

Prologue

I hadn't been in this much trouble since fourth grade when I punched Missy Perkins in the face for kicking mud in my eyes. She was such a hater. I think she meant to kick the mud onto my new hot-pink dress because she was jealous of how cute I looked that day. Instead, the brown sludge got in my eyes and then dripped onto my dress. And it was picture day! My mother had taken special pains to make sure I rocked my pictures so I wouldn't ruin the current collection of my older sibling's photos.

Did I mention this was all *before* the pictures were taken (seriously, who decides to wait until after recess to take pictures?). I can't recall whether I was angrier that my right eye was full of mud, that my dress was dirty, or that I'd have to hear my mother yell at me. All I do remember was that I was a ten-year-old full of rage, and before I could think, I knocked Missy in the eye, then took off running to hide in the bathroom.

Naturally, I was found by my teacher who, of course, called my parents. No amount of explaining got me out of the threat of a spanking and a week's punishment of no TV, which was especially heartbreaking because *Jem and the Holograms* had a cliff-hanger the week before, and I just had to find out what happened to Jem's boyfriend Rio! I probably would have kept the TV privileges, but right before I got spanked I pointed out that punishing me for doing something violent by spanking me, also violent, seemed counter-intuitive. Okay, I didn't say it in those exact words (I mean, I was ten); but with that exact meaning. My mother agreed, and decided that no TV was a better, more civilized punishment. Sometimes I was too smart for my own good.

So, here I was again, in trouble for acting too quickly before thinking.

My heart beat loudly in my chest, drowning out my thoughts. A prickly heat, soon followed by sweat, attacked my armpits. I gave a joker-like grin, trying to produce an air of calm as I stared at the small group. My boss, arms crossed, looked at me with an expectant glare. My work nemesis gave me a self-satisfied smile. My two work friends threw out looks mixed with sympathy and fear.

I wanted to run to the bathroom and hide but, like my teacher, my boss would find me. I was a grown woman; I couldn't hide from my mistakes. I had been so cocky, believing that things would work out just because I thought I was too fabulous to fail. Now my ridiculous ego had led me to no promotion, and to possibly losing my job. Could I get fired for something like this?

"Well, Sheila, we're waiting," my boss said.

I gave a light, slightly crazy villain-sounding chuckle as I adjusted my thoughts. Dear God, how did I get myself into this?

Part One: The Search

Chapter One: Sheila

It all began with a lie. A little one really, but it ended up taking on a life of its own; turning into something I hadn't anticipated or even really said; like some bad game of telephone.

The fateful day started with a particularly disturbing nightmare involving alleged tuna fish and cats, which had the undesired effect of waking me up. I grumbled and shifted around on my bed as I glared at the 4:12 a.m. time on my digital clock. I turned on the TV and frowned, trying to fall back asleep to an old *Will and Grace* episode on Lifetime TV. Finally at around five thirty, I returned to a dreamless sleep.

When the alarm screamed at me at 7:00 a.m., I opened my eyes in horror at my clock radio. Time to get up already? Surely, this was some sort of nightmare! The cold breeze from my air conditioner blasted on my skin and forced me to pull my beige satin comforter tighter around me, and I knew that it truly was the harsh reality of early morning. Ten minutes later, after thoughtlessly watching the morning news, I got up for work, still pissed at my lack of sleep.

Further, my nutmeg complexion was experiencing a type of breakout I hadn't had since I was a teen, which only seemed highlighted behind layers of expensive department store camouflage. Despite my efforts to the contrary, and the new jet-black rinse I'd put in, my bob-cut hair was frizzy, so I had to pull it back into an unflattering, tiny ponytail. Since I had not gone to the cleaners or washed clothes in three weeks, I had to wear one of my least-favorite suits, which fit poorly to my 5'6" frame. I kept having to twist the skirt back around and ignore odd looks from other passengers the whole Metro commute to work.

Before I could even make it *to* the Metro I was unfortunate enough to lock myself out of my condo. I had to call my cousin, who lived about 15 minutes away, and had a spare key. In traffic, it took more like 30 minutes. My cousin gave me an angry glare as she let me in my house, as if it was *her* day that was going down quick. The woman didn't have anything better to do; she was a housewife whose kids were already in school, and she had a maid. Worst-case scenario, she'd miss her morning spin class.

I fought hard not to flip her the bird as she chastised me for being so forgetful. I really needed to make some friends that lived closer.

Needless to say, this was not a good start for my day.

Once at work, I closed the door to my office at Washington and Morrison Law Firm and flopped into my large leather swivel chair, yawning and wondering if I would make it through my 10-hour day. The bright sun from the floor-to-

ceiling window behind me, showcasing a busy part of North Massachusetts Avenue (or NoMa, as we call it), did not serve as the mood motivator it usually did that morning.

