



One Last Blind Date

ERIN BRADY

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By

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Dedication

To my dear friend, L.R., who has provided me with the stories you'll read in this book. I am eternally grateful to you and your online dating experiences.

To my husband, you are the inspiration for all of the leading men in my books.

Sarah Jenkins

My name is Sarah Jenkins and I am thirty years old. People tell me I look like a cross between the girl next door, and a certain desperate housewife from Wisteria Lane. I have long, dark brown hair and brown eyes. I'm 5 foot 6 inches (but can make myself 5 foot 9 with 3-inch heels), and I have a slim figure. I work as a Human Resources consultant and really love it. My job gives me the flexibility to be my own boss, but I still work with clients ranging from Fortune 500 corporations to college graduates looking for their first job. I live in the Big Apple in a small downtown studio apartment that I share with my cat. I love the energy of the city and want to meet someone who shares that love. I enjoy going to the movies, bike riding, and cooking. I have a great sense of humor and love the outdoors and . . .

This is garbage. This isn't working at all! Why do I even bother?

I'm staring at the computer screen and crinkle my nose as if I've just thrown out the trash. I can't do this. I thought I could, but I can't. I read back the paragraph typed out on the screen and actually roll my eyes . . . at myself! I mean, who even refers to New York as the "Big Apple" anymore?

This is me I'm reading about and even *I*, am bored. How can I make this sound more interesting, let alone enticing? Who's going to want to date me with this kind of a profile? And why is it so hard to describe myself in 150 words or less?

Actually, come to think of it, wouldn't this be the hardest thing in the world to do? How do you cram everything you've ever done into one tiny text box? It's a lot of pressure and I've never been good at thinking on my feet. Yet, so many other women have done it and they make it look easy. In fact, I've spent the better part of my morning today looking through tons of really good online profiles. Some are poetic. Some are classy. Some are humorous, while others read like great works of literature. These women have such interesting bios. They have such interesting lives! Their lives are so interesting that *I* want to date them and, for the record, I'm not even a lesbian!

I hit backspace on the keyboard and erase my entire profile and decide to start from scratch. Maybe I should try something completely different, something outside of my comfort zone. Maybe I should aim for shock value. I can definitely get a man's attention that way. I place my fingers back on the keyboard.

Here there, big boy! Are you looking for a tall, dark, and exotic woman

to spend your nights with? Do you want someone who isn't afraid to try new experiences, someone who just wants to have some fun? Then you're about to meet your Ms. Right. Whether lounging on the beach in my teeny, tiny string bikini or watching football on Sundays with an ice-cold beer . . .

This isn't working either! I stare at the words, horrified: I sound like a poster girl for an escort service, every man's wet dream. And, to make matters worse, it's all lies! Every single word of it! I don't own a string bikini, and I shudder to think how I'd look in one. I mean, I have a nice figure, definitely nothing to be ashamed of, but *definitely*, not even remotely, in the same category as a supermodel, who makes wearing a swimsuit an art form. As for football, I can't understand a word of what the sports announcers on television are saying, and I'm embarrassed to admit that I don't even know who my hometown team is. I *do* enjoy a cold beer, especially on a hot summer night. That part is at least true. Maybe I should start with that and work backward. Maybe I shouldn't go completely out of the orbit of my comfort zone after all. It might be better to stay within the fringes of who I am. New game plan: let's keep the beer and delete the rest.

I bang on the delete key loudly and sigh, erasing myself again in the process.

This isn't getting me anywhere, is it? Why, oh why, did I let Amy talk me into this? I could kill her right about now. I turned the big 3-0 last month, and what does my best friend get me as a birthday gift? Does she get me the new designer bag I've been dying for and hinting at for months? No. Does she book a fabulous "girls only" weekend vacation to Jamaica? Of course not!

What do I get from my best friend of twenty years? What do I get from the one person who is supposed to know me inside and out? The person I confide all of my deep, dark secrets to, including my irrational fear of gnomes? From the person listed as my emergency contact should I ever find myself in a car accident, I get a six-month subscription to *www.SoulMates4Everafter.com*. What was she thinking? I'm wondering now if she even knows me at all. It's as if we're strangers!

Does she really think I need a man to make me happy? Well, I don't! I'm perfectly happy the way things are now. If someone I "click" with happens to come along, that would be great, but I'm definitely not in any rush. It's statistically proven that biological clocks don't start winding down until your late-forties, so I've got plenty of time. And even then, adoption is always an

option.

I know Amy thinks she's doing me a favor, but what she's doing is causing me more stress in my already stressful life. Maybe, just maybe, it's the goal of every married woman out there to make sure that her single girlfriends are close to, if not already, planning a wedding. Why do friends in committed relationships insist on dragging the rest of us single women with them? Could it be that misery loves company, or is it that they want to spread the love around? Regardless of the reasons, I doubt that a dating service will help me find my ideal match. I know Amy has been happily married for over five years to a wonderful man, but let's face it, she had it easy. She met her future husband in kindergarten, when the competition wasn't as fierce as it is for me now. Back then, if you knew how to color within the lines and dared to eat glue, you were a five-year-old boy's dream girl. Amy has no idea how hard it is to meet a man as good as her Tom.

Don't get me wrong. I am not opposed to meeting a nice guy and settling down, especially since everything else has fallen into place for me, including a great job and good friends. It would be the icing on my otherwise very fulfilling "life" cake, but I always expected to have it happen organically, without any help from a computer that is programmed to match up my likes with someone else's likes and spit out a compatibility profile. I rather like the idea of bumping into my prince at the grocery store while picking out ripe tomatoes in the produce section. I didn't think for a minute that I would leave my fate in the hands of a cyber-matchmaker.

I'm so distracted by my own thoughts that I don't notice how fast I'm clicking on the keys, so fast that now my computer screen is frozen! Frozen on the word "exotic" from my profile. This is a sign. Nothing good will ever come out of this. I should just forget about this whole matchmaking business. But what do I tell Amy? I wonder if I can get a full refund from *SoulMates4Everafter.com* and book that Jamaican trip instead. I'm more likely to find someone on the tropical beaches of Ocho Rios than online.

I look down at my new member folder with my name elegantly typewritten at the top, along with the glossy picture that adorns the front of it. It's a collage of images of the most photogenic couples that I have ever seen in my life. They all look so happy together, holding hands and gazing lovingly into each other's eyes. They are so picture perfect, and I know deep down inside that Amy means well. She just wants me to find the same happiness she has in her life. I'm lucky to have her as a best friend. I sigh

deeply, knowing that for her sake, I have to at least try to make an effort. After all, it cost her a lot of money and so I should try to keep an open mind. So what I told her was that I would try it for three months. If, at the end of three months, I haven't found my one true love, I have her permission and blessing to deactivate the account and put this whole cyber dating idea behind us.

My eyes dart back down to the brochure. Really, these couples are ridiculously perfect with straight white teeth and not a blemish on them. Where did they get them? They can't be real couples. Real couples have acne on their faces and bad hair days. Real couples aren't airbrushed, and they definitely don't spend their days horseback riding on the beaches of Hawaii. Although I wouldn't mind taking a trip to a tropical island, and I've always wanted to try horseback riding. I'm not sure a beach is the safest place to start riding. Wouldn't the waves frighten the horse? Do horses even know how to swim? I realize I'm digressing . . . on purpose. Anything to distract myself from writing this profile! Focus on the task at hand, Sarah. We can think about vacations later.

I press the delete key several times on my computer, trying to erase the word "exotic." I manage to delete a few letters, but in fumbling with the keys, add a few letters more so that now my profile screen is stuck on the word "erotic." This is just fabulous. It keeps getting better and better. What do I do now?

I bang on the keys in frustration. I can't leave it like this. Sure, I'll get tons of responses, but definitely the wrong ones. I could call customer support and see if they can help me with this. As embarrassing as it would be to call, it will be even more embarrassing to have Amy read this profile online. She'd die laughing and I'd die of shame.

I peruse the brochure and find a toll-free number for assistance. I pick up my cell phone and dial the *SoulMates4Everafter* customer service line. On the third ring, a pre-recorded message chimes in. The female voice, with a hint of a foreign accent, sounds not only heavenly, but sexy and I immediately picture a gorgeous twenty-something-year-old blonde with a killer body rocking a string bikini while lounging on a fluffy cloud. Staying on the theme, I picture a certain famous swimsuit supermodel on that cloud.

Welcome to SoulMates4Everafter, the place where love and eternity meet. If you have a question regarding our forever after packages, please press "1." If you have already found your eternal soul mate, but have

questions about your account, please press “2.” If you are unhappy with your search through our heavenly database and wish to process a refund, please press “3.” For technical assistance, please press “4.”

I should press option three and put myself out of my misery. No more profile and no more torturing myself over whether this will work. I can just go back to life as I know it. But even as my finger lingers over the number three, it's like my limbs have a mind of its own, and my finger moves over one button instead. I press four and wait on the line for an actual human being to answer. There is no going back now. I roll my eyes when I recognize the hold music as the “Wedding March,” as if that is the only thing that is over-the-top here. Finally, the phone clicks over to someone who appears to be reading from a script.

“Welcome to *SoulMates4Everafter*. If you have a soul, we can find your forever after,” a male voice croons over the receiver. His voice is deep and rough, as if he just woke up from a sound sleep. Like the pre-recorded female voice, I'm picturing a gorgeous looking man with six-pack abs and a five o'clock shadow. I'm starting to wonder if heaven is not filled with attractive people. And, if that is the criteria for getting in, should I be worried?

“I am your guardian angel here to assist you with any technical questions you may have. What earthly creature do I have the privilege of speaking with today?” he asks in a monotone voice.

Seriously? I stifle a laugh. I can't make this stuff up, even if I wanted to. Who honestly came up with this idea for a dating service? I scan back down to the brochure boasting over one million subscribers and realize that whoever did is extremely wealthy by now and having the last laugh at my expense.

“Sarah Jenkins,” I reply, still distracted by my random thoughts.

“Ms. Jenkins, how may I help you?” he asks again, this time with more warmth.

Suddenly, I am in panic mode. He wants to know what my problem is. I look back at my computer screen and the word “erotic” is jumping up at me like a neon sign. He's going to laugh at me. I just know it! I'm so incredibly embarrassed. I should just hang up. Calling was a bad idea.

He interrupts to again ask the question. “How may I assist you, Ms. Jenkins?” He sounds friendly and non-judgmental. Maybe, I'm being ridiculous. This is his job after all. He's probably heard worse. Come on, Sarah. You can do this. After all, we are both mature adults.

He waits patiently for my answer. I close my eyes and sigh. Although I'm still feeling embarrassed, I clear my throat and in a low voice, almost a whisper, say, "I've been having issues with uploading my profile on your website. The computer screen is frozen and I can't seem to delete or submit."

I'm almost expecting him to tell me it's a sign that I shouldn't do this. I want to hear him say that I'm too good for this. I mean, aren't angels supposed to point you in the right direction? I'm pretty sure that's how it works in heaven. Then I can simply tell Amy that the reason I'm not using the service had to do with divine intervention.

But as much as I want it, down here on earth, he simply asks, "Do you have an account with us?"

"Yes, I do," I mumble, convinced that once he reads my profile he will burst out laughing. As it is, he probably thinks I'm hopeless and, worse still, someone who has no idea of how to use a computer.

"Let me bring up your account and see what's going on here," he responds in a relaxed voice. If he's thinking those things, he's certainly not letting on.

It doesn't matter though because I can't seem to stop the image that is running through my mind. He's most likely rolling his eyes at me as we speak. He probably thinks I'm some desperate woman who can't find a man and needs a service to do it for her. I know I shouldn't let it bother me. After all, it's very common to use the Internet to find a life partner. Quite popular actually! So many people do it and have found success. I'm looking at the brochure in front of me right now and there are at least two pages of testimonials. Lovely people who have managed to find love in heaven!

And besides, I'm talking to a stranger after all. Someone I will never speak to again. Why should I care what he thinks? But the problem is, I do care! And I have the sudden urge to explain everything to him and set the record straight.

"I actually didn't create the account myself," I begin casually. "You see, my best friend thought it would be fun to sign me up to your website as a gift. It was for my birthday." I let out a soft chuckle to imply that this is all some humorous little joke.

"That was very nice of her," he replies back. He doesn't sound like he's judging me, but then again, that's probably something they are expected to say as part of good customer service.

"Well, the thing is, I just turned thirty last month," I explain.

“Happy belated birthday,” he offers cheerfully as I hear him typing away. “What was your last name again?”

“Jenkins,” I respond quickly. I hear the sound of typing again. He doesn’t seem to care at all about this, but the thing is *I* care. I can’t let this stranger think the wrong things about me, so I keep talking. “My friend, Amy, who gave me this gift, she’s happily married . . . and you know how married people are,” I say as if he knows a ton of them.

“Uh huh,” he mutters back absentmindedly.

“They want all of their single friends to be in the same boat as they are. They think the whole world should get hitched,” I offer jokingly.

“I can imagine,” he mumbles. He’s not even paying attention. I can hear him still typing away on his end.

“But it’s not like I need the help or anything,” I offer. But the moment it comes out of my mouth, I know it sounds more like an excuse than an explanation.

“I’m sure you don’t.”

“I date plenty,” I follow up.

“I’m sure you do,” he agrees as he continues to tap on his keyboard.

“So many dates, so little time . . . sort of like the song,” I laugh nervously. “You know: So many men, so little time?” What the hell am I saying? I’m babbling.

“I am familiar with the tune,” he replies back.

“Good.” And then I blurt out, because I realize how this all sounds, “Not that I sleep around or anything!”

I can hear silence on the other end of the line and the typing has suddenly stopped. Finally, he remarks, “I don’t think that at all, Ms. Jenkins.” I hear the hint of amusement in his voice now and if he wasn’t laughing at me before, he is now.

“Because I don’t,” I protest. “I mean I’m not celibate either . . .”

Oh God, I need to shut up. I just need to stop talking. This is a disaster!

To his credit, he completely ignores my meltdown and instead focuses on the issue at hand. “Well, I see here what the problem is. There was a hold on your account, but I’ve cleared it and you should be able to finish up your bio now. I can do that for you if you’d like” he says as if the last thirty seconds never happened.

“Sure” is all I can say because I’m afraid of what else will come out of my mouth if I try to string another sentence together.

“Give me just a second . . .” I hear shuffling noises and more typing. At last, he says, “You’re all set now.”

“Thank you,” I manage to reply without sticking my foot in my mouth again.

“No problem at all, Ms. Jenkins. Have I answered all of your questions today?” he asks and I know that it’s his cue to finish up the call. It’s the question all customer service representatives ask before they hang up. After the pathetic performance I just gave, I’m sure he can’t wait to get away from me.

“Yes, you’ve been very helpful,” I reply sincerely, because he has been very helpful and nonjudgmental. He hasn’t even laughed at me once, even though I’ve given him plenty of opportunities to do so.

And as I’m about to hang up the phone and crawl under a rock, he adds, “For the record, I think you’re very nice. I wouldn’t worry so much. Any guy would be lucky to date you.”

I am speechless. That is so sweet of him. He didn’t have to say that. I’m pretty sure it’s not in his job description, or maybe it is. Maybe they all have to tell their customers how desirable they are, even if it’s a lie. Either way, I don’t care. I smile and marvel. He’s managed to calm my anxieties with a few simple words. It’s exactly what I needed to hear right now.

“Thank you,” I manage to croak out. I can’t say any more because I’m on the verge of crying. It’s ridiculous for me to feel this way, but I do.

“You welcome,” he says warmly. “Anything else I can help you with?” he asks.

Anything else, he asks. If only he could fix my bio as good as he fixed my technical glitch. That would certainly be very helpful. I could use an objective opinion.

Wait a minute . . . what if he can? In a few seconds, a plan hatches in my head. It’s crazy, I know, but it might just work. And besides, he did ask. I can’t understand why, but somehow, I feel as if I can trust him. Maybe it’s his soothing voice or the fact that he didn’t flinch once during my mini breakdown. Maybe it’s those comforting words he just spoke to me. Regardless, it’s a thought I can’t seem to shake.

He’s a complete stranger, and I don’t know a single thing about him, but he doesn’t know a thing about me either. He has no clue about the kind of person I am, what I look like, and what I’m really like. This makes him the perfect person to ask the question, and somehow, I know he’ll give me an

honest answer. I don't know what comes over me, but before I can think it through, I blurt out, "Do you have my profile in front of you now?"

"Yes, I do, and all of your revisions," he replies. "It's visible now on the website for you to review and finalize the submission."

"Do you mind terribly if I ask you something?" I'm hoping he can hear the desperation in my voice because, the truth is, I am desperate. I need a professional opinion. He works for the website. He must know what gets responses and what doesn't. I desperately need his help.

"Not at all, Ms. Jenkins."

I wish he wouldn't call me that. Calling me by my last name makes me feel so old. It's what people call my mother, not me. Besides, he doesn't sound that much younger than me. "Please, call me Sarah," I request.

"Sarah . . ."

I pause, working up the courage. "I'm sure you see a lot of dating profiles come across your computer screen."

"I process all of the accounts for the company," he answers indirectly.

I'll take that as a yes.

"And you know what works and what doesn't, right?" I ask casually. "I mean, you've probably seen the best and the worst." I try to make my own voice sound light and airy. "In fact, I'm sure you could write a book about it."

There is silence on the other end. That's not a good sign. I think I might have crossed the line. I hope I don't get him fired for even asking him the question. I mean, it's not his job to provide dating advice. But despite that, it doesn't stop me from asking, "So I was hoping you could look at my profile and give me your honest opinion. Tell me if it's any good." Please say yes.

Finally, after a few more seconds of silence, he says in a hesitant voice, "I'm not sure I'm the right person to do this . . ."

Immediately, I regret the decision and interrupt him before he has a chance to finish his sentence, "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable." I feel horrible. What was I thinking putting him on the spot like that?

He immediately chimes in, "No, it's not that at all. I'd really like to help you, but I just think your family and friends would be a better judge. They *do* know you best."

"That's the problem," I explain. "I want someone who doesn't know me at all to tell me what they really think. My family and friends would only tell

me what I want to hear to spare my feelings. What I need is someone to be brutally honest.”

“You mean you want me to hurt your feelings on purpose?” he asks incredulously.

When he puts it like that, of course it sounds ridiculous.

“Something like that,” I mumble.

I can hear him chuckle softly. I’m glad someone finds this amusing. I, on the other hand, am mortified. Yet, I won’t be stopped. I might as well see this through to the end. I may not have asked to be signed up to this service, but now that I’m committed, I want to do it right and he is going to help me.

“So will you do it? It will only take a few minutes,” I plead. I can tell that he is wavering, so I add, “My future husband will thank you for it.”

Silence.

“I’ll invite you to the wedding.”

More silence.

“We’ll name our first born after you,” I offer.

At this, he laughs. “All right, you win. I’ll give you my honest, brutal opinion.”

“Thank you so much!” I’m practically giddy.

“Don’t thank me yet,” he warns. “Let me see what you’ve got here.”

“All right. Ready when you are.” I take a deep breath and wait for him to finish reading. I hear a cough as if he’s clearing his throat. He’s taking too long. He hates it. I know it. Finally, he says, “It’s very nice.”

Oh God, there it is! I’ve been on enough dates to know that *nice* is a code word for horrible. Any time someone describes a person first by saying he’s nice, it’s usually followed by a whole list of things that are wrong with him.

“Is that your *professional* opinion?” I ask, hoping I can prod him for more details.

“Ms. Jenkins . . .”

“Sarah,” I correct him.

“Sarah. I’m not a matchmaker,” he offers in a kind voice. “I work for the IT department. I don’t think you should be listening to me about this. I’m hardly qualified. If you want my opinion on hard drive capabilities, I’m the one, but this is . . . I’m no expert.”

“But you’re a guy, right?” I ask, hoping to convince him through logic.

“Yes,” he answers hesitantly, and I can tell he has no idea where I’m heading with this.

“And you’re probably in your late twenties, early thirties?”

“Thirty-four, actually,” he replies.

I knew it! He’s practically my age. No need to call me Ms. Jenkins.

“So you’re my target audience. You are a man in the demographic I am trying to attract with my profile. This makes you very qualified,” I reason.

“I guess, but . . .” he replies, still unsure. I can sense he’s conflicted. He really wants to help, but something is holding him back.

“Listen, I’ve never done this before,” I confess.

I can feel my palms sweat and I know it’s because I’m nervous. Confessing your fears to someone, even if he is someone you don’t know and will most likely never meet, is not easy. “My best friend roped me into this and I’ve been a wreck over this bio for days now. I could really use your advice. I don’t think I can bear it if no one responds.”

It’s true, too. I can and have faced rejection in my professional life, but I’ve never been good at dealing with it in my personal life.

I hear him breathing on the other end and I know he’s thinking about it. Sensing that he’s leaning more toward helping me than not, I add, “I won’t tell anyone at your company about this. You won’t lose your job. I just need someone who doesn’t know me to tell me the truth.”

“Well . . .” He’s wavering.

“Please,” I beg. “You’re supposed to be my guardian angel. You said so yourself,” I say, hoping that if reasoning doesn’t work, groveling will.

It apparently does work, because he finally replies, “All right, you win, I’ll do it.”

It’s a good thing he can’t see me because I’m doing a little happy dance as he speaks.

“But remember, it’s just my opinion and doesn’t count for much,” he warns.

“I completely understand.”

“Here goes. Brutal honesty coming up.”

I close my eyes bracing for the worst.

He starts by saying, “I have two profiles here and both are *well-written* . . .” It’s a good start, if I were an English teacher.

He goes on to say, “*But* . . .”

Oh no. Here it comes.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way,” he adds.

Anytime anyone has ever said this to me, I usually wind up taking it in

the worst possible way.

He continues, "But it's like you're two people."

"Two people?" I ask confused.

"Yes, the first one is a typical, run-of-the mill profile," he observes.

Typical is good, isn't it?

"It describes a very normal woman with normal interests and a normal job."

All right, so I'm wholesome and good.

"And the other one, well, I noticed your computer froze on the word *erotic*," he points out.

"That was supposed to be exotic . . ." I jump in to correct him quickly before he comes to the wrong conclusion.

"The woman you're describing in the second profile is very . . ."

I can tell he's struggling for the right words to say that won't offend me.

"She seems to be willing to try anything . . . different and *interesting*."

That's one way of putting it nicely. So apparently, I'm also naughty and in need of a spanking. Oh God, what he must think of me; that I'm a schizophrenic with multiple personalities. Maybe I am and I just don't know it.

I close my eyes and try to stay calm. This was a big mistake! What was I thinking? What was Amy thinking? If I'm confusing the IT guy and he has no idea who I am, what hope do I have to find a decent guy using this service? I mean, if someone from a help desk can't fix this mess for me, who can? After all, they're supposed to be helpful. That's it. It's settled. I need to pull my profile down before it's too late.

Before I can say another word, he concludes, "After reading both of these profiles, I'm left wondering who the real Sarah Jenkins is."

There it is. The real problem. *Who is Sarah Jenkins?* I'm not sure I have the answer to that question. I've spent my whole life trying to figure that out.

"Sarah, are you still there?" he asks gently. He has such a kind voice and I can tell he's very concerned about how I'm taking his critique. Poor guy. He doesn't deserve to be dragged into my insecure world.

"Yes," I mutter softly, dejected and defeated.

Sensing this, he consoles me. "I'm so sorry. I knew I shouldn't have said anything. I've hurt your feelings."

"No, you were being honest just like I asked you."

He tries to cheer me up by offering, "I'm sure you can rewrite this into

something great.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“What you need to do is let these men know the real Sarah.”

Again, easier said than done.

“You need to personalize this profile,” he suggests.

“But I don’t know how to write personal,” I confess.

It’s true. I’m not creative and never was, which is why I’m in HR. I’m good at placing other people in jobs that fit their skill sets, but looking inside myself and describing my own assets, not so much.

He seems undeterred by my confession though. “Sure you do. Everyone can.”

“You’ve read two profiles that took me hours to write,” I argue. “Trust me, I don’t know how to *do* personal.”

He tries to explain it another way for me. “Think of it like this: Everyone has a story, Sarah. Everyone has something that excites them, scares them, makes them angry.”

I immediately think of what excites me, scares me, and angers them. I’m passionate about my work, scared of spiders, and I get angry at politicians who don’t keep their promises. Is that what I need to put into my profile? Will that get the right guy’s attention?

As if he just heard the question I asked myself, he offers as advice, “Tell your story and you’ll find your Mr. Right.”

“You make it sound so simple,” I protest.

“That’s because it is.”

“I don’t think I can do that.” I shake my head, even though I know he can’t see me through the telephone receiver.

“Yes you can.” He sounds so certain. I wish I were as certain.

“No I can’t,” I repeat myself.

There is silence on the other end. I think I may have finally pushed him over the brink with my whining and he’s hung up. Serves me right. He’s not getting paid to hear me rant.

But then I hear his voice calmly say, “Why don’t you tell *me* your story.”

“You?” I ask in surprise. I wasn’t expecting that.

“Yes, me. Remember, your target audience?” he playfully reminds me. “I’m the demographic you’re trying to reach out to. So win me over.”

He has a point. It’s hard to argue with someone who is making sense. But I’m still not sure it’s such a good idea. What if I’m even worse in a

conversation than I am on paper?

"I don't know about this," I say hesitantly. This is so much more than what I bargained for.

"Sarah, you were the one who asked me for help, remember?" he says.

How can I forget? And to be fair to him, I did insist, but now I'm beginning to have doubts. It's so much more personal telling someone everything about you than having him read it instead. I wouldn't know where to start.

"I know I did. But the thing is, every time I start to write down all there is to know about me, my brain freezes and I can't think straight. Then I somehow turn into either the girl-next-door or the stripper with the heart of gold."

I can hear him chuckle. "Fair enough. You have some performance anxiety. How about this? Pretend you're on a first date with *me*."

"A date?" I repeat. He's caught me off guard once again. This guy is just full of surprises, isn't he? Maybe Amy was right about the dating service after all: I haven't even gotten my profile up on the site and already I have a date!

"Yes, unless you have a better offer?" he replies playfully.

"No," I answer honestly. It's the truth. I'm talking on the phone with a complete stranger and still, it's better than most of the dates I've had in the past year. In fact, it's the most fun I've had in a while, if I'm being honest.

"So you'll go out with me?" he asks. "You're not washing your hair or anything like that?" he teases.

"No," I laugh. "I did that this morning."

"Good!" he interrupts my thoughts. "So let's do this. We're on a date."

"Now?" I look around my apartment at the messiness that surrounds me. It's not my idea of a perfect location for a date. I wish I had some advanced notice so that I could have tidied up a little.

"Yes, right now, unless you plan on washing your hair again," he teases.

"No, it's not that. I'm just not ready," I offer as an excuse.

"Nothing to be ready for. All you need to do is close your eyes and try to imagine it."

This is silly. I'm not closing my eyes. What is he trying to get at here?

"It's easy, Sarah, and it will help you." He pauses before saying, "Trust me."

How can I trust someone I never met before? But then I remember that I

am the one who asked for his help. He has nothing to gain from this. I do have to give him a chance. My eyes are still wide open when I hear him direct me, "Close your eyes, Sarah. Give it a go. You might just be surprised at the results."

I sigh. OK, here goes nothing. I close my eyes and wait for him to speak again.

"Do you have your eyes closed?" he asks as if he's not convinced that I've listened to him.

"Yes," I reply as I comply with his request.

"Good," he responds, satisfied with my answer. "Now picture this. We are sitting down at a cozy corner table for two in the back of a restaurant. We just finished ordering our appetizers . . ."

"Wait!" I exclaim, interrupting his description of our imaginary date.

"What is it?" he asks startled by my outburst.

"What kind of a restaurant?" I ask.

"Does it matter?" he replies.

"Of course it does. I need to know how to dress and that depends on what type of place it is. You can't possibly wear jeans to a gourmet restaurant."

"All right then," he answers in a tone that suggests he thinks I've lost my mind. "What kind of food do you like?" he asks.

That's easy. "Italian." I adore anything with sauce and pasta.

"So to answer your question, we are at this very romantic little Italian bistro . . ."

"What's the name of the place?" I interrupt again.

"You want the name of an *actual* restaurant where we are having our imaginary date eating some imaginary food?" he asks incredulously.

"You're the one that wants me to take this exercise seriously," I reason. "So yes, I'd like a name please."

I can tell by the loud intake of air that he doesn't know what to make of me. "All right then, how about we go to Capisca."

Oh, I love that place. They have the most amazing pizzas and their house wine is to die for.

"Does that work for you?" he asks in a placating tone of voice.

Capisca has a nice atmosphere without being too formal. It's quaint without being too trendy. He couldn't have picked a more perfect place to go on a first date, even if it is imaginary.

"Yes, it does," I say completely satisfied. "Thank you."

This makes it much easier to imagine the setting. Now what should I wear? Oh, I know! I'll wear my favorite black wrap dress with the strappy black high-heel shoes I bought last month at Crandall's.

"So, getting back to our date, you just finished ordering . . . ?" he prompts me to finish his sentence.

"Linguine with red clam sauce." Mmm, I haven't had that in a while. Now that I've said it out loud, my mouth is watering just thinking about it and I can feel my stomach growling. I really should make a reservation to go to Capisca soon. I haven't been there in quite some time.

"I order the shrimp scampi," he adds.

He likes seafood! So do I. This date is working out better than I thought it would! Wait, I have to remember that this *is* imaginary.

"You just finished sipping from your glass of . . . ?" Again, he prompts me.

"Merlot," I respond to his cue. Come to think of it, I could actually use a glass right about now. It will certainly take the edge off while I'm on this date. It's a lot of pressure imagining what I'm going to wear and what I'm going to eat.

In a low seductive voice, he says, "Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?"

Even though my eyes are closed, I can feel my lips circle up into a smile. I knew the black wrap dress was a good choice to wear.

He continues, "You then smile at me and . . ."

"Wait!" I exclaim again, opening my eyes as I do.

"What is it now?" he sounds alarmed.

"What do you look like?" I ask. I mean, if I'm going to be on a date with the man, I need to know what he looks like. He might not be my type.

I can hear a soft chuckle on the other end. "Does it matter? It's just an exercise."

"You did tell me to close my eyes and pretend. If I'm about to tell you my life story, I need to know what you look like. I need to picture you in my head."

I hear the familiar sound of silence on the other end of the receiver and again, that hesitation. Finally, he answers. "Light brown hair and hazel eyes."

I close my eyes again and try to conjure up an image of him. It's not half bad. Actually, he looks really handsome . . . in my mind.

"What's your best feature?" I probe further, anything to veer off the topic

of me.

“I’ve been told my smile,” he responds easily. This is amazing. I can actually picture him. He’s giving me the sexy alluring look that can melt a girl’s heart. Those hazel eyes are drawing me in. Although I wasn’t so sure it would work at first, I’m getting really good at this imagination exercise.

“How tall are you?” I ask in a distracted voice, still caught up with that smile and those eyes.

“Is this really necessary?” he questions.

“This was your idea, remember?” I remind him.

“Six foot one,” he replies.

Nice height. Just tall enough for me to still get away with wearing high heels any time I want.

“Satisfied?” he asks, interrupting the internal dialogue going on inside my head.

“Not quite. What are *you* wearing?” I ask. You can tell a lot about a guy by the way that he dresses. Casual means good sense of humor. Dressy is usually someone who takes pride in his appearance.

I think I’ve worn him down because he doesn’t even bother to ask me why anymore. Instead, he simply answers, “A light blue button down shirt with a tan sports jacket and dark blue dress pants.”

That must be what he’s wearing now at work. I have to say, I’m impressed. He really knows how to dress for the occasion and the tan sports jacket brings out his hazel eyes really nicely in my mind.

“Are we good now?” His voice has that same hint of amusement as before. He must think I’m a nut case. But to be fair, this was *his* idea and I’m just playing along.

“Yes, we’re good.” I nod my head. My eyes are still closed and I can see him sitting across from me and I’m all wrapped up in how attractive he is. Forget online dating, I’d much rather live in my head. It knows exactly what I’m looking for in a man.

“Now tell me about yourself,” I hear his voice prompt me.

“You first,” I jump in. I know I’m stalling. I know the whole purpose of this role playing is for my benefit. But the thing is, I’ve always felt uncomfortable when it comes to talking about myself on an *actual* date. Even though this is *technically* not a real date, it sure feels like it in my head.

“Sarah, this is about you, not me,” he points out.

“I know, but it will help me get into the spirit of this exercise,” I explain.

“Of all the dates I’ve ever been on, the guy always starts off first. I prefer it that way. It helps calm my nerves.”

