

BETSY ST. AMANT

Tacos for Two





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BETSY ST. AMANT


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Prologue

Love at First Chat Direct Messenger

StrongerMan99:

We have to stop meeting like this.

ColorMeTurquoise:

You mean, anonymously through a computer?

Exactly. I actually spent a long time trying to think of something better to say than hi, but now I think that would have been better.

LOL. I applaud your effort. Am I the first one they've matched you with?

Second. 😬 That sounds worse than it is.

Not when I tell you that you're my fourth.

Yikes.

Does that make me look bad?

Actually, it makes the app look bad. They've failed you three times. You should demand a refund.

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I like the way you think.

So what was wrong with bachelors #1, #2, and #3?

A lady never tells.

Smart. Because then I could go out of my way not to repeat the same mistakes and you'd never know if I was genuine.

Ooh, I'm already worth a potential masquerade? That's what I call a good first impression. It's only been three minutes.

Are you going to ask me what was wrong with bachelorette #1?

I'm assuming you're too much of a gentleman to tell me.

You stole my line.

I'm sure you've got more.

Care to stick around and find out?

I think I will.

.....

StrongerMan99:
Do you like cats?

ColorMeTurquoise:
I feel like this question is loaded.

It is. No pressure.

I don't have a cat, if that's what you're asking.

It's not.

Drat.

You're getting closer. That rhymes with cat, but it's still not an answer.

I guess I'm really more of a dog person if anything. 🐶 Pass or fail?

Pass. Flying colors.

What if you hate the color turquoise?

I could never.

.....

ColorMeTurquoise:

Favorite ice cream flavor? Mine's mint chocolate chip.

StrongerMan99:

Cookies 'n cream.

I suppose I can overlook that.

That just means more for you, right? We would never have to share a pint.

The fact that you thought sharing a pint was an option in the first place makes me think perhaps Love at First Chat made another mistake.

I'm enjoying this mistake far more than the last one.

.....

ColorMeTurquoise:

Did you ever have any doubts about this app?

StrongerMan99:

You mean, did I ever doubt that an online matchmaking program could quiz me, run a background check, slap up a profile, and immediately match me up successfully with a complete stranger who lives within a sixty-mile radius of me but who I've never met before on my own and cause me to fall in love and live happily ever after? Of course not.

Me neither.

.....

StrongerMan99:

Romantic comedies are underrated.

ColorMeTurquoise:

Now you're just trying to impress me.

I mean it. Fantastic story lines. Happily ever after. Solid actors. It's gold. Besides, who wants to watch heavy stuff? Isn't real life hard enough?

You had me sold at happily ever after.

It doesn't always work out that way, though, does it?

Not in my experience.

Mine either.

Favorite novel?

Sophie's Choice.

You joke.

Are you laughing?

Yes.

Mission accomplished.



If Rory Perez could find a way to wad all the cilantro in the entire world into a ball and hurl it into outer space, it still wouldn't be far enough removed for her preference.

"That's enough, right?" She pulled her turquoise sweatshirt up over her nose and turned pleading eyes to Grady, who stood by the food truck's efficiency stove and sprinkled the vile weed into a bubbling quesadilla mixture.

Grady shook his head, humor dancing around the laugh lines by his eyes—wrinkles Rory was pretty sure she was responsible for. Probably responsible for the gray hair streaking his dark temple too, even though he was only in his early forties. "Calm down, hermana. He asked for extra. Besides, who's the chef here?"

"You are." Rory reluctantly dropped her sweatshirt from her face and reached to hand him the spatula she knew he'd need next. Grady was more than her late aunt's longtime food truck assistant. This past year, he and his wife, Nicole, had been Rory's sanity as she struggled to keep the inherited business booming—and other things from exploding.

She cut her eyes at him. "By the way, I'm not your sister."

"Close enough—and good thing, or I'd have kicked you out of this food truck a long time ago. You know I wouldn't keep up

this charade for just anyone.” He wrinkled his nose at her as he adjusted the heat on the stovetop burner.

She crossed her arms. “I don’t think *charade* is the right word.”

“Fine. You like farce better?”

“More like assumption.”

“Right.” He clicked his tongue in mock disapproval. “Customers assume you cook like your aunt and assume I bus the dishes.”

Rory’s neck flushed as the truth of the statement lingered. “They do not.”

“Sure they do. Fortunately, Nicole keeps me man enough to take it.” He winked. “And I’m not complaining. Most of our male customer base would vanish if they realized you weren’t the chef around here, and hey, men eat a lot. Now, can you hand me the—” He stopped as Rory waved the black utensil in his face. “*Gracias*.”

“See? Maybe I’m not good at cooking, but I’m good for something.” If she were typing that in a DM to StrongerMan99, she’d have added *#kidding #notkidding*. Maybe. She hadn’t dared to be quite that vulnerable in their online chats. But they were getting to that point. There was something so appealing—so *safe*—about anonymity. Grady might be as close as family, but it was hard to go there with him. One, because he turned everything into a big brother compliment-fest, but also because, technically, he was her employee.

Technically, she owned the Salsa Street food truck.

And technically, she couldn’t cook to save her life.

