

## BEEN SEARCHING FOR YOU – FREE PREVIEW

### CHAPTER ONE

February

*To Whom It May Concern,*

*I think I wronged the love goddess in a previous life. How else do you explain that I've written you so many letters yet we've still not met? Everyone I know is either married or in a committed relationship, and here I am, pen in hand, writing to someone I can't even prove exists.*

*There's an old Chinese folktale that says soul mates are connected from birth by an invisible red thread and that they can feel one another's emotions, no matter the distance. It is this connection that eventually enables them to find one another. I believe it too.*

*As I write, I find myself trying to imagine your face, grasping at flashes of memory from dreams, wondering what name to voice in my prayers that you will soon be by my side. The irony is that by the time you read this, the color of your eyes will be second nature to me and your name will roll off my tongue as easily as my sister's.*

*So please, my unknown love, hold tight to your red cord and follow it like a lifeline into the safe harbor of my arms.*

“Are you ready yet, birthday girl?” Mia's impatient voice broke through my romantic

reverie, scattering my lovelorn thoughts.

“Almost,” I yelled back as I scanned what I had written. I wanted to say so much more, but Mia wouldn’t wait. But there was one more thought I couldn’t let go unsaid.

*I just want you to know that I haven’t given up on you. I don’t trust easily, but I trust in you. I’m still waiting, though not so patiently anymore.*

*All my love,*

*Annabeth*

The note was short compared to other years’ letters, but it would be after midnight when we returned home, so this would have to be enough. My one rule in this long-standing tradition—I’d been writing these letters since I was sixteen—was that the letter to my soul mate had to be written on my actual birthday. I folded the paper, slipped it inside the matching envelope, and licked the flap, then I pressed down to seal it.

Mia stuck her head in the door just as I drew the big numeral on the front. It matched my age—thirty-four. She shook her head, making her flaming tresses bounce. “You and your letters. If you two don’t meet soon, he’s going to have to buy an extra plane ticket on your honeymoon just for that box.” She nodded toward the big square hatbox that functioned as a hope chest for my letters to my future husband.

I slipped the newest letter in front, envelope awaiting further decoration. “Yes, but it’s romantic, don’t you think?”

“For a young girl, maybe, but you’re well past that, hon.” Her tone softened when I made a face. “You’ve got plenty of declarations of love. Maybe this should be the last one. You know, new year, new traditions?” She held up a shot glass filled with golden liquid. “Come on. We need to get this party started.”

Still scowling, I took the glass and downed the tequila with a small shiver. “If you say so.”

As I locked up, I cast one last glance at the box on my desk. She had a point about growing up, but I had no intention of giving up my beloved letters. It was only one each year, and it meant something to me. Those weren't just letters; together, they were my gift to my future husband. Old-fashioned? Maybe, but it was me. Anyone who wanted to marry me would appreciate that. I smiled with a sudden thought. It was good I didn't want to marry Mia.

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Bass throbbed through the plate-glass doors of the Drake Hotel as we got out of the taxi. Next to the doors, a large placard illuminated by revolving spotlights and a dizzying dance of rotating heart-shaped lights invited passersby to “Meet Chicago’s Top Singles at *Fifty Shades of Great*.”

As we walked up the dark blue velvet stairs to the banquet room, the thrumming noise resolved itself into a song—“Marry Me” by Jason Derulo.

I rolled my eyes at Mia. “No one told me they were going to be playing themed music.”

“The hearts on the sign weren’t a clue?” She took a ticket from the attendant in exchange for her pashmina wrap. “You did name the event, remember?”

Heat flooded my face. My suggestion of a theme had come at the end of a long brainstorming session at the PR agency where I worked. We were all slaphappy and much in need of a drink. I’d meant it as a joke, but the organizers loved it.

I shrugged. “They wanted cheese. I gave them cheese.”

“Speaking of food, I hope the hors d’oeuvres are edible. I’m starving,” Mia said as we approached the registration table.

As one of the fifty top singles, she was greeted with a hug and a smile by our receptionist, who was doubling as hostess for the evening. I, on the other hand, was left to search for my own

name tag. Mia found it before I did and handed it to me.

