

No wife? No problem.

WHERE YOU MET ME

Shawn's Story



 *Dani*
BANNISTER

WHERE YOU MET ME

Dani Bannister

The Prequel to
WHERE YOU LEFT ME Vol. 1

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Where You Met Me

Edited by Lawrence Editing

Shawn

Today marked four years. To the day. The exact hour would come soon enough. 11:11 a.m., July 21, 2015. The day my sister, Anna, left this world. The day the entire course of my life changed.

Rolling over in my bed, I pulled out the drawer on my bedside table. I shuffled around a few papers, a Chapstick, and a spare phone charger before my fingers found what I was looking for. A small golden coin. I picked it up and lay back on my pillow, running my finger along the triangle inside the circle. The III etched inside the triangle signified the three years of sobriety. Could I make it to IV? The next few hours would be the test of it.

I kissed the back of the coin and tossed it back in the drawer, then I got up to hit the shower. Before I got there, though, I paused to look around my room.

“If I were a towel, where would I be?” I asked the assorted boxes still littering my new place. I’d been in Erwin, Tennessee, a few weeks now but hadn’t managed to get around to unpacking everything. I was still adjusting to the heat. A vast difference from the East Coast. I kept waiting for it to cool off before I unpacked fully, but I had a sneaking suspicion that wasn’t going to happen. Ever. I now understood why this house was on the market so long. No central air. Something I’d need to remedy soon.

I ruffled around a few boxes I had haphazardly packed weeks ago and found my alarm clock—finally, a single towel, and the suit I wore to Anna’s funeral. Lifting the jacket out of the box, I held it up to examine. It looked a little worse for wear, but that was to be expected. I hadn’t worn it since that day. Sliding it over my bare shoulders, I looked at myself in the mirror.

“Oh, Anna. Look at me. How fat was I before you died? Jesus. No wonder you made fun of me so much.” I turned to the side and buttoned the jacket. Several inches would need to be taken in for the thing to stand a chance at looking good again. Not that I’d alter it. It reminded me of her and her incessant ridicule of almost anything I ever wore.

I laid the coat out on the bed and flung the towel over my shoulder. The plan for the day had been set several days ago. I was going to find a church somewhere and talk to God. I’d been missing her so much recently, and the day of her death felt like an opportune time to have a chat. While she had

been the youngest next to me, she had always been the wisest of us all. An old soul, my mom would say. A wise-ass soul was more like it. She had a snarky comment for everything I did, but Mom was right. She pretty much always hit the nail on the head. Without her harping on me in her uniquely sharp way, I found myself a little lost. It wasn't until she was gone that I realized how hard I had leaned on her for advice.

My other sisters said they talked to her all the time and that it helped. I figured I'd start with the big guy first. I had some questions I needed answered. Not that I was religious. But I was willing to try anything at this point. I felt too close to hitting rock bottom and I couldn't go down that road again. I just couldn't. Moving here was step one of getting out of my own way. Step two was... well, that was the problem. I didn't know what step two was.

In the shower, I tended to my morning wood, using my old fantasy standby: A woman whose face I couldn't see, bathed in a wash of sun. Her breasts pressed firmly against a tight bodice. Lately, every time I jacked off, it was to her. This woman I had never met but was so turned on by. Closing my eyes, I swore I could feel her hands locked into my hair, pulling me to her. I could almost taste her lips, smell the delicate hint of flowers along her neck, but try as I might, her face was never visible.

Hey there, stranger, she teased me.

"Who are you?" I asked the water as it danced down my body and over my swollen cock. I pressed my hand against the wall for balance as I imagined plunging myself deep inside her folds. Leaning my head back, I envisioned her breasts bouncing as I thrust into her. The smack of our skin against skin sent shivers over my flesh as my hand pumped itself up and down my shaft until I exploded my load. Cum ran through my fingers as my body shook with the sensation of release. "Fuck," I whispered to my fictional lover. She never failed me. If only she were real.