He pressed the tortilla flat against the skillet. “You’re good at a lot of stuff, Ror. Probably more than you know, if you’d ever get out from behind your computer. What are those boards you stab?”

“It’s *pin*. You know—Pinterest?” She bristled. “At least I’m organizing and planning. It’s not like I’m some obsessed gamer or something.”

“Hey, now—what’s wrong with gaming? Everyone needs a break from reality now and then. Me and Nicole play online pool together. She’s getting pretty good.” Grady flipped the quesadilla.

The too-familiar aroma of spicy chicken and peppers filled

the cramped space. Rory's dark hair had smelled like smoke for almost a year now. Just one of many things that had changed in the past twelve months.

"Exactly—a *break*. That's what my Pinterest boards are for me." Everything made much more sense on her computer screen than it did in the kitchen. There were colors on her party-planning boards. Angles. Patterns. And they all fit together like a puzzle, a dazzling palette of turquoise—always turquoise—and gold and silver and peach. She liked when things lined up and looked neat.

Too bad there weren't any parties to plan. Not since her cousin's event last year. Before everything changed. Pinterest was an escape. The food truck, however, served as a frequent reminder of the pressures riding Rory's shoulders like a pageant queen on a hometown parade float. She couldn't get lost in that. It smothered. Like the smoke from the stove.

"I'll admit, the updated truck skin you designed for Salsa Street is legit." Grady reached over and clicked on the vent, raising his voice over the sudden whirring. "I knew you had more in you design-wise than those online boards."

"Whatever." She straightened the crooked oven mitt hanging on its peg by the stove. She'd learned to hate compliments. She'd gotten good at batting away the "you're so pretty" ones. Now, the ones she truly needed—the compliments that referenced her strength or character or other beyond-skin-deep attributes—seemed to ricochet right off while she flailed around to catch them. Her ex-boyfriend, Thomas, had done a great job helping her flick them away.

Rory paused to align the salt and pepper shakers against the straight edge of the counter. "Besides, until we have the money to actually put the skin on the truck, it doesn't really matter what I design."

Grady shot her a knowing look. "Don't stress out."

"I'm not." She guiltily stepped away from the seasoning shakers. He pointed with a carving knife. "You're organizing things."

Which means tomorrow I won't be able to find them. Relax—we've got the food festival coming up. That always brings in extra dough."

According to Grady—and Aunt Sophia's sales records—that was the case every year. But could they depend on that alone? Columns of red numbers danced in Rory's mind. It seemed foolish to put all their eggs—make that tacos—in one basket. But wasn't that what she'd done when she quit her pay-the-bills job in insurance and took over the food truck last year when her aunt's health declined?

It had started in increments. Rory had filled in while Aunt Sophia was too weak from chemo to work the truck. Grady kept things running, but one man couldn't take all the orders, fill them, and keep up with the business side of things. Rory had filled the gaps, thinking it would only be temporarily, until one day they all realized it wouldn't be. The decision was made, the will was signed, and a few months later, Aunt Sophia was gone.

"Like I said, hermana, you're good at a lot. But for now, why don't you be good at scooting over. You know he'll be here any minute." Grady nudged her out of the way of the stove with a bowl of freshly grated shredded cheese.

Rory glanced at her watch. Wednesday, June 2. "It's the lawyers' order again, isn't it?" The last few Wednesdays, without fail, the Worthington Family Law Firm ordered enough food for an army and insisted on a rush job. Heaven forbid they order ten minutes sooner instead to make up the difference. The runner they sent each week—a pale, lanky college kid—always looked as harried as a third monkey trying to board the ark.

And yet every Wednesday she and Grady hurried around during the lunch rush, all at the whim of some rich society family thinking they were too good to wait in line like everyone else. What was that saying about insanity? Something about doing the same thing over and over but expecting different results?

The walls of the food truck crushed in a few inches, and Rory inhaled deeply. Speaking of insanity—a food truck owner who

couldn't cook. But she was there to carry on Aunt Sophia's legacy. There for her cousin Hannah. For all the people depending on her. Salsa Street wasn't only a popular restaurant on wheels. It was an heirship.

Even if it did constantly reek of cilantro.

Grady glanced up from the stove, calm and steady as always, despite their fast-paced morning. "Ready for the box."

She was already holding it open.

His warm, big-brother smile of gratitude reminded her to take another deep breath. "She'd be proud, you know. Aunt Sophia."

Rory cocked an eyebrow at Grady.

"Don't do that. You look even more like Fiona when you do."

She twisted her lips to the side. "That's so annoying."

"Oh, yes, poor thing. It must be tragically difficult to be constantly mistaken for a beautiful Hollywood star." Grady rolled his eyes as he expertly transferred the quesadilla to the waiting black Styrofoam box.

"It is, actually." That's why Rory had signed up for Love at First Chat in the first place. Total anonymity. No pictures allowed. At least not until the app's self-designated progression of communication declared it time.

Step One: Connect via matchmaking pairing through the app's trusted formula.

Step Two: DMs.

Step Three: Personal texting.

Step Four: Photos shared.

Step Five: Meeting in person.

She'd memorized the steps, yet at the moment, she had no intention of sliding past number two anytime soon. It was too risky.