“You are one very persistent woman,” he responds. I can tell by the inflection in his voice that he’s a tad exasperated. He then adds, “That’s one thing I’ve learned about you today.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I answer confidently. Persistence has always worked for me, especially when it comes to my job. You can’t take no for an answer in my profession, so why should it be any different in my personal life.

I hear him laughing. He has a nice laugh. “You should put that in your profile,” he suggests.

“That’s not a bad idea.” And it’s really not. Whoever is interested in dating me should know all sides to my personality.

He continues, “If this can help you write that bio, I’ll go first. Where do you want me to start?”

“How about at the beginning,” I recommend.

“All right then. On the day that I was born . . .” he jokingly begins.

I interrupt him, “You don’t have to go all the way back, just the last few years will do.”

He laughs, “I wasn’t sure. You seem to like details.”

I can’t argue with that, but at this rate, we’ll be on this date until tomorrow.

He continues, “Well, let’s see. You already know I work for an online dating company.”

“Yes, I do *and* . . .” I prod.

“What you don’t know is that I am the youngest of five brothers,” he volunteers.

You mean there are four others just like him? Now I’m picturing five very handsome hazel-eyed men smiling at me in unison.

“I grew up on Long Island, but I live in Manhattan.”

He’s practically my neighbor. All right, so maybe not quite my neighbor, considering that the borough holds close to two million people, but we are still within the fifteen mile radius.

“I play racquetball to relieve stress.”

Now I picture him with sports shorts and a t-shirt that clings to his chiseled body from the sweat of playing hard. I’ve got to rein in my imagination. It’s running way ahead of me.

“I’m a movie buff and I have a dog.”

An animal lover! His stock just increased in my eyes. I love dogs. As an only child, I grew up with my dog, Penny, and treated her just like the sister I never had.

What am I doing? I’m not on an actual date with him. I have to remember that.

He offers nothing else and I know that he’s, instead, waiting for me to talk.

“That’s it?” I ask.

“What else is there?”

“I don’t know. It sounds rather *ordinary*, don’t you think?” I tease, throwing his own words back at him.

“Touché,” he responds, and I can’t help but smile. He’s not taking this personally. He completely understands my humor, which is rare to find.

“So tell me something personal, that no one else would know from a dating profile?” I ask because I’m now interested. I have a hunch there is more to this guy than meets the eye.

“Why do I have a feeling that you won’t quit until I tell you?” he remarks.

Perhaps because he’s right. I’m not so good at letting things go. I’ve been told I’m like a dog with a bone. Once I grab on, I don’t let go. I’ve been very successful in my job because of it.

“I guess it’s another quality I can put down on my profile,” I respond playfully. “But before I do . . .”

“All right, all right. You really don’t give up, do you? Something personal . . .” he mumbles to himself. “Let’s see . . . I can be stubborn and very determined.”

Those are good qualities to have, I think, or maybe it’s because I happen to have those same qualities.

“I won’t stop until I get my way if it’s something that I believe in.” His tone of voice is firm and there is an underlying strength that draws me in. I can certainly relate to that.

“I’m passionate about living, about working, but mostly I’m passionate about loving.” He lingers on that last word and then adds in a soft voice, “It takes me a long time to open up, but once I do and I give my heart to someone, she has it for as long as she wants.”

My heart is hammering so loudly, it feels like it might jump out of my

chest. I wasn't expecting that level of honesty and intensity. He sounds like he's talking from personal experience.

"That is a pretty amazing quality to have, to be able to love that strongly," I manage to say after catching my breath.

"It can be . . . as long as you can trust the person you give that love to," he adds. "Otherwise, it can be a double-edged sword . . . because once she throws it away, she doesn't get a second chance."

I hear a slight hint of pain in his voice, but before I can follow up with a question, he quickly changes the topic and focuses on me instead. "Enough procrastinating. It's your turn, Sarah. Tell me everything about yourself and try not to make it . . . *ordinary*."

I laugh out loud at this. I've definitely met my match, haven't I? But the amazing thing is, I don't mind so much talking about myself anymore. He's managed to calm my nerves. I don't know whether it's because he was so open about himself, or if it's because I'm caught up in this make-believe date of his, but I do more than just tell him what's on my profile. I close my eyes and tell him everything, including stories of my childhood, my first kiss, even my first time. And when I finish, I open my eyes to see that a half hour has gone by.

After a few seconds, he finally speaks, "Now take all that you told me and put it down on paper."

"That's it?" I ask surprised.

"That's it," comes the answer.

"You make it seem so easy," I marvel.

"That's because it is."

I guess he's right. All I have to do is pretend I'm talking to him and write it all down.

"Thank you . . ." I tell him sincerely because I really *am* grateful. He's done something that not even Amy has ever been able to do: He's given me a way to come out of my shell; this person whom I've never met before. What are the odds?

I am still in awe when it suddenly occurs to me. "Hey, I don't even know your name," I blurt out as if I'm finishing the sentence that has been on my mind.

I hear him wavering, "I'm sorry, but I can't tell you. I'm already on the verge of getting fired if they listen to the recording of this call."

Oh no! I forgot that this was supposed to be a customer service call. I feel

horrible. He's been helping me and I might be the reason he gets fired today. But wait! In some ways this call has everything to do with customer service. I'm still the customer and he's provided me with a most invaluable service. Without him, I would have deactivated my account out of frustration before I even gave it a chance. He just saved a customer for the company. Still, I don't want to see him lose his job because of me so instead, I say, "I understand. I just want to be able to thank you properly."

"You can thank your guardian angel," he responds lightheartedly.

I laugh. Of course! How appropriate. *SoulMates4Everafter* wouldn't have it any other way.

"Too bad this guardian angel doesn't have a name," I lament.

Now it's his turn to laugh. "How about Gabriel?" he proposes.

Again, how appropriate. I wonder if he's used to this. Maybe there are tons of women like me who ask for his name on a daily basis. This can't be the first time. A name is personal, after all. If he gave it out to everyone who asked, it would be easy to find out everything there is to know about him online. He could be stalked on social media. I'm sure he'd like to keep his personal life just that, personal. Besides, I don't need a name to feel gratitude.

"I like it," I announce. "It fits you."

Again, I can hear him chuckle. "I'm glad you approve."

And because I really mean it, I say it again, "Thank you, Gabriel."

"You're welcome, Sarah. It's been . . ." he pauses before finishing his sentence, ". . . interesting."

"You've helped me so much and I don't know how I'm going to repay you."

"Give me a good rating on the survey," he suggests playfully.

Of course! The survey. He's getting all "exceeds expectations" from me.

"Absolutely!"

And just like that, after nearly forty-five minutes on the phone sharing personal details of our lives, he slides back into his script. "Now, if there's nothing else I can help you with today, I want to thank you for calling . . ."

"There is one more thing," I interrupt him again. Should I even dare? I would definitely be pushing my luck. He's already done so much for me, and I could have gotten him fired. But you know what they say: nothing ventured, nothing gained.

"And what would that be?" he asks and I can hear reluctance in his voice. I'm making him nervous. He's probably afraid I'll ask him to father my child.

I can't help but giggle at the thought. Of course, it's nothing as crazy as that, but I do need him. I hope he agrees, because somehow, I'm convinced, after our imaginary date, that he's the only person who can get me through this online dating journey I'm about to embark on.

"Do you mind if I check in with you from time to time?" I ask cautiously, holding my breath waiting for the answer.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Sarah," he says cautiously. "You're a customer."

"I'm more than a customer," I argue.

"You are?" He sounds surprised.

"Yes, of course I am. We've just been on an imaginary date. We're practically old friends."

I hear him laugh and then quickly compose himself again. I can tell he's trying to keep this conversation on a professional level. "It's against company policy."

"Please . . ." I plead with him. "I could use someone like you to give me perspective," I reason. "You've been so helpful already and I need someone to navigate this whole new online dating world with me. You can help steer me clear of the crazies and stalkers."

I add, as a way of convincing him. "No one needs to know."

"Sarah . . ." he hesitates. He's still not sure. I need to convince him.

"You have my picture right in front of you, Gabriel. Do I look like a psychotic person?"

"Pictures can be deceiving," he teases.

I offer another argument, hoping something will eventually stick. "You're supposed to be my guardian angel and I think you are obligated to look after me. Besides, don't you need to earn your wings or something by doing a good deed?"

"I'm not that kind of an angel."

"But an angel still guides those in need and I am desperately in need!"

"Why do I have a feeling that you won't quit until I say yes?"

"Because you're right. You said so yourself, I am persistent."

"How could I forget?"

"You see, you already know me so well. I need that insight," I reason. "Please, Gabriel."

I wait for his answer, and from the sound of the sigh escaping his lips on the other end of the receiver, I know he's going to say yes. Suddenly, the

prospect of finding someone online isn't as scary as it was before. Not when I have my guardian angel.

Gabriel

Another call comes in and I answer it according to the script. I roll my eyes at the part of the soul and forever. Who actually believes this sentimental drivel anyway?

I hear a young woman's frantic voice on the other end. She seems upset, but then again, they all do by the time it reaches my department. Her computer screen froze up on her while trying to upload her profile. Could I help, she asks? She sounds sweet. Of course, I can. It's my job.

I pull up her profile along with her picture. She has long brown hair, full lips, and big brown eyes, the kind that I can see a guy doing anything for. She's cute. I wonder what her back story is. Why does she need a dating service? As soon as the words go through my mind, I hear her on the other end of the phone giving me the reason. It's a gift from her best friend. What a gift! My best friend usually takes me out to dinner and a basketball game. Talk about pressure. No wonder she's a mess.

It takes me a few minutes, but I fix her problem. Her profile is now up online. I glance at the clock behind my cubicle. Less than five minutes. Not bad at all. At the rate I'm going, I should be able to troubleshoot another ten calls within the next hour. I'm sure to get that raise and promotion.

She's still talking. I have to concentrate on what she's saying. The call isn't over yet.

Wait . . . She's asking for my opinion on her profile? This could spell trouble. I can tell her to go away, make up an excuse that it's against company policy (which I'm sure it is). I can get fired. I'm just here for tech support. But she sounds so nervous and vulnerable. I can tell this is all new to her. She's never done this before. When you've been at this job long enough, you start to pick out the ones who are serial online daters and the ones who really have been dragged into it kicking and screaming. And she's not a psycho or anything like that. At least, I don't think so. She seems like a perfectly normal girl who is just looking for someone special to spend the rest of her life with. I feel bad for her. Besides, it might be nice to focus on someone else's problems for a change instead of your friends and family looking at you like you're a ticking time bomb waiting to explode. It might take my mind off of things.

I skim through her profile. She lives in Manhattan. That's interesting. And she can't find someone? Then I remember how hard it is to meet people here. I get it. Probably not the bar type. Neither am I.

What am I doing, now? I took this job so I wouldn't have to get involved. I took this job to crawl under a rock. I want to blend into the furniture, be a nameless voice on the other end of the line. Yet, this Sarah Jenkins won't let me do that, will she? She is persistent and strong-willed. Nothing about that in her profile, I notice. It would be helpful for a guy to know that before jumping in. She should really put that in there somewhere. When I tell her, she laughs. She's got a great sense of humor. The fact that she doesn't take herself too seriously is a big plus.

I scan further down her profile. I almost laugh out loud at the word *erotic*, but I don't. She's trying too hard to be something she's not. I can tell. She's not the vixen type, but she's not the good girl either. She's holding back. I wonder why?

This Sarah Jenkins doesn't want anyone to really know her. Do I tell her? Should I? She's asking for my help. She needs a friend. But they might be listening in on my call. I could get fired. She sounds upset. She's about ready to unravel. I can't hang up the phone like this. Oh, what the hell.

I can't believe I'm doing this. Will I ever learn my lesson?

I tell her what I think about her profile. As soon as I'm done, she goes into panic mode. I have to calm her down. She can do this. It's not as hard as she thinks. She's not good with words, she tells me. She can't put it down on paper. What can I do to help her with that? Something clicks . . . an idea. It's worth a try. It could help her.

I ask her to picture us on a date. Not surprisingly, she resists. It takes me a while to talk her into it. Then the questions. What do I look like? What am I wearing? I can't help but laugh. This girl is exasperating, but very interesting . . . and amusing. Does she have any idea how interesting she is?

I can't believe this! She's asked for my help, and then somehow she has me talking about myself. She's asked me about my life story. I tell her some, but don't tell her all at first. I talk about my brothers, where I grew up, and my dog . . . the basics. She's not satisfied. She wants more. God, this woman is persistent.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. It's been too long since I let someone in. Should I? I'll never meet her. She's just a voice on the other end of a phone line. Why not? It might be good for me. Sort of like talking to a shrink or to a priest, but without the huge bill or the judgmental looks. A few minutes pass and I notice that I've told her things I haven't told anyone in a while. How did she do that? And the thing is, it was easier than I thought it

would be. Enough about me, though. She asked me to help her. Now, it's her turn.

Without prodding her again, she goes into her story. At the end of it, I know what she likes and dislikes. I know all of her guilty pleasures, too. She secretly watches reality TV shows when she tells everyone else she likes to watch documentaries. She is obsessed with koala bears, but doesn't like spiders or dishonest people. I can agree with her on that last one.

I'm so caught up that I don't realize I'm at work. I need to regroup. I've been on this call for over forty-five minutes now. Whatever happened to my "under five minutes"? I can forget the raise now. I ask her if there is anything else she needs. She jumps in and tells me that she does need one more thing. I'm almost afraid to ask, but I do anyway. She wants my help in her search for the right guy. I know I shouldn't get involved. It can only lead to trouble, but if I have to admit it, I kind of like the fact that she needs me. It's nice to be needed. It's been too long . . .

Even though I work at a place that sells "happily ever after," I don't believe in it anymore. I took this job to prove my theory right, and so far, I've been spot on. Everyone here is looking for love for all of the wrong reasons. Some of them aren't even looking for love, more like looking for extracurricular activities (if you know what I mean).

But Sarah doesn't seem that way. I wonder where she fits into this all. Is it worth finding out?

Sarah

As soon as he picks up the phone, I hear the familiar greeting, "Welcome to *SoulMates4Everafter*. If you have a soul, we can find you your forever after."

They really should consider changing the slogan.

"Gabriel, it's me, Sarah," I say in a frenzied voice. Thank goodness Gabriel gave me his direct number. Now I don't have to go through the ordeal of dialing the main line again and having to hear a supermodel's voice making me feel like I don't belong in heaven.

"Hi Sarah." If I sound anxious, Gabriel sounds calm. I wish I could be as laid back as he is. He needs to teach me how he does that one of these days. It will help me avoid a heart attack later on in my life.

"Can you talk?" I ask tentatively, trying to be careful not to overly disrupt him while he's at work.

"I'm due for a break in a few minutes," he replies. "What's new?"

“I have some profiles here. Would you like to help me pick out my soul mate?” I ask excitedly. No matter how much I try, I can’t seem to bring my anxiety down a notch.

It’s been a week since the first time I spoke to Gabriel on the phone, and ever since then, we’ve been talking on a regular basis. After our imaginary date, I went back and rewrote my entire profile, and just as he promised, it was so easy to do. I just closed my eyes and pretended I was talking to him over linguine with clam sauce and it worked like a charm.

As soon as I was done with it, I emailed it over to him and he added a few finishing touches and posted it up online for me. I even sent him a few photographs and asked him which one worked best for my profile. We settled on one where I am sitting at a cafe with one of my work friends. My hair is down and I look relaxed and happy. It was taken over the summer and my face had that sun-kissed glow to it, unlike the pasty look I normally sport in the winter.

As soon as my profile went live on the site, I called Amy for her feedback.

“This is good, Sarah. It really captures who you are,” she remarks, sounding impressed with the finished product.

“You think so?” I ask proudly. I mean, I’m no Pulitzer Prize-winning author, but it’s not terrible either.

“Yes, and it’s really important to be yourself because you want to find that someone special who is compatible with you. Someone you’ll want to spend the rest of your life with without dreaming of poisoning him.”

“Is that the criteria these days for a happy union?” I joke.

“When you’ve been married as long as I have, yes, that is exactly the gold standard.”

“I’m afraid to ask what the silver and bronze standards are,” I retort.

Ignoring my snide comment, she instead says, “You’ll get men to respond to this profile, Sarah. Then it will be our job to weed them down to a chosen few.”

“If you say so,” I reply, doubtful of her prediction.

I got off the phone with Amy, and unlike my friend and my guardian angel, I didn’t hold out much hope for a massive response. In fact, I started a new project for work and put the thought out of my mind. It wasn’t until a few hours had passed that I even remembered to go online and check my account again. When I did, to my surprise, I saw that at least a dozen men had

already responded!

I'm embarrassed to admit how excited I was at the prospects. I mean, there were quite a few weeds in the pile, but there were also quite a few that seemed like winners. After reading them all, I called Amy again to let her know her investment was paying off dividends. She was ecstatic and couldn't resist reminding me that this was all thanks to her. I "yes'd" her to death and when she was finally satisfied that I owed her my personal life and naming rights to my first-born daughter, I hung up the phone and immediately called Gabriel.

"So do you want to help me?" I ask him again.

"Why not," he responds. "Let's see who you've got here."

I smile and actually feel almost giddy! This might actually be fun. But before I get too carried away, I know the hard part is still to come. Gabriel and I will have to sift through all the emails and decide which guy to date first. Maybe this *SoulMates4Everafter* has the right idea. Just like a job, finding your mate might be as easy as looking at the requirements and matching them up with your skills and talents and finding a match. If I can do that for my clients, I can certainly do it to find my life mate. This may be easier than I originally thought and I'm lucky. I have the perfect person who is going to help me.

First Blind Date: Mr. Company Guy

“Are you sure about this one?” I ask Gabriel, unconvinced, as I stare at a photo of a man with dark blond hair and gray eyes on my computer screen. He has kind eyes and is dressed in a dark blue suit. He appears to be of slim build and it says here he likes to stay fit, which is important to me.

“Well, you said you were interested in someone with a career and who is passionate about his work. This guy fits the bill,” Gabriel reminds me. He’s right. This is why I asked him to help me. He gives me the perspective and objectivity I sometimes lack when it comes to myself. The last thing I need to do is to lead from the heart, which is what I normally would have done.

We’ve just spent the last half hour talking about the qualities I’d like my soul mate to have. We then ranked them in order of priority. Having a career made my top three “must haves” in a guy, along with a good sense of humor and kindness. And it has nothing to do with the money either. I make a decent living and am not really looking for someone to support me, but I also don’t want anyone that expects me to support him. I just want to be with a man who loves his job as much as I love mine. I don’t think I can see myself with someone who isn’t as passionate about what he does for a living. Other qualities that didn’t make my top three, but certainly stayed on my top ten are: good-looking, smart, compassionate, giving, sexy, and loves to cook (because I can’t).

Gabriel interrupts my thoughts, “I vote to give him a try.”

“But he’s a company guy, a man in a suit,” I argue. Although I like someone who is passionate about his job, my experience with company guys has never been good. They are more devoted to the company than anything else and there definitely has to be a balance. You know what they say about all work and no play. I don’t want to date someone who spends more time in his office than with me.

But Gabriel counters, “Exactly! Nothing screams more of dedication and loyalty than a three-piecer.”

“A three-piecer?” I ask in confusion.

“You know,” he explains. “A vest, a jacket, and slacks.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready for this,” I mutter nervously in a low voice. I know I said I was excited about meeting new people and possibly my soul mate, but now that I have to choose an actual person to go out and spend an evening with, I don’t think I can. My stomach is in a twist just thinking about it, even if he does satisfy my top-three list.

“Sarah, it’s just a date,” he reasons. “If you don’t like him, you don’t ever have to see him again after that.”

He’s right. I know he’s right. I’m just nervous and scared and a bunch of other feelings wrapped up into one big ball of stress. But you know what they say, “You’ve got to be in it to win it!” So after vetting him using the Internet (very professional profile on his company’s website and no social media accounts that I could find), I decide to get in the game and send Mr. Company Guy an email message. By the end of the day, he sends me a response back excited to have made the connection. He gives me a call, and by the end of the week, I have my first official “blind” date. Well, not exactly a blind date because I know what he looks like, but you get the idea. A plus in his favor is that, just like his picture suggests, he sounds like a nice guy over the phone.

Whether by coincidence or because Gabriel put it into my head, we decide to meet at Capisca, the little Italian bistro that served as the setting to our imaginary date. By the time I arrive at the restaurant, it has been raining all day. Not only am I damp, but my mood is damp, too. I wanted so much to wear my lovely blue sheath dress that is dressy enough for a date, but forgiving in all of my problem areas. It seems the older I get, the more problems I have to cover up! But with the weather, I didn’t think it was possible to wear it. Instead of covering up my parts, it would have exposed them. The rain would have soaked through the fabric, making it see-through. And although I want this guy to like me, I don’t want him to like so much of me yet (at least, not until I’m sure we get along). So instead of my flowing dress that makes me look amazing, I decide to go with a pale pink blouse and grey trousers that make me look professional. If I were going on an interview, I’d get the job. A date? I’m not sure.

I arrive at Capisca a half hour early so that I can sit at the bar and have myself a drink to steel my nerves. I run through all of the inspirational words that Gabriel gave me just before I headed out tonight. It’s only a date, not a global summit. Try to have some fun. Be yourself, not the someone your date wants you to be. All very sound advice (and deserving of space on a throw pillow), but not so easy to follow. I’m good at multitasking, but this is overload.

As I sit there, having an argument with myself about whether to stay or leave, I hear a commotion coming from the front of the restaurant. I look over and see the hostess pulling at someone who seems to be stuck in the door.

“Sir, you’ll need to close your umbrella,” I hear her command loudly. I can tell that the young woman, who is wearing her red hair in a neat ponytail, is frustrated. But to her credit, she’s doing her best to keep her composure. I look over at the trapped man and almost have to shield my eyes from the glare. He is holding the most colorful umbrella I have ever seen in my life. It’s as if a rainbow exploded in the room.

“I don’t want to get wet!” the man yells back at her as he pulls and tugs at the open umbrella to try to get himself past the doorframe. The umbrella is larger than life. I look over at the poor hostess who is getting wet from the droplets of rain jumping off of it. I immediately feel bad for her. Poor thing. I’m sure this was not part of the job description when she took this gig. I can certainly empathize with her. Many of my clients are just like the man who refuses to close that umbrella. The difference is I don’t have as much patience as the hostess seems to have.

“You can’t get through without closing it, sir,” she says calmly and I give her points for keeping her temper in check because I would have exploded by now. It’s one of the reasons I could never work in the retail sector. I would have hit this guy over the head with his massive golf umbrella.

And if that isn’t bad enough, the umbrella isn’t even fashionable and it’s certainly not designer! Instead, it’s one of those ugly bulky umbrellas, the kind corporations give out to their employees as a gift (usually in lieu of a raise or a bonus). I look at it again and it turns out that I’m right. It *is* a corporate umbrella. It’s hard to miss the logo of this very well-known company. In fact, the logo is huge and takes up most of the fabric. It’s just as colorful as the umbrella itself; rather blinding actually. I may need sunglasses if I continue to stare at it any longer. Just like the sun, you can’t look directly at it or you might go blind.

The hostess finally manages to get this annoying guy through the door and only then does he close his umbrella. With the large logo and color palette out of eyesight, I’m able to get a better look at the man at the center of all of this commotion. He’s wearing a trench coat and he’s brushing off the remaining raindrops from his shoulders. While he’s doing this, his eyes scan the room as if he’s looking for something or someone. It takes me a few seconds to realize it, but then it clicks. Oh no! He can’t be. Please, someone tell me he’s meeting his wife. Tell me he’s meeting his parents! Tell me he’s meeting his shrink.

I quickly look down, hoping that I can fade into the walls, like a

magician or a friendly ghost. I glance at my drink, wondering how many glasses I need to act like tonight isn't happening to me. I can still hear Gabriel's words running through my head. *Have fun. Enjoy the experience.* If Gabriel was here, I'd enjoy killing him. Why did I let him talk me into this? What am I doing here? I should be home watching Masterpiece Theatre instead. Men with britches never let me down.

I look up again and notice that he's still looking around. Calm down, Sarah. This can't be Company Guy. He looks nothing like his profile picture. The picture from the website is of a man who looks to be in his late thirties, thin with thick blond hair and piercing gray eyes. The person who is standing before me has a receding hairline and there is nothing piercing about his eyes. On the website, he said he's 180 pounds. I'm no scale, but this guy is well over 250 pounds. I don't care so much about the weight, it's just a shock to expect a certain someone and actually meet a completely different person instead. His eyes meet mine and there is a flicker of recognition. His lips curl up into a smile and I know he's found who he's been looking for.

He slowly walks over to me: Mr. Company Guy and his kaleidoscope umbrella. I can feel the panic rise inside of me like bile coming up my throat as I fervently say a little prayer underneath my breath. *Please not him. Please not him. Please not him.* But I know that, tonight, my prayers will go unanswered. As he gets closer, he tugs his sleeves from his coat and removes it. I literally do a double take. As if it can't get any worse, it actually does. His entire wardrobe is replete with the same logo that adorns his umbrella. He's like an old-fashioned travel trunk with stickers plastered all over it.

He's wearing a bright blue zip-up track jacket with a collared shirt underneath. He's also wearing what look to be elastic waist track pants. Each article of clothing has a company logo on it. Where's the suit? Where are the jacket, vest, and slacks? There is no three-piecer here! He doesn't look like a corporate guy. Instead, he looks like he's a high school gym teacher.

He extends his hand out before he's close enough for me to take it. He has a smile from ear-to-ear, as if he's pleased with what he sees. I wish I could say the same thing. Judging from his clothes, I feel like I'm at a corporate pep rally rather than a date. A day filled to the brim with motivational speakers and team building events. All we need are the balloons, streamers, and corporate swag bags.

"You must be Sarah?" he asks cheerfully. His hand is clammy as I grasp it in my own.

“Yes, that’s me,” I mumble, forcing a smile on my face. I glance behind him and notice that the hostess’s mouth is wide open in surprise. I can certainly agree with her.

“It’s so nice to meet you,” he says in a timid voice. “I’ve been looking forward to this all day.”

I look at him and suddenly feel ashamed. He really does seem so happy to be here with me. He sounds so sincere and sweet and I’ve been nothing but selfish and cruel. I look into his eyes and they are still the same kind eyes that I found staring at me from his online profile picture. I’m being unfair, aren’t I? Sure, it was a shock to see such a change in his appearance, and yes, the umbrella and his gear threw me off, but I’m judging a book by its cover. I need to open that book up and actually read the first few pages before deciding it is not for me.

I mean, really, who am I to judge him so harshly. Maybe, he’s very proud of where he works. I can certainly relate to that. I, too, can get carried away sometimes with my job, working long hours and getting absorbed with a project. I shouldn’t be knocking him down for that. Suddenly, Gabriel’s voice pops into my head and he’s telling me to give him a chance. I owe it to Company Guy to at least try.

So I give him a bright smile (to match his colorful umbrella) and reply, “Thank you. Me too.”

The red-headed hostess who had to wrestle him out of the door appears by our side wearing the same surprised expression. It’s like it’s frozen on her face. She reluctantly leads us to our table, eyeing the umbrella, not quite convinced that it won’t pop open again.

We sit down and get settled in as our waiter makes his way over to us with our menus and introduces himself. He then leaves to give us a chance to consider our food options and it is then that the small talk begins.

“I’m sure you’re wondering about my clothes?” he asks before I even have a chance to casually mention it. *Was I being that obvious?* I feel so guilty now.

I can’t look him in the eyes as I do my best to sound convincing. “Not at all,” I say.

“Well, at least you won’t have any problem guessing where I work, will you?” he jokes, letting out a loud laugh as he does.

Trying to put him at ease, I nervously laugh with him. “Is that where you work?” I feign ignorance, although it couldn’t be more obvious if he had

rented a billboard in the middle of Times Square.

He nods and gives me a satisfied grin. I take a sip of water from the glass in front of me. Suddenly, my throat feels parched and beads of sweat start to form on my forehead. “You must be very proud of what you do,” I comment. Either that or he gets a commission as a walking advertisement, sort of like driving cars decorated with corporate logos splashed on the doors and trunk.

“Not really,” he replies in disagreement, and my mouth drops in shock. He explains, “Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy where I am. It’s a great environment and I’m good at what I do and my boss is easy to get along with, but . . .”

He leans into the table as if he is about to let me in on a little secret. He gestures with his finger to have me lean in with him. I do as he asks and he confesses in a whisper. “It’s the free clothes, you see. I have dozens of these outfits at my apartment.” He then grabs the lapels of his jacket in both of his hands and exclaims in a booming voice, “I haven’t gone shopping in years!”

He leans back into his chair with a smug expression on his face as if he’s just revealed the secret to never aging. He then explains, “It’s easy to snatch clothes with company logos at various events or from inventory, especially if they’re outdated. No one misses them. To be honest, no one wants them.”

Surprise, surprise. I wonder why.

He must mistake my wide-eyed expression for confusion because he goes on to say, “It’s one of *many ways* I save money.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Is he really telling me that he gets his clothes from his company? He doesn’t own anything from a retail store?

“I’ve developed quite a system to cut corners and save every penny for that rainy day,” he announces energetically. I barely hear what he’s saying because I’m too distracted by what he’s doing instead. Right before my eyes, I see him grab dozens of sugar and butter packets from the table and stuff them into his tracksuit pocket. Even though I know I should pretend I didn’t see that, my eyes stay locked on his hands in shock.

“That’s very interesting,” I mutter as my eyes follow his hands. Any minute, I’m expecting him to reach over and grab the linen napkin from my lap and stash that away as well.

“You’d be surprised how much you can save by being a frugal consumer,” he declares solemnly.

“I can just imagine,” I respond absentmindedly, and suddenly, Aunt Edna pops into my head. She lived and died by the scissors and her coupon book. I

thought she was extreme, but it seems Company Man has taken this to a whole new level!

As I think about my Aunt Edna, I notice that he's still talking away, oblivious as to whether I'm listening to him or not. All he seems to care about is the fact that he has a captive audience. He apparently is too excited about his minimalist way of life to really pay attention to me. I try to catch snippets of his conversation and pretend to be interested so as not to hurt his feelings, but I don't think it matters.

"For example, we don't have to order two separate entrees," he points out. "I've observed that most of my dates don't finish their plate of food, so in the interest of efficiency, it's best to order one entrée."

My ears perk up immediately. Did he just suggest ordering a single entree for dinner? Is he joking? His dates probably don't finish their entrees because they can't wait to leave! I know I said I'd give him a chance, but I think I may need to reconsider my promise. I look over and he's still rambling on about savings and coupon cutting and I can't keep track. My head is swirling and I feel a migraine coming on.

"Thinking this way has saved my company millions of dollars," he offers. Thinking this way has also probably scared off any potential wife, I make an effort not to reply.

The waiter comes over to take our drink order and I immediately ask for a vodka and cranberry juice, giving Company Guy a look to warn him not to even suggest sharing my drink. I'm going to need this and a few more if I plan to get through this date. I remind myself to let Gabriel *and* his inspirational quotes have it when I speak to him tomorrow.

Within an hour, I've consumed three drinks and got a crash course on how to live forever on ten dollars a day. By the time our single entrée comes to the table, I'm officially drunk. I can't eat a bite of the food and I don't think it has to do with lack of hunger, but rather my lack of enthusiasm for sharing my meal with a stranger. He doesn't seem to notice that I haven't eaten and if he does, he doesn't seem to really care. He's so enthralled by the sound of his own voice that I think it's hypnotized him.

I glance over at our waiter and give him a frantic look. *Please save me.* I think he's read my mind because he nods and gives me a small smile of understanding. I follow him with my eyes as he moves to the back of the restaurant and I'm hoping he's left to retrieve our check. I need the check!

Company Guy and I have been sitting at our table for over two hours

now, but it seems more like twelve! The waiter was kind enough to let us sit at his station for the entire evening even though we opted for one entrée and no dessert. The “no dessert” was his choice, not mine. For me, it’s my favorite part of a meal. In fact, no matter how full I may be after my main course, I always have room for a chocolate cheesecake somewhere in my stomach. Mr. Company Man deprived me of my cheesecake. The one thing that made me hang around for the past two hours. There’s no forgiving the man for that!

I see our waiter reappear and he’s holding the check in his hands, waving it in the air for me to see as if it’s a white flag of surrender. Thank God! The cavalry has arrived! My knight in shining armor dressed in a white shirt and black slacks is here to save me.