Finishing off my shower, I put on a pair of black slacks. I skipped the belt mostly because I didn't know where it was. One of the only things in my closet at this point was a collection of pressed dress shirts and a few variations of the pants I had on. I'd been going to the hospital on a near-daily basis now since I'd arrived and while I didn't need to dress up, it didn't feel right to wear jeans and a T-shirt. Hospitals were a place of

precipice. A place of hope, or fear. The ultimate line of life and death. It deserved some level of respect.

When I was fully dressed, I glanced again in the mirror and frowned. I really needed to get a new suit. This was just embarrassing.

“What do you think, Anna? Think it’s time for me to find somewhere local to get me some new duds?” I could almost hear her laughing at how silly I looked. Anna was the most fashion-forward of my six sisters. She had the sort of style that annoyed the hell out of the others because they couldn’t keep up with her, but one that set her apart. When you’re one of seven kids in a four-bedroom house, you learn quickly how to stand out from the crowd. I was the troublemaker. The heartbreaker. The overall moron of the group. Forever making bad decisions. Would I ever snap out of that cycle?

Picking up my phone, I snapped a picture of myself in the mirror and sent it to Wendy, my artist sister.

Good Lord, what are you wearing, she typed back a second later. I laughed.

I hit the button to call her. She picked up at once, her voice tinged with sleep. Even though it was an hour later for her, she was not much of a morning person.

“So, it’s no good then?” I asked, running my fingers through my wild mop of curls. I needed to find a barber soon too. The hair was constantly getting in my eyes now.

“Meh, what do I know? Anna would roll over in her grave, but she would have scoffed at me wearing sweatpants to bed instead of matching pajamas. You can’t please everyone. If you like it, wear it.”

“I don’t like it.” I sighed. “But it’s not like I own any other suit jackets.”

“One, you should change that, and two, where the hell are you going on a Sunday morning that requires you to wear a jacket? Don’t tell me our Catholic guilt has gotten the better of you? It’s not even Easter!”

I sat on my bed and tied my shoes. “It’s July 21.”

Wendy shifted the phone. “Shit. It is. Isn’t it?”

“You going to mass?” I asked.

“Fuck. I probably should, huh?”

“Only if you want Anna to let you into heaven one of these days.” I laughed.

Wendy grumbled. “The little shit would do that, too. She’d put her nose in the air, make fun of my outfit, and bring up every time I ratted her out to Mom and Dad before she let me in.”

“I miss you,” I said, suddenly quite sad to be so far away from my sisters.

“I miss you too, brat. You called the others yet?”

“No. You were the first on my list.”

“I’ll call them. You should go visit Dad. This is always such a hard day for him.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I need to find a church as well.”

“Jesus, Shawn, you’ve been there for almost three weeks now. What *have* you found?”

I looked around at all of my unpacked boxes. “A town where nobody knows who I am.”

“Well, that’s what you were looking for.” Wendy sighed.

That it was.

After I hung up with Wendy, I texted my dad that I’d be heading over. Maybe I could convince him to come to church with me. Though, he hadn’t stepped foot inside one since Mom died. Didn’t see the point in praying after a blow like that. First his daughter, then his wife a few months later. It was a rough year for us all.

Glancing over at my bedside table, I went back over to it and pocketed my sobriety coin. Today more than any other, I’d need the reminder of why I put down the bottle.

When I got to my dad’s house, the door was already open before I even cleared his porch. I suppressed a smile, knowing he’d been watching me walk down the street from his recliner by the bay window. He all but lived in that chair. Stopped doing much of anything after Mom died.

“You stalking me, old man?” I asked, closing the door behind me.

“Morning, Son.” He looked at my suit jacket. “That from your puffy period?”

I tugged on the coat. “That obvious, huh?”