I squinted at my name. “Does it say ‘spinster’? Because it totally should.”

Mia peered over my shoulder. “No, but it does say ‘foolish romantic who needs to get laid.’”

I threw her a dirty look and was about to retort, but I was distracted by a muscular ebony arm intertwining with mine.

My best friend and agency-mate, Miles, appeared at my side. “You're always complaining you don't know where the single men hide. Maybe tonight you'll finally meet a few.”

Mia kissed Miles's cheek. “But you can't have this one. Even if I am playing single for the night.”

So that meant the on-again-off-again couple was back on? Or were they off since Mia was going to be auctioned off later? I shook my head, resigned that I would never figure out their relationship.

“You are going to have fun tonight if it kills you.” Mia poked me in the stomach with one hand while grabbing a glass of champagne from a passing waiter with the other. “Start with this.”

“I'm heading to the bar,” Miles said. “Anyone want anything?”

I pointed at the glass at my lips and mumbled into it that I wanted another.

While Mia gave Miles her drink order, I scanned the room, gauging what kind of night we were in for. When I first heard the plans concocted by our event team, I had feared walking into a bad facsimile of a reality dating show set, but instead I'd entered a Grace Kelly film. The event crew had used the room's ornate columns, glittering chandeliers, and checkerboard marble floors to transport guests back to the early twentieth century. Tall tables covered in shimmering white linens and sprays of long-stemmed roses fanned out across the room. A catwalk hidden in shadows split the ballroom in two. Artful lighting directed the guests' attention away from that

area to the bars and posters displaying information on the Top Singles.

The honorees, designated by tasteful red roses pinned to the lapels of finely tailored suits or beaded gowns, weaved in and out of the crowd. Even the waitstaff was in black tie and serving from silver trays. Curious, I tapped the edge of my flute with a fingernail, waiting for the telltale chime of crystal, but I heard only the clink of glass. Still, I had to give the sponsors credit for maintaining the hotel's impeccable class while hosting an event with a silly name.

I was about to remark to Mia on the beauty of the room when we were approached by a middle-aged woman in a simple black dress and an upswept bun that pulled her face into a scowl. She put out a hand to Mia. "Miss LaRue? I'm Eva Stegman. I'm in charge of tonight's event. We need to talk about your dress. It's far too short. Did you not read the dress code that accompanied your invitation?"

Oh, she'd read it; she just didn't think it applied to her. Rules were for other people, not Mia. I took that as my cue to slink off before Mia could throw an *America's Next Top Model* diva fit.

I found Miles at the bar, deep in conversation with a handsome man with broad shoulders and just a hint of hard muscle beneath his tailored navy suit with white pinstripes. Long-legged and trim, he looked as if he'd be right at home on a runway. When the stranger ran his fingers through his wavy dark-blond hair, I glanced at his left hand. No wedding ring. Maybe tonight was looking up after all.

"So how's Regina?" Miles asked him.

The stranger looked down, contemplating his drink. "I wouldn't know. She left."

"Aw, man, that's rough."

"Yeah. Sometimes I still hope she changes her mind."

"Seriously, I hear you," Miles said. "I love Mia, but there's one woman from my past I'd welcome back in a heartbeat if I could."

“Violetta?”

Miles tipped his glass toward the other man. “The very same.”

I froze, not liking the sound of that conversation. They were trading war stories. Apropos at a singles’ event, but not exactly the time for a woman to interrupt. I changed course, aiming for an empty seat a few chairs down, but Miles saw me and waved me over.

“How is Mia doing?” he asked.

“I think they’re making her change her dress. I left before she could get into full-on ‘Don’t you know who I am?’ mode.”

Miles shook his head. “I told her it wouldn’t fly. But she didn’t listen. Never does.” His gaze flicked to his companion, who was watching us with obvious curiosity. “I’m sorry. Annabeth, this is Alex Grantham. Alex, Annabeth Coe. Alex and I were friends when I first moved here, but we had lost touch.”

I reached out to shake his hand, but he surprised me by turning my palm downward and brushing the top of my hand with his lips, the slight stubble of his beard grazing my skin. “Delighted to meet you, Annabeth.”