Rory artfully arranged slices of yellow and red peppers atop a pile of rice, then secured the lid on the box, added it to the to-go bag of other orders, and turned to the pick-up window just as the lanky law firm runner rushed up, shirt half untucked and shoelace untied.

“Laces.” She jerked the bag out of his reach.

“Not again.” He sighed as he bent to quickly whip them into knots. Then he straightened and held out his hands.

She shook her head. “Shirt.”

He rolled his eyes and shoved it haphazardly into the loose waist of his slacks.

“You know your boss would lecture you. I’m doing you a favor.” She surrendered the heavy bag to his waiting grip.

Grady joined her at the window, straight-faced. “Fly.”

The kid’s eyes widened, and he quickly lowered the bag a few inches south. Grady snorted. “I’m kidding, man. It’s a joke. They don’t do that where you work?”

He sighed. “If you count laughing *at* people as joking, then yes. The partners are regular comedians.”

Grady tilted his head back and roared, the contagious sound radiating from deep within. Tension melted off Rory’s shoulders. It always did when he laughed. It reminded her of Aunt Sophia. Joy, personified. She could hear her now. “*Cooking brings me joy, hija.*”

Rory wished it did the same for her. Maybe it would if she could do more than burn grilled cheese.

Grady leaned farther out the window. “You’re funny. What’s your name?”

The guy hefted the bag to hang on his elbow. “Alton.”

“You going to be a lawyer one day, Alton?” Grady shoved a handful of napkins at him. “Don’t forget those sample cups of jalapeños.”

Alton dumped a few lidded cups into the bag. “No way. It’s just a job. Beats minimum wage somewhere.”

“You should always do what you love,” Grady said. “Then it’s never truly work.”

She kept her eyes on Alton, bumping Grady intentionally with her shoulder. “But also remember that commitment is important.”

“So is finding joy in the everyday.” Grady pressed closer to the window, raising his voice over hers.

She ignored Grady's elbow in her ribs. "Yes, but so is financial security and supporting the people you love."

Alton backed away slowly, wary eyes darting between them like ping-pong balls. "So, is the life advice free, or will you add that to the company's tab?"

"Oh, we're adding it." Grady straightened with a grin. "They can afford it."

"They can also afford manners, and yet . . ." Alton's voice trailed off as he lifted one hand in a wave and walked away.

Grady chuckled in his wake. He cupped his hands and shouted after him. "You're gonna be fine, Alton!" He shook his head, still laughing as he began cleaning up spilled cheese. "And you too, by the way." He raised his brows pointedly at Rory. "Even if you keep working jobs you hate."

"You trying to get rid of me?"

"Of course not. I need you."

The sentiment was meant to be kind, but it felt more like a noose. Salsa Street did need her—and so did her cousin, Hannah.

Rory helped him clean, swiping the mess into her hand with a napkin, her mind drifting to a happier place. StrongerMan99 would get a kick out of the exchange they'd had with Alton when they talked tonight. She couldn't share any names, though. No hints of anyone or any places that would lead to recog—

"You're doing it again." Grady snapped open a new trash bag.

Rory cinched the full bag and lifted it from the can. "No, I'm not." She hated when Grady read her mind.

He ignored her. "Are you ever going to meet this guy? Or should I tell your computer congratulations and get Nicole to buy you guys a toaster?"

"Look, we can't all marry our high school sweetheart and live happily ever after the traditional way like you and Nicole, okay?" Rory hefted the bag and opened the truck door. "Some of us have to get creative."

"*Have to?* Hardly. You could walk down that street right there

and have any date you wanted.” Grady gestured to the alley behind them. Then his eyes darkened. “But don’t do that. That’s dumb. You know not to do that, right? Bad example.”

“Relax. I’m not desperate. I’m not even looking.” Rory hesitated at the top of the truck ramp as she shifted the bag from one hand to the other. “I just like chatting. Keeping it casual.”

“Casual, as in perfect strangers.”

“It’s not like that.” In fact, she felt like she knew StrongerMan99 a lot better than most of her in-person friends—and they’d only been talking for a few weeks.

She knew StrongerMan99 ran 5Ks and enjoyed classic literature like she did. She knew he had one brother, his favorite NFL team was the Saints, he was addicted to the Food Network, and he reluctantly knew all the words to “Ice Ice Baby,” which had won him a karaoke contest back in college.

She just didn’t know his name. Or phone number. Or where he lived, except for somewhere within sixty miles of Tyler, Texas. The odds of him living in her own small town of Modest, Texas, were slim. After all, she knew just about everyone here. Which meant he could even be as far away as Tyler.

“You ever going to meet?” Grady repeated his question, the one Rory thought she had so carefully dodged.

She shrugged. “We have a good thing going now.” She didn’t want to jeopardize that. There was something safe about having a friend—a flirty friend—who knew so much about her yet didn’t know the less attractive, in-person parts. The rejectable parts.

She’d had enough rejection.

“But what if you could have a better thing going?” Grady gestured with the damp rag he held. “You know. Marriage and kids.”

She wanted those things. One day. But . . . “I don’t like change.”

