okay, ladies, we have two hours to work our way through all our unmatched clients and brainstorm ideas about how we’re going to find these people their perfect matches.”

“You’ll come up with something, Hope. You always do,” my assistant said, trying to be helpful. “That’s why you’re the second in command now. You’re a problem solver. A silver bullet.”

“That’s just great,” I muttered as I looked over the profiles that had been printed and laid out across my desk. “Let’s get started. I’m sure something will jump out at us if we work together.”

I picked up the first of the profiles, checking the date on which the man had signed up. It’d been a whole month and we’d not yet managed to set him up on a single date. With the rate at which we were gaining new clients, this shouldn’t have been possible, but it seemed it was.

Sight Unseen had been steadily gaining popularity ever since that first part of Porter's and my documentary aired, and we'd made similar documentaries of other couples going through the process since. We were determined to consistently prove that we weren't fudging our results, and besides, the documentaries were doing so well that they'd been picked up by a major streaming service.

It was a huge win for us, and while not all of our clients walked out dating, obviously, as far as I was concerned, that only helped prove our authenticity. As a result, however, the company was growing faster than ever and Milena had promoted me to Vice President.

Part of my role was vetting clients and couples for the docuseries, but the rest of the company was continuing as normal. The problem, however, was that we were receiving more and more profiles from clients who seemed impossible to match up.

The system just wasn't finding anyone for them, and since I had become the *problem solver*, as my assistant had put it, Milena had asked me to look into it. Not only was the camera crew coming to do a quick follow-up since it was the anniversary of the first airing of mine and Porter's story, but I also had dinner with him later to celebrate.

Life had definitely become busier this last year, that was for sure, but I loved every single minute of it. As I looked through the first few profiles, I noticed an odd theme running through them. "Look at page three. Tell me what you see under hobbies."

Milena's second assistant spoke up first. "Walks on the beach. Running. Banana picking?"

"I've got walks on the beach. Jogging, and strawberry picking," my assistant said.

I groaned. "Right. Go through all of these. Let's put all the profiles with that listed under hobbies in a pile and then look over the rest. In the profiles I've looked through, there's at least one bogus answer in every section. That's what's throwing the system off. It has to be. Someone is messing with us, ladies."

"How is that possible?"

I sighed. "Where there's a will, there's a way. The system should protect us against it, but whoever is behind this has been careful. It's fine, though. We're just going to have to go through these with a fine-toothed comb and run similar answers through the computer to make sure no one got through on

false or generic answers.”

We kept working on it until the film crew arrived, and I hugged them like the old friends they had become when they walked into my office. I left the others to keep working through the profiles and sat down with Tina, smiling as Tracy turned on the camera.

“So here we are again, Hope,” Tina said. “One whole year later. Can you believe it?”

“Honestly? No. Not a chance.”

She chuckled. “Neither can I. We’ve seen each other a few times this year, though, but it’s been a while since we’ve done our last interview with you as a former client. Tell us about you and Porter. Are you still together?”

I grinned. “Yes. Together. In love. Attached at the hip whenever we’re not at work.”

She returned my grin. “What have you two been up to this last year?”

“Well, uh, we’ve mostly just been settling in as a couple. To be honest, it’s been a lot easier than I would’ve thought it might be, but that’s probably just because I’ve got the best boyfriend on the planet.”

She laughed. “Boyfriend, though? No ring yet.”

I shook my head. “Not yet. It’s been a really busy year for us both workwise. Porter’s working on a new invention and I’ve been promoted. So for us, it’s been more about finding our groove for now. We’ve also done a bit more traveling, which has been great.”

“Any plans for the next step?”

“Not as far as I know,” I said, smiling when she arched her brows at me. “Then again, you guys are more likely to know than I am, right?”

They laughed me off, but it was true. Porter had become something of an advocate for *Sight Unseen* and he’d appeared on the docuseries at least twice as often as I had. Often, the interviews weren’t about us but rather about the process, the company, or that kind of thing.

I had a feeling he felt like he owed it to Milena and Foster to be outspoken about the success of the program. He *still* felt guilty about what he’d done, and even though we’d all told him it was water under the bridge, Porter didn’t do anything halfway.

Once he started something, he went for it at full throttle and it seemed he’d added *support Sight Unseen* to his list. A list which also included making me the happiest, most spoiled girlfriend ever, and giving Terri shit for telling me he was in love with me without giving him a heads-up about it.