He shrugged. “What do I know? I haven’t been fitted for a suit since my wedding day.” His face contorted for a fraction of a second before he looked back out his window. I sat down on the couch beside him as he sipped his coffee. “You going to mass then?” he asked.

I nodded. "You?"

My dad shook his head. I knew he wouldn't. He rarely left the house anymore. Didn't see the point without Mom.

"I'm gonna walk into town. Check out one of the churches there. Say a prayer, maybe check out the architecture."

"You always were one for looking at the bones of something. You could always spot where the gems were and where the cracks in the foundation would form. You should have been a carpenter."

I laughed. "You saying I wasted my life, Dad?"

"No. No. I know you have a plan for your future. And it's not the path I took or any of your sisters did, but it's still your path to make."

That was for sure. The road I was on was most certainly unique. I had no idea where it was going, but I'd hopped on it and was going to let it take me wherever it told me to go.

"So, you're walking to town? That mean you still don't have a car?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Haven't needed one yet. And I'm used to walking everywhere. City life has ruined me for cars. They just feel like a nuisance now."

My dad laughed. "You're not wrong there. Cars are a pain. Mine's gotta go back into the shop soon. Engine light is on again. These new-fangled cars seem to break down more than they run."

"The light is on again? I thought they replaced the filter that was causing the error code?"

Dad lifted a hand in the air. "I thought so too, but it's back on again. Things were simpler with cars in my day. If your car broke down, it was only a handful of things it could be. Now it could have an engine failure if I sneeze wrong in it." He shook his head in frustration. "Give me my old Chevy again any day. That thing was a tank."

"And was single-handedly the cause of ninety percent of the air pollution in Boston."

At that, he laughed. "She was on the smoky side, wasn't she?"

Nodding, I leaned back and took in his small house. It wasn't much. One bedroom, bath. Small open living room that merged into a gally-style kitchen. A small deck and an even smaller yard in the back. But he was a simple man. He didn't need or want frills.

“Still no artwork on the walls yet, I see. Did you get that painting I sent you?”

“Yeah, that’s in the bedroom. Your mother would have loved it.”

I knew that. It was why I sent it. She had always been a sucker for tropical anything. She longed to be whisked away from the cold and grime of Boston, but Dad was a homebody. Lacked the adventurous spirit she had. I got that wanderlust from her.

“I thought maybe you’d hang it up here in your living room. Something to brighten up the space.”

“It’s plenty bright enough in here.” He shifted in his seat, clearly not comfortable with me criticizing his house. “What about your place? You unpacked everything yet?”

I flinched. “Some stuff. Not all. It’s weird. I feel like I’ve been in a funk since moving here. That and the heat make it unmotivating. I need to get some AC in there.”

“Well, you’ll get to it. It’s not like you have to rush. Still at the hospital?”

Nodding. “Yeah, for now. Going in a few days a week. The people seem kind, for the most part. A little nosier than Boston people were. It’s challenging to dodge some of their questions.”

“It’s a small town, Son. With not much to do except to get into everyone else’s business. People are bound to snoop. Not sure why you thought Erwin would be any different than Boston. They’ll find out your secret soon enough. And what then? You gonna up and move again?”

Maybe.

“I don’t know what the future holds, Dad. If the last few years have taught me anything, it’s that plans can change in a flash. After this last roller-coaster, I’ve learned to just go with the flow. I’m done trying to forge my way down a path. I’m succumbing to the pull of the Universe. If it wants me to stay in Erwin, then that’s what I’ll do.”

“Well, I think the Universe is telling you to make your old man another cup of coffee.” He leaned over and gave me his empty cup, just like he used to do with Mom when she was still alive.

I took the cup and sighed. “You’re lucky I love you,” I said as I walked into his kitchen. There was an electric hot water kettle next to his jar of Sanka. “Dad, where is the Keurig I got you?”

“I gave that to Karen. I couldn’t figure out how to work that thing. Too many buttons and do-dads to mess around with.”