His expression softened. “I know. There’s been a lot of it lately.”

She nodded, blinking back the memories. Sophia had served more as a mother figure to Rory over the years than an aunt. She didn’t deserve to die in her fifties. Didn’t deserve the cancer that

stole her hair and her health but never her smile. If Rory turned into even half the vibrant, vivacious, caring woman Sophia was, she'd be doing well.

Rory might be one-fourth Mexican, but as it were, she wasn't remotely one-fourth of the way to being as good of a woman as her aunt.

Grady's voice cracked. "I miss her too."

Rory lifted the bag, her throat tight. "I've got to—"

"I know, I know." Grady held up both hands in surrender. "Too mushy." He called over his shoulder. "I'll just go light this cilantro-scented candle I bought for you."

The knot in her throat slid back down a few inches, and she cast Grady a grateful smile before heading for the dumpster. She knew her blessings. He was one of them. Sophia had been another, and Rory would do all she could to keep her aunt's legacy—the best part of Rory's heritage—alive.

Even if that meant spending her days with endless cilantro.

They never put enough cilantro on his quesadilla.

Jude Strong Worthington swiped his mouth with a napkin, the cheap paper catching on the five-o'clock shadow that always sprung up around noon and was the bane of his father's clean-shaven existence.

Which meant if his beard was a puppy, Jude would have given it a treat as a reward.

Hollis Strong—never "Dad" during business hours—raised dark brows at Jude across the gleaming boardroom table. "Did they get your order wrong again?"

"Nah. I asked for extra cilantro, but it's no big deal." Jude shrugged before diving back into the deliciously cheesy concoction. Nothing was ever right—or good enough—for Hollis. Jude had learned long ago to let the little things slide. When you grow

up without a mom and have the world's most domineering father and a pretty-boy society brother, you figure that out quick. Unfortunately, Hollis had yet to catch on. Besides, Salsa Street's food was delicious, even without the extra cilantro. He'd taken to eating there once a week months ago, but once his family jumped on board, they'd insisted on creating obnoxious rush orders.

Apparently, it wasn't enough to be one of the top law firms in North Texas. The infamous Worthington family had to leave their mark everywhere they went.

"Figures they screwed it up. I don't know why we keep going back to this Salsa Street place." Hollis sprinkled a few jalapeños onto his salad.

Jude gestured toward his meal. "Because it's fresh food, and if the doctor finds out you keep eating burgers and fries three times a week, he's going to lay into you again."

Hollis scoffed. "What he doesn't know won't hurt him."

"It'll hurt *you*, I believe is the point."

"Salsa Street isn't that great," his brother, Warner, chimed in. "The chips are always stale."

"They're not stale, they're organic. Besides, you think you can do better?"

"No, but you probably do—Mr. Taco Boy, always watching Food Network and helping our housekeeper when we were growing up." Warner snapped his fingers. "What was her name?"

Maria. Her name was Maria, and she'd been the only mother figure in their household for most of their childhood until she retired and moved back to Mexico when Jude turned eighteen. Warner knew her name—he was just being rude.

Jude fisted his napkin. Lately he'd been picking his battles with Warner, and while Maria was worth it, getting Warner to change his spots was impossible. "She made good tacos." The best he'd ever had. Salsa Street, while consistently pleasant, couldn't come close to Maria's authentic, four-generational family recipe. His mouth watered thinking about them.

“Well, I’d much rather have the burger and fries. I’m sick of this Salsa Street place—they never know what they’re doing.” His father muttered a racist expletive. Warner snickered his amusement.

Jude dropped his napkin. “For the hundredth time, don’t *say* stuff like that.”

“Why not? The walls have ears?” Hollis crunched his taco salad with a fork.

“Yeah. Yours.” Warner flashed a polished smile that earned a chuckle from their dad. “What with that new security system you put in last week.”

Jude ignored his brother. “Because it’s racist. Or, at the least, bigoted.” Knowing his dad, it was both.

“What, am I on trial now?” Hollis laughed. “Save it for the courtroom, son. You need the practice.”

Jude shoved another bite in his mouth to keep from saying something disrespectful. Some days he couldn’t believe this was his family. Other days the framed Ivy League degrees on the walls proved it was in his blood, and escape felt the opposite of imminent.

In fact, when he half closed his eyes, the walls felt like they might be slowly moving together, like that carnival fun house he went to when he was ten. The one that Warner abandoned him in, thinking it’d be hilarious. That night was the first and only time he heard Maria cuss at his brother. Good thing Warner hadn’t known Spanish back then.

He opened his eyes. The walls, with their custom crown molding and mahogany chair rails, remained in place. But the weight of his load felt a dozen times heavier. He had to get out of there. Not for the afternoon but permanently. Yet as usual, any plans he conjured with that goal in mind always dissipated like a mirage on the horizon. How did a man fight his destiny?

Hollis tossed his napkin onto the table. For someone who allegedly didn’t like Salsa Street, he sure had devoured that salad. “How’s the Blackwood case coming?”

Speaking of heavy loads. Jude couldn’t muster the energy to

mask his sigh. “It’s coming.” His dad had given him a complicated scandal for training, and it was taking most of Jude’s evening hours to investigate it as thoroughly as he needed to. And he wouldn’t even get credit for it since he wasn’t licensed to practice yet.