Either way, as I finished off my interview, I wondered if Tina and Tracy knew something I didn't. They weren't acting cagey, exactly, but they did keep laughing and dodging the question. The truth of it was that I'd also been wondering about us taking the next step.

I really wanted to and I was ready, but Porter himself had been dodging the question the last couple months and it was making me nervous. As I got downstairs to the parking garage, I smiled in surprise when I saw him leaning against my car with one of the Sight Unseen blindfolds in his hand.

"What are you doing with that?" I asked, suddenly suspicious.

He shrugged but then kissed me senseless and slipped the blindfold over my eyes before finally breaking the kiss to respond. "You trust me, right?"

"With my life."

"Then just roll with it," he said, putting on a whole different voice. "This is how the process works, ma'am."

"Now I know what it feels like to get kidnapped," I joked as my heart did hops and skips in my chest.

Porter laughed softly against my ear before pressing a kiss to the sensitive patch of flesh underneath it. "That's exactly what I said."

With his large hand firmly planted at the small of my back, he guided me to my car and into it. Then he got in behind the steering wheel and turned over the engine, not saying much as he drove us to wherever we were going.

"What are you up to, O'Brien?" I asked once I suspected we were on the freeway. "Where are you taking me?"

"To your first anniversary date, ma'am," he said in that weird voice again.

It wasn't long until we stopped and he turned off the car, then helped me out and once again planted his hand at the small of my back. A bell tinkled, and when the scent of coffee permeated my nostrils, I smiled, immediately knowing where we were.

At the same time, his warmth disappeared from behind me. "You can take off the blindfold now."

I did what he'd said, but instead of looking around the familiar old coffee shop, my gaze zeroed in on my gorgeous blue-eyed, dark-haired boyfriend, and more specifically, the fact that he was down on one knee in front of me with an open ring box on his palm.

"Back where it all started, Hope," he said softly, those sparkling blue eyes soft and even slightly wet as he peered up at me. "Twice, actually. It only

seemed right to do this here because this is where I fell in love with you and this is where you said yes to me the first time. I figured I might as well push my luck and see if I can get you to say yes here again.”

My hands came up to cover my mouth, and when I heard a soft squeal from the side, I glanced over to find Grace, Sharp, Terri, Foster, and even Milena seated in our old booth. I shot my sister a surprised, wide-eyed look and then looked back at Porter.

“What is happening right now?”

He chuckled. “What is happening right now is that I wanted to ask you in front of our family and closest friends if you’d finally marry me, baby. Tracy’s outside, by the way, so if you ever wanted to get me back for embarrassing you on camera, now would be the time.”

I stared at him. “What?”

He smiled a beautiful, radiant smile that raised the corners of his eyes and made my knees weak. “I have loved you for a long time, Hope, and this last year has been the best year of my life because of you. I know we had a bumpy start as a couple, but the world got to watch us fall in love for good, and when Tracy asked if I had any plans to make it official, I thought it was only right to let them see this, as well. Also, I want the world to know that I’m yours. That I belong to you and that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. So what do you say, baby. Will you marry me?”

Joy exploded through me as I nodded, but I couldn’t get any words out. Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes and I couldn’t move, not until he wrapped those strong arms around me, grounding me and making me feel like I could reach up and touch the stars all at the same time.

“I love you, Porter O’Brien. I’m just sorry it took me so long to realize that it was always you,” I murmured against his chest as I held it. “It was always going to be you.”

“Better late than never,” he joked before pulling back and slowly bringing his lips to mine. Just like it always did, everything else faded away as soon as he kissed me.

The Parker-effect had been great, but the Porter-effect, it was so much more powerful, and from now on, it was all mine.

Forever.

If you just loved Hope and Porter, I've got a surprise for you! Here is a special Deleted Scene just for YOU!!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Weston Parker
EVERY *good girl* DESERVES A *bad boy*

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, two dogs, three cats, and a turtle.

Yep. A turtle. You read that right. Don't be jealous.

You're going to find Billionaires, Bad Boys, Military Guys, and loads of sexiness. Something for everyone hopefully. I'd love to connect with you. Check out the links below and come find me.

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Pull Me In
A Match Me Up Novel #2

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