I heard a knock at my door and sucked in a deep breath before answering.

My coworker, Gregory “Greg” Walters, opened the door and strolled in. Greg was something out of a *GQ* magazine. He was 6’2” with a muscular body, shaved head and was the color of peanut butter. Damn, that man was fine. But Greg was a pit bull in Armani, and we had sort of a complicated friendship. He sat down and began to yammer away about something. Since I really wasn’t mentally ready for my day to begin, my mind couldn’t really hold in everything he was saying. Instead, I was wondering if I had time to stop past a drug store for some zit cream at lunch.

“So, you going?” he asked me, seated in one of the two chairs in front of my desk.

I hadn’t even noticed him sitting down. And what the hell was he talking about? “What the hell are you talking about?” I asked. For a guy he could talk. Sometimes, even in the best of moods, I just tuned out parts.

Greg shook his head, smiling. “Are you going to the Entertainment and Sports Conference? The dinners, the parties, and the seminars?” he repeated, purposely over enunciating his words enough to make me want to slap him.

“The one in June? That’s three months away. Who knows?” I shrugged. “I’ll figure it out when the time draws near.”

“What’s this I hear about you not going to the banquet?” said a shrill voice that stabbed at my spine. It belonged to Jamie Martin, who was leaning against my doorway, looking too comfortable. Jamie was tall, thin, brown-eyed, and blond, with fake boobs and I’m sure a Botoxed forehead. She was wearing a bright-red skirt suit, which made her look like the she-devil she was. I wish I could have booby-trapped the doorway for her. Seeing her butt fall through a hole in the hardwood floor would have made my day.

“I know that’s not what I said. Perhaps your eavesdropping skills are falling off,” I replied with a tight smile.

“Well, you know that it’ll have *the* parties of the summer. Actors and singers and athletes will be there. It’ll be like Hollywood!” she cried with glee.

This year the Entertainment and Sports Conference would be held in DC, where I lived, so I had to go. “I know; I went to the one in Miami the year before last.”

She walked further into my office, which annoyed me more. “I’ve already picked out my gown. It’s a designer, but it was worth every penny. Ted will love it,” she bragged. Ted was her new investment banker boyfriend who happened to look like Brad Pitt and spoiled her rotten.

Oh, yeah; I hated her.

“Are you going, Greg?” she asked, batting her eyelashes. Although she now had a man, she couldn’t stop flirting with Greg. It was as if she couldn’t have even one man not show interest in her.

“Yeah, you know me, never one to miss a networking opportunity,” Greg replied, sitting back in my chair, hands casually crossed behind his head.

“Who will you take? Sheila again? You’re always so kind to be her escort to these different functions,” Jamie said, a smile on her lips. “Or, Sheila, are you actually seeing someone now?”

“You know, Jamie, it’s still early yet. We’ll have dates for the banquet. Don’t you worry,” I stated.

“Well, keep those spirits up.”

Not while she was around. “I’ll have someone to go with, Jamie.”

“Sure you will.” She shrugged, then turned to leave. “And going alone is no problem, either. I’m sure you’re used to that by now.”

I was seeing red, and it was not just her suit. “You know, Jamie, I actually have been seeing someone. And if things go well, he’ll be my date to the event,” I replied confidently.

Greg turned his head to me and raised an eyebrow. I hadn’t dated anyone in four months; what was I talking about?

Jamie spun around, eyes wide with curiosity. “Oh, really? What’s his name? What does he do?” she asked, leaning against my doorframe again.

I thought fast; of course she would want details. “His name is.... James.” Yeah, James. That was nice and respectable-sounding. So, what did James do? Maybe he could be a doctor. I’ve dated doctors before. Maybe even a plastic surgeon. Then I thought, she probably knew all the ones in the area with her melt-near-a-fire body. Another lawyer? No, she’d look him up on a legal search engine. Plus, you couldn’t throw a stone without hitting a lawyer in this town. I looked down at the cover of my latest copy of *Essence* peeking out of my large handbag by my feet. Sean “Diddy” Combs was on the front, and I knew what James did.

“He’s a music producer,” I replied seriously.

Greg tried to control his laughter.

Jamie’s eyes glowed with surprise. “What label?”

Label? What the hell? “Uh...Um. He told me. I can’t remember the label...”

“It’s the one Jill Scott’s on, right? I remember you told me that.” Greg smiled.

I tried to cover the look of gratitude on my face and nodded my head in agreement. Jill Scott was neo-soul, right in my musical database. “Yeah, that one. I’ll have to ask him again. He works a lot with neo-soul music. He’s a VP and lives in New York.”