“How enlightening of an update.” Hollis’s tone dripped with sarcasm. His attention shifted to Warner. “What about the Steiner case?”

Warner straightened in his seat. “It’ll be wrapped and ready for trial in three days.”

Jude fought the temptation to roll his eyes and settled for finishing his quesadilla in two forceful bites. The way they seasoned their chicken was exactly on point. Cumin, cayenne pepper. He chewed slower. What else was he tasting? Maybe—

“You still with us, baby brother?” Warner tilted his head toward Jude. “Who is she?”

“Who is who?” Jude shoveled in a forkful of rice and beans. *He* knew who she was. Well, her username anyway—ColorMeTurquoise. But Warner had no idea he’d been chatting online with a woman, and he’d like to keep it that way.

“The girl on Love at First Chat.”

Jude’s eyes narrowed, and he set down his plastic fork. “You’ve been monitoring my internet usage?”

“I just said the walls have Dad’s ears.” Warner spread his hands wide. “Regardless, personal time should be spent during personal time, am I wrong?”

“You’re not the boss.” He immediately hated how petty that sounded. But Warner had crossed a line with the privacy invasion, and now his heart pounded faster than at the final lap of his 5Ks. His conversations with ColorMeTurquoise were one of the highlights of his evenings. The last thing he wanted was for Warner, of all people, to poke his haughty nose where it had no business being.

Warner bristled. “Maybe I’m not the boss *yet*.”

Hollis snorted. “Hey, I’m still very much alive and well over here.”

Warner ignored him and pointed at Jude. “You know, maybe you need to study more instead of drifting off into la-la land over some chick.”

“You’re one to talk. *You* have a girlfriend.”

“I didn’t when I was taking the bar years ago. Yours is in less than a month.”

“I’m aware.” Jude boxed his trash and tried to keep the grit from his voice. Warner knew how to push his buttons. It was a matter of staying calm. Staying in control. Not giving in.

Warner ignored the hint, per usual. “You know me and Dad both scored a—”

“I *said* I was aware.”

“Don’t get testy. Sometimes I go weeks without seeing Maddison.” Warner slammed his bottle of sparkling water on the table.

It had always aggravated his brother that things came a little easier for Jude in school—he had earned his master’s six months faster than Warner had. It wouldn’t be a competition, except Warner insisted on making it that way. He was probably ready for Jude to get the bar over with simply so he could relax in knowing he’d made the better score.

Warner’s scowl deepened at Jude’s silence. “We all have to pay our dues to get where we’re meant to be.”

Jude swiped a stray piece of cheese from the table. “And I’ll pay mine.”

At the moment, his entire life felt like paying a debt—or maybe more like prison labor. Cutthroat lawyer blood didn’t run in his veins. But carrying the last name Worthington didn’t give him a choice. The embossed name on the firm’s intimidating doors ran up the ancestral ladder all the way to the legacy his grandmother had left behind—and it carried expectations.

If there was a way out, Jude would have taken it by now. He didn’t fit in here. But leaving meant abandoning his place in the family will. Hollis didn’t play. And Jude had nothing else to fall back on.

"I haven't seen you crack a book in two weeks." Warner refused to drop it. "*I breathed* law for literally nine months in preparation for my bar."

"I don't see how you could breathe at all, with your head so far up Dad's—"

"Boys." Hollis's voice boomed. "Enough."

Boys. Exactly how they were acting. His brother always brought out the worst in him, and Jude hated that he let him. If he tried hard enough and passed the bar with flying colors, then maybe—*maybe*—he could earn their respect. Even earn Dad's favor over Warner, for once.

He just wasn't sure he wanted to anymore.

What *did* he want? Not the bar. Not another plaque on the wall. Not another rat race paired against his brother, striving to earn their father's empty praise.

And somehow, under all that, he couldn't stop wondering about that dang quesadilla. What *was* that other ingredient?

He offered a halfhearted apology to Warner, more for the sake of his own conscience than for any true attempt at achieving peace. Warner brushed it off, as expected. And naturally, his brother didn't return the gesture but rather set his jaw and averted his gaze.

Jude shoved away from the table. He'd had enough, all right. Enough of all of it.



Rory sat in bed, her laptop perched on the pillow in her lap as she typed in Love at First Chat's messenger app.

Do you ever feel like the walls are closing in?

She should have been sleepier than she was, given the fact that it was almost midnight. She'd left her girls' night out with Nicole early to come home and crash with sweatpants and her favorite romantic comedy but found herself unable to stay away from StrongerMan99's DMs.

He was quickly becoming the best part of her day—even more so than Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan. She paused the movie, then took a sip of green tea as she waited for him to respond to her question.

Walls, huh? You mean literally or figuratively?

She hesitated, then resumed typing.

Both.

I experienced that today, oddly enough.

Literally or figuratively?

Both.

She leaned back against the padded headboard, comfort seeping through the quiet space. Being understood was priceless. Suggested progression timelines or not, if her friendship with StrongerMan99 never went anywhere else, that alone would be enough.