My knees went weak. Here was a taste of the chivalry I’d always dreamed of but rarely encountered. And he was so handsome too. Did I dare hope he was available? Based on the conversation I’d overheard, he might have been, but then again, he seemed to be hung up on this Regina. Maybe I should have hovered a little longer.

Alex gazed at me with sparkling hazel-green eyes, awaiting a response, but my mind was so muddled that, “Uh-huh,” was the best I could manage.

“Annabeth and I work together at Smith and Grenwick PR,” Miles supplied, surrendering his seat to me. “We’re a creative team. I design. She writes.”

“You’re a writer? How interesting.”

My brain was beginning to recover, albeit slowly. “Yes. I’m much better with the words

that come out of my fingertips than the ones that come from my lips, I'm afraid." I gratefully accepted the drink Miles held out to me, and I took a long swallow, praying I didn't appear too desperate.

Alex smiled. "I know that feeling all too well. What do you write?"

For some reason, the question caught me off guard, and I struggled to set my glass down steadily. "Oh, all kinds of things—articles, press releases, brochures, ads. You name it, I do it." I giggled, wiping my sweating palms on my pale mint-green dress.

"She writes fiction too," Miles said.

I would have to thank him later for thinking for me. He was my guardian angel tonight. His job completed, Miles excused himself with a wink in my direction, leaving the two of us alone.

Alex raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. "What genre? What do you write about?"

"Historical mystery mostly. Nineteen-twenties Chicago." I took a deep breath, grateful to be in comfortable territory. I was never very good at talking about my day job, but I could talk fiction for hours. "I've just finished my first book. It's about a flapper in love with a gangster. She's really smart, but instead of using her brains to help the police solve crimes, she uses them to help the mob cover theirs. Kind of a detective for the bad guys."

"That's a great premise. North side or south side gang?"

I beamed, excited that he knew something about the period. "Both, at least for now—a hired gun, if you will. She'll have to choose eventually, but I want the readers to form that alliance with her."

"I'd love to read a sample sometime if you're willing. I'm an English professor, so I may be able to offer some tips. You know, for what they're worth."

I looked at him through my eyelashes, pitching my voice to a sultry register. "Professor Grantham, is that your way of saying you'd like to see me again?"

He adopted a mysterious expression. “Perhaps.” He shifted in his seat, changing the topic along with this posture. “So if you’re a writer, you must also be a big reader. What’s your favorite book?”

“Modern or classic?”

“You pick.”

“Modern has to be Anne Fortier’s *Juliet*. It’s a retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* in dual time periods.”

“So it’s both modern and a classic. Nice. Does this one have a happy ending?”

“Yes and no. You’ll have to read it to find out what I mean. What about yours?”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “If you were any other woman, I’d say *Ulysses* by James Joyce and try to convince you I actually understand it. But I have a feeling you’re too smart for that.” Alex rubbed his scruffy cheek with the back of a finger, considering me. “If I’m honest, I’m obsessed with Rex Stout’s Nero Wolfe mysteries. That’s why your stories intrigued me. Stout’s books are light and fun, plus they touch on all the timeless themes: betrayal, revenge, fine food.”

I laughed “That they do. They make me hungry.”

“You’ve read them?”

I shook my head. “No, but I loved the A&E TV show that starred Timothy Hutton. I was a little in love with his Archie Goodwin.”

His eyes twinkled. “Seems I have a lot to live up to.”

I raised a mental eyebrow. So, he was comparing himself to my fantasy man. That was a good sign.

“Seriously though, A&E did a great job with adapting that series. But you should still read the books. As usual, they are better.” He leaned closer to me. “Speaking of books, Miles said the two of you came up with tonight’s theme? It’s both culturally relevant and clever. You

should be proud.”

“Thank you. I thought it was rather silly, but I’m glad you appreciate it.” I stared at my glass, suddenly unable to look at him even though that was all I wanted to do. I searched my brain for some way to turn the conversation back to him and forced myself to look up. “What brings you here tonight?”

He took a sip of his drink, some sort of scotch or whiskey judging by the color. “Supporting a friend—Paulo Rodriguez. He’s a professor of Romance languages at the University of Chicago.”