I quickly grab the bill before Company Guy pulls out a calculator and starts checking the invoice and I give the waiter a smile of gratitude. I would kiss him if I could. It might be a better end to this date. I reach into my bag and take out my wallet to pay. Just as I’m about to pull out my credit card, I hear a cough, followed by a clearing of the throat. I should just pretend I didn’t hear that. Pay the check and call it a night. I hear another cough and a tapping of a finger against the table. Someone is definitely trying to get my attention. Despite my better judgment, I look up and see Mr. Company Guy give me a disapproving look. He does not seem pleased at all. You would think I had just cursed him out or spat in his eye by the way he’s glaring at me. He glances down at my credit card and his eyes widen, followed by a loud gasp.

“That’s not very efficient, Sarah!”

I wave him off by saying, “I insist. It’s really not a problem at all.”

“It is too.” he replies. “Do you know how much these credit cards companies charge you for using their cards? Twenty two and a half per cent, Sarah. You are much better off using cash or a check!”

I cannot believe what I am hearing. And I thought he would be upset because I did not let him pay the bill!

He shakes his head rigorously. “Besides!” he exclaims in horror. “I find this to be a big problem! We need to split the bill.”

“It’s too much bother to do that. It’ll be much easier if I just pay it,” I explain, hoping that the big spender in me will turn him off forever.

“It may be easier, Sarah, but it’s certainly not cost-effective. If you actually think about it, splitting the bill will save us both . . .”

And he's off and ranting again. I have a splitting headache and I'm pretty sure it's not from the drinks. I take out the money from my wallet to cover my share of the bill and hand it to him. I'd pay double if it would only stop him from lecturing and get me home sooner. I'm already looking forward to the warm bath waiting for me.

He takes it from my hand, opens the folder with the bill, and looks up at me with a condescending smirk. *Where did the kindness in his eyes go?*

"Guess you don't know the rule?" he asks in amusement.

"What rule?" I ask in an annoyed voice.

He apparently finds this to be very funny, because he cackles as if I've just told him the most humorous joke in the world. He shakes his head and utters. "That is so cute. Most people know the rule, especially New Yorkers like you, Sarah."

Cute? The rule? I don't know what he's talking about. All I *do* know is that I want to get out of here and get to that bath of mine, but one look at him and I know that I'm not going anywhere until he tells me the blessed rule.

"Which rule is that?" I ask rather abruptly, having lost my patience two hours ago. I know that even as I ask him, I'm going to regret it, but what choice do I have?

"Sarah, you don't tip on alcohol, although I know you've consumed quite a bit of it . . ."

Quite a bit? Has he been counting my alcohol intake? I can't believe he's done that. Well, maybe I can, but it's still wrong. I know I drank a lot, but it's still not something you lecture your date about.

He continues, oblivious to the dagger stare I'm throwing at him, ". . . And while perhaps a 22-25% tip might be appropriate because they did not rush us out of the restaurant, that would be about . . ."

I am in shock as he pulls out his phone to calculate the tip, all the while muttering underneath his breath, "Two dollars fifty cents, rounded up to three dollars because it would be based on the food bill." He's busy calculating and recalculating our total as if it's a complex financial exchange rather than a simple bill.

He then shows me the bill (as if I've never seen one before), which, as he points out, actually separates out the food and the alcohol for that very purpose. I am mortified. The waiter has been so incredibly nice and patient throughout the whole evening, even coming to my rescue with the check, and here is Company Man who is going to give him a measly tip and not a penny

more because of some “rule” that apparently all New Yorkers are aware of except me.

“Now I know what you’re thinking, Sarah,” he says as he smiles at me.

That I’m going to take his tracksuit and strangle him with it?

He doesn’t wait for my answer. “You’re thinking our waiter did us a favor by letting us linger longer after our meal was done. But not so.” He wags his finger in front of my face and it takes all of my self-restraint not to take it and snap it into two.

He goes on to say, “But I’ve been watching the front door of the restaurant all night long and there was never anyone waiting for the table so, really, the waiter wasn’t doing us any favors by letting us linger. In fact, we were doing the restaurant a favor by making it appear as if it was full.”

I can’t believe my ears. Not only was he counting my drink intake, but he was also keeping an eye on the door and the crowd flow of the restaurant. Apparently, everything else has been more interesting than getting to know me. In fact, as I think about it now, he hasn’t asked me a single question all night. Gabriel’s little exercise the other day was completely wasted on this date because I didn’t need to tell him my life story. Company Guy wasn’t interested.

As he slips the money into the folder, I’m almost afraid to leave a tip for fear of another hour-long lecture. I want to get out of here as quickly as possible. But I also know I can’t leave without giving our waiter more than what he left. So as we get up to leave, I give Mr. Company Guy a coy smile and say, “I’ll meet you up front. I have to use the restroom.”

He smiles back, “That’s a good idea. I think I’ll go too.” He whispers in my ear so only I can hear it, “They might have boxed soaps to take with me. I’m running a little low at home.”

As I see him walk toward the restroom, I quickly run back to our table and pull out more money from my wallet for our waiter. He’s earned every single dollar of it. I feel just like a spy in an action movie, except instead of trying to dodge a bullet, I’m dodging a man with pockets full of sugar, butter, and soaps.

As we leave Capisca, Company Guy offers to split a cab ride home with me (more efficient), but I just can’t. I’m liable to throw him out of the backseat while the car is still in motion. So instead, I turn the tables on him and suggest, “I would never dream of taking a cab. Think of the cost! Even if we split the fare, the subway is still so much cheaper and much faster.”

He beams with pride like a father holding his newborn child for the first time. “What an excellent idea, Sarah! You’re a woman after my own heart.”

Or rather, after his own pocketbook. But I’m no such person. Not by a long shot. I offer him a handshake and a very quick peck on the cheek before we go our separate ways. I watch as he walks in the direction of the nearest subway station before I hail a cab back home. Even though I know I’m doing nothing wrong, I’m sneaking around like a teenager coming home after her curfew.

As I lift up my hand to signal a yellow car that’s driving toward me, I can feel a few drops of rain start to fall. It seems like a perfect ending to a disastrous date. As luck would have it, I realize that I’ve left my own umbrella at the restaurant. I turn around just one more time, unable to resist the urge. As I guessed, I see Mr. Company Man opening up his massive colorful umbrella before fading away toward the subway.

Gabriel

I hear a ping from my instant messaging and see that it’s from Sarah. I have given her my cell phone number because there are only so many personal calls I can take at work and only so many technology issues one customer can have.

I open it up and read: *Are you kidding me? Company Guy was a nightmare . . .*

I smile despite myself. She doesn’t have any filter, does she? She just writes whatever comes into her mind. It’s nice to know a woman like that. I’ve always had to guess at what my girlfriends were thinking. I compare it to taking a test. If I got the right answer, I was rewarded; but if I didn’t, heaven help me.

But with Sarah, there’s no guesswork. Like right now, for instance, judging from the tone of her text, I know she’s upset. The date must not have gone well. I can’t help but feel bad about that. After all, I’m the one who pushed her to go out with this guy in the first place.

I look at the phone on my desk, blinking with callers waiting for technical assistance, and instead, I pick up my cell phone to answer her text. I know I should take the calls, but I need to know what happened on Sarah’s first date.

I type: *What went wrong?*

A few seconds later, I hear the ping again. *Where do I start?*

I chuckle to myself and begin typing. *How about at the beginning?*

She types back: *Do you have a few days?*

She's got a deprecating sense of humor, which I like. It's exactly what I need today.

That bad?

Bad would be a good date.

Ouch. I'm sorry to hear that.

Can you talk?

She wants me to call her. I look at the phone with the blinking lights that can't be avoided. I need to answer them before I lose my job. I know that if I call Sarah, it won't be a quick conversation. She has a way of drawing me in and before I know it, hours, instead of minutes, have passed.

So I type the following message to her instead. *Let me take care of some calls first.*

Oh, right. I forgot you're on the clock. I'm sorry.

It's closer to my lunch hour when I pull out my cell phone to call Sarah. I hear the ringing and wait for her to pick up. At the sound of her voice, a small smile involuntarily spreads across my face. I hadn't realized how much I looked forward to the call.

"Are you ready to hear the whole ugly story, tabloid style?" she asks.

"I take it that the three-piecer was a bust," I reply playfully, as I lean back into my chair and make myself comfortable.

I can hear her laughter as she exclaims, "That would be an understatement! He wasn't even a three-piecer, more like a tracksuiter."

"What's a tracksuiter?" I ask, intrigued.

"I don't even know how to explain it to you."

"He couldn't have been *that* bad."

"Oh, Gabriel. He was horrible," she complains. "And I tried. I really, *really* tried . . . but he was . . . just . . . he . . ." I can tell she's struggling to find the right words. "He was so . . . efficient."

Did I hear right? It's not a word I would use to describe a person, but then again, I wasn't there.

"Efficient?" I repeat. "I never heard of that one before."

"That's because you've never meet someone like him before."

"All right, why don't you start off with the positives first," I suggest, because it's always easy to think of what went right.

"Well, the food was delicious, whatever little I had." I definitely detect a hint of sarcasm. Should I even bother to ask?

“Oh, and the waiter was really nice,” she adds.

I wait a few more seconds to see if Sarah adds any more positives, but she doesn’t speak again and I finally realize she’s waiting for me to speak.

“That’s it?” I ask incredulously. “That’s the best of the date.”

“Pretty much,” she replies matter-of-fact.

“I think I’m going to regret asking, but what was the worst part of the date?”

“My date. He was the worst part of it.”

Oh boy. That’s not a good sign. And I know she’s dying to tell me all of it so I put my feet up on my desk and tell her, “Well, let’s have it.”

I look at my wristwatch and know I’m not going to get a chance to eat lunch today, but somehow I don’t mind . . . not at all.

Sarah

So Gabriel says I should get back on that horse again. I told him I didn't like falling off of it the first time, why would I want to get right back up. Shouldn't I take a few days or years to get over the pain? He laughed at me. Apparently, he didn't think I was being serious, which I was! The thing is, I know he's right about getting back out there. It's just easier said than done. It's always easier telling someone else what to do than actually doing it yourself.

And to make matters worse, Amy agrees with him. She would, Mrs. Happily Married. It's like they're both ganging up on me! I know it's not possible since they've never met, but I still wonder if they've compared notes with each other. As soon as I got off the phone with Gabriel, I called Amy and retold the same story. I told her all about Company Guy and his obsession with savings. Instead of sympathizing with me, she laughed at all of the embarrassing moments, just like Gabriel did. Really? I was hoping that someone would console me, but it seems that I'm zero for two in that department.

Side note: I don't think I can ever buy products from that company again. Every time I see that infamous logo, I experience flashbacks and go into full panic mode. I get heart palpitations and not the good kind. I'm half expecting him to pop up and tell me new ways to save. Him and his brightly-colored umbrella.

Amy suggested we meet for dinner the next night to regroup and discuss the next steps. Even though we both work from home, our schedules are super crazy. You'd think telecommuting would allow us more free time to spend with one another, but it's quite the opposite. Yet, no matter how busy we are, we have an unwritten agreement to meet at least twice a month for dinner. It's a promise we haven't broken for the last five years. It helps that we live close by each other. Amy lives in a beautiful brownstone in Brooklyn Heights, which is a fifteen-minute subway ride to my downtown walk-up in Manhattan.

"You know you're being completely unreasonable, Sarah," Amy tells me as she jabs a fork into her arugula salad. Amy works as a critic for a food blog and doesn't think twice about telling you exactly her opinion, anywhere and anytime. Requested or not. This time is no different.

"Unreasonable?" I exclaim in disbelief. "I've never done anything unreasonable in my life." It's true. I've always been the kind of person to

make my decisions based on common sense and practicality.

To drive the point home, I add, "In fact, agreeing to be a part of this online dating service is, by far, the most unreasonable thing I've ever done in my life!"

"*Really*, Sarah. Listen to you! You're being so melodramatic," she retorts, rolling her eyes at me for effect. I roll my eyes right back at her. Two can play at this game.

"Did you not hear a word I said about my date with Company Guy? The disastrous date that I wasted three hours of my life on!" I practically shout.

"Cue up the violin solo," she replies in a calm voice while ignoring my temper tantrum.

"You know that's three hours of my life I'm never getting back," I remind her. "When I'm old and gray and sitting in a rocking chair in a nursing home, I'm going to look back on my life and I will always regret those three hours. Always!" I repeat for emphasis.

"Don't change the subject on me, Sarah. So the first date didn't work out too well. So what?" she says matter-of-factly. "These things happen. It's not the end of the world."

I'm about to open my mouth to protest, but I can't. She does have a point. Sensing that she has me up against the ropes, Amy adds, "How are you ever going to meet the love of your life if you don't get out there and meet a few not-so-perfect guys."

Not so perfect is putting it mildly as images of Company Guy stuffing packets of sugar into his company logo pants flash before my eyes. Three hours I'm never getting back, I mentally mumble to myself.

Amy puts her fork down on the plate and folds her hands together. She looks up at me and announces with much fanfare, as Amy is known to do, "I went online and accessed your account and I think I may have found the perfect guy for you."

My mouth drops. "You went and did what?" I ask incredulously. "Amy, my account is private."

She waves me off with her hands as if I'm a fly buzzing around her face. "Nonsense! This is my birthday gift to you, remember? I need to see a return on my investment. Did I mention that it was a very *costly* investment?"

Here we go again. This is why I should never have let Amy talk me into online dating. Eventually, she'll want to take control and try to run the whole thing herself, like she's done my entire life since we were kids. Touch up my

profile, sort out potential suitors, even go on a date with them herself to make sure . . . I know her heart is in the right place. I'm her friend and she wants to see me happy. But the truth is, she's found the love of her life. I'm nowhere close to finding mine and I don't like the idea of her taking on my personal life as if I'm some home improvement project she's latched on to.

She continues, "Anyway, I really think he could be the one for you. This guy is different."

Anytime I hear the word "different," I always wonder exactly what that means. Sugar-free ice cream is different, but not nearly as good as ice cream sundaes topped with sugary whipped cream, sprinkles, and decadent hot fudge.

"How is he... different, Amy?" I ask cautiously.

"He's a professional, just like you. In fact, he's an attorney-slash-writer."

And there it is: the "slash." Anytime, I hear about anyone with a "slash" job, I take pause. Nothing good ever comes after the slash. It either means he can't afford to live on one income or he can't make up his mind as to what he wants to be when he grows up. A dentist-slash-D.J.; an accountant-slash-belly dancer; a stock broker-slash-bartender...Well, you get the picture: Either way, it doesn't sound exactly promising.

Amy seems undeterred. "I've looked him up online, Sarah. This guy is legit. He's an author and he must have done quite well for himself because he can afford to split his time between his legal work and his writing. I mean, really, how many people are able to work flexible jobs like that, especially in this economy? He must be the real deal."

My head starts spinning with the infinite possibilities. Maybe this can work. I let my imagination run away with me for a little while as I hear Amy describe his accomplishments. Suddenly, I can picture it right before me. The two of us sitting on the deck of our beach house, laptops facing one another, as we both type feverishly, trying to meet deadlines. We can hear the waves crashing below us as we gaze lovingly into each other's eyes. He's smoking a pipe and wears a tweed sports jacket, the kind with the corduroy elbow patches. He calls me "darling" and "sweetheart" and we drink cocktails in the afternoon. Even his profile picture, when Amy shows it to me, fits the image of an intellectually stimulating author. He has dark brown hair with soulful eyes and sports a five o'clock shadow that can pass as a beard. Suddenly, I can hear him reciting me poetry as we jet set to his Parisian apartment in early April.

After a few minutes of letting the images of our perfect life together run through my mind, I decide to give Mr. Slash a try and contact him as soon as I get home from my dinner with Amy. After all, this might very well be the one I've been looking for. I decide to hop on that horse again, grab onto the reins for dear life, and pray that I don't fall off.

Second Blind Date: Mr. Slash

Within a day, I've agreed to meet Mr. Slash under a tree in Central Park. And not just any old tree, but a very specific tree. What I first took to be a romantic gesture on his part turns quickly into a serious discussion about how to locate it. At first I think he's joking when we speak on the phone and he asks me to meet him under the "old oak tree." I laugh, believing he is referencing an old song and I joke about whether there will be a yellow ribbon tied around it. I even mutter something about carving our initials into the tree with a heart around it. I know it's corny, but I thought he'd find it amusing. I know Gabriel would have laughed at it. But Mr. Slash doesn't laugh at all, not once. He completely ignores my comedic attempts and instead, busies himself with providing me with exact coordinates and topography symbols so that I will find my way to his tree. I tell him I can just pull up the map online, but he immediately informs me that it will be close to impossible to find it on any maps available on the Internet. I feel like I'm participating in a covert mission for the government, instead of planning a date. He even goes so far as to ask if I want him to email me a marked up map of Central Park so I won't get lost. I humor him and agree. Within minutes, it's in my inbox. I open it up to see a big red circle in the middle of the map with arrows pointing to a clump of green. He really does mean a particular tree. Here I thought it was a metaphor for life or something. After all, he is a writer so I didn't think to take his words so...literally.

I should just back out and tell him I have a headache or something, but I don't because I promised Amy and Gabriel to keep an open mind and that's what I intend to do.

On the day of our meeting, I'm feeling anxious and nervous, not because it's another date, but because I have no idea what to expect from Mr. Slash. This whole "tree" thing has me unhinged. I uproot myself out of my apartment armed with the printout of the map and my questions. When I told Gabriel about Mr. Slash's horticultural obsession, he teased that I should bring a compass with me too.

"It's not funny, Gabriel."

"I'm being serious," he says as I can hear the hint of amusement in his voice. "You should bring a compass and binoculars with you, just in case you get lost or if you two crave a little bird watching."

I look down at the brightly colored *and* very detailed map. "Not likely I'll get lost," I mutter.

“You should also consider bringing a supply of food and water just in case you’re left wandering the park for days on end in search of this tree.”

“It’s not the Amazon rainforest. It’s New York, for crying out loud. If I get lost, I’ll just turn right around and do some shopping at Crandall’s Department Store.”

“That’s really roughing it.”

I disagree. “Have you seen that place when there’s a sale? It’s a veritable jungle.”

“Well there, Park Ranger Jenkins,” Gabriel teases. “Here’s wishing you luck on your tree challenge.”

It doesn’t take me long to get to Central Park, and when I do, it takes me even less time to find our meeting point. The map has proven to be invaluable, and before I know it, I’m leaning against the tree waiting for Mr. Slash. I feel someone tap me on the shoulder. I turn around and find a very slim and wiry man standing next to me. He is dressed in biking clothes, which include tight cycling pants that leave nothing to the imagination. And I mean *nothing*! This throws me off because he looks nothing like the picture Amy showed me from his profile. Where is the tweed jacket with the corduroy patches? He doesn’t look like a writer. He looks nothing like an attorney. He looks more like he’s about to compete in the Tour De France instead. He also looks much older than his picture suggests. What is it with these men and posting unrealistic pictures of themselves?

“Are you Sarah?” he asks in a monotone voice, very calm, very sedate.

“One and the same,” I offer lightheartedly. I put on a big smile and extend my hand for a handshake.

He walks right past me and my open hand. “You found the tree?” And as he says this, he looks lovingly at it and pats it softly with his hand.

I don’t quite know how to react to this. So, I answer his question. “Yes, I found it. It was actually very easy. Your directions were rather . . . umm . . .” How do I say this without hurting his feelings? “Detailed.” I look over at him, and from the expression on his face, he seems pleased.

“I’m glad,” he replies as he nods approvingly and then glances once more at the tree, tilting his head up so that his eyes are looking to where the branches hang high in the sky. He seems lost in his own thoughts for a few seconds, and I can’t help it, curiosity is getting the best of me. I have to know why he is so obsessed with this tree.

Maybe there is a story behind it. He might have met the love of his life

underneath this tree only to lose her. That would be quite the story. Very *The Way We Were*. I love a good romance and I love a good cry even more. Two people in love go their separate ways only to be reunited twenty years later. Maybe Mr. Slash saw his love again by this very tree with her husband and children, happy in her new life. He watched her from afar, knowing that she would never be his, and every day he visits the tree to celebrate their unrequited love. How beautifully tragic. I am dying to know so I ask, "This tree is very special to you, isn't it?"

He gives me a small smile as his eyes glass over with nostalgia. This is it! Here comes the tragedy. Maybe he's working on the novel of their love story as we speak. I can see it now. It'll be a bestseller and be adapted into a movie, a box office hit. If I'm still dating Mr. Slash by then, I can go to the premiere and actually meet a few film stars. I've never been to a Hollywood movie premiere. What should I wear? How exciting that would be! This date is turning out even better than I thought. That is, until I hear his answer.

"Yes, it is . . . very special," he replies. "This is where I come to meditate."

Oh. That's it? No tragedy. No heartbreak. No made-for-Hollywood dramatic movie based loosely on true-life events?

He goes on to explain, "I sit down lotus style and close my eyes . . ." He pauses before continuing. "I take deep breaths and find my chi."

He does seem very relaxed and at peace. So what if there's no tragic story. He's happy and at ease. Maybe there's more to this "chi" than meets the eye. I should give him a chance. I should give his *tree* a chance.

He adds, "You see, Sarah. It's all about finding your balance in the world. You have to find your equilibrium."

"And you do this by mediating under this tree?" I ask in earnest.

He nods at me as if I've just uncovered the mysteries of life. "Exactly!" he exclaims. "I sit here and roll myself a blunt . . ."

Wait a minute! Did he just say *blunt*? As in...*cannabis*! What does this have to do with finding balance and the meaning of life? Not only does he not have a romantic story, but now he's a stoner without a romantic story. I suddenly feel cheated.

He, on the other hand, doesn't notice my reaction at all. "I like to feel a certain detachment from the world. It helps me to think, frees my mind and creates stories floating around in my head."

I'm sure it does.

“Have you published anything?” I ask, trying my best not to be so judgmental. After all, maybe he’s a *brilliant* stoner.

My hopes are dashed by the next words he speaks, “Publishing is so commercial. Writing should be seen as a way to cleanse the soul, not make a profit. It helps me reach my inner core.” He pats his stomach. His shirt is so tight that it looks painted on and I can see his ribs protruding from the fabric. Apparently, his inner core doesn’t get fed much either.

So now he’s a broke and hungry stoner who doesn’t believe in writing for the sake of making a living. I need a lifeline to turn this date around.

“I read in your profile that you’re an attorney,” I mention as a way of changing the subject to a more positive focus.

“*Was* an attorney,” he corrects me.

“Was?” I repeat.

“Yes, I *was* an attorney, but I gave that up.” He waves his hand in the air and becomes very animated as he explains, “That was the old me, the *me* who lived and worked within the pressures of a conformist society. I found myself shackled by the chains of the oppressive capitalism that was ruining my life. It was stifling.”

I feel my mouth drop open, but he continues to drone on, unaware of my shock. “Sure, I was a successful corporate lawyer with a large bank account and a two bedroom condo on Park Avenue, but I wasn’t happy. Who’d want to be with someone like that?” he asks as if I’d agree.

I’d want that guy! Where did he go? He sounds perfect. If I had a time machine, I’d go back and find him, preferably not under this tree, and knock some sense into him. I want someone that has ambition and goals in his life. I’m not interested in a drifter who’d rather watch life pass him by than seize it and make the most of each day.

“So, what do you do to support yourself now that you’re not a lawyer anymore?” I ask, hoping he’ll answer the question that has been hanging over my head since he announced his disdain for money and earthly possessions. I’m half expecting him to say he’s in training to be the next Dalai Lama. That would explain it all, but instead he replies, “I model.”

My ears perk up. “You do?” I ask. I don’t remember seeing him in any magazine. Maybe he does the runway shows during Fashion Week at Bryant Park. How exciting! I wonder if he gets any perks from the designers.

“Yes,” he confirms proudly. “I work the windows at Crandall’s and other small boutiques stores in the area.”

“I’m sorry, but did you just say you work the windows?” I ask, hoping that I heard wrong.

“That’s correct,” he answers. “I freeze model, posing in department store windows.”

“You’re a live mannequin?” I ask in surprise. Although I’m not really sure why I’m surprised at anything that comes out of his mouth anymore.

“I prefer the term human statue,” he corrects me.

“And you earn a living doing that?” I ask dubiously.

“It helps pay my rent and my living expenses, which are all I need to make me happy. I work a few days a week and one weekend a month. It’s just enough to get me by.”

“Really?”

“It’s living and breathing art, Sarah. It also gives me the freedom to write and meditate . . . right here.” He pats the tree again with the look of awe. I’ve had it with that tree. If I could take an axe to it, I might consider it. But I did not bring one to this date. Besides, I’m a nature lover and think better of it.

Suddenly, his eyes light up and he points his finger in my direction. “I just thought of something fun for us to do,” he says excitedly. “If you’re not doing anything next weekend, come see me work. I have a great job lined up in Times Square. A friend of mine is going on vacation and needs me to fill in for him.”

“Doing what?” I’m almost afraid to ask.

“I’ll give you a clue,” he says playfully.

Interesting enough, I’m in no mood for games, but apparently he is.

“I’m green and a lady,” he hints.

If he tells me he’ll be dressed as Kermit, the Times Square Drag Lady, I’m out of here.

“Give up?” he asks.

I haven’t even tried to guess.

“I’ll be the Statue of Liberty,” he exclaims.

Something inside of me clicks. I faintly remember seeing half a dozen Statues of Liberty, Roman Gods, and Ladies in Gold wandering the corner of 42nd Street and Broadway, available to take pictures with anyone for a small fee. As a native New Yorker, I don’t pay much attention to it, but I’m sure it brings good money as a tourist attraction.

He interrupts my thoughts to ask, “So what do you say? Are you up for it?”

I don't know what to say, and as an incentive, he adds, "I can get you a costume, too. Wouldn't that be fun?"

Fun? Sure, right up there with a root canal and getting run over by a bus. I don't say that out loud though. Instead, I mutter incoherently, "I'll have to check my schedule. I may have to work that weekend."

"Oh, what a shame. Maybe another time," he says hopefully.

"Yes, maybe." As in never.

Wanting to change the subject, I ask, "So, where are we going for lunch?" I've had enough of the tree and his mannequin job, I mean, human statue profession. I'm ready to go eat, and then head home and pretend this date never happened. This pattern of amnesia is becoming a habit with me and my online dates.

He gives me a confused look and asks, "What do you mean?"

I look at him intently and wonder if he hasn't gotten a "head start" on his meditating this afternoon.

"Where are we going to eat?" I clarify. "I'm kind of hungry."

"We're already here," he replies with a big smile on his face as if he's just given me the loveliest surprise a girl can have, confirming that I was right to be afraid, very afraid.

He crouches down and sits yoga style on the grass underneath the tree. "I want you to meditate with me. I've packed lunch for us."

He reaches both his hands out for me to take. I look around as I see joggers and mommies with strollers pass me by and I hesitantly comply. He pulls me down and I'm so glad I didn't dress to impress. Silk does not mix well with grass stains. Before I know what is happening, I'm sitting next to him with my eyes closed and humming like a vacuum. We spend a solid half hour in this position, and finally he jumps up (scaring the chi right out of me) and reaches for his backpack. He takes out a brown paper bag containing rice patty sandwiches, homemade iced green tea, and carrots for dessert.

After I manage to swallow what I can of the meal, he proceeds to pull out at least a half dozen journals from his backpack and shows me all of his random thoughts, phrases, pictures, and half-finished plot lines. I'm doing my best to look interested when all I really want to do is lift myself up from the ground and walk a few blocks to eat a cheeseburger and fries and drink a large chocolate milk shake.

"I do all of my writing in these journals," he explains. "I have tons more in my apartment."

“I see . . . very interesting.” It isn’t. I stifle a yawn, covering it up by placing my hand in front of my mouth.

“I’ll show them to you next time we meet up, hopefully for my weekend gig.” He gives me a wink. I give him a small smile, even though I have no intention of going anywhere else with him. Here’s a thought. Maybe he should dress up as the tree and forget the Statue of Liberty.

After another half hour of meditating (he was meditating, I was trying to stifle my growling stomach), I pretend that a client has left an urgent message on my cell phone and that I have to leave. He cheerfully says his goodbyes and squats back down to spend the rest of the afternoon underneath his beloved tree. I turn the corner and head to the nearest burger joint before my sugar levels crash.

When I finally get home, I log into my account and see a new email from him, thanking me for such a wonderful date and asking if I am available next weekend to stand in Times Square with him. I could hold the coffee can for the tips. Where in his foggy state did he think this actually went well?

Sarah

"You know what they say about the third time being a charm?" Gabriel teases, and I can hear him trying to stifle a laugh over the phone.

"Besides being a cliché, it's so untrue," I respond. "I've never really understood that saying. I don't believe you have to try something three times before it gets better."

"Really?" he asks incredulously. "It's always been perfect the first time you've tried *anything*?" He emphasizes the word *anything* and I know exactly what he's implying. I can feel the blood rush to my cheeks and I can't believe we're actually talking about this. How did we get from the topic of me going on a third date to the topic of my sex life, or lack thereof?

"Not *everything*, no," I stammer, thinking about my own past experiences. "Not the first time anyway."

"I didn't think so," he chuckles softly.

"But not the third time either!" I protest. "It takes a few more times than that to . . . click with someone."

"Then you obviously haven't been with the *right* person." He sounds so sure of himself and I wonder if he's met the right person. Is he with her now?

I hear him clear his throat and there is an awkward silence between us. When he finally speaks, he's back to being playful. "That being said, practice *does* make perfect."

Before I have time to think about it, I blurt, "I wouldn't know. I haven't had any practice in a long time."

Did I just say that? I can't believe it! What is wrong with me? Now, he can add frustrated to the list of other qualities I possess, including persistent, stubborn, and unlucky in love.

"That is a shame," he says in a mischievous voice. "We need to correct that as soon as possible."

"That's not why I'm doing this!" I cry out.

Although, I can't lie. If the right person came along, it would be a definite plus.

"No?" he questions.

"No," I answer firmly. "I'm looking for love, Gabriel."

"Practice still makes perfect, even with finding love," he cautions.

"I don't agree with you," I contradict him.

"Why am I not surprised?" he laughs.

"Because when you've found the one, you know it," I remark softly. "I

don't believe it takes practice. It's magical the first time you're with him."

I don't hear anything from Gabriel, not a smart retort or a playful ribbing at my expense, and I wonder if he hung up or the connection was lost. "Are you still there?" I ask.

"Yes," I hear him reply in a low voice.

"You don't believe in love at first sight, do you?" I ask.

"Maybe . . . I'm not sure . . . I used to," he answers solemnly. Gone is the mischievous tone to his voice. I hope I didn't hit a nerve.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I reply. "I always thought of you as a romantic."

"Me too," he replies sadly.

There is hurt behind his words and I freeze at his honesty. It makes me wonder what's happened in his life to make him react this way. And if he doesn't believe in true love, why is he working at an online dating service and why is he helping me search for it.

Before I have time to process this in my head, Gabriel changes the subject and I know it's my cue to move on. He doesn't want to talk about it. I file it away in the back of my mind, hoping to bring it up at a later time. There's certainly more to Gabriel than meets the eye.

"So, who's your next victim?" he asks.

Third Blind Date: Mr. Broadway

My next victim, as Gabriel likes to call him, is Topher Watson. I decide that, this time, I should be the one to choose my date. I let Gabriel pick the first guy, Amy volunteered herself to pick the second, but this time around, it's all on me. If third time is truly the charm, then I want to take credit for it.

I scour the website for profiles that match as closely as possible to my top ten "must haves" in a guy. It takes me several hours, but I finally settle on Topher. Besides loving his first name (it's so sophisticated), Topher is the head buyer of men's apparel for a major department store in London. At thirty-two, he is the youngest to hold that position. There is no denying his success as a businessman, and from his profile picture, he really looks the part, too. He's very handsome in a metrosexual kind of way. He has thick dark brown hair combed neatly back and beautiful green eyes that jump right out at you. He also has a clear olive-skinned complexion that I would kill for, very Mediterranean and very sexy.

I also notice that while most of the profile pictures people put up on the website, including mine, are candid pictures taken on vacation or an event, Topher's picture is professionally done. It looks like a headshot for a modeling agency. It's polished and elegant and it shows off his beautiful smile with his perfectly straight white teeth. As a bonus, he also has another picture of himself at the beach (also professionally taken) and let's just say he looks just as good with his clothes off as with them on! Contrary to what Gabriel says, I don't think I'll need any practice to get anything right with Topher from the looks of him.

I choose him for several reasons. He's very successful at what he does, which is important to me. He also has many of the qualities I value in a man. He's sensitive (he volunteers as a mentor for inner-city children), generous (he's donated money to animal shelters and hospitals), stylish (see above for reasons), and smart (graduated top of his class at Oxford University). He also shares my same love of music (jazz, blues and country), movies (rom com anything), and activities (shopping at antique stores and visiting art museums).