He got her.

Sometimes I feel so trapped in what I do.

What do you do?

She hesitated.

I thought we couldn't share specifics?

That was part of the rules of the site. Of course, they could break them anytime they wanted to—that was up to them. But the blind concept of the site and its suggested progression course were there for a purpose. She and StrongerMan99 had both signed up for a reason.

And a few weeks of connection probably wasn't long enough to override reason, even if it was starting to feel like she'd known him forever.

Dots formed, then vanished, then started over as he responded. She held her breath as her thoughts battled each other over his question. What did she do—or what did she *want* to do?

She was fairly certain those were two different answers. She beat him to the response.

Well, my coworker tells me all the time I should do what I love.

So that means you don't currently do what you love?

No. But it's not that simple. I have responsibilities.

Like protecting her aunt's legacy and decades of recipes passed down through the family.

Dots formed. Then he wrote,

I understand that. Ditching the specifics, what do you do? In general?

In general, I own a business. Did I ever tell you that?

Would he pick up on the *You've Got Mail* reference? She smiled at the movie paused on her TV.

Is this my cue to tell you to go to the mattresses?

She laughed.

I knew you were a keeper.

Her fingers flexed over the keyboard. Too far? They'd never pushed the limits from appropriately flirtatious into future references. But tonight, she craved connection.

She pressed on, heart pounding.

I like daisies too, for the record.

Duly noted. I've heard they're the friendliest of flowers. 😊

She couldn't stop the matching smile tugging relentlessly across her own cheeks. She typed again.

So what do you do? Generally.

Family business.

Discount bookstore featuring overpriced coffee? F-O-X?

Funny.

The dots formed again after a brief pause. Was he, too, trying to filter how vulnerable to be?

No books, unfortunately. Let's just say it's not a business I want to stay in.

Is that why the walls moved on you today?

They do that a lot around my dad. He's not the easiest person to get along with.

Dots formed again, then stopped and didn't return. He couldn't—wouldn't?—say more. It was her turn. She thought a moment.

My mom died when I was little, and ever since then, my dad has traveled a lot for his work in the oil and gas industry. We're not very close either.

She knew deep down if she needed her dad for something major, he'd be there—probably. But she had the feeling that her father preferred the distance, so she rarely burdened him. He'd left so much of her parenting up to Aunt Sophia, especially during her tween and teen years. And with each failed relationship she'd endured, the absence of his attention always felt a little rawer.

Families can be tough, huh? I never knew my mother at all.

She inhaled slowly. Things were getting heavy. This was a next step for them—but a step to exactly where, Rory wasn't sure. She started to respond, but he beat her to it.

Didn't mean to go all Eeyore on you. ☹️

No problem.

She wanted to offer so much more, but her fingers wouldn't move. She wasn't sure where to go from here. Even thanking him for being there felt too mushy. But wasn't she always afraid of that—of being vulnerable? Grady would say so.

She ran her fingers over the keys.

After all, if you can't talk to a total stranger, who can you talk to?

LOL.

She pressed on before she lost her nerve.

I'm here anytime you want to vent. Vague vent, of course.

As much as she enjoyed talking to StrongerMan99, she also really enjoyed the rules. They were safe—and they kept their developing friendship safe. In a way, it'd be nice to be able to see the person on the other side of the screen. Did he have dark hair? Blond? Was he telling the truth about his age?

She knew the risks. Knew he could be anyone, anywhere in the world, masking as a single guy in her radius. But that was unlikely since the site's staff background-checked each applicant and canceled accounts without refund if caught lying.

But at least he didn't gawk at her. "Has anyone ever told you that you look like Fiona Stone?" She'd heard it on every date she'd ever gone on—and after each one, she never knew if the guy was interested in her or in her best physical features. This site was perfect. No photos, no identity except the true one of the heart. Or however their cheesy motto went.

He typed again.

I appreciate it.

And she appreciated him—more than he'd ever know, and probably more than she'd ever be willing to say.

Favorite *popsicle* flavor? Mine's grape.

And just like that, the heaviness of their conversation faded. She loved this part of their signing-off routine—taking one last step to get to know each other before saying good night. It was lighthearted, fun—and best of all, it conveyed the message that he wanted to keep learning about her.

She responded.

Orange. Grape turns your mouth purple.
Favorite gum flavor? Hint—it's either mint or you're wrong.

Cinnamon. 😊

She snorted.

Well, it's been nice chatting with you.

Hey, now. Don't forget, opposites attract.

You have a chance to redeem this.

She looked up at the movie.

Do you prefer Meg Ryan's hair short or long?

Short, obviously.

Redemption secured.

They said good night, then signed off.

Rory slowly closed her laptop. The warmth of their interactions always lingered deep inside, easing the ache like a hot shower after a cold jog. Grady had a point. Eventually, they'd have to meet for

their relationship to go any further. But for now, she craved stability, and StrongerMan99 was always a DM away. So far, he wasn't treating her like she was too much and somehow not enough all at the same time—like Thomas had.

Maybe that meant he wouldn't run away after realizing she was just a small-town woman who hated change . . . a food truck owner who struggled not to burn toast . . .