“Neo-soul, huh? That’s not really my area. But I’m sure the partners would be interested to know this. You’ve been holding back a major networking opportunity.” She wagged her index finger at me, and I wanted to bite it off. “Lives in New York? Must be hard, so far away,” Jamie stated, searching my eyes as if looking for a lie.

I shrugged. “Not really. It’s just a three-and-a-half-hour drive with no traffic. And he makes enough money where filling up his Mercedes with gas on a regular basis is no problem. Or he flies me to him. I prefer to go see him because I like the access he has. I meet some of his artists and get VIP treatment wherever we go. Next weekend we’re going to New York City for a celebrity party, but I can’t remember whose it is. Jay-Z, or Diddy, Kanye West? Who knows?” It was like I was plugged into a lying machine. Somebody stop me!

The right corner of Jamie’s upper lip twitched. She was pissed. All of a sudden, I was starting to feel better.

“Damn, can I go with ya’ll?” Greg asked, giving me a playful, wide-eyed look.

“Well, Sheila, sounds like you’re doing well for yourself. I suggest you show a good attitude and hold onto him. Maybe he just might stick around for the banquet. I would love to meet him,” Jamie smiled tightly.

Show a good attitude; I’ll show her my foot as it connects to her face. “Oh, he’ll be there for the banquet; we’re pretty serious,” I replied with confidence.

“Then who knows? Maybe you’ll defy statistics and get married!”

Thanks, *Dateline* and friends, for sharing with the masses the black woman’s plight in finding love. Seriously, how long would I get in jail for tasing someone? Might be worth it.

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Jamie gave a shocked face. “So, you could be getting engaged? How exciting. Wait until I tell everyone. The partners will love the exposure,” she muttered, leaving before I could straighten her gossiping ass out.

I stared at Greg in horror; he looked at me with pity. “What in the world? Friends don’t let friends be stupid!” I cried, throwing a paper clip at him.

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I had dug myself into a major hole, all because I was insecure about being single at 31, and even more insecure about the prospect that my single status might continue well into my thirties. Maybe forties. God, I was giving myself heartburn.

The guys just weren’t as plentiful as they used to be. I worked long hours, and in an environment where the only eligible guy was one who didn’t want to be tied down; and clients were not to be touched. The bar scene was tired. With so many folks having post-grad degrees and good jobs, my title wasn’t so impressive. And let’s not get into the fact that for a man in DC, women were just falling out of trees like ripe fruit.

With so many women here, finding enough good men was like finding a needle in a haystack. Well, there was the cable guy, my mechanic, the maintenance and movers in the building, and the security guards; but it wasn't as if any of them were studs in blue-collar uniforms, not that I would date a blue-collar guy anyway. I worked too hard to date a guy who wasn't on my level. Times weren't that hard...yet. I sighed again. *God, please don't let times get that hard!* I refused to succumb to some typical black movie where the woman could only be happy if she was with a blue-collar guy. I wanted my freakin' fairy tale, just like the white women in movies got too. Was it so hard to have one movie where the black woman lived happily ever after with a successful businessman instead of a plumber? Where was my President Obama?!

My best gal pal Denise looked at me with wide eyes, hands over her mouth, as I told her the sad, sad tale of *The Day I Lost My Damned Mind*. We were having dinner that Thursday evening, and taking advantage of the \$5 martini special at Mist, a trendy jazz lounge in Washington, DC near the capital.

I looked at Denise, sadly shaking my head. "And it wouldn't be so bad if she hadn't told everyone, including the partners, who now think I have some hook-up I haven't been sharing. They've been pressuring me for some client contacts. Then she told others that I'm already engaged to someone. People keep wanting to see a ring! I've been saying he hasn't yet properly proposed, but it's coming soon. What? Don't look at me like that! It does actually feel good to be the center of some positive attention, instead of looking like the workaholic bitch with no life."

Denise took her hand away from her open mouth as the waiter came back with our second round of drinks. "Yes, well, more lying sounds like the logical thing to do," she replied with a serious face. "Seriously though, what the hell are you going to do, woman?" she cried.

I shrugged. "Find myself a James, I suppose."

"You've got three months. More than enough time. Just tell whoever to act the part for the night," she said, running a hand over her mass of shoulder-length curly brown hair.

"Well, I've been on a dry spell, so it might be a bit difficult. What about you? Got any options for escorts to Mia's wedding in June?"

"The only option I have is what shoes I'm wearing with the dress she's gonna make us wear," Denise replied, rolling her eyes.

"You have got to get a date!" I said in horror, hand to my chest.

"For what? It's not like I'm entering a dance competition. I don't need a partner."