And, if on our first date, all the above fails and he proves a total bore, I can at least spend the entire evening staring at his perfectly chiseled face. It's a win-win situation, as far as I'm concerned.

There is one tiny little hitch, which Gabriel is so quick to point out to me. "He lives in London, Sarah."

“Yes, I know,” I reply, undeterred.

“And this doesn’t bother you?” he asks incredulously, as if the answer should be obvious.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I reply.

“That you can’t have a relationship with someone three thousand miles and a different time zone away,” he retorts back.

Sometimes he can be so negative. Why can’t he be optimistic, see the glass as half full?

“I’ve considered that, Gabriel but the positives outweigh the negatives. I listed them all out and I have more pluses than minuses in his favor.”

“Wait, you made a list of why you should date this guy?” he asks.

I can tell from the tone of his voice that he finds this amusing.

“Yes, of course.” Now it’s my turn to sound like I’m stating the obvious.

I can hear him chuckle on the other end of the phone. “You never cease to amaze me, Ms. Jenkins.”

“I’m tired of wasting my time,” I reply resolutely. “This *has* to work.”

Or else, I may just have to break my promise to Amy and give up a lot sooner than the three months we agreed on.

“But it would be a long distance relationship and those never last,” he says matter-of-factly.

“I have to disagree with you again,” I answer confidently, and then explain why. “This can actually work better than your average relationship. It says here, on his profile, that he flies into New York City at least three times a month on business.”

“And your point is?”

This is where I dazzle Gabriel with my irrefutable reasons.

“It’s quite simple really. If we meet and hit it off, I have it all mapped out. We’ll be able to see each other at least once a week except for the last week of the month. With my busy schedule and his, this would really work out nicely.”

“Really?” he remarks with skepticism.

“Of course,” I answer confidently “Besides, we live in a technological world. There’s no reason for us not to stay connected. We can video chat, text, and follow each other on social media.”

“With thumbs up, smiley faces, and red hearts,” he teases. “You can even tweet!”

“Your suggestions are not helping,” I mutter.

"I'm sorry," he says with a chuckle. "I'm only trying to be useful here."

"Try harder," I suggest.

"So he'll be like a virtual boyfriend?" he asks, trying to stifle a laugh.

"Make all the jokes you want, but this can work," I answer stubbornly.

"I'm sure it can," he answers unconvinced.

"You and I are friends and we've never met before!" I offer as an example. This should put things into perspective for him.

"That's different," he argues.

"How so?" I ask, feeling triumphant that I may have finally beaten him at his own game.

"You're not looking for a long-term committed relationship with me," he explains. "You're not looking to start a family with me."

Why does he *always* have to be right? I just hate it when he's winning an argument.

"Speaking of which, do you plan to have virtual children with Topher?" he asks. I can still hear amusement in his voice, but I choose to ignore it.

"Never mind," I say dismissively. "This *still* makes sense."

"Whatever you say."

"We won't have to worry about any romantic distractions. I can be productive and he can be productive. Our careers wouldn't have to suffer because we're a couple, which is what always happens when a relationship is new."

"Is that how it goes?" he teases.

"Yes, and the best part is that the distance will give us time to miss each other."

"That's an interesting way of looking at it," he observes.

I know he doesn't see my viewpoint and is only playing along for my sake, but I don't care. I do have a good feeling about this.

As if to prove my point, I add, "And when we do see each other, we'll appreciate our time together even more."

"And make up for lost time," he coyly comments, implying more than what is said.

"Something like that," I mutter, feeling my cheeks burn red. How does he know exactly what to say to make me blush?

"They do say absence makes the heart grow fonder," he parrots an old cliché.

"Exactly!" I exclaim. It may be cliché, but it's true.

Maybe Gabriel is finally seeing it my way. Finally, he gets it.

“And we won’t be like so many couples I know who eventually get tired of each other’s company. We can keep it new and exciting.”

“You’ll have to carry around your planner every time you go out with him. Slot each other in between appointments and meetings,” he playfully suggests.

I was wrong. He doesn’t get it at all.

“You make it sound like a cold business arrangement.”

“And you paint such a pretty picture of true love,” he replies back sarcastically.

“I paint a *realistic* picture,” I note. “Practicality always wins out over romanticism. Haven’t you ever taken a relationship quiz?”

“No, I can’t say I’ve had the pleasure,” he replies again with a hint of sarcasm.

“Well, if you did, you’d know that most relationships fizzle because the couple falls into a rut,” I inform him. “They lose their own identity and become a half of a whole person. Sort of like Brangelina.”

I pause to let what I just said sink in before adding, “I don’t want to be a Saropher.”

“Brangelina who?” he asks confused.

“Forget I said that,” I answer him. I don’t have time to catch him up to speed on pop culture.

“You have this all figured out, don’t you?” he observes.

“Of course I do,” I reply optimistically. “And who knows, we might be the new model for successful coupling.”

“Did you just make that word up?” he playfully asks.

Ignoring his remark, I add excitedly, “We could be the next power couple, like mega celebrities, dining at the best restaurants and vacationing at the most exotic places.”

“And we know how much you *love* anything that’s exotic,” he says mischievously, and I feel myself blush a second time in less than five minutes.

“Yes . . . well . . .” I mutter. “It’s better than *erotic*.”

He laughs at my attempt to poke fun of myself. “I guess so. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Trust me. It’ll be great. I just know it!” I answer confidently.

When the day of the date comes around, I’m actually excited at the

prospect of meeting Mr. Topher Watson. I'm practically giddy with anticipation. He suggests having dinner at Taner Steakhouse, one of the hottest restaurants in Manhattan. Of course, it's booked solid for months in advance as the most sought-after reservation in town, but one call from Mr. Watson and we have an eight o'clock table at our disposal. Even though it's later than I usually eat dinner, as Topher explains over the phone, anybody who is anybody eats after eight. Who knew? I apparently have a lot to learn if I want to be half of a power couple.

I get to Taner at seven thirty, and at the mere mention of my date's name, I am given the VIP treatment. It seems Mr. Watson carries more weight than I could have ever imagined, because the hostess greets me like I'm an old dear friend and the servers scramble to make me feel comfortable. They seat me at the best table in the place and fuss over me as if I am an A-list celebrity. A girl can get used to this kind of treatment. I'm no diva, but I certainly won't object to a little pampering, once in a while. In less than five minutes, I'm sipping on a glass of champagne and nibbling on a selection of appetizers specially made by the chef.

I'm so overwhelmed by the buzz of activity around me and slightly buzzed from the bubbly that I don't notice the time. It's eight fifteen when Topher finally strolls or rather, should I say, saunters in. It suddenly occurs to me that this is all done on purpose. He intentionally wanted to make a grand entrance. And what an entrance he makes too!

First of all, the pictures don't do him justice. He is even more attractive in person, and for the first time in my life, I am about to use the word "beautiful" to describe a man. And stylish? I don't think there is a single article of clothing that he's wearing that doesn't have a designer label attached to it. He's wearing a light grey linen jacket with a pale pink checkered handkerchief peeking out from the front pocket and a white button down shirt. He also has on red (yes, you heard me right) red pants, something which, I'm convinced, only he can pull off, and to top off the ensemble, he has a dark grey scarf wrapped around his neck. I'm suddenly ashamed of the outfit I am wearing which, for the record, is perfectly acceptable under normal circumstances (a sleeveless black A-line dress and bone-colored patent pumps), but standing next to Topher, it suddenly makes me feel like a bag lady.

He catches my eye and casually waves his hand in my direction as if he's hailing a cab. I notice him taking his sweet time making his way to me, and

his hips shimmy as if he's strutting the catwalk at a fashion show. I'm half expecting to see flashes of light from a dozen or so cameras and cell phones aimed at capturing his every movement.

I get up to greet him as soon as he nears the table. He turns his face to kiss me on one cheek and then the other. As much as I wouldn't mind feeling his lips on my skin, I only feel the whoosh of air passing by me. I wonder if it's a British thing or a fashion thing.

He then cups my face with his hands and gives me an amazing full-on smile. "Sorry, love. I greet everyone that way." I feel my knees buckle beneath me at the sound of his voice. There's just something about a foreign accent that turns me to putty every single time. I quickly sit down so I don't fall and I give him my most seductive smile. It's good because I am speechless and smiling precludes talking.

The waiter immediately rushes to our table and Topher casts his eyes up and gives him the same disarming smile. I take another look at the waiter and can't believe my luck. He's even more handsome than Topher, if that's even possible. I can feel my face flush and I'm hoping that no one notices. It doesn't take me long to figure out that I have nothing to worry about because no one is looking in my direction. In fact, the waiter doesn't even give me a second glance. Neither does Topher. It's like I'm not even in the same room as the both of them. The waiter is staring at my date as if he's a glass of water and the waiter is dying of thirst. Topher lightly touches the waiter's arm with his hand and gives it a playful squeeze. I wonder if all British men are as affectionate as Topher seems to be.

"Hello, James. It's so good to see you again," Topher coos. It's obvious that he's a regular at Taner to be on a first name basis with the staff. Now this makes sense. It certainly explains the interaction between them. Topher must be a really good tipper.

"Pleasure is all mine," James replies in a low sensual voice. I notice Topher's hand has not moved from James' arm, but instead is gently massaging his bicep.

"Would you like your usual?" James asks.

Topher gives him an appreciative smile. "That would be lovely."

Our waiter is about to walk away without taking my drink order. That's rather rude. To make matters worse, Topher doesn't say anything to correct it. I cough loudly to get both of their attention and Topher finally breaks the trance between the two. He looks over to me in embarrassment. "I'm so

sorry, love. What would you like to drink?" he asks attentively. That's more like it.

"I'd like a Cosmopolitan, please," I order. Topher gives me a nod of approval, but as I turn to James, I'm almost certain I see him sneering at me in contempt. What's his problem?

After we have a few drinks, we are ready to order our appetizers and entrees. Unlike Company Man, Topher lets me pick out whatever I want from the menu and I don't even have to share any of it. I'm impressed by how well he knows his cuisine, because everything he selects tastes even better than the last. No expense is spared, and when the bill comes, he doesn't once take out his phone to calculate the tip. In fact, he throws his credit card down on the table without so much as blinking an eye. And as much as I try to protest and offer to split the bill, he won't hear of it.

Conversation flows so easily during our meal, and it's clear from his knowledge of music, art, books, and current events that he is a man who has traveled the world and knows a variety of people from all walks of life. I'm having such a good time that I forget all about my nerves. He's so easy to talk to and I find myself just being me, without having to close my eyes to do it.

"Do you go to the shows at all, Sarah?" Topher asks with keen interest.

The shows? I'm not sure what he's talking about exactly.

He must see the confusion etched on my face because he clarifies by saying, "You know, *Les Miserables*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Book of Mormon*?"

Oh, those shows!

"A few, here and there. And you?" I ask.

"Every chance I get!" he responds excitedly. "I *adore* the theatre."

He leans in and whispers, "It's my secret passion. If God had only blessed me with a singing voice, I'd be up there on center stage instead of in the audience, green with envy."

I've heard of people who love Broadway shows, but Topher seems to be in love with them. He goes on to say, "It's the *real* reason I'm in New York as much as I am."

And here I thought it had something to do with his business. As it turns out, it has more to do with show tunes. Well, I can certainly appreciate a man who has an interest in the arts.

"London has some amazing shows as well, but nothing beats Old Broadway." As he speaks, he has a far off expression on his face as if he's in some sort of a daydream. Suddenly, his eyes light up and he practically jumps

out of his chair. “I know! I have two tickets to the opening of a new play next month. It’s a much anticipated premiere and I’d love to take you with me. Would you like to go, Sarah?”

He looks at me with those beautiful green eyes and I’d say yes to anything if he asked.

“I would love to,” I reply calmly even though inside, I’m bursting with excitement. I can’t believe I already have a second date with Topher Watson and the first date hasn’t even ended yet!

“Wonderful!” he cries out.

He’s acting like a kid in a candy store. It’s rather sweet.

He goes on to suggest, “I know a fantastic bar right by the theatre where all of the actors go. We can make our way over there afterward to have a few cocktails.”

He certainly has the lingo down pat.

“That sounds lovely,” I respond.

He then takes his glass of wine in his hand and sips it slowly, savoring the taste of it in his mouth. Just that simple act has me mesmerized. I can’t stop staring at his lips.

After he’s done sipping and I’m done ogling, he comments, “It’s so nice to be here with you. In my line of work, I often travel in the same circles, meet the same industry people. Sure, they have private planes and we can go to Paris at a moment’s notice, but that gets rather tiring after a while.”

I can’t imagine ever getting tired of that. He then adds, “I’m always excited to meet normal, everyday women like yourself.” I’m not sure if he just gave me a compliment or an insult, but I don’t care. All that matters is that he’s excited to be here with me.

I can feel his eyes boring into me and my knees turn to jelly once again as he says in a serious voice: “You interest me, Sarah. I want to know all about you. I have a feeling that there’s more to you than meets the eye.”

I can barely breathe with the intensity of his look. He then playfully adds, “Tell me all about the ruthless world of Human Resources.”

I laugh and off we go again, getting wrapped up in conversation. I find Topher to be a great listener and an even better storyteller. This is definitely turning out to be one of the most enjoyable nights I’ve had in a long time.

At one point, he stops mid-sentence and looks intently at me. “You have such beautiful skin.” He leans forward and lifts my chin up with his fingers. “Quite stunning, actually, like porcelain.”

My hand automatically goes up to my face self-consciously. No one has ever paid me such a compliment before. Could he be coming on to me?

"It's probably the lighting," I offer as an excuse. It's rather dark in here, part of the whole romantic ambiance and the candles on the table purposely give off a soft hue to create an intimate feel. This kind of lighting would make anyone look amazing. I have to remind myself to downgrade to a softer light bulb at home to recreate the same effect. I might be bumping into the furniture, but at least I'd look wonderful doing it.

"No, it's definitely your skin," he notes. "Trust me on this. I've seen enough supermodels to know the difference. You're quite stunning."

He thinks I'm stunning! Now I know he's coming on to me. And the way he looks at me makes my knees go weak again. The compliments, the attention, the grooming. I definitely could get used to a man like this in my life. Someone who is self-confident and comfortable in his own skin. Someone who knows what he wants and isn't afraid of going after it. Where has he been hiding all this time?

He's actually too good to be true. It makes me wonder why he needs a dating service at all. He should be off the market by now. Maybe he's had a bad and painful breakup. I need to know and so I have to ask, "What made you try online dating?"

He responds without hesitation, "Like I said before, Sarah. I like to meet new people."

"Are you hoping to find that special someone?" I ask shyly, casting my eyes downward, hoping not to be so obvious.

"God no!" He exclaims loudly and the way he says it so emphatically completely takes me by surprise.

My eyes dart up at him in shock. I ask him the question again in case I misunderstood, "You *don't* want someone to spend the rest of your life with?"

"Heaven forbid," he replies with an expression on his face that suggests a foul odor is in the air. Apparently, I understood him perfectly.

"Who would want to be bothered with that," he goes on to say. "Relationships seem like too much work."

My head is spinning as I process the words that come out of his mouth. Have I misread all of the signs tonight? I thought he was giving me signs!

"I'm sorry. I'm confused. Why did you put your profile up on the website then?" I ask in a stunned voice.

“To meet new friends, of course,” he replies with a mischievous wink.

My eyes widen as I sit there speechless. Why, of course. It’s the most obvious thing in the world. Join an online dating service that advertises meeting your soul mate so that you can meet platonic friends instead. Why didn’t *I* think of that?

“Just friends?” I ask again, just to be sure.

“Yes, just *friends*,” he confirms. “I love to meet intriguing people like yourself, Sarah with the porcelain skin.”

“Aren’t there other ways to do that besides a dating service?”

“Not as much fun, if you know what I mean.” He gives me another wink and I blush on cue. Damn my involuntary bodily reactions to this man!

He just wants to be friends. All right then, but he winked as if there’s an underlying meaning. What could he be implying? And then suddenly, it dawns on me. I replay all of his comments in my head and it clicks. He’s not talking about platonic friends at all. He’s talking about meeting friends with benefits! He’s wining and dining me so that he can get me into his bed.

I’m still trying to process this new information when he excuses himself to go to the restroom. I quickly dig into my bag and pull out my cell phone. I immediately dial Amy’s number.

On the second ring, she picks up and says, “Why are you calling me when you are supposed to be out on a date?”

I cup the hand around the receiver so James can’t hear my conversation and speak in a panicked whisper, “I *am* on the date and he’s gone to the bathroom so I don’t have much time.”

“So hang up and call me tomorrow with all of the details.”

“No!” I practically scream out. “Don’t hang up. I need to talk to you.”

“What’s wrong with you?” she asks calmly, ignoring my hysterical rants.

“Amy, listen. This guy isn’t interested in making a love connection. He just wants to make love.” Now that I say it out loud, I know it sounds ridiculous.

“And that’s what you’re calling to complain about?” she asks in a voice that suggests I’m some kind of raving lunatic.

“Well, yes . . . I guess . . .” She has me all confused. Finally, I say confidently. “Yes!” and then I whisper, “It’s not what I signed up for.”

“Is he hot?” she asks.

“Yes. More than hot, he’s beautiful.”

“And we know from his profile that he’s rich and successful.”

“Well . . . yes . . . but,” I protest, knowing exactly where she’s heading with this.

“And you’re calling me to complain that a rich, handsome, and successful guy wants to get you in the sack?” she asks incredulously.

“I guess, but . . .” She interrupts me before I have a chance to finish my sentence. “Goodbye, Sarah. I’m hanging up now. I don’t feel sorry for you.”

“Amy, please don’t. You know I’m not a one night stand kind of person and I could really use your advice.”

I hear her sigh deeply as if she is struggling with what to do next and then she finally speaks, “Are you sure that’s what he said to you?”

“Well, not in those exact words,” I answer honestly.

“What did he *exactly* say, and be specific!” she demands.

“He said he wasn’t looking to meet his soul mate, that relationships are too much work.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” she observes.

“And then he said he just wanted to meet interesting people and have some fun.”

“And from that you got sex?” she shouts out in disbelief.

“He winked twice!” I offer in my defense.

“Oh that changes everything, Sarah,” she says in a sarcastic voice. “Why didn’t you say that in the first place? You’re right. He definitely wants to get into your pants.”

She’s not making this easy on me, is she? I hate it when she makes sense.

“Amy, this guy is not interested in finding a soul mate,” I reason.

“So what!” she exclaims. “That doesn’t mean he wants to get in bed with you! It means he’s not ready for a commitment. What’s wrong with that?” she asks, clearly annoyed by my behavior.

I don’t know what to say to that. Topher didn’t actually say he was looking for a physical relationship. He just said he wasn’t looking for a romantic one. Maybe I’m reading too much into this and I’m letting my imagination get the best of me. After all, he’s a very attractive man and I’m sure he has no trouble finding anyone to sleep with him. He certainly doesn’t need a dating service to help him in that department. Hell, even James would gladly volunteer if Topher asked!

“You’re right,” I concede. “I’m overreacting, aren’t I?” I ask quietly, ashamed of my over-the-top behavior.

“Just a little,” she replies in a gentle voice. Then she adds, “Sarah, just

have fun and let go for once. You'll be surprised where you end up."

Possibly in Topher's bed, I think, but quickly stifle the thought. Instead, I listen to Amy without saying another word and take her advice to heart. She's never steered me wrong before.

She then says, "Who knows, by the end of the night, you might not think sleeping with Topher is such a bad idea after all."

She's right. I should just see where this takes me. After all, having a guy like Topher interested in me isn't the worst problem in the world to have. Just as I'm about to speak, I look up and see Topher heading back to the table.

"I've got to go. He's coming back," I whisper in a hurried voice.

"All right, go, but remember, have fun, girl!" she reminds me. I smile. I can always count on my friend to talk me off the ledge.

"Thank you, Amy."

"Remember, f-u-n."

I hang up the phone and slip it back into my bag before Topher notices. As I watch him walk, I can hear Amy's words run through my mind. He is very good-looking and there's definitely an attraction between us. I should stop thinking so much and let things take their natural course.

When he finally sits back down at our table, he looks over at me and smiles. "I think it's time for a change of scenery, don't you think?"

I nod my head in agreement without saying a word as Topher waves his hand up in the air to get James' attention. The waiter runs over to him as quickly as possible as if he exists only to serve Topher's every need.

"Can you ask the valet to bring my car around, James?" Topher asks sweetly. I can tell from James' expression that he too is powerless to resist my date's charms. I don't blame him. Topher can be very persuasive with just one smoldering look.

Topher then turns back to me and, with a twinkle in his eyes, asks, "Are you game for a little fun, Sarah?"

My heart is hammering and I feel my stomach flip as I wonder what kind of fun he has in mind. I push any panicky feelings aside and, instead, focus on enjoying the moment. Let's see where this takes me.

Fifteen minutes later and I have the answer to the question of what is Topher's definition of fun. I find myself in a lavishly decorated lobby about to get into the most trendiest and exclusive bar in Manhattan. I just read about this place last weekend in the entertainment section of the newspaper. Supposedly, the entire bar is made out of ice, from the chairs and tables to the

counters where they serve the drinks. When we arrive, there is a line a mile long to get in; a line for everyone else that is, except my date. Topher saunters right up to the front of the line, gives his name to the bouncer patrolling the entrance, and before I can say the word igloo, a cute man with a mohawk and several earrings on both earlobes hands me a red parka, a red scarf, gloves, and the best part, a faux fur cap, just like the ones you see fashionistas wearing in the Nordic countries, except in NYC, it's not real fur. It's black and beautiful and all I want to do is pet it. But I don't dare look foolish in front of Topher. So instead, I place it on my head and my body temperature automatically rises. I'm so warm and toasty. We walk into the bar and it suddenly hits me like a ton of bricks why I'm all bundled up. It's freezing in here. And when I mean freezing, I mean double digits below zero degrees.

As I stand there shivering, I look around in awe. Just like the news article described, everything is encased in ice, except for the dance floor, which is made of dark mahogany. I was half expecting that too to be made out of ice and for someone to hand me ice skates. Thankfully, there is no ice rink because I'm a horrible skater. But everything else is clearly frozen, even the seats. As I sit down by the bar, I give a little jump as my behind gets a jolt from the cold. The bartender comes over to us to take our drink order. He, like James, gives Topher the once over, just as every other man and woman did when we first walked in. It seems that when it comes to being eye candy, Topher is an equal opportunity provider. The bartender then gives me a sideways glance as if to ask why Topher is with someone like me. I wonder if he's friends with James.

"What will it be?" he asks. Topher looks at me and smiles, "Ladies first."

"A hot chocolate," I request, still shivering from the frigid temperatures.

Both the bartender and Topper burst out laughing and I'm suddenly feeling like Clarence the Angel in *It's a Wonderful Life* when Nick, the bartender, asks him what he'd like to drink.

Topher wraps his arm around me and gives me a hug that makes my insides melt at a faster rate than my fur hat and gloves did.

"Isn't she precious?" he asks the bartender as he plants a kiss on top of my head. I suddenly feel like a five year old. "Sarah, sweetie," he explains patiently. "They only serve hard liquor here."

"OK then, I'll have a hot chocolate with a shot of vodka in it."

I don't hear any laughter, which is a good sign, but when I look at the

bartender, he's shaking his head in disgust. Topher gives my shoulder another little squeeze.

"How about just the shot of vodka?" Topher asks me. I give him a small smile in agreement and he gives me an approving nod back. "Good girl."

He then turns back to the bartender and adds, "The same for me."

I try to hide the disappointment on my face because I can't let him see that I'm freezing and wanted that hot chocolate desperately to warm me up.

"Did I tell you how fetching you look with that fur hat on? It's very Anastasia of you," he murmurs in my ear, causing goose bumps to form on my arm, perfect matches to the ones I've developed elsewhere from the extreme cold.

"Really?" I ask, trying hard to keep my teeth from chattering. I touch the hat on top of my head, grateful for the warmth it's giving me, unlike the rest of my body. Why did I decide to go with a dress tonight, of all nights? There is definitely a draft in some parts of my body that I wasn't expecting to experience.

"Yes," he says in a flirting tone of voice. "It suits you." There's that wink again.

"You look very fetching yourself," I offer in reply.

He's also wearing a fur cap, a blue parka, and matching gloves, and he does look amazing. But then again, he's so good looking that he can wear a plastic bag or neon lycra over his entire body and he'd still manage to pull the look off handsomely.

He smiles at me as the bartender quickly comes back with our two shots of vodka. Topher takes the shot glass in his hand as I do the same.

"To Mother Russia," he salutes.

"To staying warm," I propose as a toast.

We both guzzle it down and I feel an intense warmth spreading through my internal organs like a match has been lit. Wow! I'd forgotten how vodka can do that to a body. *Mmmm*. This feels nice. My teeth have stopped chattering and my goose bumps are fading. Forget the hot chocolate, bring me more of this! Two shots later and I'm feeling warm and cozy, like I'm on a tropical beach in the Caribbean.

Once I finally feel my hands and toes, I take the time to soak in the atmosphere. I hadn't paid much attention when I first walked in because my brain felt frozen solid, but now that I'm able to take it all in, I can't quite believe what I see.

This place is amazing. It's like something out of the circus. There are attractive girls in very skimpy outfits flipping around on trapezes hanging from the high vaulted ceiling over the dance floor. I'm in awe, not from their acrobatic skills (which are certainly impressive), but by the fact that they are moving swiftly, wearing close to nothing at all. Aren't they freezing? They must have an IV of vodka hidden somewhere in their flaps of clothing. There are also shirtless men sporting six packs balancing themselves on high stilts. All around us and on the dance floor, people are drinking and laughing and dancing very close to one another (probably to keep warm). The music is blaring, making it hard for anyone to have an intimate conversation, but that is certainly not the point of this place.

I look over at Topher, who is busy chatting away with a couple next to us and he seems to be the life of the party. I've never quite met anyone like him before. In just three hours, I've done more with him than I've done in the last three years of my life. It's made me reconsider my priorities. Amy is right! Maybe it's the vodka talking, but I should really take more time to have fun. I can't remember the last time Amy and I had a girls' night out like this. I know she'd love this place. Just like Topher, it fits her fun personality to a tee.

And without knowing why, I suddenly think about Gabriel and wonder what he would do if he were here. We'd probably have a good laugh at the three-ring circus and he'd probably tease me incessantly about my hot chocolate request and my faux fur hat. I missed talking to him today. I'll have to catch him up tomorrow. I can't wait to hear what he thinks of Topher and his ideas about online dating. I wonder if Gabriel would have offered the same advice to me as Amy did.

As if on cue, I feel Topher's lips by my ear and his hot breath on my neck, which causes me to jump. "Do you want to have a go at it?" he asks in a low seductive voice.

I freeze in place. Is he implying what I think he's implying? Have a go. Is that the term they use back in London? I know I promised Amy to keep an open mind, but I'm not sure I'm ready for this. I mean I know he's gorgeous and sexy and sophisticated, and most girls would pounce at the chance, but what if I don't live up to his standards? Oh God, he's probably had many women to compare me to, and more *interesting* to be sure. I don't know if I can do this.

I look at him in sheer panic only to see him arch his eyebrows and tilt his

head in the direction of the dance floor. My shoulders automatically relax. Oh, he doesn't want to sleep with me. He wants me to dance with him. Well, that I can certainly do! I mean, I'm not the most coordinated person in the world, but how hard is it to sway your hips and move your arms from side to side.

True, I've never been a club person myself, so it's been ages since I've actually danced. Wait, how long has it been? Let's see . . . does doing the Electric Slide at my cousin's wedding a year ago count as dancing? Panic sets in again as it dawns on me that I haven't really danced in a long, long time. What if I embarrass myself? What if he takes one look at my archaic moves and leaves me on the dance floor? I'm now wishing he meant sex instead of dancing. Although, if I'm being honest, I haven't exactly done that in a while either.

Oh God. I look over at him and he's waiting for an answer. I look at the dance floor and see everyone jumping around without a care in the world. I look back at him and he's wearing that devilish grin that's so hard to resist. So I don't. Instead, I exclaim, "Why not!"

"Let's go then," he shouts over the loud music as he grabs my hand. I stop him and with my other hand, tell him to wait. I signal to the bartender to fill up my shot glass again. I'm going to need a little bit of courage. I gulp it down in one swallow and it does the trick. I feel wonderful, without a care in the world.

Now, it's my turn to grab his hand and lead him out to the dance floor. The music playing is a familiar rhythm and blues song, slow and sensual. We face each other and I get as close to him as possible. I then move both my hands up and around his neck and nuzzle my head into his chest (which I'm not surprised to feel is rock solid). My hips begin to sway with the music and I'm feeling good. I look up at Topher and see a surprised look on his face. I giggle at his reaction and give him a wink. Two can play at this game.

Topher leans into me and says, "You are full of surprises, aren't you?"

"There's much more where that came from," I tease as I give him another wink. He throws his head back and laughs.

We continue dancing, but don't stay locked in each other's arms for long as the music tempo changes from slow and rhythmic to fast and hypnotic. Topher pulls away from me and somehow disappears into the crowd. Before I can follow him, I feel another pair of hands on my waist and I turn around to see a short, balding man twice my age trying to dance on top of me. I pull

away and decide it's best if I leave the dance floor and try to find Topher. I go back to the bar and nurse another drink, hoping he'll look for me there. A few minutes pass and there's no sign of Topher. After a half hour, I decide to look for him back on the dance floor.

I scan the crowd and that's when I see him, standing off to the side of the dance floor, but I see that he's not alone. Instead, Topher has got his arm around a tall and dark beauty and they are locked in a very intimate conversation. I gasp and look around, unsure of what to do next. Before I'm able to slip away undetected, I catch Topher's eye. He smiles as if nothing has happened and waves me over to him with his free hand. His other hand remains, I notice, still draped around that shoulder.

As I get closer to him, he shouts over the music, "Where have you been, Sarah?" Before I can answer, he continues in a teasing tone, "Were you trying to get away from me? Because you know you can't get rid of me that easily."

I open my mouth to speak, but Topher interrupts me again. "I want to introduce you to an old chum of mine." He turns to face his friend and says, "Sarah, this is Livingston. Liv, this is Sarah."

I look over to the tall and lanky man that is standing next to my date and nod. He's not as stunning as Topher is, but he has a face that I would describe as very attractive in a rugged kind of way. He extends his hand out to me with a broad smile and says, "Nice to meet you, Sarah." I notice from his accent that, unlike Topher, he is American, with a slightly southern twang.

I smile back and return his handshake. "Nice to meet you too."

Livingston leans closer to me and says, "Topher tells me you two are just getting to know each other."

"Yes, that's right" I reply, feeling awkward and uncertain of how much Topher has told him about me. "We met online a week ago."

Livingston turns to Topher and playfully jabs him in the ribs. "Well, don't believe everything this guy tells you. He's good for tall tales."

At this, Topher pulls him in and punches him lightly on the arm. They laugh like two guys who've known each other for a lifetime would. I wonder if they're childhood friends or colleagues. Although I don't think I've play wrestled with any of my co-workers before.

As if reading my mind, Topher explains, "Liv is an old dear friend of mine from my university days. We were on the crew team together."

I can see that Livingston doesn't take his eyes off Topher as he adds in a

soft voice, "I'd say we were more than that, wouldn't you say, Christopher."

Christopher? Could that be his first name and Topher is a nickname? That wasn't in his profile. But maybe some things are just too personal to put on a dating website.

"We haven't seen each other in years," Topher remarks. "Lost contact awhile back."

"Correction," Livingston points out. "You lost touch, not me . . . right after your career took off." I hear a hint of hurt in his voice.

"And of all places we could meet again, we bump into each other at a bar in New York City," Topher marvels. "I thought you lived in Miami?"

"I did, but my company transferred me over a few months ago. I now live in Long Island City."

"What a coincidence," Topher replies in surprise. "I'm here most of the time now."

While this exchange is taking place without me, I glance over at Topher, who is still looking at Livingston, and there's something in his eyes that I hadn't seen before. I turn back to Livingston and he has a nostalgic smile on his face. It's like they're in their own little world, speaking their own private language. And just as it was in the restaurant with James, it's like I'm not even in the same room with them.

And suddenly, I see Topher for the first time. I see past his gorgeous looks and his playful innuendoes. I see past his teasing and mischievous winks. It's been as plain to see as the nose of my face and I feel very foolish to have missed it as I begin to put all of the pieces together in my head. And here I was afraid he wanted to sleep with me. Boy, was I wrong.