And a girl who couldn't ever get a man to stay.

“Mayonnaise!”

That was it. The ingredient in Salsa Street's quesadillas he hadn't been able to figure out. Jude shoved away from the stove and yanked open the refrigerator as the front door chimed. Quesadillas would be his next experiment. For now, he had to finish these tacos.

“What in the world are you doing?”

Jude turned, meat-laden spatula at the ready, and shoved it toward his best friend as he entered the kitchen. “Try this.”

His longtime friend and college roommate, Cody Austin, held up both hands in defense as he rested his hip against Jude's stainless steel kitchen counter. “I think I just turned vegan.”

Jude extended the sampling of seasoned ground beef farther. He could only imagine what his friend thought, coming over to help quiz him for the bar and finding Jude in an apron, the kitchen a total disaster. “If you hate it, I'll eat a bite of raw onion.”

“Like an apple?” Cody raised his eyebrows.

“Like an apple.”

“Deal.” He opened his mouth.

Jude handed him the spatula, and Cody shoveled in the bite. He chewed, hesitated, swallowed, then hesitated again. “Totally awful.” He pointed to the peeled onion sitting on the cutting board. “Your turn.”

“You're lying.” Jude snatched the spatula back.

"I'm lying." Cody nodded. "I tried to hate it, but man, that was good. Excellent, really."

"I knew it." Jude resisted the urge to fist pump, then went ahead and did it anyway. This was cause for celebration. He hadn't cooked Maria's beloved taco recipe in about six years, and he'd been afraid he'd lost his touch.

"The cilantro might be a bit heavy."

Jude scowled. "Impossible."

"Not everyone loves it like you do."

"Well, they should."

"So, are we studying or playing Martha Stewart?"

Jude untied his apron strings. "I got hung up on this one section in the book and wanted a snack, and the snack turned into . . . well." He gestured to the cilantro covering the island like confetti, the dishes stacked in the sink, and the hamburger meat wrappers piled by the overflowing trash can.

"You know, there are people out there who do this cooking thing for you. And even bring it to your door, for an extra fee. It's an amazing time to be alive." Cody swept a handful of cilantro into his palm and dusted it over the sink.

"That's the idea." Jude stirred the skillet of meat with a clean spatula. He cast Cody a glance over his shoulder. "What if I was that people?"

Cody squinted, as if trying to follow. "That people?"

"Well, *those* people."

"Those people?" Cody echoed.

"Dude. You're not a parrot."

"And you're not a chef. Or a deliveryman. What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, I could be." He nodded toward the flyer lying on the kitchen counter. "Look."

Cody picked up the blue flyer and read the big block letters in a monotone voice. "Announcing Modest's Food Truck Cook-Off, sponsored by Coined Bank & Trust."

"Not the contest part. Keep reading."

“The annual food festival?” He blinked at Jude. “But isn’t the festival for food trucks?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t have a food truck.” Cody glanced over his shoulder, as if checking to see if one had pulled up and parked in the living room.

“Not yet.” Jude rubbed his hands together. It was crazy. But he felt a little crazy. Because working for his dad had made him crazy. “But I could.”

Cody tapped the flyer against the counter. “Is this like a midlife crisis a decade early? Wouldn’t it be easier to, like, rent a convertible and drive up the California coast or something? I’ll chip in for gas money if that’s the deal.”

Midlife, no.

Crisis? Nearly.

“No gas money necessary. Unless I need gas for the food truck.” Jude frowned. “I guess I need to figure out how that works.”

Cody face-palmed.

When the flyer had come in the mail that afternoon, Jude had almost thrown it away. But the exchange with his family at lunch yesterday and his conversation with ColorMeTurquoise last night had gotten his bar-weary brain churning with what-ifs.

What if he didn’t take the bar?

What if he didn’t stay in the family business?

What if he opened his own food truck—or one day, a restaurant—and actually enjoyed his career?

If he wanted out of the family legacy, it was now or never. He’d never had a shot at it before, but this seemed to be a true opportunity. Or maybe, for the first time, he’d finally mustered enough courage to go for it. Regardless, the festival would be the perfect time to launch into the industry and make a name for himself.

Jude shrugged. “Look, there’s a lot to figure out, but I can do it. I’ve always loved cooking.” There was a special joy in creating something and having someone else find pleasure in it. Something comforting and warm. He couldn’t tell that to Cody, or his brawny,

former-football-playing best friend would go into testosterone overload and march right out the door.

But he could be real with ColorMeTurquoise. She'd get it. In fact, he'd tell her tonight. As much as he could, anyway—no specifics. But he could tell her he was finally chasing a dream and that she was partly responsible for giving him the courage to do so. Their conversation yesterday had sparked new initiative in him. Asking her what she did made him reevaluate what *he* did, and he didn't like what he saw.

And he wanted her to see the best in him.

Cody handed back the flyer, doubt glazing his expression. "Your dad's cool with this? Quitting the family firm to drive around tacos?"

"I'm not driving around tacos." His smile faded. Cody had a point. Hollis wouldn't just let him leave without consequences. There'd be vague—but intentional—threats using words like *trust funds* and *rewritten wills* tossed around if he even tried.