I lowered my head. “Dad, a Keurig is literally one of the easiest ways to make coffee.”

“Ain’t no faster than boiling some water.”

Sighing, I filled the kettle at the sink. This was a debate I’d never win. He was set in his ways and wasn’t about to change for anyone.

“You don’t need to keep buying me things like that,” he huffed. “I can get by just fine.”

“Dad,” I said, running my hands through my hair. “I know you can. I just thought—”

“You just thought your old man needed help living on his own. That he’s helpless without your mother. Well, I’m not. I manage just fine.”

“I know you do, Dad. I’m not trying to say that you can’t—”

“What about the new phone you got me?” he countered.

“What about the new phone? You use it all the time to video chat with your grandkids.”

“Don’t kid yourself. You got me that phone because you didn’t trust me to be on my own with just a landline.”

“Dad—”

He cut me off by jerking his thumb out the window. “And what about that stupid car? My Chevy worked just fine.”

“Okay, first of all, that ‘stupid car’ was a gift from all of your kids. Not just me. And second, your Chevy wouldn’t pass inspection!”

“You kids do too much for me. I don’t need to be coddled.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Says the man who just asked me to get him coffee.”

“Oh, hush, you.”

As the kettle roared to life, I gave my dad a gentle smile. “You sure I can’t convince you to come to mass with me? Anna would love it.”

“I’ve already had a chat with Anna today in my own way. I don’t need to get all dressed up and sit in some church filled with people I don’t know to honor my daughter.”

Lowering my head in defeat, I poured his hot water into a cup, plopped a spoonful of his instant coffee into it, and watched for a moment as it dissolved. “Fine, but what about joining me for breakfast then?”

I brought his coffee back to him, which he took eagerly.

“I’ve already eaten. You know I’m up with the sun. I’ve been awake for hours.”

“I figured. Okay, well, I’m gonna go hit the diner, then check out the churches. Is there one here you prefer?”

“Lot of the locals like The First Church up on Main, but I think you’d dig St. Margaret’s. It’s that one just on the edge of town. Up on the hill?”

“Oh, right. That one is beautiful. Bit of a hike on foot, but yeah, I bet that one has better bones.”

I looked around his place once more and gave him a wave. “Well, I’m off on an adventure then.”

“Send me a postcard,” he said before he picked up the remote.

Invigorated with the possibilities of the day, I set out to the diner. The one place in Erwin I’d frequented more than once. Their breakfast plate was quite satisfying. It had all the right elements. Cheesy eggs, crisp bacon, pancakes, and if I was feeling extra, buttery biscuits with white gravy.

As soon as I walked in the door, however, I almost turned back. Dottie was working. I didn’t know many people in town, but Dottie made it her business to try to know mine. And not in a friendly local sort of way, but in the ‘I need a husband and you’d do just fine’ sort of way. Marriage was so not on my horizon. Let alone dating. No offense to Dottie or her caked-on lipstick. I just wasn’t interested. I had my own shit to get together before I ever invited someone else into my world.

“Well, hey there, handsome!” Dottie beamed the second I walked in. It was too late to escape.

“Morning, Dottie.” I did my best to avoid eye contact.

“Morning, yourself, sugar. Let me set you up in my section so I can make sure I take extra special care of you.” She winked at me, then looked blatantly down at my crotch.

Not gonna happen, Dottie. Sorry.

“I’m actually in a bit of a rush today. Could I just get the special?”

Her face fell for a fraction of a second. “Of course you can, sweetie. Let me put that in for ya. The two booths in the back are open.”

Nodding, I slid into an empty booth and drummed my fingers on the edge of the table while I took in the handful of diners. A few looked

familiar, but so far, everyone was minding their own business. Just how I liked it. Dottie came back with a carafe of coffee and poured me a cup.

“Can I get ya anything else, darling?” Dottie asked with a big, toothy grin.

“No. Thank you.”

“Not even my number?” She winked at me as I squirmed in my seat.