I suddenly burst out laughing because it's quite funny, if you really think about it. Before I know it, it's a full-on belly laugh. Both Topher and Livingston stop talking and look at me quizzically, wondering why I've developed a severe case of the giggles.

"Are you all right, Sarah?" Topher asks concerned, as he places his arm around my shoulder. I can't speak because I'm still laughing. And the more he asks if I'm OK, the more I seem to laugh. I can't seem to catch my breath, but when I do, I wipe the tears from my eyes, regain my composure, and turn to Topher and say, "I should get going. I've got an early day tomorrow."

"Are you sure?" he asks distractedly, as he glances over to Livingston. I know he's conflicted. I can read his expression. He came with me, but would like to stay with him.

“Yes, I’m sure,” I reply as I follow his gaze. “But you should stay behind and have some fun. No reason for both of us to call it a night.”

He looks at me with uncertainty. “I should go with you, make sure you get home all right. You’ve had a few drinks.”

I wave him off instead. “Nonsense. I’m a big girl and I’m feeling fine. I’ll just catch a cab home. Stay with your friend.” I give him a warm smile. “It looks like you two have a lot of catching up to do.”

“Are you sure?” he asks again, concern still etched on his face.

“Positive.” I nod. I reach my hand over and give his shoulder a squeeze.

He suddenly beams that amazing smile of his and I can feel my knees buckling again. Even though I know now that there can never be anything between us, it’s like my knees have a mind of their own. They are at the mercy of his pearly white teeth and incredible dimples.

“I’ve had a lovely time tonight,” he says sincerely. “Shall we do this again sometime?” he asks expectantly.

I glance over at Livingston and then back at Topher, with his beautiful face and carefree, fun attitude and think why not! So what if a love connection wasn’t made. He’s funny, sophisticated, and easy-going. He’s promised to introduce me to some well-known designers and stylists. He’s even taking me to see a Broadway show! He’s better than a boyfriend. I get all of the perks without any of the baggage that goes along with a relationship. Maybe Topher has the right idea about this online dating game after all. I mean, I’ve just met a very interesting person and made, hopefully, a life-long friend. Not bad for a night’s work.

“Yes, that would be great!” I happily answer him. “I’ll call you later on this week.”

Topher leans over and gives me a soft kiss on both sides of my cheeks. “You’re a star, Sarah with the porcelain skin,” he whispers in my ear.

And just like that I leave the bar and catch a cab back home. On the ride to my apartment, I can’t help but smile at the irony of tonight. Topher went into this evening without any expectations of finding his soul mate, but as luck would have it, fate had different plans for him. I may not have found the love of my life, but I have a feeling he just did.

Sarah

“Should I break out the ‘I told you so’?” Gabriel asks smugly.

“No, because *technically* we didn’t break up,” I answer defiantly. He’s not going to get me to admit that I was wrong about Topher.

“Sarah, he’s gay,” he reminds me.

“And . . .” I offer dismissively.

“And that would mean that he doesn’t like girls,” he explains, and although I know he can’t see me, I roll my eyes at the obvious.

“Of course he likes girls,” I answer stubbornly. “Some of his best friends are girls.”

“But not in the way you’d want him to like you,” he notes.

“It’s a minor technicality,” I remark casually, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world to say.

“A minor technicality?” he asks incredulously. “Unless you’re planning to live a celibate life, Sarah, I’d say it is *more* than a technicality.”

“I’m living a celibate life now, so what’s the difference. At least, this way, I get to spend time with a sophisticated, witty, and very handsome man.”

“Who happens to be gay,” he points out.

“Again, a minor technicality,” I repeat myself. “We have a lot of fun together, Gabriel,” I reason.

“I’m sure you do, but . . .” he begins.

“But nothing,” I interrupt him. I don’t want to hear logic. Instead, I point out all of the reasons why I should see Topher again. “We like the same things and he makes me laugh. He’s also not bad on the eyes.”

“I thought that the whole point of using the service was to actually find someone to *be* with,” he says, placing emphasis on the word “be” to imply something more than friendship.

“I’ve decided on a new game plan,” I announce.

“And what’s that?” Gabriel asks in an amusing tone.

“Step one . . .”

He interrupts me before I can finish, “*Oh*, so now we have steps. Before we had lists.”

I choose to ignore his snarky comment, “Step one: Stop taking this so seriously and start having fun.”

“I like the first step,” he remarks. “Go on . . .”

“Step two: Enjoy each date for what it is. Not all of them have to lead somewhere. As long as I’m putting myself out there and meeting as many guys as possible, I’m on the right track. I have to stop being so picky.”

“Wait!” he exclaims. “I’ve been telling you this all along, but somehow Mr. Broadway mentions it and it’s suddenly a brilliant idea.” He imitates a

British accent as he says this.

“His name is Topher,” I correct him. “And he’s just a friend.”

“Of course he is because he *likes* boys!” he nearly shouts.

I laugh at his comment and then add, “Can please we focus on my new plan?”

“Why, of course, my lady. I’m at your disposal,” he says still using a British accent in a playfully deferential tone of voice.

“Thank you!” I offer in a regal voice, doing my best to channel the Queen of England.

“I bet Mr. Broadway isn’t as helpful as I am, is he?” he continues to tease me, dropping the accent.

“Can we concentrate on me now? If I didn’t know any better, I’d think *you* have a little crush on him.”

“From what you tell me, he *is* absolutely wonderful. Maybe I should.”

I laugh again and we spend the rest of the call talking about my new agenda. For the next few weeks, I dedicate myself to throwing out my “top ten” list and instead, go out with as many men as time allows regardless of whether they fit into my must-haves.

I have to admit that once the pressure of finding someone special fell by the wayside, I’ve been able to enjoy the company of some very nice men. But the best part of it all is when I make my way home and call Gabriel. I hadn’t noticed how much I have been looking forward to hearing his voice at the end of the night.

He’s been such a good friend to me and I realize that, even if this whole dating adventure is a bust, I will never regret a single minute of it (the good, the bad, and the really ugly). After all, if it weren’t for *SoulMates4Everafter* and Amy’s crazy birthday present, I wouldn’t have found my guardian angel and the person who has become a confidant to me. We laugh about my misadventures and he listens patiently when I lose perspective and hope after a date gone horribly wrong. Maybe it’s because we’ve never met, that it is so easy for me to open up to him. Even if that’s true, it’s hard to deny that Gabriel has become an important part of my life.

Gabriel

She has no idea how charming she is, does she? She's quirky and neurotic, but in a good way. It's ironic that she doesn't see that. She has no idea how much she has to offer a guy. What started out as an innocent request for help has turned into an unlikely friendship, and yet, part of me wonders if there could be more . . . I shake the thought out of my mind. No sense even going there.

I can't understand why she's having such bad luck meeting someone. Some of these guys are way out there. They can't all be like that. There must be normal guys who want to meet a nice girl like Sarah. I take that back . . . that want to meet a funny, attractive, smart, and ambitious woman like Sarah. But then again, if she does meet her soul mate, the phone calls will stop and I don't think I'm ready for that to happen.

Yesterday, she told me about the guy who wouldn't say a single word during the entire date. If it were anyone else telling me this story, I'd think she was lying, but this is Sarah, and besides having the worst luck in the world, she doesn't lie. She lays it all out there, regardless of how it makes her look. It's what I like most about her.

"Gabriel," she says in disbelief. "He used a small whiteboard to communicate."

"How is that even possible?" I ask incredulously.

"I don't know," she replies. "All I know is that when I met him at the restaurant, he seemed perfectly normal and all, but then I saw it."

"The board?"

"Yes, and the black marker," she adds.

"Are you serious?" I ask. "And you had no idea?"

"No!" she exclaims. "We exchanged emails and he sounded so charming. He was eloquent and witty . . ." She pauses before finishing her sentence. ". . . On a computer screen. But in person, he couldn't string two words together. It turns out he has fear of talking in public. He wrote it down. It's called *glossophobia*."

"Stage fright?"

"Severe stage fright," she elaborates.

"So why did he agree to go out with you if he can't talk?" I ask, trying to wrap my head around this.

"He's been going to counseling and his therapist suggested that this would be a good first step to overcome his fear."

“I’m thinking he’s not ready yet,” I observe.

“He looked mortified, Gabriel. He was sweating and when he wrote on the board, his hands were trembling.”

I shake my head in amazement. Instead of being upset about it, she’s more concerned about him and his feelings.

Without thinking too much about it, I remark, “I would too if I had a date with a beautiful woman like you.”

As soon as the words fly out of my mouth, I know I shouldn’t have said that. I wait nervously to see how she’ll react, hoping she didn’t hear it. Things will get complicated fast if she did.

There is silence on the other end. Finally, she asks quietly, “You think I’m beautiful?”

I guess she heard it, but why did I have to say it? I mean she’s pretty. All right, she’s more than pretty. She’s beautiful inside and out, but this isn’t about me. It’s about her. Besides, I can’t get involved. I won’t get involved.

So I quickly try to divert her attention by asking, “So did that mean you *actually* had to talk the entire night?” I wait to see if she’ll get the hint.

As casually as I sound, she mirrors my tone of voice as if I didn’t say anything unusual. “Yes, and I had to order our food and everything. I’ve talked to myself before, but never this long. By the end of the night, I was starting to lose my own voice.”

I breathe a sigh of relief and I’m grateful that she didn’t push the issue. She could have . . . most women would, a certain someone I know certainly would have. I shake the thought out of my mind.

“How did the date end?” I ask instead.

“We went our separate ways after dinner. He wrote his goodbye on his board. I gave him a kiss on the cheek and told him I had a lovely time.”

“You mean he didn’t ask you out again?” I ask in mock surprise.

I can hear her laugh. She’s got a great laugh. It sounds so light. She finally replies after she catches her breath, “I think it was pure torture for him. He might even need extra sessions with his therapist after what I put him through.”

“So it’s back to the drawing board?”

“It certainly looks like it,” she replies. She pauses and I can hear frustration in her voice. “Gabriel, I don’t think I’m cut out for this.”

“Of course you are,” I say encouragingly. “Besides, you’re halfway there. Wasn’t it three months you promised?”

“I guess, and then I can put this whole thing behind me. Get back to my life.”

“You’ll find the person you’re meant to be with when the time is right. It’ll happen when you least expect it,” I console her, but I wonder if I’m saying it more for my benefit than hers.

“Thanks, Gabriel,” she says softly. “You always know the right thing to say.”

Not *all* the time, I think to myself.

“And, Gabriel . . .”

I can hear her softly breathing on the other end of the line and I know she’s hesitating, not sure if she should say what she is about to. So I gently push her by prompting her, “Yes . . .”

Finally, in a whisper, she says, “Thanks for the compliment. That was really nice.”

And just like that, she hangs up.

Sarah

“He thinks I’m beautiful, Amy. What does that mean?” I ask my friend.

As soon as I got off the phone with Gabriel, I quickly dialed her number in a panic, eager for her to pick up the phone so that I can ask her for advice.

“It means he finds you attractive, which doesn’t surprise me because you are,” she says matter-of-factly.

“So does it mean he *likes* me or just likes me?” I blurt out, knowing that it sounds ridiculous as soon I hear the words come out of my mouth. It takes me back to when we were young girls and I used to pass her handwritten notes in class, asking if she thought the cutest boy in our school liked me.

“Surprisingly, I know exactly what you’re trying to ask and frankly, I really don’t know,” Amy offers.

She senses my frustration and adds, “Listen, Sarah, I know you don’t want to hear this, but as your best friend, I think I know you better than anyone else does. You have to be realistic. I know Gabriel is helping you and he seems like a nice guy, but the truth is you don’t really *know* this guy.”

“Of course I do,” I reply defensively. “Gabriel and I have talked every day for almost two months now.”

“But you’ve never met him before. He exists as only a voice on the receiving end of your cell phone. Gabriel is not even his real name.”

“I don’t need to see him or call him by his real name to know him, Amy,” I argue.

“You kind of do,” she disagrees.

“Then what do you call the online dating service you’ve signed me up for? I don’t know these men either,” I contend.

Ha! I’ve got her. She can’t argue with me on that.

“It’s not the same. Eventually you do meet them . . . *in person* and you, hopefully, get to have a real relationship with one of them,” she explains.

So apparently Amy can be pretty persuasive, but I don’t give up that easily.

“What Gabriel and I have is real,” I note. “He’s a good friend and who knows, maybe it can lead to something more. He said I was beautiful so he must be thinking the same thing.”

“Give me an example of a couple where this has actually worked?” she challenges me.

“An example?” I ask, scrambling to come up with one. I have never been any good with thinking on my feet.

“Yes, an example of two people who have fallen in love without ever meeting,” she reiterates.

She’s very specific in her questions, isn’t she?

I struggle to think of someone, anyone, and then it suddenly pops into my head like a flash of lightening and I exclaim, “Tom and Meg!” I offer smugly. I smile with pride at my quick thinking.

“What are you talking about?” she asks in confusion.

“In the movie, *You’ve Got Mail*,” I explain. “They fell in love over email exchanges.”

“That’s a movie, Sarah,” she points out. “This is real life.”

I’m silent because I don’t have a response to that. She does make a lot of sense, but she’s still wrong about some things: I do know Gabriel and he called me beautiful.

Amy finally speaks in a soft and gentle voice. “If Gabriel really wanted to ask you out, he would have. Don’t you think?”

My heart drops. I hadn’t thought of that before, but now it’s all I can think about. It’s not what I want to hear, but it’s the reason I called Amy in the first place. She’s always been my voice of reason. She brings me down to earth whenever I’m in danger of floating out of the atmosphere.

“Listen, Sarah, I’m sorry,” Amy consoles me. “I don’t mean to be so harsh.”

“That’s all right. You’re just trying to protect me,” I respond dejectedly.

Amy’s voice perks up as she continues, “Look on the bright side. You still have to give this online dating a chance. You promised me three months and a lot can change in the time that’s left!”

Again, she makes sense. My spirits rise a little bit. Maybe I’m reading too much into what Gabriel said. He is, after all, helping me find a soul mate. Why would he agree to help if he wanted to date me instead?

As if reading my mind, Amy offers me one last bit of advice, “Stop obsessing about Gabriel. He’s getting paid to keep his customers happy. Remember that. You are a customer.”

It’s as if she just poured cold water over me and woke me up. I shake my head in agreement, “You’re right. I know you’re right, but . . .”

Before I can argue a different viewpoint, Amy chimes in, “No buts. You have to move onward and forward. If he’s interested, he’ll let you know.”

Amy is right. I know she’s right, so why can’t I let it go?

Because he called me *beautiful*. Because he sounded sincere.

Sarah

I look at the calendar and realize that it's been almost three months to the day since I started this adventure (or more like nightmare, depending on how you look at things). Gabriel and Amy are both of the "glass full" mentality, whereas I'm on the side of the "glass empty."

Regardless of who is right, I promised myself I would deactivate my account at the three-month mark if it didn't work out. Since my date with Topher, I've gone out with all sorts of men and nothing has panned out. I've gone out with needy men, men obsessed with sports, men obsessed with themselves, men obsessed with wearing women's clothing. I've gone out with a mama's boy who actually brought his mother to our date (I got along better with her than with her son). I also dated a man with extreme obsessive-compulsive tendencies. Every two minutes he would have to sanitize his hands and rub them together exactly twenty times, no more and no less. If he missed count, he would have to start all over again. It made for quite an interesting evening.

But, in keeping with Topher's theme of meeting new people, I've also met a lot of smart and fun men who, for one reason or another, weren't quite right for me, but whom I've continued to stay in touch with as friends. And on the plus side, I found a new accountant to do my taxes and a fabulous colorist to do my hair. I've also added substantially to the total of followers on my social media page. So not all of it was a complete waste of time.

One more day, and it will all be over. I'm sitting at my desk, staring at the computer, my account up on the screen, detailing all of my failures in chronological order, from Mr. Company Man, Mr. Slash, and let's not forget Mr. Broadway. I should feel relieved. I should feel vindicated, knowing that I can finally give Amy my "I told you so" speech, which I've written and practiced many times over the last two weeks.

So why do I feel so empty? Why do I feel like there is a huge hole in my stomach? Is it because after tomorrow, I won't have a reason to talk to Gabriel anymore? I have to remember what Amy told me. If he were interested, he would have let me know, showed me a sign. He's had plenty of opportunities to do it, if he really wanted to. Since my talk with Amy, I've spoken to Gabriel every single day, sometimes twice a day, and in all that time, he's never given me any hint of interest. So that must mean he just wants to be friends and the beautiful comment seems like a million years ago now.

I log on to my account, more out of nostalgia than anything else. Just one more look around heaven before I get to float back to earth for a reality check. As soon as I log on, I hear the chords of a harp and see white wings flapping around my inbox signaling that I have a new message waiting for me. I open it up not expecting much. I've grown accustomed to the emails. I don't get as excited as I used to, maybe because I've lowered my expectations quite a bit since I started this. But what I see surprises and intrigues me all at the same time.

The man in the picture is exactly the type I would be attracted to. He has sandy brown hair, brown eyes, and a very sweet smile. He reminds me so much of my high school boyfriend, who played on the varsity basketball team and drove me home after school during our entire senior year. But I've learned my lesson with making choices based solely on looks as Topher and Mr. Slash flash before my eyes. Instead, I read his profile carefully to see if this is even worth pursuing, especially on my last day of online dating.

His name is Michael Lester. I like the sound of it. It's strong and easy on the tongue. Under hobbies, he lists hiking, white water rafting, and tennis. He also plays on an amateur hockey league, so he's very active. All of his pictures are of him in the great outdoors. I can see us on hiking dates, lugging a picnic basket up a secluded mountain and sharing cheese and wine under a big pine tree.

He's the Senior Director of Sales at a wine distribution company and lives in Scarsdale, New York. It's a well-known fact that Scarsdale, considered one of the most charming suburbs in Westchester County, is where the wealthy go when they want to start a family. There are plenty of nature and biking trails there, as well as babbling brooks and playgrounds. It's quaint and idyllic and practically everyone wears pastel-colored shirts, khaki pants, and loafers.

It says on his profile that he just turned forty and he looks like he's done everything that life could possibly offer, including traveling most of the globe. He loves to read during his down time (something that, between his love of extreme sports and his work, I don't know how he has time to fit in) and has read all of the classics, including most of Jane Austen. He must be real confident about the person he is because I know very few men who would actually list that author under their favorites.

I immediately call Gabriel for his opinion.

"What do you think?" I ask. "I mean, it can't be a coincidence that he

contacts me on the last day I planned to use the service. Isn't this perfect timing?"

"Too perfect, if you ask me," he comments. And as proof of it, he then observes, "He lists Jane Austen as one of his favorite authors."

"Yes! Isn't that incredible!" I respond excitedly. "What are the odds?"

"He's lying," he answers and there's an edge to his voice that I haven't heard before. I wonder if he's having a bad day at work.

"Why do you assume that because a guy says he likes Jane Austen, he must be a fraud?" I ask, starting to feel a little irritated by his quick rush to judgment.

"He doesn't just say he *likes* Jane Austen. He says she's his *favorite* author."

"There's a difference?" I ask in an annoyed voice now.

"Of course there is," he remarks in a matter-of-fact way. "I like Jane Austen too, but she's not my favorite author," he points out. "Be careful, Sarah. He's a player."

This must be what they call "guy speak" because I don't understand a word of what Gabriel is telling me. And men say *women* are hard to figure out!

I need clarification, so I ask, "Why would you say he's a player just because he likes Jane Austen?"

"Guys only say that because they know women want to hear it," he reasons.

He may have a point, but what's the harm in a little white lie. It definitely shouldn't be a deal breaker. But before I can argue my view, Gabriel adds, "You should move on. He's not worth the energy."

What did I just hear? Why should I move on just because he claims to like Jane Austen? After all, I've just spent the last three months dating men with logos, men with love of trees, and men with love of men. This guy seems perfectly normal and someone I can see myself getting along with. I can't just leave it like this, not when I believe fate has stepped in. So I ask, "Why not? I've dated worse than Michael and some of them based on your recommendations!"

"I just don't have a good feeling about this one," he says and then there is silence. No details, no reasons, no further explanation other than Jane Austen and his gut feeling. That's the one thing I wanted to avoid when I asked him for help in the first place. No feelings involved in the selection process, just

objectivity. Up until now, it's worked out all right. Now he's changing the rules of the game on me. I can't accept that.

"There has to be more to it than that," I say in disbelief.

"Nope, just a feeling," he answers simply.

He's doing this on purpose, clamming up like this. He's being stubborn. *Why won't he tell me his reasons?*

"Well, I like him and I'm going to go out with him," I reply defiantly.

"It's your choice," he replies back. And the way he says it, there's an underlying coldness to his voice. I don't know why, but it suddenly sets me off.

"I will!" I retort loudly.

"All right then," he answers calmly, but clearly annoyed.

"Who made you the expert on this anyway?" I ask in a sarcastic tone of voice, practically spitting out the words.

"You did, remember?" he reminds me and just as I'm about to let him have a piece of my mind, I pause mid-rant. He's right. I did drag him into this. I can't get mad at him now just because he makes a point I don't agree with. That's not fair to him. He doesn't owe me anything and I owe him so much. How can I be angry at him when all he's done is try to look after me?

"You're right," I say in a contrite voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to blow up like that."

I can hear him sigh on the other end of the line. "I'm sorry too, Sarah. I was out of line." And as his way of extending a peace offering, he adds, "He sounds like a good guy. You should go out with him."

Yet, I can't shake the feeling that there's something underneath this all that he's not telling me. I can't quite put my finger on it.

"They all can't be like you, Gabriel," I say, trying to lighten the mood. "I have to settle on someone." Although I meant it to be playful, there is truth to my words.

"You're just saying that because you need my help," he teases back.

"No, I mean it," I say quietly, almost in a whisper. "I would stop my search now if I found someone like you."

I can't believe I just confessed that to him. I close my eyes and can feel my heart beating loudly as I wait for some kind of a reply, anything. Maybe he'll laugh with relief and say that he's been waiting so long to hear those words from me. Maybe he'll tell me that he feels the same way, and he didn't speak up until now because he wasn't sure about how I felt about him. All

those thoughts drift into my mind; all those possibilities lie ahead until they come crashing down around me with the words he finally does say.

"I'm seeing someone," he mutters awkwardly underneath his breath.

Oh. I can feel my heart slide into my stomach. Of course, he's taken. Why did I think he wouldn't be? Amy was right. If he were interested, he would have said so. He obviously isn't. I just got caught up in the moment. He's been so good to me . . . more than that actually . . . he's been my best friend. It never dawned on me that he's not mine.

"Sarah? Are you still there?" he asks concerned.

I take a few seconds to compose myself and then in my most cheerful voice, I exclaim, "That's wonderful, Gabriel!"

"It is?" he asks, surprised, but then he corrects himself. "Of course it is."

"She must be someone *really* special." I try my best to sound happy for him even though inside I'm broken into pieces.

"Yes, I guess," he stammers. "It's still new . . . early days . . . but so far, so good."

Why does it hurt so much? My mind is swirling around with thoughts of this woman who has captured Gabriel's heart and what she's like. I bet she's tall, slim, and gorgeous. I wonder where they met. I bet it was at the grocery store in the produce department. Does she make him laugh? I'm sure she does and so much more.

Is it possible to hate someone you've never met before? Why not? It's possible to fall in love with someone you never actually laid eyes on.

"I'm happy for you," I say warmly, trying to hide the disappointment in my voice. More than anything, I want him to be happy, even if it's not with me. I then add, just so that he knows there are no hard feelings between us, "She's one lucky lady."

"Thank you, Sarah," he says softly. "That means a lot to me."

"And if things don't work out between you two, I know this really great dating service with a pretty wonderful guardian angel . . . He's one of a kind."

Gabriel

What is wrong with me? It's none of my business if she wants to go out with this Michael Lester character. Why am I surprised that she wants to meet him? She did sign up for a dating service. She did go on a million dates already. What did I think would happen? Could it be that, secretly, I've been hoping that she'd continue meeting losers? Is that what this is all about?

She's too sweet for all of them. She's kind, caring, and . . . What am I doing? I've got to stop interfering and let her live her life!

I just don't want to see her get hurt. This guy, Michael, sounds too good to be true. I have some experience with that. Usually, if they look too good, it means that they aren't. She should be careful with that one. Any man that openly admits to Jane Austen being his favorite author is up to no good.

It doesn't matter. I told her I was seeing someone so that's that. It's done. I have to let her find someone that she can spend the rest of her life with that isn't damaged . . . like me.

She sounded surprised and hurt when I told her I had a girlfriend. I don't think she was expecting that. I wonder if . . . was she suggesting that we . . . ? Put it behind me. That's what I need to do. I need to get back on track and concentrate on work. I need to move on with my own life. No distractions.

Maybe it's a good thing that she'd meet this Michael Lester, the Jane Austen fanatic. They'll fall in love and marry a year later. He'll move her to the suburbs and they'll have two kids and a family dog. It'll be perfect! Just perfect! And when it happens, she'll call me to tell me the news, thank me for all of my help, and then I'll never hear from her again.

It's exactly what I want. It should make me very happy. So why am I not?

Sarah

Closure. That's what I finally got. I asked for it and Gabriel delivered. It's actually a good thing. Really it is. Subconsciously, I would have continued to pine for him and obsess about every word he said and every gesture he made, always wondering if a small part of him was interested in me. I would have continued to compare every single man I went out with to him. That might very well be the reason some of my dates didn't work out. No one quite measured up to him.

No, this is really, really good. He did me a big favor by telling me about his girlfriend. Better now than later. Rip the Band-Aid right off. What's her name anyway? He didn't mention it. It's probably something bouncy like Katie, or something exotic like Sahara. She's probably gorgeous and super skinny and has some fabulous career, like an art curator or bull fighter. Definitely something much more interesting than a head hunter. Maybe, she's a gymnast and can contort herself into a dozen very exciting positions. On a good day, I can't even reach my toes!

Let it go Sarah! You have to move on. I've got to focus all of my energy on Michael Lester. After all, he's my last date! It's either sink or swim; die or let die; eat or be eaten, or something like that. At least, those are the only clichés I know. No matter. The point is that I have to give Michael a try and that means forgetting about Gabriel. Gabriel is just a friend, and Michael could be so much more, possibly the father of my future children. I don't really care what Gabriel thinks of him. *I* think he's wonderful, and so does Amy. She actually surprised me by saying so.

"He sounds great," she says after reading his profile. "He's also not bad on the eyes."

"Best part is, there are no hidden skeletons," I tell her.

I made sure too, spending countless hours searching the Internet just to be on the safe side. "He has no unusual fetishes, no embarrassing pictures of him wearing stockings over his head, and no multiple wives or half a dozen children that he's fathered, knowingly or not."

Amy bursts out in laughter.

"He's got a sister out on the West Coast who's married with three kids, and his parents are still together, celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary next month."

"Wow! You've done a thorough search," Amy marvels, impressed by my creative sleuthing. "Were you able to get a DNA swab and run his

fingerprints with Interpol?

“Joke all you want, but I’m leaving nothing to chance on this one,” I say emphatically as I hear Gabriel’s words swimming in my head. *Don’t trust him. He’s a player.*

“I just wish I knew why Gabriel doesn’t like him,” I complain to Amy. “He says it’s because Michael loves Jane Austen.”

“And you believe that’s the reason?” she asks incredulously.

“What other one is there? Maybe Gabriel is not a fan of the Darcys, the Bingleys, or the Bennets.”

“Have you considered the fact that maybe he’s... jealous.”

“No, he’s not. He’s got a girlfriend, Amy,” I dismiss her. “He told me so himself.”

“So what if he has a girlfriend,” she disagrees. “It doesn’t mean he still can’t be jealous.”

I shake my head in disbelief as I say, “I’m done playing games. As a very wise friend once told me, if Gabriel were interested in me, he’d let me know.”

I see a satisfied smile spread across Amy’s face. “Smart girl, that friend of yours. You should listen to her more often.”

“I would, but it will likely go to her head,” I tease her.

She arches her eyebrow. “As long as it doesn’t go to my thighs, I can live with it.”

I laugh and try to change the subject away from Gabriel. “Now if we can get back to the matter of Michael . . .”

Sarah

Nothing can keep me down today, not even Gabriel and his gut feelings about Michael. Because right now, I am waiting in front of Crandall's Department Store for Topher, who has volunteered to be my personal shopper.

Topher and I have kept in constant touch since our vodka shots at the Ice Bar and after three months of dancing around it, he's finally told me that he and Livingston are an item. I'm so happy for him. I mean, it was so obvious there was something going on between the two of them and I like to think I played a small part in it.

Topher has turned out to be a great friend and so much fun too. We went to that Broadway show he promised me just last month and besides riding in our own black limousine, we sat first row in the orchestra section and got to meet the entire cast afterward. When he's not in town, we speak via video chat and text, and I've liked all of his posts on social media. Just as I predicted, we've become that power couple, only without the sex.

I told Topher all about Michael and he's agreed to help me find a jaw-dropping outfit for tonight's big date. Unlike Amy, who basically said I was being too superficial, Topher agrees with me that first impressions definitely matter. And if I'm going to take fashion advice from anyone, it's going to be from the head of men's apparel at one of the biggest London department stores around, not from a food critic. If I wanted advice on a restaurant, Amy would be my girl.

Besides, most married couples remember what they wore on their first dates. If Michael turns out to be my soul mate, I certainly don't want him recounting to our children and grandchildren how I wore a bulky sweater and leggings the first time he laid eyes on me. No, sir. I'm going to dazzle, at least for the sake of future generations!

"Hello, lovely," I hear a familiar voice whisper in my ear. I turn around and can't help but mirror the broad smile that's on Topher's face. He looks even more attractive than he did that night at the bar. Is it possible that beauty can grow?

Today he's wearing his version of what I'm assuming is casual wear. He has on a skin-tight silk t-shirt with white floral designs, layered under a light grey button down short-sleeve shirt. He's paired it with dark grey pants, a black leather belt, and black penny loafers. Because it's Topher Watson, not a single item has been plucked off of a sales rack. Instead, he looks like he's

just stepped off a men's fashion magazine. My knees react as normal by buckling on –or rather, without- command. A tiny part of me is still disappointed that this won't be anything other than a good friendship. But my head certainly understands why.

"Topher! How are you?" I exclaim as he leans in to give me an air kiss on both cheeks. I fumble through it, forgetting to give him the other side of my face. I'm not used to the two-sided European kiss. I'm embarrassed with how uncultured he must think I am.

"I'm doing just fine," he answers. "More importantly, how are you? You haven't been drinking hot chocolate vodka shots without me, have you?"

He winks at me with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. He really should trademark that move.

I can feel the blood rush to my face. "No, not recently."

"We must work on getting your tolerance up, Sarah," he says as he flashes a playful smile. With that face, I can forgive just about anything he says or does.

"How is Livingston?" I ask teasingly.

My eyes widen with satisfaction as his expression changes. I never thought it possible, but for the first time I've made the unflappable Topher Watson blush. Apparently, Topher's knees have a trigger, just like mine, and its name is Livingston!

"He's doing well," he says with an impish grin. "We're getting to know each other again."

"I'm glad. Very glad." I nudge him on the shoulder as he blushes again. I'm quite enjoying the power I have over him, for once.

He quickly changes topics, "Enough about me. Today is about you. Let's go on that shopping spree, shall we?"

I laugh at his transparent attempt to take the focus off of his love life. "It's why we're here."

Then he arches his eyebrows as he asks, "What do you say after we're done, we go hit the bars? Work on that tolerance of yours."

"Will Livingston be joining us?"

I know I shouldn't try to embarrass him, but I can't help it. It's too easy.

He puts his arm around my shoulder as he says, "He's working late, so I'm all yours, darling."

"Then I accept . . . on one condition," I warn.

"Anything for you, Sarah with the porcelain skin." I will never get tired

of hearing him call me that.

“The place has to be at room temperature.” Really, I can’t freeze again, even for a cute little fur hat.

He gives me another wink as he says, “Sounds like a good compromise. Just as long as you don’t order hot chocolate.”

I nod. “Agreed.”

He starts to walk in the direction of Crandall’s front entrance leading me by the hand. “All right, love. Let’s get you a knock-out dress to show off those knock-out calves of yours.”

Again, I feel myself blush. For someone who has no interest in me romantically, he sure knows how to be flirtatious. He should really give classes in the subtle art of coquetry. I’m not complaining or anything. I love the attention, especially the stares (or rather scowls) I get from other women as we pass by arm-in-arm. They don’t have to know he’s batting for the other team. For just an afternoon, let them assume he’s my man.