I knew that name. “Wait. Is he the one they called ‘Hot for Teacher’ in the *Chicago Magazine* article?”

“One and the same. I don’t know if I’m embarrassed or proud to admit to nominating him for this event. You can see for yourself in a few minutes. He told me he was early in the lineup.” His eyes swept over me from head to toe then back up again, leaving a tingling heat on my skin as they moved. “Will you be bidding tonight?”

“Me?” I croaked. Wait. Was that his way of finding out if I was single? “No, I’m here with a friend as well. She’s up first actually.”

Alex’s brow wrinkled. “That’s Mia, right? She’s the one Paulo asked me to bid on.” Seeing my confusion, he added, “The Top Singles can’t bid on each other, but the rules say nothing about bids by proxy.” He shot me a mischievous grin.

We lapsed into momentary silence, so I mentally leafed through my lackluster catalogue of topics to discuss with strangers.

“So you and Miles go way back? How did you meet?” I asked. It was such a banal question, but small talk had never been my forte. There I was, wanting to impress him with my sparkling wit, and the best I could do was basic niceties.

He started to respond, but his answer was drowned out by an ear-splitting squeal as Eva

took the stage, manhandling the microphone.

“Welcome, ladies and gentlemen to the Windy City’s most popular singles event of the year, sponsored by *Chicago Magazine* and Heart+Soul online dating. Each of our fifty Top Singles will be up for auction. All proceeds will benefit the University of Chicago Medicine Comer Children's Hospital, so please bid high. As each single walks out, I’ll read a brief bio, and they’ll explain which synonym of the word *great* they have chosen to describe themselves—no two will be the same. The bidding will begin when they have finished speaking.” She gave a small nod, and the lights dimmed, plunging us into near darkness.

A moment later, they flashed to life as Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance” blared through the speakers, then it quieted as Eva read Mia’s bio. I almost choked when Mia emerged from the wings, hands on her hips in supermodel style, long red hair swinging with each stomping step. I hardly heard Eva’s account of Mia’s time gracing the runways of Paris, Milan, and New York because I was too busy staring slack-jawed as Mia strutted down the catwalk in a one-shouldered metallic-silver cocktail dress ruched at the waist to accentuate her curves. It was longer than her other dress but left little to the imagination.

When she approached the end of the runway, she paused, turning once. Then the music quieted, and she addressed the crowd. “I’m Mia LaRue, and my synonym for great is wicked!” She made rock n’ roll devil horns with the pinkie and forefinger of her right hand. “I chose this word because being great is about more than excelling at something. You have to have a special little spice to rise from good to great.” She paused for half a beat. “And just so you know, I’m accepting bids from men and women.” She winked at the crowd, which tittered in response.

Eva cleared her throat with a touch of disapproval. “Thank you, Mia. We will begin the bidding at one hundred dollars.”

I tuned out as the room exploded in a volley of shouted figures, each higher and louder than the next. Miles emerged from the crowd and rejoined us at the bar. I leaned into him to be

heard over the noise.

“How do you stand this?” I gestured toward the chaos. “When you’re together, I mean.”

He sipped his drink through a thin straw. “Comes with the territory. You don’t like it, then you’d better run because you certainly won’t be able to handle Mia. She’s this multiplied by a hundred all by herself.”

After only a few minutes of bidding, Mia’s price was in the thousands and the auction was down to two contestants: Alex and a sultry brunette with huge doe eyes who looked as if she could have given Mia a run for her money. The bidding was up to five thousand dollars, and she wasn’t backing down. Her bright, sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks betrayed the thrill she was getting out of the competition. Alex, however, did not look as excited. A muscle jumped in his jaw as he stared the woman down.

“Ten thousand dollars,” he shouted.

The crowd gasped. All eyes turned toward the woman. She considered his offer for a moment then slowly shook her head.

Eva brought down her gavel. “We have a winner! Mia LaRue has just raised a record-breaking ten thousand dollars. Isn’t that wonderful?”

As the crowd cheered, Mia winked at the brunette—whose number she would no doubt be in possession of by the end of the night—then blew a kiss at Alex before turning on her spiked heel and exiting the stage.