“I’m not really on the market. Thanks, though.”

Dottie’s face froze in such a way as to convey either shock of being turned down or abject humiliation.

“Right. Well, your order will be out shortly,” she managed to squeak out through tight lips.

I felt bad for Dottie. It wasn’t her fault I was emotionally unavailable. It’d been the same answer for any woman who approached me the last few years. Not to sound conceited, but there had been a lot of them. I was cursed with a boyish charm that seemed to attract women. I didn’t give off that scary alpha-male vibe but was just cute enough to still be considered sexy. Or so they told me. A fact I took advantage of quite often in my college years. Back when all I cared about was partying and getting laid. My priorities were different now. I’d be thirty in a few years, and I had yet to do anything of meaning with my life. I hadn’t met *the one* or even come close to a woman who could become the one. I was restless. I’d hoped maybe moving someplace new would help anchor me. Escape my past, lay down new roots. It worked in the movies. Why couldn’t it work for me?

A small town in Tennessee might seem like an odd choice for a New England kid, but I knew my dad was out here all alone. My sisters all had partners and full lives. They couldn’t drop everything to make sure he was being looked after. I was in the best spot to do that. And since it didn’t matter to me where I moved, just so long as it was away from everyone I knew, Erwin was just as good a spot as any to start over. That was all I wanted. A reset button. I wasn’t stupid. I knew what was happening. I was having a quarter-life crisis. I knew I was running scared, but that didn’t stop me from the sprint. Sooner or later, my past would find me, even here. And what would I do when it did? I preferred to ignore the possibility.

Several minutes later, Dottie came by with my plate. She didn’t smile or even bat her eyelashes at me. She just dropped my food and left. Eating here just got a little easier. Until the next server tried their luck. They didn’t

get it. I wasn't interested. They could be the most drop-dead gorgeous creature on the planet, but lately, the only thing that got me hard were my fantasies of some fictitious girl who only existed in my dreams.

I took a bite of my bacon, savoring the salty meat, when a woman wearing a horrific bridesmaid or tacky prom dress came into the restaurant. The woman was in her mid-fifties. Her silver hair was tucked up under an ugly as sin hat. She had a paper fan that she was flittering in her hand at a breakneck speed.

"Emergency, ladies. The coffee maker died on me this morning and I'm already running late to get the rest of the girls for the wedding. Can one of you be a doll and pour me a to-go cup?"

Dottie sprang into action as another waiter at the register rang her order up.

"I still can't believe they are getting hitched," the woman at the register was saying. "I just didn't see it happening. They're just so different, you know?"

"That wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that you've been crushing on her groom for about ten years now, would it, Sandy?" The woman in the hat chuckled.

"Oh, you know they aren't gonna last just as much as I do. He's too old for her."

Dottie handed the coffee cup over. "Oh, to be a fly on the wall in that service. Ten bucks says she doesn't go through with it."

"You're on." The woman took her coffee and slid over some cash before she barreled out of the diner as fast as she had come in.

I sighed in relief. Maybe this wedding drama would finally take the focus off me being the new bachelor in town. The less spotlight on me, the better.

After I downed my breakfast, I waved down Dottie for the bill. She came over and ripped off a paper from her pad.

"Big wedding today?" I asked, fishing out my wallet.

She shrugged. "Suppose so. Gladys is the town's perpetual bridesmaid. Seems like she goes to two or three a month every summer."

"Sounds like you don't have a lot of faith in this couple."

Dottie waved a hand. "She's younger than him by at least ten years. But maybe I'm just bitter. I'm not much for weddings myself. Don't put much

stock in them. People today treat marriage like it's social proof that they are 'happy' and easily swap out spouses for a new model when they get bored. Starter marriages they call them now. Like marriage is a stepping stone, not an actual life-long commitment. Makes me sick. People can't commit like my folks did, ya know?"