Once inside, Topher gets right to work and I am mesmerized. He should really host shopping classes because he certainly knows how to do that well too. I can see why he’s so successful at what he does. He knows clothes. I mean *really* knows clothes, like I know how to breathe or walk. It’s a big part of who he is. He can tell you all about the texture, the design, and the feel of the fabric. He even knows exactly how it’s supposed to fall on the body.

And not only does he know clothes, but he can tell you the psychological reasons behind the choices people make when selecting a blouse or a pair of pants. I was afraid he was going to diagnose me as a schizophrenic when I couldn’t decide between a cute little black cocktail dress and a red hot two piece pantsuit. I’ve heard of retail therapy, but this gives new meaning to the phrase. Apparently, clothes really do make the man, as in literally!

At the end of our little shopping excursion, I have several takeaways from the experience. First, I’ve found a fabulous dress for my date with Michael. Secondly, I know what color palette works best for my porcelain skin (apparently, I’ve been wearing black and grey when I should have been wearing plum and teal). Third, I need to choose clothes that bring out my natural confidence and determination. And lastly, I need to stay away from high-waist jeans. It draws too much attention to my waistline. I’ve also scheduled a follow-up visit with Topher to make sure I stick to my retail treatments.

As a treat for being such a quick study, Topher takes me to the bar he had

talked about when we first met. It's called Sing Along and it's consistent with his first love. It's theater-themed and everyone there seems to know him because as soon as he walks in, he's greeted by name, plenty of hugs and lots of kisses on both cheeks. It is clear that Topher is in his element. He's surrounded by the great loves of his life: devastatingly handsome actors, delicious martinis, and Broadway show tunes. A few hours and several Cosmopolitans later, I'm feeling good. We talk, we laugh, we drink some more, and I'm having such a great time that I don't want the evening to end.

We even have entertainment! Topher and his merry band of actors gather around a black grand piano in the corner of the restaurant and a pretty young woman with a pixie haircut starts playing the piano while everyone else takes turns singing. From the looks of it, I'd say they've done this before. It's an impromptu karaoke session except, unlike some of the places I've been to, this group can really sing! They take suggestions from the crowd and I even throw out a few of my own, including "Tomorrow" from the musical *Annie*. Bet your bottom dollar that I just love when the sun comes out tomorrow. I'm tapping my toes to the music and swaying my head back and forth and sipping my delicious drink. A show like this would normally cost me a fortune and I have front row seats for free!

Suddenly, I feel Topher's arm wrap around my shoulders and pull me in from the back. From the looks of him, it seems like the alcohol has gone straight to his head too. He slurs, "What do you say, Sarah?"

I look at him in confusion. I haven't said a word or have I? I can't tell with the music playing and the effects of the cosmos swimming in my head and Annie still belting out that there'll be sun tomorrow. Topher nods in the direction of the piano and my eyes widen in surprise. It's amazing how sober you become when something terrifies you. He's not seriously suggesting what I think he is.

"Come on now, my porcelain doll, have a turn," he cajoles me.

Apparently, he is seriously suggesting what I think he is. I shake my head vigorously, prompting me to feel dizzy. I lean my head back on his shoulder and confess, "I don't sing, Topher."

"Nonsense!" he retorts. "Everybody does!"

He doesn't believe me, but it's true. I can't sing and I have long stopped trying, even in the car or in the shower, which speaks volumes about my natural talent or lack of it!

"You don't understand," I explain. "I *can't* sing."

Topher is undeterred though. “Who cares, darling? It’s all fun, isn’t it?” He looks over to the group around the piano. They do look like they’re having a lot of fun . . . well, maybe just this once, I could . . . What am I talking about? I can’t. I won’t. It would be too humiliating.

Then he says, “Everyone has to have a turn. It’s a tradition in this place.”

“A tradition?” I ask stunned. When did he mention this? I had no idea of any tradition. He’s not playing fair. He should have warned me.

“Of course. Why do you think the bar is called Sing Along?” he replies. Then he warns, “They’ll ask you to leave if you don’t.”

Who is “they” and why would “they” do such a cruel thing to me? I see a few heads nod in agreement with Topher. Sure, it’s easy for them to say! They all sound so wonderful.

Panic sets in and I protest loudly, “No, I really can’t sing, not a note. Wolves howling at the moon sound better than me. Nails screeching against a chalkboard is music compared to my voice. As soon as I try singing, rain starts pouring down!”

Topher laughs. “You are so melodramatic, Sarah. I didn’t think you had it in you.” He then wags a finger in front of my face. “There’s an actress inside of you after all.”

I close my eyes and plead quietly with him, “Please don’t make me do this.”

He doesn’t listen to a word I say. Instead, I feel his hands on my shoulder and they are lifting me up from my chair.

“I must. It’s my duty,” he says in a solemn voice. “You *need* to do this.”

He pushes me forward in the direction of the piano. He takes the microphone from a grungy-looking man decorated with tattoos who has the voice of an angel. I do a double take as I’m sure I’ve seen him somewhere before. Wait! It was on television. The Thanksgiving Day Parade to be exact. Oh my God, he’s the lead to this year’s Tony Award-winning musical. Is Topher kidding me? He wants me to follow a Broadway veteran?

I suddenly can’t feel my legs. I think I might faint. I think I should faint. I barely register the fact that Topher is speaking because my eardrums are about to explode. He, on the other hand, is as smooth as silk.

“Hello, everyone. I want to introduce you to a very special lady who has agreed to sing a little something for us tonight.”

I hear polite applause as he continues, “She’s a friend of mine and new to our little circle. As such, she wasn’t well acquainted with the rules here. No

singing, no service.”

I hear a few whoops and hollers of agreement from the crowd.

“So, without further delay, for your entertainment pleasure, I give you Miss Sarah Jenkins.”

I hear louder applause and a few whistles. Topher turns to me and I whisper in a terrified voice, “I can’t do this.”

He gives me a smile, the kind of smile only Topher can and suggests, “Think of Frank.”

“Frank?” I ask confused. Who’s Frank and why should I be thinking of him now?

Topher laughs as if he finds my ignorance adorable or something. “You know. Ol’ Blue Eyes.”

“As in. . . Sinatra?” I guess.

“The one and only, love.”

I scrunch my face up in confusion and wonder what any of this has to do with the feeling of sheer terror coursing through my body. I’m pretty sure Frank was never nervous. He was “The Voice” for crying out loud!

Apparently, in addition to being a retail therapist, Topher is also a mind reader, because he explains in a low voice, “He never sang his songs. He spoke them. What made Frank great was the way in which he told a story.”

He then looks me straight in the eyes and in a gentle voice says, “Tell me your story, Sarah.”

As soon as I hear those words, Gabriel comes into my mind and my mouth drops. That’s exactly what he told me to do all those months ago! There was another time not so long ago when I was terrified, petrified, in fact, of writing that profile. But Gabriel made it seem so easy. He made it seem possible. “Just tell me your story, Sarah,” he said and I did. All I had to do was close my eyes and think of him.

Suddenly, I wish he was here . . . with me . . . to talk me through this. My guardian angel on the other end of the phone line. Then I remember! He doesn’t have to be. I just need to close my eyes and imagine that little Italian bistro and his voice in my head.

Standing in front of all these people now waiting for me to sing, I do just that and somehow that calms my nerves and gives me courage. I open my eyes again and grab the glass of alcohol that is in Topher’s hand. I take a long swig of whatever is in it. Wow, that’s strong stuff.

“What’s in there?” I ask Topher, coughing through the burn.

“Single malt whiskey.”

That explains the burning and the warmth that is spreading through my body. The crowd is quiet and the pixie-hair girl at the piano is waiting for my song. I take the microphone from Topher’s hand and giggle as I see his eyes widen in surprise.

“All right, darling,” I whisper to Topher, imitating his British accent. “I’ll have a go at it.”

I look out over the small crowd and smile. I move the microphone closer to my mouth and address the audience. “In honor of the Chairman of the Board . . .” I lower my head and pause for dramatic effect. “I’d like to sing ‘My Way.’”

I hear Topher chuckle in amusement over the roar of the crowd, who are clearly happy with my song choice. Then I hear the familiar melody. I look over at Topher and give him a wink and begin singing the first words of the song. I think of Gabriel and give it my best, off key and all. After all, if I can write that profile, I can certainly sing. Who cares what it sounds like? As long as I tell my story, that’s all that matters.

I don’t remember *exactly* when it is that I got home. All I know is that when I woke up the next morning, I had a rhinestone tiara on my head, a yellow feather boa around my neck and a tiny plastic gold trophy on my nightstand. Good old Topher. He got me to do the impossible with a little help from Frank . . . and Gabriel. Who knows, I may even start singing in the car again. But even if I don’t, I have a feeling that as long as I’m friends with Mr. Broadway, life will never be boring again.

A few days later, my courage is again put to the test, except this time I don’t have Topher or Frank to see me through. I am wearing *the* dress and am one hour away from meeting Michael Lester for the first time. I could use something to calm my nerves, but after my karaoke debut, I don’t dare drink again. Knowing my luck, I’d be tipsy before my date even begins. Thanks to the whiskey and my low tolerance for alcohol, I’m now a member of the Broadway Pack, which Topher tells me is quite the honor. They apparently don’t accept just *anyone* into that exclusive club.

So even though it all worked out and I can sing again, I can’t stagger around, slur my words, or belt out a Frank Sinatra song over dinner with Michael. How would that look? After all, I want to make a good first impression, not scare him off.

I’ve spent the whole day grooming. Amy normally helps me get ready,

but she's on a weekend getaway with her husband. It's lousy timing, but I completely understand. She so deserves a mini-vacation. With young kids and a job, time alone is a rare commodity, and so if the in-laws agree to babysit, you jump at the chance.

I miss having her with me though, styling my hair and giggling over what might happen at the end of the night as we pour ourselves a glass of wine. I promised Amy I would text her a picture before I left my apartment to make sure my panty lines aren't showing and I don't have lipstick on my teeth. She said that was as good as being there except I can't text her a glass of wine, can I?

I've never tried a selfie on my cell phone before, but how hard can it be? People take selfies all the time and they look so good, some of them even look like works of art. I position myself and extend my arms out in front of me as I hold the cell phone and snap.

I review the picture. Argh. I look horrible. Let's try this again. I can't expect a winner the first time out. I try a sideward glance and snap. This looks even worse than the first. One more shot, this time with a pouty face. I thrust my lower lip out and snap. I review the picture and cringe. Instead of looking like a vixen, I look like a small child having a temper tantrum. I've had it. I don't understand how young girls do this all day long, but I guess if I still had a firm body and a single chin, I would too. Forget the fancy poses. No wide-eye fishy face. I just have to pose and snap. And that's what I do. I contort myself into a pretzel while my arms are outstretched high up in front of me and snap. I look at it somewhat satisfied with the results. This one is a keeper.

I text it to Amy with the caption: *What do u think?* I hit send and wait for her to respond. As I do, another person comes to mind. Part of me knows it's wrong. I can just hear Amy shouting in my ear: Don't do it! But I need another honest opinion and he's still my friend. Without thinking about it and before I have time to change my mind, I quickly attach the picture to another text and hit send.

Within a few minutes, I hear a ping and my heart jumps. I look down and my heart sinks again. It's from Amy. I burst out laughing as I read it.

Baby has back and front and everything else. U look amazing!!!! He might jump u the minute he lays eyes on u. Better carry pepper spray! JK Have fun! xoxo

Leave it to Amy to put me in a better mood. I look back down at my cell,

hoping to get another text, but not from my best friend. He must be out . . . probably with his girlfriend. I set it down and finish getting ready for my date. If he wanted to text me back, he would have. No sense thinking about it. After all, I have a handsome and successful guy waiting to . . . what did Amy say? . . . jump me the minute he sees me.

Gabriel

I place the slice of pepperoni pizza on the coffee table with my ice cold bottle of beer. This is the sort of dinner I've been eating for the past six months. I'm not much of a cook and living alone has made cooking practically non-existent. So instead of trying to make something that's barely edible, it's easier to order in. I sit down on my living room couch to watch the basketball game on television when I hear the ping of my cell phone.

I reach for it with one hand while balancing the paper plate of pizza in the other hand. It's from Sarah. I'm half hoping she's texting to tell me that Mr. Perfect stood her up. I don't know why, but that guy rubs me the wrong way. I click on the text and I see that it's a picture instead and it stops me cold. I nearly drop the pizza on the floor. It's a picture of Sarah wearing the most incredible dress I've ever seen. It's not so much the dress, but the way that she fills it. *Good God*, this girl is attractive! I swallow hard and I can feel the familiar feelings of desire. She looks amazing and beautiful, and it's all for this guy named Michael . . . what's his last name again? Does it matter?

Under the picture she asks what I think about the dress. Is she being *serious*? How can she ask me that? Does she really want to know?

I drop the phone on the coffee table and run my hand through my hair, all the while never taking my eyes off of *that* picture. Should I tell her how beautiful she looks? Do I tell her that she's wasting her time with this Michael guy? He won't appreciate her or treat her the way she deserves to be treated.

I let out a deep breath, knowing that I can't tell her. I won't. It's not fair to her. She's been looking forward to this date and she deserves to have at least one of them go her way. Up until now, they've all been losers. She was starting to lose hope. It's wrecked her self-confidence. Besides, I've told her I'm seeing someone and I can't take that back. What's done is done. It's for the best really.

Another ping and I look over and it's from Sarah again. This time, she texts: *That bad huh?*

She really has no clue as to how amazing she looks.

I reach over and text her back, trying to sound as casual as possible. *U look great. Hope it goes well.*

I wait a few minutes and another ping and another message: *Thnx. I'll let u know tomorrow. Not eating for two days to fit into this dress better be worth it!*

If I were Michael, I'd be thinking all night of how to get you out of that dress, but I'm not him and for the first time in my life, I wish I were someone else.

Then I hear another ping. *I'm nervous. What if ur right. He's 2 good to be true?*

I feel like an idiot. All I've been thinking about is myself and I forgot all about Sarah's feelings. What kind of a guardian angel am I? What kind of a friend am I?

I look back down at her picture and know what I have to do, even if it kills me. I text her back.

Don't listen to me. It'll be fine. Have a great time!

I drop the phone back down on the table. I sink down on the couch and take a long swig of my beer. The first of many tonight. It'll help me get used to the idea that she doesn't belong to me. I have to let her go.

Twenty-Fifth Blind Date: Mr. Perfect

“So, tell me a little bit about yourself?” he asks with interest and I smile.

The dress was a big hit (thank you very much, Topher). Michael couldn’t take his eyes off of me from the minute I walked into the restaurant and told me so several times. If there is anything I’ve learned from Topher by now, it’s how to make an entrance.

Looking at Michael, I have to say the feeling is mutual. He’s much more handsome than in his pictures. In fact, the pictures really don’t do him justice. He’s wearing a dark blue cardigan over a light blue collared shirt with grey slacks. His light brown hair is thick and wavy and falls over his eyes in a rather sexy manner. His brown eyes are equally as captivating. He looks like he should be on a billboard in Times Square in just his underwear. I mentally check off the “sexual attraction” box from my top ten “must have” list. And here Gabriel thought making lists was silly.

Fifteen minutes into the date, we’ve ordered our food and I’m sitting across from him in the most intimate setting that I’ve ever been. It’s definitely conducive to romance. The lighting is low, the music is soft, and the table is adorned with candles. If Cupid flew over our heads shooting arrows at us at this very minute, I wouldn’t be surprised in the least bit!

I look deeply into his big brown eyes as he patiently waits for me to speak. I know exactly what I’m going to say. I’ve rehearsed this a million times, starting with Gabriel a few months ago, for all of the dates I’ve been on since then. You would think I should be used to talking about myself by now, but because I’m trying so hard to impress Michael and want him to like me, I feel the butterflies fluttering in my stomach. Take it easy, Sarah. This is going great. Just be yourself.

I straighten out my posture and give him a seductive smile. I have every reason to feel confident, especially with this dress on. All I need to do now is let the words flow out. The hard part is starting. I know that once I begin, the conversation will fall into place. Here we go. But when I open my mouth, instead of my own voice, I hear an unexpected sound. It’s not exactly words. It’s more of an involuntary reaction. My eyes widen and I immediately place my hand up to my mouth as I feel my diaphragm contract and my shoulders spasm. Five seconds later, it happens again. I’m mortified because I suddenly realize what is wrong. I’m hiccuping. *Hiccuping!* How is this possible?

Michael looks concerned and places his hand on my shoulder. “Are you all right?” he asks.

I open my mouth again to try to speak, “I’m . . . *hiccup* . . . fine . . . *hiccup*.”

This is humiliating. I reach for my glass of water and swallow it down in one gulp. Out of the corner of my eye, I can tell from the expression on his face that he’s not sure of what to do. I give him the thumbs up sign to let him know I’m not choking or anything as serious as that. I don’t want him jumping out of his chair to give me the Heimlich. First of all, I worried that my dress, which is barely holding up certain body parts, would come flying open letting it all hang out and I’d probably spit out the water from my mouth, spraying it all over the restaurant like a garden sprinkler. Knowing my luck, I’d probably extinguish the candles at our table.

After I’ve emptied out the contents of the glass, I wait to see if the hiccups have gone. I can see Michael leaning in expectantly. He’s following my cue without having a clue as to what this was about. My shoulders start to spasm again and his eyes suddenly light up as he realizes what is actually going on.

“You’ve got the hiccups!” he guesses.

I nod in agreement as I don’t dare open my mouth, afraid that another loud sound will fill the air. This place is not only romantic, but very quiet. Everyone is talking in whispers like they’re in a library. I wish they would turn up the music or drop a plate on the floor or do something noisy.

“And the water didn’t help?” he asks.

I shake my head vigorously, as I feel another hiccup coming on.

He reaches over across the table and rests his hand on my mine. “You poor thing,” he coos and I suddenly feel overwhelming gratitude toward Michael Lester. It’s not often your date consoles you during a hiccuping fit. Come to think of it, it’s not often someone has a hiccuping fit on a first date.

“Let’s see what we can do to make them go away, all right?” he consoles me. I nod and cast my eyes downward, feeling like an embarrassed mime.

“Try holding your breath,” he suggests.

I’ll try anything at this point, even standing on my head, if it will make this stop.

He reaches for his cell phone. “I’ll time it. When I say the word ‘go,’ take a deep breath and hold it in until I tell you to release.”

I nod again. This is starting to feel like a game of charades gone horribly wrong.

“Go!” he booms in a loud voice and I jump up startled. Not only have I

missed my cue to hold my breath, but he's also scared me half to death. And I still have the hiccups.

He resets the clock and we try it again. He lifts his hand up as a signal and then he points it in my direction. This time, I don't miss my cue. Instead, I inhale and wait. I feel ridiculous with my cheeks all puffed out. Thank goodness, Michael has his eyes on the clock and not me. I probably look like a blowfish. Finally, after what seems like minutes instead of seconds, he gives me the go ahead to exhale.

"Now take deep breaths," he commands, and I do as I'm instructed. "Breathe in and breathe out," he repeats. "Breathe in and breathe out."

Is this what Lamaze classes feel like? This isn't so bad, but then again I'm not trying to push an eight pound baby out of my body, am I? I suspect the breathing is the easy part.

Finally, he tells me to stop and he looks at me as if I'm a ticking time bomb. "So?" he asks. "Did it work?"

I smile, convinced that it did the trick until I open my mouth again. "I think it's . . . *hiccup*."

Oh, this is useless! I should just go home now and save myself any further humiliation.

"Why don't we . . . *hiccup* . . . reschedule?" I offer, wishing I had a small whiteboard to write down what I want to say. Serves me right. This is what I get for making fun of my glossophobic date!

Michael shakes his head. He won't hear any of it. "Nonsense. So you have the hiccups. If it doesn't bother you, it doesn't bother me."

I look at him in amazement. *Is he for real?*

"Are you . . . *hiccup* . . . sure?" I ask, giving him another chance to back out of this.

He gives me a warm smile. "Of course I am. Until it goes away on its own, I'll do all the talking and you can just listen."

I smile back. "I'm OK . . . *hiccup* . . . with listening."

"Good," he nods, happy with my answer. He then takes my hand and looks intently into my eyes, which makes my heart beat faster. "And as for those pesky hiccups," he offers. "I'll find a way to make it stop. I have my . . . *methods*." He arches his eyebrow and flashes a mischievous grin and I burst out laughing in between the hiccups.

His facial expression changes and in a low voice, he adds, "One thing about me, Sarah, that you'll hopefully come to know is that I like a

challenge.” He holds my stare. “I don’t give up easily when it’s something I *really* want.”

Somehow, I don’t think he’s talking about hiccups anymore.

The rest of the evening goes smoothly, except for my incessant hiccuping. As he promised, Michael does all of the talking and I do all of the listening. He tells me about his childhood and what it was like to grow up in a big family with tons of brothers and sisters. He tells me about his college years and how he slowly climbed his way up the corporate ladder after graduation. He tells me about his current job as a Chief Information Officer of a major company, which is another way to say that he’s a computer genius. He’s traveled the world and tells me all about his adventures, starting with his backpacking tour through Europe at the age of eighteen and ending with his most recent business trip to Tokyo last month.

He leaves no stone unturned, even divulging every single detail about his love life, including the trail of ex-girlfriends he’s left behind. My eyes widen as I hear him recount one romantic relationship after another. He certainly has dated a lot. I don’t know how he’s managed to remember it all. I would need a notebook or a journal to keep it all straight.

He’s dated artsy types, sporty types, career women, southern women, high society women, older women, younger women, friends of the family, even strangers on the subway.

It’s quite the impressive list. So impressive that I have to interrupt him at one point, “Michael, can I ask you something?”

His eyes crinkle into a smile. “I see your hiccups are gone.”

I didn’t even notice, but he’s right. I smile back, “I guess they are. You’re a natural storyteller.”

“If I had known I was the cure to your hiccups, I would have bored you with my stories sooner,” he teases.

I shake my head. “I’m not bored at all. You are *very* fascinating.”

“I’m glad I excite you,” he says flirtatiously. “Should I keep talking?”

I laugh and then ask, “Seriously, Michael. Why did you sign up for an online dating service? You don’t seem to have any trouble finding women to date.” From the sound of it, finding them on subways, libraries, cafes, sidewalks . . .

His smile fades and from the serious expression on his face, I can tell he’s all business now. Gone is the flirtatious side of him. “To tell you the truth, Sarah, I have been with my fair share of women.”

That's putting it mildly.

He then confesses, "But this is my first time using a dating service."

His eyes fall squarely on me and he doesn't look away. If this was a staring contest, he'd win, hands down.

"So why now?" I ask in a fog. His eyes are very hypnotizing. I can't seem to look away. Is this what it feels like to be put in a trance?

"I suspect for the same reasons you signed up," he replies.

Does he also have a best friend who signed him up against his will as a birthday gift? What are the odds?

He continues, "My career always came first and I worked very hard to build it up to where it is now."

I can understand that, and from the looks of it now, he's certainly succeeded.

"I was always busy and never interested in anything serious but because I don't like to play games, I always made sure to be honest with the women I was with. They understood exactly where I stood on the possibility of marriage."

I can certainly appreciate a man who doesn't like to play head games.

"And when I wasn't working and I needed some company . . . well . . ."

He looks away sheepishly before adding, "Let's just say I liked to play hard too."

I nod in understanding. From the litany of ex-girlfriend stories I've just heard, I'm sure he liked to play hard . . . *against* everything. The mental image of him shirtless and against the wall, against the floor, against a bathroom stall is distracting me. So much so, that I almost don't hear the next few words he speaks.

"I won't lie," he says. "I've enjoyed the friendships of many beautiful women with the mutual understanding and sole purpose of satisfying a basic fundamental need." He pauses for effect, letting the words sink in.

How did he do that? He's just made his promiscuous past sound like an ordinary business transaction. I can see why he is so successful at his job. He can probably logically talk his way into anything, including woman's underpants.

"So what's changed?" I ask, hoping for honesty like he prides himself in being.

"I'm getting older," he confesses. "I'd like children and I'm finally at a place where I'm looking for someone to settle down with and raise a family."

Honesty is exactly what I get. It should sound romantic, but somehow it doesn't. It all sounds so . . . technical instead. Is this how it's supposed to go? Why not? I ask myself. Maybe this is exactly how it's supposed to pan out. It makes sense. Isn't this what Amy wants for me? Isn't this what I want? Despite my protests and all of my promises after meeting Topher to just enjoy myself, haven't I been secretly hoping to find someone to settle down with as well? Haven't I been matching up my "must haves" and measuring them up against all of the men I've dated. Up until now, no one has checked off every single one of my top ten. Nobody except . . . Stop it Sarah. You're here with Michael. Michael, who is actually available and wants to be with you. Michael, who doesn't have a girlfriend and who doesn't call you beautiful only to take it back.

And he's got the right idea, too. After all, I've tried it the other way (love before marriage) and it's never worked. I should approach dating like a business and find a compatible person to share my life with; and the love can always come later. Michael and I can grow to become best friends, just like me and . . . There you go again! You are not thinking about Gabriel tonight!

Michael interrupts my thoughts by pointing out, "We share many of the same interests and beliefs. We have similar educational and family backgrounds. You're an independent, attractive, career-minded woman who's at that stage in her life, too, where she may be looking to start a family. Our goals align. Am I right?"

I nod and give him a small smile, but all the while I can hear *his* voice telling me sarcastically, "He's a real romantic guy. A regular Casanova. I bet he's even got a marital contract all typed up for you to sign, listing how many children you're supposed to have and how many times a week you will commit to have sex."

I close my eyes, willing Gabriel to leave my head. I wish I knew where my "off" switch was so I could shut him down.

Meanwhile, Michael doesn't seem to notice and, instead, is rambling on. "So it makes sense to spend some time together to see where this can lead, don't you think?"

I can't think straight because all I hear is an imaginary Gabriel saying, "Where's the spark? Where's the passion? He's a player, Sarah. He's saying everything you want to hear. All with a single purpose in mind!"

"Be quiet!" I tell myself, trying to silence imaginary Gabriel in my head. "You need to go away and let me be with Michael! I need to give him a

chance.”

I ignore the voice and instead turn to Michael and remark excitedly, “That’s a wonderful idea. I was just thinking the same thing.”

He smiles and says, “That’s great, Sarah. I have a very good feeling about this.”

And despite the turmoil going on inside of me, I reply confidently, “So do I.”

Within a few hours, Michael is dropping me off in front of my apartment building, and if I had to decide whether the date was a success, despite the hiccuping incident and imaginary voices running through my head that would, under normal circumstances, have me committed to the psychiatric yard, I’d say it was. Once I put Gabriel out of my mind, I was able to enjoy myself, and it turned out to be the best date I’ve had since this entire online odyssey started. We talked for hours over dinner, right through coffee and dessert. We even discussed Jane Austen at great length, and he knew every single book by heart and had watched all of the movie adaptations. He’s even seen the BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice* with Darcy’s wet shirt. I knew it! He’s not a fake. He’s the real deal! There’s a certain someone who is going to get an earful from me tomorrow.

I was so engrossed in our conversation that I never once looked at my watch or glanced at the door or even flagged down the waiter for the check. In fact, I had no idea how the time flew by, and when I realized the date was over, I was actually very sorry to see it end.

He offered to split a cab with me and walk me to my door. Despite what the magazine articles tell me otherwise, chivalry does still exist! Michael Lester is living proof of that. Now, I’m standing by the door, facing him and nervously wondering whether he’ll make a move. I feel just like a giddy teenager on my first date. I almost expect my dad to peak through the window any minute now to tell me it’s time to get inside.

“I’m so sorry about tonight,” I blurt out again, apologizing for the hiccup mishap for what seems like the fiftieth time tonight.

“It’s all right, Sarah,” he says and reaches for my hand to hold it in his. “It was actually rather sweet.”

“Hiccuping is sweet?” I ask incredulously. What’s sweet is the way he’s trying to put me at ease about the disastrous start to our date. Meanwhile, I can feel my palms sweating and my heart pounding as he moves closer to me.

“Actually, it’s very sexy,” he says in a low, seductive voice as he arches

his eyebrows.

My eyes widen in surprise. I've been called sexy for a lot of other reasons, but never because I hiccuped.

Before I have time to process it, he moves his head in and softly brushes his lips against mine. It feels really nice. I can't remember the last time I *really* kissed someone. Air kisses with Topher don't actually count, do they?

I close my eyes and my hands move to his neck as if they have a mind of their own. We spend the next few minutes locked in an embrace as our mouths and hands take their time exploring one another. For me, this would include parts of my body that haven't been explored in a very long time.

As quickly as it started, I break away from Michael before we get carried away. Not only so I can catch my breath, but also to slow things down a little between us. After all, it's our first date and I have standards. He needs to know that I'm worth waiting for.

Gabriel

I couldn't sleep at all. Ever since that damn text with the picture of her and that dress, she's all I've been thinking about. Every time I tried to close my eyes, Sarah would appear in front of me, smiling, and then my gaze would wander down to her dress and those gorgeous legs that seem to go on forever . . . I force myself to open my eyes again. If I've gotten two hours of solid sleep, I'd be surprised.

I look at the alarm clock on the bedside table. I have to get up and get ready for work, but I don't want to. I know that Sarah will call soon, telling me all about her date with Mr. Perfect, and I might lose it. Despite trying to drown my sorrows in my beer last night, none of it helped. As of yet, I haven't figured out a way to get her out of my system.

Like clockwork, as soon as I get out of the shower, my cell phone rings. I can always ignore it, but I know she'll keep calling until I pick up. Better to get it over with now. Remember, keep it natural. Casual is the word. She can't know what you're thinking. I take a deep breath and answer the phone.

"Hey Sarah. How's Cinderella this morning? Was Prince Charming everything you thought he would be?" I ask teasingly, even though I don't really want to hear about him or how he may have swept her off her feet.

"It didn't start out so well," she replies cryptically.

Now *this* I'm interested to hear about. Could it be that Prince Charming lost his charm? That wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to happen.

"What happened?" I say, only too eagerly.

"Gabriel, I hiccuped the *entire* date," she exclaims. She's clearly embarrassed by it.

"How is that even possible?" I ask incredulously.

"I don't know. All I know is that I met him at the restaurant and everything seemed to be going so well and then I heard it."

"The hiccuping?" I ask.

"Hic, hic, hic."

I laugh at her imitation.

She continues, "I was mortified."

I can just see her go into a panic. "So did it stop?" I ask.

"Eventually!" she laughs. "We tried everything."

"Holding your breath and counting to ten?" I ask, going through the common list of home remedies.

"Did it."

“Did he try to scare you?”

“Boo and all,” she answers.

“Drink a glass of water in one gulp?”

“That was the first thing I did,” she offers. “And the worst part of it all was that he had to do all of the talking because I couldn’t.”

“And I know how much you *love* to talk about yourself,” I tease.

“Very funny,” she retorts. “It’s not my favorite thing to do, but I’d rather talk than hiccup my way through a date.” She lowers her voice to a whisper. “Everyone at the other tables kept looking at us!”

“I guess the date was a bust,” I say with a voice that suggests I’m happier than I should be. So I add, “I’m sorry, Sarah, but you know what they say about fish and the deep wide ocean.”

“Oh, the date wasn’t a bust,” she corrects me.

“It wasn’t?” I act surprised.

“No! In fact, it only got better after that!” She sounds so excited and the more details she tells me, the more I don’t want to know. He’s talking about planning a future with her when he doesn’t even know her. Does he have any idea who the real Sarah is, because I do.

She’s still raving about him and I catch snippets. They have common interests he tells her. Really? Does he know that she loves reality TV shows? Does he know that she’s terrified of talking about herself? I wonder if he knows she values honesty more than anything.

I hear her talking about him wanting to start a family . . . with her! They’ve only been on one date! How can he possibly know? He’s definitely playing with her heart strings and she’s falling right into his game. She’s still talking. Something about a kiss. *He kissed her?* He kissed her and apparently she liked it. I can’t hear it anymore. I need to hurry her off the phone before I say something I’ll regret.

“I should get going,” I interrupt her mid-sentence. “I’ll be late for work if I don’t.”

It’s a good excuse. She can’t argue with that, but I can tell from the sound of her voice, she doesn’t believe me.

“Is everything all right?” she asks, concerned.

“Fine, just fine,” I say, more forcibly than I mean it to sound. “I can’t be late.”

“Of course you can’t,” she says. “So many lonely women depend on you,” she says in a playful tone.

“Yeah . . . well . . . I can’t drop everything every time you need to talk,” I say coldly. “I can’t afford to get fired over it.”

As soon as I say the words, I know I’ve hurt her. I can hear her shallow breathing on the other line.