Which meant he somehow had to make his dad think this was *his* idea. That it was somehow better for the firm if Jude went this route instead of taking the bar—at least for now.

The meat sizzled. Jude reached over to click off the burner and removed the pan from the heat. "Does it ever bother you that you went to an Ivy League university, yet you're back here in Modest?"

Cody tilted his head. "The same can be said for you."

"I didn't mean it like that." Jude shook his head. "We're only here because Grandmother grew up in Modest before moving to Dallas later in her life with all their oil money. Her family helped found this town, so she carried out all the Worthington traditions. As the only son, Dad feels an obligation to keep that torch burning."

"Grandmother?" Cody shook his head. "You never called her something more familiar growing up? Like Nana or Mammaw?"

Jude squinted. "You never met Emma Worthington, did you?"

"I can only imagine."

"Let's just say she was more pearls and pedigree than cookies

and throw pillows.” More firm pats on the back than warm hugs. Maybe it was no wonder his dad was so stiff and unaffectionate. Still, Grandmother had been generous to the town of Modest with both her time and her money and left behind a legacy that demanded respect for reasons far beyond wealth.

Unfortunately, Hollis wasn’t living out the same. He might have donated annually out of obligation, but doing so was more a power play than true generosity. Grandmother had loved the landscaping around downtown Modest and had spent countless hours beautifying the town with her own hands, gloved though they were. She hosted garden parties and book clubs—which was the reason he’d been introduced to Austen, Hemingway, and Dickens at a young age—and created a nonprofit that supplied art supplies and instruments to the elementary school. She donated funds and first-edition literature tomes to the museum, started a monthly women’s Bible study at the country club, and made frequent efforts to create awareness about and protect local honeybee colonies.

The only thing Hollis ever wanted to protect was his own backside.

Cody shrugged. “I’m pretty happy with the construction business I started.”

Jude pointed. “Exactly. *You* made your own decision, *you* started a business, and *you’re* happy.”

Cody handed Jude the colander sitting on the counter and stepped back as he drained the meat. “What’s your point?”

“The point is—you chose, and you’re reaping those benefits.”

“So you’re saying being a millionaire in *Grandmother’s* hometown isn’t doing it for you? Why not stay in Dallas then, in your other family mansion, and do law there?”

Jude turned on the water to rinse the grease from the sink. “Because I love Modest.”

“Dude, you’re losing me.” Cody ran his hand over his jaw. “What are you getting at?”

Jude set the colander on the counter and turned to face him. “I never got to choose.”

“And you’re not happy.”

“Right.”

“You know, a girlfriend could help with that.”

Jude shot his friend a look.

“Okay, so to sum up—you’re not happy, and now you’re choosing tacos over the family business.”

"I don't know. Maybe."

“What’s it gonna be? Should I quiz you on the bar? Or is my new duty official taste tester?”

What *was* it going to be?

Jude hesitated. He was most likely diving in over his head. He knew nothing about any of this. He'd never even cooked for more than a few people at a time. It was going to take more than simply figuring out a few secret ingredients and stuffing his own fridge with tacos. He needed a cooking class—probably several. Maybe he could sign up for one of those YouTube courses, take a master class online.

An idea suddenly flared in his subconscious, morphing slowly into possibility. He didn't know a lot about starting a business, but he knew a great business that already existed. And he didn't know much about cooking anything other than Maria's recipe, but he knew an existing food truck that did a stellar job. And right now, he had the funds to invest in learning.

Hope rose against the odds—stubborn like a Worthington. Jude shoved his textbook out of the way, then pointed to one of the barstools on the other side of the counter with a confidence he didn't quite believe but desperately needed. Decision made. "Have a seat and grab a fork."



StrongerMan99:
Favorite TV show?

ColorMeTurquoise:

I love *King of Queens* and *Friends* reruns.

Would it be weird if I said the same?

No. You still like sports, though, and I'd rather watch grass grow. Actually, watching golf is sort of the same thing.

Fair enough.

First memory?

Hmmm. My dad took me and my brother to this restaurant when I was little. They threw rolls at you from across the room if you asked for one. It was a kid's dream and a parent's nightmare.

LOL. I've been to one of those before. I got smashed in the face with a roll.

What's your earliest memory?

I don't know if it's my first memory, but it's an old one. My dad and my aunt took me to Disney World with my cousin. I just remember the parades and the spinning teacups.

Is barfing allowed in the happiest place on earth?

Allowed or inevitable?

It'd have to be both if I rode one of those. 🤮
Okay, new game. Would you rather . . . be able to tell the future or read minds?

Hmmm. Read minds.

Even right now? With us?

Tacos for Two

Especially right now . . . with us.

You don't strike me as a risk-taker, and that seems risky.

You make me feel safe.

I'm honored. Also, I have to point out, I'd choose tell the future. We should combine our powers for good and rule the world.

Deal. Now, would you rather let a tarantula crawl down your arm or eat a ghost pepper?

I hate spiders.

That's cliché.

No, really. I HATE spiders.

I hate spicy food.

More than spiders?

More than anything.

Can I tell you that you're an absolute weirdo and you not be offended?

I already knew you were going to say that.

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