I nodded. I did know. If I ever did, it would be once and forever. Just like my parents had. No starter marriages for me. Not that there was anyone even remotely on the horizon. While my 'clock' was ticking, I certainly wasn't in any rush. My mom told me I wouldn't have to worry about finding a wife. When she came into my life, I would just *know*. As she had with my dad. I didn't put much faith in that. Love at first sight was a myth. Love didn't work like that. It wasn't a fairy tale. It was real life. And relationships took time. Trust. Loyalty. All of which were in short supply these days.

I dropped cash and a big tip on the table for my meal, then went to hit the head. As I was relieving myself, I closed my eyes and tried to see myself standing in front of a packed church, waiting for my own fictional bride to come down the aisle. Nope. Couldn't see it.

As I was washing my hands, however, the woman from my dreams flashed before me. Face still blurred but prominent in my mind.

Hey there, stranger, I imagined her whispering hot against my ear.

"Fuck." I looked down and saw that I was hard. "I just fantasized about you this morning," I chastised myself. I looked at my wood for a moment and realized it wasn't going to go away on its own. Not with the tricks my mind was playing on me.

Confirming the door was firmly locked in the single-stall bathroom, I unbuckled my pants and let them fall unceremoniously to the ground. Because I never wore underwear, my cock was out in the open and standing at attention. I shrugged off the jacket and placed it over the doorknob before I set to the task at hand. Getting this woman out of my head. Again.

Giving in to the fantasy, my fingers wrapped around my dick as I leaned my other hand against the door to ensure my privacy. Closing my eyes, I imagined her hand cupping my ass as I moved my hand up and down my shaft. Slowly at first as I relished in the mental image of *her*.

Fuck me, Shawn, she begged inside my mind. Lifting her fictitious shirt off her body, I watched as her perfect breasts bobbed gently. Two peaked

nipples begging to be suckled. Working myself faster, I imagined my tongue latching onto her, teasing and tugging at her nipples. My teeth dragged slowly over each peak as she moaned out her pleasure.

Just as I was envisioning her lips lowering themselves to land on my dick, ready to suck me off, there was a knock on the door.

“Just a sec,” I groaned through my teeth as my hand worked in double time.

Don't stop, Shawn. Come for me. I want to taste you. Please.

Her pleading reinforced my mission. I would come. I would let her taste me. My hand stroked my cock into a frenzy in the expert way it knew how.

Yes, baby. Right there. Don't stop. Come in my mouth.

I'd give her what she wanted. Stroke, stroke, so close now, stroke.

“You almost done, buddy? I gotta drain the snake.”

I pinched my eyes shut and imagined her pink lips opening wide to taste me.

Gritting my teeth, I suppressed a groan as I blew my load all over the door.

“Fuck me,” I whispered. Panting, I quickly wiped myself clean and grabbed a few paper towels for the door. I said a silent apology to the cleaner, then washed my hands again before shrugging back into my jacket.

“Finally,” the burly guy said, pushing me out of the way once I'd opened the door. My face was still flushed from exertion, so I made my way through the diner as quickly as I could, scared someone might figure out what I'd been doing.

Once outside, I took a few gulps of fresh air. I closed my eyes and felt the bright sun against my lids. My heart rate returned to its normal rhythm. I stood there, palms facing upward, absorbing the heat, listening to the soft sounds of an occasional car, the birds in the trees nearby, but mostly inhaling the air as it thickened with the heat of the day. Such a change from life in the city.

Opening my eyes, I rolled my shoulders a few times before I made my way toward the church. A walk that would take a good forty minutes, but I didn't mind. It helped me take in the town better.

As I walked, I passed by signs for Nolichucky River, a white-water rafting site. I'd always wanted to do that. Once I was settled, I'd need to look into booking a trip. If there was one thing Erwin was known for, it was

its rapids. I'd argue their mountains were a close second. After being surrounded by concrete and steel for so many years, trees and the wide-open blue sky were a welcome change. I could get used to the pace of life here. As much as I had once loved the hustle and bustle of city life, there was something to be said for country calm.