Finally, she says in a soft voice, “I’m sorry. I never meant for you . . .” She can’t finish the sentence and I know she’s trying to stop the tears.

I’m such a jerk. She’s done nothing wrong except be herself. It’s all me. I need to distance myself from this and from her. I’m the one with the problem. She needs to be happy, and if Michael is the person to make that happen, I can’t get in the way of that.

“I’m sorry, Sarah,” I say quietly. “I just can’t talk right now.” And I hang up the phone before she can say another word.

Sarah

There is definitely something wrong with Gabriel. He's apologized a hundred times for the way he behaved over the phone. I would be lying if I said it didn't hurt. His words stung me. So much so that I cried the entire day. But he called that very night to say he was sorry, and I can't stay mad at him for long, not Gabriel. Yet, things haven't been quite the same between us. I've noticed a definite change in his behavior toward me, and I wish I knew why. Where before he was warm and encouraging, making me laugh to ease my nerves, now I detect an undertone of anger or annoyance. Why the different demeanor?

It's been three weeks since I've started going out with Michael. Three weeks and four dates later. It's been nice spending time getting to know him. We've decided to take it slow and see where it takes us. We share so much in common that we practically agree on everything. We haven't had one single argument yet.

I know, I know. It's too early in the relationship for that, but it's like we are on the same wavelength. Gabriel calls it boring, but I call it compatible. Gabriel even went so far as to question whether we have any chemistry at all. Without a good fight, you can't make up properly, is what he told me. That's simply rubbish as far as I'm concerned. I told him I never really understood that argument, and he told me it's because I haven't had good makeup sex yet.

Gabriel can be so infuriating at times, especially when it comes to Michael. I don't understand why he's not just happy for me. After all, he promised to help me find someone. Hence, the online dating service. Besides, he has someone special in his own life, so why shouldn't I? After dating a string of losers, you would think he'd be thrilled that I've found someone nice and pleasant and, most importantly, normal, to develop a relationship with. So what if we don't have a bright, bursting flame between us. So what if it's not all fireworks and the Fourth of July. I never did like fireworks. As a child, I'd cover my ears to block out the noise. And as for the fire, I prefer a steady burn that lasts through the night than something that putters out way before morning.

Yet, as much as I ignore Gabriel's snide comments about Michael, I can't turn him off. It's like he's in my head all of the time. He's the chaperone you can't see. Talk about a heavenly presence. *SoulMates4Everafter.com* sure takes its credo seriously, don't they? Because my guardian angel hasn't left

my side once.

Just the other night, I was sitting on the sofa at Michael's apartment and we had settled down for some wine after he cooked me a lovely dinner (check off the "he can cook" on my list of must haves). The lights were low, the fire was roaring in his fireplace, and my head was resting against his shoulder as we listened to jazz music. It was perfect.

"This is nice," I murmur into his ear.

"It certainly is," he whispers in a low voice that sends shivers down my spine.

"All we need is the sand, the ocean, and the hot sun," I suggest.

"And you in a string bikini?" he mutters as his lips lightly brush up against my neck. Mmmm, this feels nice. And here Gabriel thought we had no chemistry. If he were here, I'd say *ha* to that! Wait, why am I still thinking about Gabriel when I have a handsome and sexy man flirting next to me. I look up above me and scowl. I think I may need an exorcism to expel that angel from my mind.

"I don't own a string bikini," I remark, trying hard to re-focus my attention on the much more interesting conversation I'm having with Michael.

"That can easily be remedied," he replies. "I suggest a shopping spree. What do you think?" He looks thoughtfully into my eyes, patiently waiting for my reaction.

That's a great idea! But, I wish we could go now . . . buy that string bikini and sit on that beach within the hour. That's exactly what I need right now to forget a certain someone.

Suddenly, a light bulb goes on inside my head. A fun idea, something we can do now. A little exercise of the imagination. I lift my head up from his shoulder and turn my body to face him. I give him a smile and he looks at me in anticipation.

"Forget the shopping spree," I suggest. "Let's close our eyes and imagine ourselves on the beach."

"Close my eyes?" he asks. He stares at me as if I'm speaking a language he doesn't understand.

"Yes, close your eyes and picture us lying on the white sands of Ocho Rios," I explain excitedly. We don't have to wait to go on this trip, not an hour, not even a minute longer. We can go now!

But I look back at Michael and realize our flight has been delayed,

perhaps indefinitely.

“You want me to close my eyes . . . right now?” he asks in disbelief. *Is he even paying attention to what I’m saying?*

“Yes,” I whisper in the sexiest voice I can muster as I slide closer to him and wrap my arms around his neck. I am not giving up just yet. The weather might clear up in time to get our flight back on schedule.

“And I’m wearing that string bikini that leaves really nothing to the imagination,” I murmur as an incentive to get Michael to go play with me.

I already have my eyes closed and can picture the scene before me. I can feel the sand in between my toes and the warm sun on my face and Michael lying right beside me bare chested wearing nothing but swimming trunks. And since this is my daydream, I have to say I look amazing in that string bikini that I would never have the guts to wear in reality. I’m so wrapped up in my own thoughts that it takes me a few minutes to realize that I’ve lost Michael somewhere along the way to this imaginary journey of mine. Did he miss the flight?

I open my eyes up and find him staring at me as if I’ve just grown another head on my neck. “Is something wrong, Michael?” I ask.

“Why would I do that?” he answers me with an incredulous look on his face.

“Do what?” I ask again, hoping to get back to my imaginary beach soon. I’m losing vital sun tanning hours.

“Why would I close my eyes and imagine a beach or you for that matter in a string bikini?” He has a look of concern on his face. Didn’t he ever play imaginary games before as a kid or have an imaginary friend? Maybe he just doesn’t understand this game. Maybe I’m not doing such a good job of explaining the objective.

So I start again. “Well, you see . . . we were talking about the beach and how we both love the sun and I just thought we could have a little fun and imagine it . . . here and now. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

He grabs my hand and takes a deep breath as if he’s about to explain a very complicated concept to me. “Sarah,” he says gently. “If I want to see the beach, I’ll book a trip to Jamaica. And if I wanted to see you in a string bikini, I don’t have to use my imagination. I’d just take you to Crandall’s and buy you one.”

My eyes cast downward and I can’t help feeling disappointment mixed in with anger. First of all, I can buy my own string bikini. I certainly don’t need

him to do it for me. In fact, if I wanted one, I would have already bought one for myself. Second, I don't need him to take me on a vacation. And third (and most important), he completely missed the entire point of the game!

He senses this, because, before I have a chance to tell him how I feel, Michael pulls my body into his and wraps his arms around me. I can feel his lips on top of my head. "Would you like to go with me to Jamaica?" he murmurs into my hair. "We can take a mini-vacation. It could be a long weekend getting to know each other. Let's say next weekend?" he asks in a low voice.

He has no idea that I'm upset, does he?

He then pauses and playfully adds, "Just you, me, and that string bikini."

"I guess," I shrug. "I have to check my work schedule."

"Of course, let me know on Monday," he says in an understanding tone of voice.

Perhaps I'm being too hard on him. So what if he doesn't like to play games. It's not the end of the world. And, as for buying me a string bikini, he didn't mean to sound condescending. He simply wanted to buy me a gift. Why am I dissecting every word he says? The man just wants to take me on a vacation and I'm making it into more of a big deal that I should.

Wait, does this constitute our first fight? I know it was only in my head, but still, I think it counts. Which means we get to make up now.

As if on cue, he gently takes my chin with his hand and pulls my face up. His eyes lock intently with mine. "I'm really looking forward to it, Sarah." He then lightly kisses me on the lips and pulls me into him, as we slide down the couch together.

Gabriel

I've spoken to Sarah about a dozen times since she started dating Michael on a regular basis. She sounds happy, but I can't help shaking the feeling that it all seems so forced. So artificial. It's like she's trying to fit him into her idea of a perfect relationship, instead of the other way around. Why can't she see that he's not the right person for her? True, he seems perfect on *paper*, but the thing is, it's only on paper. Paper can rip. Paper can be thrown away. What about the qualities you can't see on paper?

Will he make her laugh? Will he appreciate her kindness? Will he support her dreams and her goals? Or will he leave the minute things get tough?

I know I shouldn't be doing this. I have no right to invade her privacy. I

can absolutely get fired over this if anyone were to find out. Worse than that, Sarah will never speak to me again if she was to find out, but I do it anyway.

I pull her account up. She's changed her profile picture. It's the same picture she texted me on the night she went out with Michael. The one with that dress. It still has the same effect it had on me when I first saw it.

I look into the eyes staring back at me from the picture on the computer screen and it takes me back to that first phone call with her. I can hear her frantic pleas for help. I remember how she convinced me to read her profile. She asked for my name and I gave her Gabriel. She drew me in from that very first "hello."

I notice that her status has changed on her profile from "available" to "no longer looking." I guess she's made up her mind to see only Michael. Michael, the guy who says he loves Jane Austen. Michael, the guy who wants a ready-made family. Michael and Sarah. Mrs. Sarah Lester . . . Is that what I have to look forward to?

Why am I letting this happen without putting up a fight? I've been sitting here sulking and doing nothing, letting the inevitable happen. She doesn't have to be with this guy. I'm the one who has been pushing her away and into his arms. All of a sudden, I feel a sense of urgency. I've been so stupid and blind and stubborn, so damn stubborn. I've let my past get in the way of my future, and if I don't do something now, I will lose her forever. Do I really want that to happen? Can I live in a world where I won't hear her voice or her laughter again? Where someone else gets to have her?

I can't let that happen. I also can't let her make the biggest mistake of her life. Michael is not right for her and I'm the only one who sees that. She'll come to realize it eventually, but it might be too late then. She may be married to him with kids and won't be able to get out. Then on one random Tuesday, she'll find a note on the kitchen table from him and he'll be gone.

I can't let her ruin her life. I can't bear to see her get hurt. She told me I was her guardian angel and I need to look out for her.

So before my good sense kicks in, I quickly find Michael Lester's contact information on the website and send him an email. She'll thank me later for this.

Sarah

It's been a few days since that night at Michael's apartment and I haven't heard from him. At first I didn't think anything of it. I've been busy with work and I imagine he is too. But then I left him several phone messages and texts, and he still hasn't returned a single one of them. We were supposed to plan our Jamaican getaway for this weekend. I even bought a new bathing suit in honor of the occasion. Not a string bikini, mind you, but something that wouldn't disappoint either. Now, I'm not sure if I'll be putting it to any use because I haven't heard a word. It's like he's dropped off the face of the earth.

Finally, when I've had enough of the waiting game, I write him an email and send it to his work address instead, trying to sound casual, but at the same time, concerned. I don't usually like to bother anyone at work (well, with the exception of Gabriel), but I need Michael to get the message. Since work is like his second home, I know he'll have no choice but to read it.

Why wouldn't he get back to me? We had a good time last we met. Didn't we? I thought we did. Maybe it was that imagination game I tried to play with him. He did look like I had lost my mind when I asked him to close his eyes and imagine the beach. But then he invited me to go with him on vacation, so I don't think that was it.

It's all so confusing. Amy says it's part of the chase, but I don't like chasing. I never did and I thought Michael was the same way. If I like someone, I tell them. If I don't, I let them know too. It doesn't matter if I look foolish in the process. I certainly proved that with Gabriel.

I walk over to my computer to start my day. I have tons of projects with deadlines to meet and maybe that's a good thing. Maybe what I need right now is to busy myself with work so that I don't think about Michael or Jamaica.

I log into my email account to catch up on my messages and my eyes immediately zoom in on an email waiting for me from the same person I'm trying to forget. The subject line simply reads "Sorry." That certainly doesn't sound good. Why would he need to apologize? He didn't forget my birthday or anything like that. Let's be positive about this, Sarah. Maybe he's apologizing for not getting back to me. Maybe he's been sent to some remote location for work where there is no Internet connection or phone lines. Maybe he's been in some freak accident where he lost the use of his typing hands. So many plausible reasons, but only one way to find out. So I hold my

breath and open up the email.

Dear Sarah,

I'm so sorry to have to do this over an email, but my schedule is very hectic right now and I'm not sure when we will be able to meet again.

I certainly understand work commitments. It's one of the things I like most about him, the fact that we're both career-minded individuals and, sometimes, our jobs have to come first. I can be a mature adult and wait for him to finish up with his project. It's not the end of the world . . . that is until I keep reading on.

These last few weeks have been wonderful getting to know you more. However, I think we may be looking for different things out of this relationship.

Different things out of this relationship? All I wanted was to get to know him better. I thought he wanted that too.

I want to be in a committed relationship.

So do I!

I want to eventually start a family.

So do I. I mean not right now, but . . . eventually . . . someday!

I can't waste time with someone who doesn't share my vision.

Who said I didn't? I thought I did. Wasn't I clear? I'm so confused and my head is spinning in a million different directions and I'm starting to feel dizzy. Where is this all coming from? Is it the Jamaica trip? Is this what started this all?

I respect your wishes and understand that we might be on different roads. I think you are an extraordinary woman. Maybe if you were at another point in your life this might have worked.

Wait. What did he just say? My wishes? Different roads? I don't remember saying anything like that. I may be forgetful, but it usually has to do with misplaced car keys, not entire conversations. I'm racking my brain thinking about what I could have said to him and all I can recall was string bikinis, Ocho Rios, and sand between our toes.

I wish you all the happiness in the world and I know that you'll find the person meant to for you somewhere out there.

Always affectionately yours,

Michael

I'm in shock. How did this happen? One minute we're sitting on his sofa wrapped up in each other's arms, and the next minute he writes me a Dear

Jane email. A break-up email!

I thought everything was going so well. I thought we were heading in the direction of a serious relationship. How could I have been so wrong? I'm upset and angry all at the same time. How can he tell me this over an email? I don't even get the courtesy of a phone call.

I don't know exactly what I'm supposed to do. Am I supposed to reply back and ask him calmly why on earth he sent this and where this is all coming from? Am I supposed to call him instead and tell him how I really feel about his email and his 'affectionately yours' kiss off? I suddenly have the urge to go down to his place of work and whack him over the head with a string bikini!

I look around my empty apartment and I suddenly can't stand the silence. I don't want to be alone right now, but I'm not ready to talk to him either. So I do what any heartbroken single girl in the city would do. I frantically call my best friend to see if she can't drop everything she's doing now to meet me at the bar around the corner from my apartment. When my best friend doesn't pick up the phone, I call the next best person I can think of to help me understand this all.

I'm so relieved when Topher picks up and even more relieved when he tells me that he's in New York City. Just like Amy would, he drops everything he's doing to meet me, and within a half hour, I am sitting next to him on a barstool.

"Tequila cures any ailment of the heart, darling," Topher predicts as we watch the bartender pour the clear liquid into two shot glasses. Lime and salt nearby, ready to be used. "And if it can't cure it, it can at least temporarily drown it."

I grab the shot glass from the table and quickly gulp it down forgetting about the lime and the salt. Topher follows right after me. "Pace yourself, Sarah," he warns. "I don't think I can carry you all the way up to your apartment."

"I don't want to pace myself," I tell him. "I want to get as drunk as I can."

I signal the bartender to pour me another two shot glasses of tequila.

"Who's going to carry us if we both pass out?" Topher asks.

The bartender places the second glass of tequila in front of me and, as with the first, I swallow it all down. After I'm done, I move the other glass next to Topher and prompt him to keep up. I watch as he drinks his empty

too.

"I just don't understand why Michael would do this," I exclaim. "And in an email, no less!"

"Because men are horrible creatures and can't be trusted," he replies.

"You're telling me!" I shout in agreement, but then add confused, "Wait! You're a man, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I'm different," he observes.

"How so?"

"I'm not trying to get into your pants."

He does have a point there, so I amend my declaration.

"Well all men except you can't be trusted, especially Michael! I just can't believe he did this. He didn't even have the guts to tell me in person or even over the phone! I would have settled for that."

"Can I ask you a question?" he asks hesitantly.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Topher's expression and I can tell he's not sure whether to tell me what is really on his mind. Do I look that unhinged that he's afraid I might collapse?

"Ask me anything!" I reply, a little louder than I intended. I can feel the alcohol already dulling my senses.

"Did you love him, Sarah?" he asks candidly.

I think of Gabriel instead. This time, I don't even try to get him out of my head.

"No, I didn't, but I really, really *liked* him and I seriously thought that he might be the one."

"You seem more upset that he broke up with you in an email than the fact that you are never going to see him again," he notes. He then pauses before he finally says, "I think your pride is more wounded than your heart."

I open my mouth to respond, and then quickly close it again. I don't know what to say to Topher because the truth is he's right. But I still can't help feeling betrayed and hurt.

"That's not the point, Topher," I disagree loudly.

"What is the point, Sarah?"

"The point is that I seem to be undateable," I exclaim, bursting out in tears in the process. Alcohol is such a truth serum. Maybe, I should give some to Gabriel and see what happens.

"Undateable, darling? Is that even a word?" he asks, not even attempting to stifle his laughter.

“If it’s not, it should be because it describes me perfectly!” I announce, ignoring his laughing fit.

Finally, when he’s gotten himself under control, he consoles me by saying, “You’re very dateable. Plenty of men would love the opportunity to date you.”

“Oh sure, I’m so enticing that there are at least a dozen eligible bachelors lining up outside this bar as we speak.”

“Sarah, I never figured you for the dramatic,” he says. He places his hand on top of mine and offers, “The truth is you are a lovely woman who is going to meet the right person soon.”

“If I hear just one more person tell me that, I’m going to scream bloody murder.”

“It’s true, Sarah. It will happen when you least expect it. Look at Livingston and me,” he offers as an example. “After so many years, we run into each other on *our* date.”

“Exactly! Undateable,” I rant.

“No, darling. I think you just have to let it happen and not think so much.”

I signal to the bartender to fill up our glasses again.

Thinking is all I can do, but instead of Michael, I can’t stop thinking about Gabriel.

Gabriel

I can hear my cell phone ringing. It wakes me up from a deep sleep. I look over to the alarm clock by my bed and I squint to try to adjust to my surroundings. It's three o'clock in the morning. Who would call me at this hour of the night? I hope it's nothing serious as I think about my parents back home.

I pick it up and in a groggy state mutter, "Hello . . ."

"I need to speak to you," the voice on the other end cries out. It's Sarah and she's sobbing hysterically.

"Are you still there? Gabriel?" she asks, half sobbing, half slurring. She sounds like she's had a few drinks.

"Yes, I'm here. What happened?" I ask concerned, although somehow I know exactly why she's calling.

"Michael broke up with me!" she exclaims and the sobbing begins again. She's definitely had more than a few drinks. "And this is all your fault," she replies in anger.

I panic. How does she know? Did she somehow figure it out? How am I going to explain this to her? She's probably calling to tell me off. Calm down, Gabriel. She hasn't said anything about that, has she? She's probably calling to vent.

"Why is this my fault?" I ask carefully and wait for her to respond.

"Because," she sobs. "You made me believe there was someone out there for me and you lied!"

I breathe a sigh of relief as I close my eyes. She doesn't know. "But there is, Sarah," I console her.

"No, there isn't!" she cries out. "Michael ran the other way and the only person I really want I can't have."

There is silence between us when I finally ask quietly, "Who's that?"

"You know who that is, Gabriel!" she wails in frustration.

"Why don't you tell me, Sarah?" I ask again and wait for her to speak. If she says my name, I'll tell her everything. It's time to stop hiding.

"Never mind," she mutters. "It doesn't matter. This was all a big mistake."

Before I can open my mouth to tell her not to hang up, I hear the dial tone. This has completely backfired on me. She's really upset. I can't stand to see her in so much pain, with so much hurt. I feel very guilty. This is really all my fault. I need to fix it before it's too late. I need to tell her the truth,

even if it means she'll never talk to me again.

Sarah

Argh, my head feel like it's about to explode. I should never drink when I'm upset. It only leads to trouble. I don't remember much about last night. It's all so foggy. I can recall only snippets, including the tequila shots with Topher and the phone call to Gabriel.

Oh no! The phone call! It's all coming back to me now. I think I yelled at him and said it was all his fault. I can't believe I blamed him for Michael, especially when he did his best to warn me about him. I should have listened to him in the first place and this wouldn't be happening to me.

It was Gabriel who told me he was too good to be true. And what did I do? Did I believe him? Did I take him at his word? No, I didn't. Instead, I got angry at him for even suggesting it. I feel terrible for treating him so badly. He's right. You should never trust a guy who claims Jane Austen is his favorite author. From now on, I will steer clear of such guys. It's men who like political thrillers for me.

I am so embarrassed that I called Gabriel, and in the middle of the night, no less! No one should ever be allowed to carry around a cell phone when they're drunk. Not only should bartenders collect a person's keys to prevent them from driving, but they should also collect cell phones to prevent irrational calls and texts. I have to call him to apologize right away, but first I have to take care of the pounding inside of my head. I must remember to never mix Topher and alcohol together again. The combination is deadly.

I spend the morning soaking in a bath hoping that the aspirin and cups of black coffee will work their magic sooner rather than later. It's late afternoon by the time I feel well enough to have an articulate conversation with Gabriel rather than the incoherent rantings of a drunken lady.

"Hello?" I hear his voice on the other line and I take a deep breath. It's now or never.

"Hey there," I answer contritely.

"Hey yourself. How are you feeling this morning?" he asks concerned.

"Humiliated," I reply.

"Don't worry about it," he says in a dismissive manner. "You had every right to be upset."

"But not with you," I respond. "I mean it's not your fault Michael turned out to be such a disappointment."

I can hear him mutter something underneath his breath, but I can't make it out. Did I lose my hearing from the drinking too?

Finally, he says in a louder voice, "I have to confess something to you."

This sounds ominous. I don't think I can handle another confession.

"What is it?" I ask encouragingly. As much as I don't think I want to hear this, he's Gabriel. After what I put him through last night, letting him unload is the least I can do.

"First, it's important that you understand that I did this with your best interest in mind," he warns.

Why is he saying that? Of course, I know he's looking after me. He has since the first day I spoke to him.

"I know that, Gabriel," I say, putting his mind at ease.

"And you know I would never do anything to hurt you without a good reason," he reminds me.

I really don't like the sound of this. Whenever someone says they don't want to hurt you, it means that they inevitably will. This sounds an awful lot like a breakup and I don't do well with breakups, especially two in one week!

"Gabriel . . . what are you trying to tell me," I get right to the point.

"I might have sent Michael Lester an email . . .," he says.

"You did what?" I say absentmindedly as I try to process his words in my mind.

"And I might have sent it under your name," he throws in.

Did I just hear him right? He sent Michael an email and he made it seem like it came from me. Why would he do such a thing? And more importantly, what exactly did he . . . or rather *I* tell Michael?

Before I can ask him that question, he answers it for me, "I may have told him you weren't interested in a serious relationship, that you changed your mind and weren't looking for anything long-term."

"What else *might* you have told him?" I demand, trying to control the anger rising inside of me.

"I might have said that you wanted to date more before you jumped into anything . . . permanent." His voice fades as he finishes the sentence.

My thoughts were all jumbled up until that moment, but now it all clicks. Like a missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle, it's all fitting together to form a picture. Suddenly, everything Michael wrote me in that email makes complete sense. He wasn't being rude or irrational. He wasn't being a cad or a phony. He was actually being nice about it. I dumped him in an email for no reason at all and he took it all in stride, like a true gentleman. He could have called me all sorts of names, but he didn't. He could have told me to go

to hell, but he didn't. He was so understanding after I treated him so badly. But the thing is, it wasn't me. I didn't treat him badly! I didn't dump him! It was Gabriel who did. I feel so hurt and betrayed as I realize what Gabriel did.

"He wasn't good enough for you, Sarah." Gabriel tries to explain, but I don't want to hear it. I can't believe he would do something like this to me. I trusted him.

"Really, Gabriel!" I answer sarcastically. "And you're the person who decides this?" I practically yell at him. I'm so blinded by anger.

"No . . . I don't know . . . he's just not right for you!" Now it's his turn to raise his voice.

"And how would you know?" I ask in disgust.

"I know everything there is to know about you, Sarah," he replies in frustration. "I know that you laugh when you're nervous. I also know that you need that first cup of coffee in the morning before you can form two sentences together. I know you have a low tolerance for alcohol and that you absolutely don't sing in the car."

How does he know that? Did I tell him all that?

"I know that, Sarah Jenkins, and so much more. But most of all, I know you have a tremendous capacity to love and you deserve someone who appreciates that love."

I am stunned. I can't believe he just said that. A week ago, it would have been exactly what I wanted to hear from him. I would have been jumping for joy at the thought, and Michael wouldn't have stood a chance. But now, all I feel is hurt and emptiness.

"And who is that exactly, Gabriel? Who can appreciate my love?" I ask in anger.

"Not Michael," he says, still deflecting. After all of this, he still can't be honest with himself.

"Then if not Michael, who?" I prompt him, not allowing him to get out of this so easily. Instead of an answer, though, I hear silence on the other line. I then utter, "That's what I thought."

"You'd be making a mistake going back to him," he interjects.

"And it's my mistake to make," I answer calmly and for the first time since I first spoke to Gabriel, I say, "You have no business getting involved."

"You asked for my help," he reminds me.

"I don't want your kind of help anymore," I reply, hoping to wound him.

"Sarah, please . . . don't do this," he pleads.

I don't want to listen anymore. I'm just too tired to fight anymore.

So instead, I say, "I don't know why we're even having this argument. You have a girlfriend. You've made your choice, Gabriel. You have no right to decide for me."

He doesn't respond. He knows I'm right. So quietly, without any anger, but with conviction, I whisper. "I don't ever want to speak to you again."

And I hang up the phone, collapsing on my sofa in tears. I'm crying, not so much for Michael or for that email I never sent. I'm crying more because I've lost my best friend.

Sarah

"I am officially done with online dating!" I announce to Amy, as I raise my glass of sparkling water in a toast.

"As long as you're not done with dating in general," she remarks.

"Not done, but I definitely think I need a hiatus from it . . . for a while."

"Fair enough," Amy agrees.

After my argument with Gabriel, I called Amy so upset I could barely get the words out over the phone. She immediately dropped what she was doing and met me at my apartment. We emptied out two cartons of ice cream and she let me cry and vent and cry some more. It's been almost a week to the day and we are here again at our regular stomping grounds for our monthly dinner.

I've had a week to recoup and put things into perspective. I realize that Michael was not meant for me. Eventually his lack of imagination and rigid ways would have driven me crazy. And although I want to have a family, I think Michael is way ahead of me in that race. He's almost at the finish line and I'm still waiting for the gun to go off. So in many ways, we did want different things out of life and it was best that we parted as friends. I wrote him a lovely email wishing him well and he wrote back wishing me the same. I hate to admit it, but I haven't really given him much thought since then. I have, however, been trying desperately to put someone else out of my mind. We haven't spoken since that day. The wound is still raw for me.

"I think it's time I focused on me," I tell Amy. "I need to be on my own."

"I won't argue with that," Amy replies. But out of the corner of my eye, I can see her looking at me intently before she finally adds, "Before we put this whole online dating fiasco behind us, I need to get something off of my chest."

I look up from my salad to meet Amy's eyes. "What is it?" I ask.

She avoids my stare and I know she's about to tell me something I don't want to hear.

"I think I may have been wrong," Amy confesses.

My mouth drops open in surprise. This may be the first time I've ever heard my friend admit anything that could be perceived as a character flaw.

"You mean to tell me that the great and flawless Amy Ratner may actually be wrong about something?"

From the expression on her face, it's clear she's not enjoying this.

She lifts her chin up defiantly and announces, "I'm not going to repeat what I just said, Sarah Jenkins, so don't push your luck."

"Is there a full moon tonight," I tease. "Are all of the stars aligning? Is this the end of the world as we know it?"

"All right, all right," she says as she waves her hand at me. "You don't have to make a big deal out of this. Forget I said anything."

"No!" I exclaim. "I'm sorry, I'll stop," I apologize.

I want to hear what Amy has to say more than I want to continue teasing her. "What were you wrong about?" I ask.

She looks up at me again with that same defiant look and simply says his name, "Gabriel."

My expression freezes in place and I can't breathe. Why is she bringing *him* up? She knows how much he's hurt me. She knows I've been trying to forget him. She knows he broke my heart in half.

"I don't want to hear that name again, Amy," I warn her.

She raises her hands to me as if to calm me down. "I know you don't, but listen to me . . . just once."

I look at her sternly, but don't say a word to stop her.

Taking this as a sign of acquiescence, she proceeds, "Just let me speak my piece this once and I'll never bring it up again."

After a few seconds of silence, I utter softly, "Go ahead."

"I think I may have been wrong about his feelings for you."

I shake my head in disagreement, "No, I think you were absolutely right and I should have listened to you." And for added measure, I mention, "He's an unfeeling person who messed up my life."

"No," Amy interrupts. "He's a man in love who is afraid to admit it."

"Sure, of course, he is," I answer in an unconvincing voice. "Because men in love always lie and deceive the woman that they claim to care about."

"If he thinks he's in danger of losing her."

“That’s no excuse,” I reason and then to prove my point, I ask, “Remember our conversation when I asked you what he meant when he called me beautiful?”

“Of course, I do,” she replies with a laugh. “You were such a pain. You wouldn’t let it go. ”

“And what did you say to me?” I ask.

“I said if he wanted to make a move, he would.”

“Exactly!” I exclaim with a satisfied grin on my face. “He never made a move.”

She can’t argue with the truth.

“His email to Michael *was* his move,” she offers. She apparently can argue with her own version of the facts, but I remain unconvinced.

“Really?” I ask. “Do you think his girlfriend would agree with that?” I say bitterly.

Amy may have forgotten about her, but I certainly haven’t.

“For all you know, he may have broken up with her when he did this. Did you even bother to ask him?”

“Oh right, Amy. I should have asked him. Why didn’t I think of that?” I raise my voice in frustration. “As I was yelling at him for ruining what could have been a very viable relationship with Michael, I should have paused and asked him how his girlfriend was doing, by the way!”

“Listen to you,” Amy shakes her head in disbelief. “You’re talking about viability of relationships. It’s *love*, Sarah, not a medical procedure. You either are or you aren’t in it, and I know you weren’t with Michael. But the question remains as far as Gabriel is concerned.”

I don’t say anything because I’m afraid that my voice will crack and give me away.

Amy doesn’t wait for me to speak though. Instead, she says in a calm voice, “And you know what I think? I think you do love him.”

I close my eyes, willing this conversation to stop because I can’t hear this anymore. I don’t want to hear Amy talk about him. It’s too painful. It may be the truth, but there’s nothing I can do about it now. I told him never to call me again and I meant it. I just can’t deal with that kind of deception.

But she doesn’t stop. Instead, she observes, “And you know what else I think? I think he loves you right back.”

I open my eyes and with steely resolve I hear myself say: “You know what, Amy. I don’t care. If he really does love me, like you say he does, he

would have told me so. He would have asked me out. He would have jumped at the chances I gave him. He would have done something other than leave me in the mess I am right now.”

“But . . .” she begins and I interrupt her before she has a chance to further argue her point of view.

“No more *buts*. I’ve decided to look forward. I’m going to enjoy our meal and when I get home, I’m going to delete my account. After that, I’m going to concentrate on my career, and maybe even take a little vacation somewhere warm. It’s all about me now. Not Gabriel, not Michael, but me! Do you hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” she responds quietly as she takes another sip of her wine.

I look into her eyes and I suddenly feel horrible. It’s not her fault this happened. It’s not her fault I attract impossible men. She’s my friend and only trying to help me.

“I’m sorry, Amy. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

Her eyes soften as she says, “Some birthday gift this has turned out to be. I’m sorry, Sarah. I really did have nothing but good intentions.”

I reach out for her hand and give her a warm smile. “I know you did, Amy. I’m lucky to have such a good friend. But what do you say; you leave the matchmaking to me and Emma Woodhouse from now on.”

“Agreed, but . . .”

“What did I say about your *buts*?” I playfully remind her.

She waves her hands in front of me. “Hear me out. I decided that I have to make this up to you.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask.”

She reaches for her bag and pulls out two rectangular paper folders, placing them on the table before me. My eyes widen in surprise as the words on the front of the folder comes into focus.

“Is this really what I’m seeing?” I ask in awe.

She nods her head with a huge smile on her face. “Two tickets to an all-inclusive Jamaican resort with airfare and two spa treatments included and all the relaxation two people can have.”

I look back up at her and I can feel the tears pooling in my eyes. I really do have the bestest friend in the entire world.

“Happy belated birthday, Sarah.”