"My God, woman! If you go alone, all those bitches at the wedding will think you're pathetic. Besides, you do need someone to dance with."

“I can do the two-step by myself,” she responded, bobbing her head to the beat of the jazz rhythms emanating from the band on stage.

I shook my head slowly. “You’re going to end up feeling bad and calling me on the phone to complain. Those girls *expect* you to be alone. Don’t give them the right.”

Denise frowned and stopped moving. “Why does being alone have to sound so sad?”

“Bring an escort. You’ve been to enough weddings alone,” I pushed. “Just think; if you had a gorgeous man on your arm, all those heifers would see that you’re doing just fine on your own. Nothing else seems to get through to them other than man language.”

Denise raised an eyebrow. “Problem is, where can I find a man like that in three months? Can we share James?” she teased.

The waiter appeared with our food as I spoke. “Girl, you have no idea how bad the situation is getting. Let me tell you about the nightmare that started all this foolishness,” I said, looking down at my salmon.

Denise nodded for me to start as she grabbed her fork and knife, preparing to cut into her lemon chicken.

“I choked on a piece of tuna I was eating out of a can.” I looked up at the waiter, who looked at me with a raised eyebrow. “We’re good, thanks,” I stated, and waited for him to leave before speaking again. “I dreamt that I died choking on canned tuna fish which, right before I croaked, I realized was actually cat food, and all my many, hungry cats were surrounding me, preparing to eat me as soon as I died. How pitiful is that? I mean, I hate cats!”

Denise held her fork midway to her mouth, a frozen look on her face. “Wow; that’s some seriously sad shit, Shiela. Ooh, say that three times fast, ha-ha!”

“I don’t like you.”

Denise shrugged. “Hey, maybe those dreams are saying that you need a cat.”

I frowned. “That makes no sense. Why do I need a cat? To chow down on my body ‘cause I died eating its food?!”

“Maybe the dream was about you feeling unsafe living by yourself. Get a roommate who can account for you, so your dead body isn’t stinking up the complex.” Denise nodded with a smile, like she’d just had an epiphany.

“Thanks, Denise. Yes, that’s what was bothering me so much. I’ll be dead; screw my neighbors!” I cut into my salmon and soon realized it smelled like tuna. I put my fork and knife down. “Maybe it means I should just stop watching *Animal Hoarders* before I go to bed.”

Denise frowned. “Yeah, or that.”

“I just can’t have this anymore. What we need to do is be proactive and find ourselves some decent men.”

“I couldn’t care less,” Denise said, covering her mouth as she chewed, and moved to the beat of the new song the band was playing.

“We need to get out there,” I stated, ignoring her. “We’ve got a mission, and we have work to do. We *must* find dates to our events. And we only have three months to do it!”

“How, pray tell, do *you* do that?” Denise asked, taking a sip of her drink.

“I printed this online guide on finding your Mr. Perfect. My secretary recommended it to me. She seems to think I’m having problems sleeping because this steady case of the singles is starting to wear me down,” I said, and took a folded sheet of paper from my purse for Denise to review.

Denise took the paper, unfolded it and looked it over. “*How to Find Your Mr. Perfect.*” She raised her head and gave me a cynical look with a raised eyebrow. She then lowered her head back down again and quickly scanned the article. “These rules are stupid.”

I took the paper back from her, chin jutting out, unashamed. “Hey, we have to start somewhere. And my secretary said it worked for her cousin, Sharonda.”

“Well, I don’t know Sharonda, *or* the man she’s with. And most of those rules there would only be relevant if this was sixty years ago. Besides, there’s no such thing as a Mr. Right or a Mr. Perfect.”

“Yes there is!”

Denise humphed. “Okay then, if there is a way to find a Mr. Perfect, perhaps the makers of this can also do a guide to finding Big Foot or the Loch Ness Monster. I mean, if they’re going to have us chasing after make-believe creatures, they might as well go all the way. Go hard or go home, right?”

“This isn’t a game, girl! We should try it out. The people in the 1950s had it right. There weren’t all these single women running around back then.”

Denise put her hands up in objection. “And God forbid we be allowed to run amok.”

I rolled my eyes. So, our mission would begin. I lifted my water glass (we’d finished our drinks) in a toast. “To Mission: Get A Man. Otherwise known as GAM. We have to have a code operative!”

Denise made a face, then raised her glass. “That’s mad-corny, and I’ll toast to never hearing it again,” she replied, clinking my glass with hers.

Maybe Denise pretended she didn’t care, but I knew she loved a challenge. She’d participate in my little plan if for nothing more than pure curiosity. But she’d see the light. Love wasn’t bad. It was as necessary as air, and I refused to suffocate.