I had to rise up on my tiptoes to get near Alex’s ear. “Does she know you were bidding for someone else?”

“I have no idea. I’m just glad I don’t have to pay for her.”

Was it my imagination or had his voice held a hint of disgust? So he wasn’t interested in supermodel-perfect, trappy Mia. Good. Maybe his tastes ran more toward the girl next door.

Inspired by that thought—or perhaps it was the alcohol kicking in—I bit my lower lip

and asked, “Would you have bid on me?”

He turned to me and looked me over again. “Now that’s a different story.” A breathtaking grin lit up his face. “I’d pay a lot more for you. Fine things are worth more than what’s common for a reason.”

My heart melted. I opened my mouth to respond but was interrupted by an auction official who’d come to collect Alex’s—or rather Paulo’s—payment information. By the time Alex had explained the situation to the official, Mia was strutting toward us as quickly as her sky-high heels would let her.

“There’s the man with the best taste in the room,” she yelled over the chaos of Paulo’s auction. She grabbed Alex by the lapel and planted a noisy kiss on his cheek. “Hello, handsome.”

So she didn’t know he’d bought her for someone else. I couldn’t wait to see Alex set her straight. But before Alex could even react, Miles took my hand and dragged me over to the nearest standing table.

“What the hell, Miles? We’re going to miss all the fun.”

He fixed me with his I-mean-business stare. “I heard what Alex said to you. Enjoy the compliment, but don’t take it as anything more.”

“Why not?”

“He referred to just getting out of a long-term relationship earlier. From the sound of it, the wound is still pretty fresh. I think he wants her back, and I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“You just reconnected with him. What do you know about his heart?”

“I knew the woman. She was special to him.”

“*Was* being the key word. So what if he wants her back? He doesn’t have her right now, does he?” I narrowed my eyes at him as a thought occurred to me. “If the situation was reversed, would you be warning Mia off him?”

“Of course not. She can handle herself.”

I threw up my hands. He was always big-brothering me. “Happy birthday, Annabeth! Here’s a hot guy who might be interested in you, but Miles thinks you’re too fragile to handle him. Thanks a lot.” Before he could reply, I turned away and went back to Alex’s side.

As I eyed a tall Latino man who had joined our group—had to be Paulo—Alex leaned down and whispered, “You okay?”

“Fine. Miles was just being an overprotective friend,” I said, crossing my arms to show I didn’t want to talk about it.

My face must have betrayed my emotions more than I thought because Mia leaned over to me. “Buck up, Pookie. This is no way to spend the last few hours of your birthday.”

I gave her a withering look, not in the mood for her to patronize me.

“So where’s the lucky lady who ‘won’ you?” Miles asked Paulo, mercifully changing the subject.

Paulo nodded toward the crowd, where a noisy volley of figures signaled the beginning of another auction. “Back into the fray. She’s bidding on someone for her daughter. I’m supposed to call her tomorrow.”

Behind us, two women erupted into a high-pitched yelling match over the current bachelor.

Paulo winced. “I don’t know about you, but I’d much rather finish our evening somewhere quiet than listen to forty-seven more of these. Since we’ve all fulfilled our obligations, what do you say we head out?”

“I know the perfect place,” Mia cooed. “There’s a little jazz bistro on Eire that’s just cozy enough for us to get to know each other.” She squeezed Paulo’s bicep while smoldering at Alex and Miles. “Oh, remind me to tell you what that *Vogue* photographer said to me last weekend. It’s the funniest thing.”

I rolled my eyes. So that was how the night was going to go. Queen Mia would hold court

with her suitors and regale us with stories of her latest worldwide escapades. That was pretty much par for the course, but I didn't want to deal with it. With her in control, Alex and I wouldn't be able to get a word in edgewise, much less get to know one another, which was all I really wanted.

"Why don't we ask the birthday girl where she wants to go?" Miles said. "That's your agreement, right? You do what she wants tonight?"

Mia's face fell as she remembered our pact. "Yeah."

I could have forced the issue and insisted on getting my own way, but my inner introvert was exhausted. Finishing out the evening with a hot bath and a good book was sounding better by the minute, especially since I couldn't spend the evening talking with Alex.