Sarah

I get home from my dinner with Amy feeling renewed. She didn't have to treat me to a vacation. At first, I felt so guilty that she spent so much money on my birthday, first on the website and now on the trip. But she insisted, said it was the least she could do for the mess the dating service has caused me and wouldn't take "no" for an answer. She wouldn't even let me pay for half of the cost. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to some relaxation and down time . . . and with my friend, who I don't have to worry about looking or acting a certain way. I don't have to worry about impressing her either, and the best part, no string bikinis! I'm so looking forward to putting this whole fiasco behind me. It's been a complicated few months.

I sigh and head straight over to my computer. I wasn't kidding when I told Amy about my immediate plans. I need to focus on me again. If I'm meant to find the man of my dreams, I will . . . organically . . . possibly in the produce section of the grocery store, like I always imagined I would.

As soon as I think it, I find myself fighting the urge that rises up inside of me yet again. I've tried silencing it or ignoring it, but it's like it has a mind of its own. I wish I could turn off the internal dialogue running through my mind that continues to speak in *his* voice. *Maybe you've found him already and he's been right in front of you all this time.*

I shake the thought. No! If he really wanted me, he would have told me. No more games and no more hidden agendas. I'm done with that. And as proof of this, I log onto my computer and get ready to deactivate my account with *SoulMates4Everafter.com* and put this whole journey behind me, once and for all.

My profile picture is the first thing that pops up and I immediately think about Michael and that date. I can't help but chuckle as I think about the hiccups and how chivalrous he was about it all and how that night ended with a sweet kiss. I nod my head, resolved to put him behind me as well. If Michael thought I was worth it, he would have picked up the phone and talked this out. If I thought Michael was worth it, I would have tried to clear up the misunderstanding. Maybe Topher is right. Maybe a part of me wasn't interested in Michael as much as in the idea of him.

At that moment, I also realize that I have to let go of my anger at Gabriel for what he did. It's over and done and if I'm going to move on, I will have to let go of him too, even if my internal voice is telling me otherwise.

I click on my bio and decide to read it once more for old times' sake. It

takes me back to the first time I spoke to Gabriel and my poor attempt at describing myself in 150 words or less. I'd be lying if I said I won't miss him. Of course, I will. There hasn't been a day in the last three months when he wasn't the first and the last call I made. But I have to move forward.

As if spurred on by a renewed resolve, I click further into my account, looking for the deactivation option. As I do, it's like I'm flipping through a photo book of my dating odyssey, starting with Mr. Company Guy, to Mr. Slash, and finally ending with Michael Lester. It hasn't been all bad, as I think of Topher and the lifelong friend I've made in him.

Just as I'm about to hit the button that will end my heavenly visit, I hear the harp playing and heaven beckoning once again. I notice my mail button is blinking in the form of flapping white wings. Someone has sent me an email. It's probably another profiler who wants to go out on a date. In the early days, this would have frightened me, or made me excited, practically giddy. Now . . . not so much.

Yet, I can't help but smile at the irony. It does seem like a very appropriate ending. Just one last click and one last read before I say goodbye. What would be the harm? I click on the wings and my heart suddenly drops into my stomach as my eyes scan and freeze on the name. *Gabriel*? Is this some sort of a cruel joke? What is going on? It can't be him, can it? Only one way to find out. I click on the subject line and up pops the email:

My name is Gabriel, but some people prefer to call me their guardian angel. I've been working in IT for over ten years now and I work, of all places, at an online dating service. I thought I found the perfect place to work because it gave me a chance to hide away from the world and forget about the past. It was working for a long while, until it didn't. You see, I hadn't counted on meeting Sarah Jenkins.

My eyes tear up as I read the last sentence.

She's a wonderful person who has no idea how wonderful she really is, and did I mention beautiful? Her smile is quite amazing. And for the last three months, I've had the chance to really get to know her and become her friend. I've also had to watch her date all sorts of men, when all the while I've been fighting the urge to tell her how I truly feel. That she shouldn't be dating them. She should be dating me.

Am I really reading this? Is he really saying this?

I didn't intend to get involved, didn't want to, but she has a way about her that drew me in from the very beginning. She's smart, kind, and funny.

I've always liked girls who can laugh at themselves. She's honest and likes to leap before she looks. She's put her heart on the line countless times and isn't afraid of getting hurt because of it. I admire her for that. I've wanted to be just like her for so long. You see, the truth of the matter is that I haven't put my heart on the line for anyone in a very long time, until now. But it's more than admiration that I have for her. I care for her, and I'm ready to jump in and take a risk.

I'm hoping she can forgive me for what I've done. I never meant to hurt her. I wasn't really thinking of anyone, except me. But if she agrees to go out on just one last blind date with me, I'll explain everything. I'm hoping she'll agree and meet me at the little Italian bistro with the delicious linguine and clam sauce. She knows the one. I'll be waiting there this Saturday at seven o'clock.

Her Guardian Angel

Gabriel

I can't quite believe my eyes. It's really Gabriel and he wrote a profile, just for me. Not only that, but he wants to meet in person to explain everything. Not over the phone, not via text, but in an actual face-to-face meeting. Should I give him that chance though? After what he's done? But, he did call me beautiful again, and that's got to count for something! But he's lied to me and gone behind my back. But he says he cares for me and wants to put his heart on the line again. But he has a girlfriend and I can't ignore that. I'm so confused as I vacillate back and forth.

I reread the email again to see if it will help me make my decision. He does sound like he's sorry. He sounds like he's in pain. And as much as I want to say I'm enjoying it, I'm not. I don't want to see him hurt. He asks if I remember the restaurant. How can I forget, as the memories of the first time I spoke to him come back to me? If I close my eyes now, I can recreate it in my head. The same exercise Michael wouldn't play along with. *What should I do?*

"I'll tell you what you should do!" I hear Amy practically screaming on the other end of the phone line.

"Can you speak a little louder? I don't think all of my neighbors have heard you," I tease.

"Joke all you want, Sarah Jenkins, but this is the sign we've been waiting for!"

"We?" I ask. "I didn't know you wanted him too."

Amy explains, "If he dates my best friend, he also has to be prepared to date me and Tom."

"I think you're jumping the gun here. I didn't say I'd go."

"Then you'd be a fool, Sarah. You wanted him to make a move and this is it. I told you what he did with Michael was a sign and you didn't believe me. Well, now he's pretty much spelled it out for you!"

"But I don't think I can easily forgive him for what he did."

"Are you willing to walk away from him just because he chased the wrong guy away from you?"

I'm silent as I ponder the question she just posed in the hope of being able to answer it.

"Let's be honest, Sarah. You liked Michael, but you would have dropped him in a heartbeat if Gabriel sent you that email weeks ago."

She has a point, and I have no words for her. She's right. It's what I've secretly been hoping for from the moment he called me *beautiful*. Who am I kidding, from the moment he picked up the line the first time I called! It suddenly dawns on me that I have been comparing all of my blind dates to Gabriel and no one has measured up, including Michael Lester.

"What if he still has a girlfriend?" I ask, afraid to even say what I fear inside.

"There's only one way to find out."

Amy is right. I have to see this through and see where it leads. Even if that means having to let him go.

Gabriel

It's been a day since I sent Sarah the email. I know she's read it, but I don't know if she'll agree to meet with me. I haven't heard a single word. She must still be furious with me. She has every right to be, but I'm hoping that she wants to see me more. I'm hoping she'll give me a chance to explain and to offer her so much more than Michael or any of the other guys before him could.

I have the reservations all set for Saturday so I'll go and I'll wait, and if she doesn't show up, I'll move on. I have no other choice. I'll have to live with the fact that I may have driven away the one good thing to come my way in quite a long time.

I'm sitting at work, finishing up yet another call, this time from a middle-aged man who has an issue with paying his monthly service fee on the website. The calls are all a blur, one after the other. I used to look forward to work, but that was before, when I had Sarah to look forward to.

I'm about to take a new call when I hear a ping. It's coming from my cell phone. I look down and cannot repress a smile.

Confirming. Capisca at 7 p.m. this Saturday.

It's the text I've been waiting for. She's giving me a chance. She wants to see me. I quickly text her back.

Looking forward to it. And Sarah?

I wait for the next ping. Within a minute, I read her reply.

Yes?

I text back

Thank you.

Now it's all on me. No more excuses and no more playing games. I've decided to put myself on the line and I need to go all the way with this. I will only get one shot at this. Better make it work. This has got to work. I've got to leap before I look.

The Last Blind Date

I walk into Capisca, the same restaurant where I began this roller coaster of a journey. If I close my eyes now, I can still picture Company Guy in front of me with his rainbow umbrella and larger-than-life logos. No matter how much I'd like to erase that memory from my mind, it's imprinted into me like a stamp, a very colorful stamp. But this time, thankfully, I'm not here to meet him. This time, I'm here to meet my last blind date.

I walk over to the same hostess as that other night, and she's leaning on a dark wooden podium. She is twirling her long red hair around her finger, looking bored at the prospect of yet another night of showing people to their tables. She looks up and immediately beams a smile at me as if she's a light bulb and I've just turned on her switch. There is a hint of recognition in her eyes as if she's seen me before. It's as if she's trying to place me. I almost giggle at her surprised expression when it finally dawns on her who I am. How could she forget the poor girl who had to spend an entire evening with Company Guy?

"Welcome to Capisca. How may I help you?" she says cheerfully. These are the exact same words she said to me that night, probably the same one she says to everyone that walks through that door.

I smile back at her. "Yes, I'm actually meeting someone here."

Not Company Guy, I want to tell her. Definitely not him! I wonder if it's possible for her to read my mind. I add nervously as I feel the butterflies once again reappear in my stomach at the thought of finally meeting Gabriel, "He might already be here."

She nods her head in understanding. It's the same response she gave me the last time too. There must be a lot of people that meet here for first dates. I wonder if members of *SoulMates4Everafter* get a corporate discount. I'm pretty sure if they did, Company Guy would have taken full advantage of it on our first date.

"Do you have a name for the reservation?" she asks politely.

Name? I don't even know what he looks like.

"I think it's under Gabriel," I offer hesitantly, embarrassed that I can't even answer what should be a simple question.

Her eyes suddenly light up and she gives me a look as if something clicks inside of her and I wonder what she knows that I don't.

"Of course! You must be Sarah!" she exclaims excitedly.

"Yes," I mutter. "That would be me." I feel my face blush. It must be

beet red by now. Not only am I nervous about meeting Gabriel for the first time, but now this stranger apparently knows our whole story. She must think I'm quite the character, between my date with Company Guy and now Gabriel.

She leans in and whispers conspiratorially to me, "He's already here . . . and he is such a great guy!"

Apparently, she's spent some time getting to know him, too.

Then she adds, "And really cute, too!"

She gives me a wink. I smile at her nervously. Not only does she know our story, but she's also seen him first!

I follow her to the back of the restaurant and I'm trying my best to compose myself before we get to the table. I'm fidgety and nervous and I can feel my hands shaking. I have to stay calm, but I know I can't until I finally see him.

Just like he described it on our imaginary date, our table is nestled in the corner, all the way in the back and away from everyone else. He must have called ahead to make special arrangements.

Although the hostess is walking in front of me, I move my head to try to catch a glimpse of the man sitting at our table. I see Gabriel before he has a chance to see me and to my surprise, he is exactly as he described himself.

He's tall, dark, and most definitely handsome. The hostess was not lying about that. It's most likely a coincidence, but he is exactly as I pictured him in my mind, only better, if that's possible. For the first time in my life, my imagination got it exactly right!

I start to panic. *What if I'm not what he imagined? What if I'm a disappointment?* I made sure to wear my black wrap dress and the strappy black high heels, the same outfit I saw myself wearing on our imaginary date, in keeping with the theme of the night. I'm wearing my hair down and it falls over my shoulders in soft curls. I hope he likes what he sees.

I look at him again and he finally glances in my direction. Our eyes lock and his face suddenly lights up with a broad smile, showing off a small dimple in his left cheek. It's rather sexy and I can't take my eyes off of that mouth.

And the way he's looking at me, I know he's pleased with what he sees, too. I breathe a sigh of relief. Thank goodness! I don't think I could handle it otherwise.

Gabriel gets up from his seat as I approach. Our eyes are still locked on

each other, and even though the hostess is standing right besides us, it's like she's not even there. It's like nothing else exists.

"Sarah?" he asks tentatively. He extends his hand out in front of him and I take it into mine, feeling his fingers gently glide across my palm. It's like a jolt of electricity is coursing through me as I feel the warmth of his skin caressing mine.

I nod in reply and then I ask as well, because I still can't quite believe it, "Gabriel?"

Could he really be standing in front of me? It's funny how you know a person so well, talk to him every day, but still can't pick him out from a face in the crowd. But then I look into his eyes, his beautiful hazel eyes, his kind eyes, the same ones I've seen in my dreams recently, and I know. He's my Gabriel. It's definitely him.

"My name is Sean . . . Sean Avery," he volunteers.

"Sean," I repeat it, letting it settle on my tongue. I look up at him again and smile. The name suits him.

I sit down and so does he.

"You were right, Gabr . . . I mean Sean," I say. It's going to take some time getting used to his name.

"Right about what?" he asks out of curiosity.

"Your eyes are your best feature." He looks down and then back up again, speaking softly. "You are exactly as I pictured you."

"I hope that's a good thing," I say, barely able to get the words out.

"It's a very good thing," he replies in a low voice as the corner of his lips turn up into a smile. It's hypnotizing and I can't look away.

Suddenly, I hear a loud cough and it breaks our trance. We both look up at the hostess who has been standing there the entire time. She's wearing a big grin on her face as if she's privy to a secret. It's so unlike the first night I met her with Company Guy. That night, she had a look of pity mixed in with annoyance.

"Your waiter will be with you shortly," she mentions. "I'll make sure he gives you some time to . . . get acquainted," she says cryptically as she gives Sean a knowing glance.

"Thank you, Linda," Sean says.

As soon as she leaves, I can feel Sean's eyes on me again. I place the napkin on my lap and fidget with the utensils in front of me, anything other than return his stare. I can still feel my hands shake in nervous anticipation.

I've thought about this moment for so long. Now that it's here, I don't quite know how to act.

He doesn't wait for me to speak, but immediately begin with an apology. "I'm so sorry, Sarah, for everything that's happened." He sounds so sincere and contrite.

I finally have the courage to look into his eyes as I ask, "Then why'd you do it?"

"I think you know why," he says with an intensity that causes my heart to beat faster.

"But you could have just told me," I reason, the pain still audible in my words. "You knew how I felt about you. I certainly didn't try to hide it."

Heaven knows I didn't try to hide it.

He combs his hand through his hair and looks away. "I was confused," he replies.

Suddenly, I remember and nod in understanding. How can I forget the other presence at the table? "Your girlfriend?" I ask.

"Yes and no," he answers cryptically.

"I don't understand, Sean."

"I lied to you, Sarah," he tells me.

"I know. You've already apologized about Michael."

"No, not that," he says.

If not that, then what else? He looks to be struggling with the words as he continues, "I told you that I was with someone . . ."

"And you're not?" I guess.

"No, I'm not," he confirms and looks down as he does.

My heart drops. It's one thing to believe he didn't want me because he was dating someone else. It's quite different when it's really just an excuse to keep me away.

He looks back up and offers, "It's complicated."

He runs his hand through his hair again and I can tell he's nervous. It's as if he's not sure how to tell me what he needs to tell me. My imagination starts running wild as I think of all of the scenarios in my head: he's married with kids, he's a Topher and likes boys or the worst excuse, he's just not into me. I know what he said in that email, but he might have had a change of heart or just said that to get me here so that he could ease the blow.

I avert my eyes so he doesn't see the pain clearly etched in them. "Sean, you don't need to explain anything to me," I say calmly, resolved not to

break down in front of him. Because the truth of the matter is he doesn't need to offer me any more explanations. He apologized for Michael and that's all that he owes me. Nothing more.

But he shakes his head as he says, "I want to . . . I need to. You have to understand why I did what I did. I don't usually act like some irrational lunatic."

A lunatic with an amazing smile and alluring eyes and . . .

He reaches over the table and places his hand over mine. My mind wanders to the feel of his skin on mine. It distracts me as I think about the feel of that same hand on other parts of me.

"The truth is I *was* seeing someone . . . a long time ago, and it was very serious," he tells me.

He pauses and takes a deep breath in before continuing, "In fact, I was engaged to be married . . ." He says this last sentence in such a low voice I almost don't hear it. But I do hear it and I automatically pull my hand away in shock.

He was engaged . . . to be married? Suddenly, I feel sick to my stomach. How could he have kept this from me? I told him everything about me and I now realize how little I know of Gabriel . . . I mean Sean . . . or whoever he is.

He doesn't stop there. He continues explaining; "It was a few years ago. We met through friends and it was intense, love at first sight, and we fell hard for one another . . . too fast."

I look at him and I see the hurt in his eyes. It's like he's reliving the memories in his mind. I don't say a word though because my own mind is still reeling from this news.

"I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with her . . . but she obviously had other ideas about what that meant."

I can hear the contempt in his voice. Something bad must have happened, and so I ask, "Did she break up with you?"

"Worse," he answered.

Worse than a break up? And before I can say it, he says it first. "She cheated on me . . . with some guy she worked with," he spews out in anger. I can tell the wound is still fresh.

"I'm so sorry, Sean."

"Don't be," he says with conviction. "She obviously didn't love me . . . It was better I found out before the wedding than . . . after."

“Did she try to explain at least?” I ask. I’ve never met his fiancé before but that doesn’t stop me from feeling blind rage at what she did.

“She said it just happened, that she didn’t set out to hurt me. She tried to fight off the sexual attraction she was feeling, but it was much stronger than she imagined.”

If she was in front of me now, I’d give her something strong to feel, like my fist on her nose. I shake my head and though I know I sound like a broken record, I tell him anyway, “I’m so sorry.”

“Michael reminded me a lot of Laura,” he adds.

Is that her name? I have to remind myself to cross that name off of my baby-naming list.

He continues, “When we met, it was all about planning our life together and starting a family. She had it all mapped out, the big wedding and the house with the picket fence, the whole nine yards, and then just like that, it wasn’t.”

Is that why he sent the email to Michael? Is that why he broke us up?

“You could have just told me all of this instead of going behind my back,” I remark.

“I tried, but you didn’t want to listen to me.”

I think back to our conversations about Michael and I do vaguely remember being stubborn.

“I get it,” he remarks. “You wanted Michael to be the one, like I wanted Laura to be the one.” He looks into my eyes as he then says, “But I didn’t want to see you get hurt.”

Now it’s my turn to come clean. “I only wanted Michael to be the one because you couldn’t,” I confess. “Why did you make me believe you had a girlfriend?” I whisper, my voice catching as I try to stifle the tears.

“I didn’t want to go down that road again. I was scared at how strong my feelings for you were becoming.”

“Feelings?” I repeat.

“It happened too fast, Sarah. I didn’t know how to handle it.”

I am speechless as I wait for him to speak again. I don’t dare move, afraid that this will all go away, like our imaginary date.

“But I don’t want to run away from them anymore.”

He pauses before he asks, “Do you know why I work at an online dating service?” he asks.

I shrug my shoulders. “To help desperate women like myself.”

He laughs as he says, “No. I took the job hoping to hide. But I think a part of me was also hoping to believe in love again. I may sound corny, but I think I needed to believe in that possibility.”

“And do you?” I ask quietly.

His eyes stare intently at me as he says in a low voice, “Do you remember the first time we spoke over the phone?”

Of course I remember. How can I ever forget? I was going crazy over that miserable profile, and Gabriel, I mean Sean, put me at ease. He made it all so easy. If it wasn’t for him, I don’t think I would have had the courage to put myself out there.

“You mentioned to me that I was your guardian angel,” he reminds me before saying, “The truth is you were mine, Sarah.”

I can feel the tears starting to fall from my eyes and I am choked up. *Is this really happening?*

He continues, “You once told me that you don’t need practice when it comes to finding love. When you find it, you just know. I thought I found it with Laura, but I realize now that what I had with her wasn’t love. It was *infatuation*, but not *love*.”

I immediately think of Michael and understand exactly what he’s trying to say to me. Sean’s eyes are locked with mine now. It is unflinching and there is not a hint of humor in them. My mouth has suddenly gone dry.

“She hurt me but didn’t damage me.”

He reaches over and grabs my hand again. “You’re the one, Sarah. You’ll always be the one. I don’t need practice and I don’t need second chances. All I need is you.”

I can feel my stomach flip as this thumb softly caresses the palm of my hand. I wipe my tears away with my other hand and smile at him. “So I guess this mean that I have to deactivate my account,” I offer playfully.

He lets out an easy laugh and I stare at his lips, wondering what they would feel like against my own. “I think that’s the general idea,” he murmurs. “I won’t share you with anyone.”

I continue, “But before I do, you have to do something for me in return.”

“I’m intrigued, Ms. Jenkins. What is it?” he asks, his hand still on mine.

“I’d like to turn the table on you,” I suggest.

“I’m listening . . .” he says hesitantly.

“Close your eyes,” I ask him.

“What?” His eyes crinkle in amusement.

“Close your eyes,” I repeat more forcefully.

He arches his eyebrows, “You’re not going to have your way with me, are you?”

I laugh and say, “No.” *Not yet, anyway.*

He does as I ask and I take that moment to get up from my seat and kneel right beside him. My lips are within inches of his ear as I whisper, “I want you to imagine that you’re sitting in front of your computer and you are putting together your own profile.”

“You want me to write a profile for myself?” he asks.

“Yes, unless of course you find it hard to do?” I tease. “I realize it’s an acquired skill and you might not be up to the challenge.”

“No, I can do this,” he replies.

“Are you sure?” I ask as my hand gently brushes up against his arm.

“Absolutely,” he murmurs.

“How does your profile start?”

“You know it’s not fair,” he groans as my hand slowly moves up his shoulder and caresses his neck. “You are distracting me on purpose.”

“That’s the idea.”

He laughs as he utters, “You are incorrigible, Sarah Jenkins, but I’m up to the challenge.”

“I was hoping you would be,” I playfully whisper in his ear as my fingertip softly traces the outline of his lips and before I realize it, his hand is firmly on top of mine and he takes my fingers and intertwines them with his. He opens his eyes and our faces are within inches of each other. I can barely breathe as he looks at me intently.

“My profile starts and ends with you,” he offers.

“That’s a great profile,” I say breathlessly. I’m trying hard to concentrate as I feel his hand moving down my back as he pulls me closer to him.

“And in less than 150 words,” he murmurs as his lips softly brush against mine. It starts off gentle, but quickly becomes intense and passionate. I can feel my head spin and my heart is hammering as his mouth opens slightly and our tongues find one another. It’s everything I imagined a kiss from Gabriel (aka Sean) to be. It’s like coming home.

We finally break free, and from the corner of my eye, I see the hostess looking at us with a surprised expression on her face and her mouth wide open in shock. I can’t help but giggle. Poor thing has no idea what to think anymore. I smile at her and wink as I pull Sean back toward me for another

kiss.

Sean

I have a new favorite dress. It's not the one she wore on her date with Michael, the one that kept me up all night thinking about it. No, that dress is black and it wraps around Sarah in such a way that it shows off all of her curves. It's the one she wore for me on our first date. The one I couldn't keep my eyes off of, the very dress I eventually got her out of . . .

And our first kiss? God, I've been wanting to do that for a long time! When I opened my eyes and saw that she was within inches of me, I couldn't control the urge anymore. I pulled her tightly to me, wrapped my arms around her waist, and kissed her with urgency. My lips then traveled to her neck and I was lost in her. Her skin was so soft and my nose was filled with her smell. Let's just say it was a good thing we were in a public place or else I wouldn't have been able to stop.

Sarah is everything I imagined her to be and more. From the moment she walked into the restaurant, I instantly knew. This was it. I never thought I'd feel that way again. I can't say it was love at first sight because it wasn't. You see, by the time she walked up to me that night and introduced herself, I already knew everything there was to know about Sarah. I wasn't meeting a stranger, I was meeting my best friend and I've spent the last few months loving her for it.

Sarah

I am sitting in front of my computer, happily typing away on the keys. I look up at the screen and read over what I've just written.

My name is Sarah Jenkins and I am thirty years old. It doesn't matter what I look like or what I enjoy doing. It doesn't matter that I work as a Human Resource consultant or that I live in Manhattan. None of that matters because I've met the love of my life!

This is my last post on the website. I started this journey four and a half months ago and I started as a reluctant nonbeliever. A birthday gift from a friend. But now, I'm a convert and if it were not for SoulMates4Everafter, I wouldn't have met my guardian angel.

He shares the same interests as I do, and together we go to the movies, and go bike riding, and he's actually a great cook! He makes me laugh every single day, and after a long day at work, I get to come home to him. The best part is he's a great listener too, always has been.

So I'm signing off now for good. I'm happy to report that my account has

been deactivated. I've found my happily ever after and a soul mate that was truly heaven sent.

I smile with pride. I didn't need to close my eyes and imagine what to say. I didn't need any help from my friends and family or their comments. I didn't need anyone else's approval. All I needed to do was think of Gabriel and start typing.

EPILOGUE

Although I've closed out my account and considered myself a success story of SoulMates4Everafter, I've managed to stay in touch with several of my blind dates. We send updates via email to one another, and occasionally meet up for a drink.

I'm happy to report that Company Man has found true love with Jessica. She is an extreme couponer and was even featured in a reality show on the subject. They happily spend their weekends looking for deals and shopping at consignment shops. He just told me the good news that they are engaged to be married and are planning to move into her rent-controlled apartment together by the end of the month. He is so proud of the fact that their wedding will be a sponsored corporate event and all of the services will be donated. How efficient!

Mr. Slash is still going strong with the "tree." He meditates every day without fail. Sometimes I'll pass by there on my way to a client and whiff the familiar scent of burnt candles. He's since taken over his friend's gig as the Statue of Liberty at Times Square, and Sean and I actually posed for a picture with him on our way to a Broadway show to celebrate our six-month anniversary.

Speaking of Broadway shows, I'm blessed to have Topher in my life. Mr. Broadway is still going strong with the leading man in his life, Livingston, and we all go out together whenever he's in town. They both split their time between Manhattan and London, and are having the time of their lives. In fact, it was Topher who surprised me and Sean with tickets to a Broadway show on our anniversary. Afterward, we headed over to the Sing Along Bar where I was the first volunteer to karaoke. To my surprise, Sean joined in on a duet and now he's become an honorary member of the Broadway Pack, just like me!

And the best part of all of it, the two most important men in my life get along amazingly well. And the same thing goes with Amy and Tom. We've become inseparable and Amy does not waste any opportunity telling me whom I have to thank for it all.

And she's right, I owe her so much. I think of her now as Sean and I cozy up in front of a roaring fire on the sofa, sipping our glasses of wine, as I casually glance down at the gorgeous diamond ring that is on my finger. We lean back into each other as we close our eyes and relax, imagining what our

wedding is going to look like in exactly one year.

BOOK EXCERPT: THE SHOPPING SWAP

Chapter One: Alice

“What am I going to wear now?” I complain to no one but myself as I pull the pink terrycloth housecoat out of my shopping bag. It has little flowers adorning the collar where the zipper ends. I didn’t even know people still wore housecoats, and I’m trying to remember the last time I saw someone actually wear something like this. I think it was on an old episode of the Brady Bunch where Mr. Brady woke up Alice the housekeeper in the middle of the night because Jan ran away again, possibly for the fifteenth time.

This is not going to do, not at all. Richard is going to be here in less than two hours, and I don’t have the sexy lingerie I was planning to wear—the one I carefully picked out at the upscale Crandall’s department store; the one with the black lace and leather ties that barely covers up anything that should normally be left to the imagination; the one that cost me a fortune to buy, practically a month’s paycheck as a New York City public school teacher.

I turn the coat over and frown. Maybe if I leave the zipper all the way down, showing some cleavage, and tell Richard it’s some kinky foreplay, he’d buy it. Maybe, if I tell him we are role-playing, and I am supposed to be the bored 1950s housewife being seduced by Dick, the mailman, in the middle of the day while her husband is still at work, he’d be totally turned on and rip this awful-looking thing off my body.

Turning the housecoat back over to the front, I sigh, knowing that there are several problems with this plan. First, I don’t have the cleavage to make this work and, secondly, not even Richard is that kinky. I’m sure that if he walked in and saw me sprawled out on the bed wearing this housecoat, he’d feel as if he were seducing a geriatric cougar rather than his still young and, for the most part, wrinkle-free (but not completely cellulite-free) girlfriend. Suddenly, I swear I can smell the distinct odor of arthritis and denture crème.

How did this happen? My mind works overtime as I retrace my steps from last night. I had gotten home from work after a long day teaching bored high school kids about the excitement of prepositions and hanging participles. I changed clothes and caught the subway into Manhattan from my home in Queens. It was a crisp, fall evening in mid-September, and around seven o’clock, I said good-bye to my sister, Janie, after a nice dinner in one of our regular NYC spots. I walked over to Crandall’s, just a few blocks away, and I

first stopped at their perfume counter to buy “Desiring,” which is one of Richard’s favorites. Then, I headed straight to the Intimate Apparel section to buy the lingerie.

Well, not exactly straight away.

I did stop at Jewelry, and I might have spent some time perusing the diamond counters—diamond earrings, diamond tennis bracelets, and well, maybe, lingering by the diamond engagement rings. Possibly wincing at the fact that it has been five years since I met Richard, and he has not once talked about marriage or a future involving more than weekend sleepovers and mini-getaways. Not even the talk about getting a dog together. If I sound bitter, I really am not, but were I forced to admit it under oath before a jury of my peers, I would say that these last few years with my boyfriend have been somewhat frustrating. I would never, of course, admit this to him or to anyone else—not even my friends or my sister, Janie. I mean, how could I? I don’t want to look desperate, and I certainly don’t want to be that girlfriend. You know the type. Everyone knows the type. She’s the girl who pressures her boyfriend to make a commitment before he’s ready. I’ve seen enough movies, read tons of magazine articles, and taken 627 relationship quizzes to know that in the end, those girls never get the guy. No, I need to be the cool one, the laid-back woman, the one not in any rush to make my way to the altar. Those are the girls that get the guy. And those are the qualities Richard loves the most about me.

I first met Richard at a bar. We were there with mutual friends, and we bonded over our shared love of Belgian beer, boneless buffalo wings, and retro 80s music. The fact that he loved Wham and Madonna (after “Like a Virgin” but before “Vogue”) just as much as I did made me realize that we might have the beginning of something. It also didn’t hurt that he was cute, not living with his parents, and had a life plan that did not involve moving to California to pursue his passion for music, acting, surfing, or finding himself. I know; I certainly did set the bar high, right? But the fact that he knew exactly what he wanted to do with his life was a major turn-on and still is. When we first started dating, he was a second-year law student, aiming to become a very successful and wealthy attorney after he graduated and passed the bar. As someone studying to get her master’s degree in education while working as a public school teacher, I was totally impressed with his ambition, and I think I fell in love with him mostly because of it.

We talked, we laughed, we drank, and by the end of the night, he went

home with me to my small apartment in Queens where he woke up the next morning and served me pancakes in bed. Although we never made it “official,” we were living, working, and playing like a couple in love.

Fast forward two years later, and Richard did graduate from law school, did pass the bar, and was hired by a big law firm in Manhattan in their litigation department, which I’ve since found out is code for people who love to argue for a living. He started working crazy hours, trying to build a name for himself. He was stressed and tired all the time, so although I was thinking about it, I couldn’t exactly bring up something as weighty as marriage. Not when he was busy working on important stuff, like bringing justice to the poor, unfortunate woman whose boob job was botched by an overzealous doctor or seeking compensation for the victimized man who suffered third-degree burns from holding a plastic cup of hot steaming coffee in between his legs after ordering it at the Quickie Fast Food drive-thru. Here he was, working on life-altering cases, and I didn’t want to seem petty; especially since he kept repeating over and over again how much he loved me because of it, because of the fact that I’m not concerned about—what did he say again? Oh yes—“conventional” and “traditional” stereotypes that the media and television talk show personalities pretending to be doctors were feeding us. Richard always has a way with words...

To read the rest of the book, [click here to purchase](#) it on Amazon in eBook or paperback.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Brady, an accountant turned author, resides in New York City. Several of her books have become run-away best-sellers, especially in the United Kingdom. She bases her novels on real life experiences that, thanks to creative license and a crazy imagination, she takes to the extreme, adding her own brand of unique humor.

On a personal note, she acknowledges her own obsession with celebrities and shoes. Despite spending the better part of her life single and looking for love, she found is happily married now, but it took her awhile to get there. Last but not least, she has several subscriptions to tabloid magazines and isn't afraid to admit it.

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