I forced a smile. "Don't worry about it. Go wherever you'd like. I'm getting a headache—probably too much champagne. I think I'm going to head home."

"Are you sure?" Alex asked. "Maybe you just need some fresh air. At least let me walk you out."

I took his proffered arm. "That's very sweet, thank you." Looking over my shoulder, I called, "Have fun, you guys."

While we waited for the coat check girl to emerge from the sea of leather, down, and faux fur, Alex drummed his fingers on the countertop. "So what's with Mia calling you 'Pookie'? Is there something I should know about?"

It took me a second to realize he was asking if Mia and I were together. When I finally did, I burst out laughing. "No, no, it's not like that at all. I mean, she's into girls too, but I'm not." I found myself reaching out to touch him, but I changed direction to fiddle with my hair instead. "It's an inside joke. She says it to annoy me."

The girl returned with my coat, and Alex gallantly took it from her and helped me into it. "So what's the story?"

He walked me to the curb as I explained. “It goes back a few years. I told her once that ‘The Tango Maureen’ from the musical *Rent* should have been called ‘The Tango Mia’ because she’s as complicated and manipulative in her relationships as Maureen. She responded by calling me ‘Pookie,’ and it kind of stuck.”

“Maureen’s pet name for her lovers when she wants something. Nice.”

I stopped in my tracks, turning toward him. “You know the musical? I’m impressed.”

“It’s one my favorites. I studied it when I worked as a dramaturge during my college internship.”

Handsome English professor who knows Chicago history, studied theatre, and made an effort to say good-bye to me... could this guy get any more perfect? There had to be a catch. There always was—ask any woman. I knew he wasn’t gay, so that left the ex.

She had to be it. But how could I ask about her without seeming all crazy stalker?

I looked around as though the perfect question would be written on the buildings towering over us. All I succeeded in doing was catching the eye of a cabbie who, guessing correctly that I needed a ride home, started his engine and pulled up to the curb in front of us.

“I guess this is my signal to go home,” I said. The part of my brain that would forever be sixteen prayed he would ask for my number.

Alex hesitated, leaning toward me, then pulled back. He opened his mouth then closed it again. Instead, he took my hand and kissed it just as before. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Annabeth. Happy birthday.” He squeezed my hand. “We’ll miss you tonight.”

My breath caught, and I cleared my throat. “Thank you. I enjoyed meeting you as well.” He didn’t say anything else or make another move, so if I wanted to see him again, it was up to me. I mentally took a deep breath. “Since I’m bailing on you tonight, what do you say I make it up to you over coffee sometime?”

Alex’s gaze turned toward the pavement. He shuffled his foot. “Now really isn’t the best

time. Maybe in the future.”

I held up a hand to forestall any further excuses. “Say no more. I had to at least ask.” Inside, disappointment was hardening into a crust of ice around my heart, but there was no way I would let him know that. I reached into my handbag and withdrew a business card. “In case you change your mind.”

He took it with a soft smile. “I meant what I said about wanting to read your book. I’ll email you when my class load is light enough to give it due attention.”

I turned toward the cab, and Alex opened the door for me. As I got in, I couldn’t resist casting one last glance in his direction, drinking in the green and gold flecks in his eyes. A hint of sadness glinted in them as if he regretted our parting as much as I did.

I closed the door, gave the driver my address, and raised a hand in farewell. Alex mirrored my gesture, not breaking eye contact until distance forced us both to look away.

I sat back with a sigh and closed my eyes. The city passed by as brief spots of light behind my lids as the driver turned down Michigan Avenue. *Seriously, God, is this your idea of a joke? Give me a guy for my birthday, but he’s not interested? Thanks a lot.*

The taxi crossed over the river, getting closer to my empty apartment with every second. I thought about the box waiting for me with its growing collection of letters. It didn’t appear I was any closer to finding their intended recipient. But what did I expect after only one night?

I directed my thoughts to that soul at the other end of my invisible red cord. *Whoever you are, I hope you really can feel me. At least that way you’ll know how much you’re needed and how mad I am that you’re so slow in getting here. I obviously can’t leave our future up to you. In that moment, I made promise to myself and to him. I will find you this year...one way or another.*