By the time I made it to the top of the hill, I was quite sweaty. The sun was starting to peek out of the cloud that had shaded me for much of the journey, but now it was out in all its glory. Its heat burned brightly over the church as though to say, 'ta-da!' I felt myself smile at its simple beauty. Yeah, the walk had been worth it.

The little church looked like something right out of a travel brochure. Small, white, with a simple bell tower. I shrugged out of my jacket and draped it over my arm as people started filtering into the church. Glancing at my phone, I saw it was 10:45. The service must start at eleven if people were just showing up now. Perfect timing.

As soon as I walked through the doors, I noticed the ceiling first. Curved wooden arches sporting a clapboard style design as they bowed into a spade-shaped point. A lot of artisanship went into the grandness of the church. The light-colored wood was carried onto the floor, and the large stained-glass windows filled the space with light that was nothing short of ethereal. Even without the larger than necessary cross at the front, you'd feel that this space was sacred. Holy. Just the balm I needed. I craved peace. Quiet. Serenity. But mostly, direction. I desperately needed the universe to let me know what road I should be following. I'd let it lead me to Erwin, but now what was I supposed to do here?

Closing my eyes, I prayed. Something I hadn't done since my mom was alive and dragged us to mass every Sunday as kids. There was no bench to kneel on, so I knew it wasn't a Catholic church. It hadn't even dawned on me to look at the denomination on the sign outside. I knew He wouldn't mind where I came to honor Anna. Shifting in my seat, I closed my eyes and focused on what I wanted to say.

Hey, so yeah. It's me. Shawn. Shawn Maven? I'm Nora's son. You have my sister, Anna, with you too. I hope she isn't too much of a nuisance. She's bossy, but she means well. Anna, that is. Well, my mom could be that way too, I suppose. They were both alike in a lot of ways. Knew what they wanted and pursued it with a fierce passion.

I squirmed in my seat, trying to get comfortable on the hard pews, while still trying to stay in the moment. It was hard to ignore the sounds around me as people came into the church. The friendly ‘hellos’ and ‘beautiful day out’ side conversations. But I needed to get this chat in with the big guy before I snuck out. I had questions only He could answer.

That’s something I wish you’d given me. Their drive. Their passion. I wish I knew what I wanted and then had the guts to go after it. Now that you’ve taken both of them from me, who is supposed to teach me how to do that? How can I have faith in your ‘grand plan’ when you’ve taken away my guiding lights?

The conversations grew louder around me, signaling the service would likely start soon. Still, I kept my eyes closed and my head down. The real question had yet to be asked.

I’m sure you get asked this all the time from millions of desperate people, especially from those who have lapsed in their faith, but on the off chance that you’re listening and in a giving spirit, could you send me some sort of sign? Some path you want me to take? I don’t know what I’m supposed to do now. I think you wanted me to come to Erwin. Was it just to look after my dad or was there some other purpose for this road I’m on? What am I supposed to do now that I’m here? Your sign doesn’t have to come via the way of a burning bush or anything, just some small signal to guide me. That’s all.

“Excuse me,” a voice said to my left. I opened my eyes and saw an elderly man wearing a checkered dark gray suit and a bright blue bow tie. ‘An unfortunate combination’ I could almost hear Anna say.

“Yes?”

“Did you want an Order of Service? You snuck in before I got to my post. Don’t tell Monique.” He held out a folded sheet of paper to me, which I took.

“I don’t know Monique, so your secret’s safe with me,” I said, giving him a nod of assurance.

“Count your blessings.” He gave me a kind smile, then went back to the entrance to greet others who were streaming in. That was when I noticed Gladys. The woman with the ugly hat in the diner. She was chatting urgently with a woman in the front row before she rushed back out again. Glancing around those who were coming in, I quickly realized I was at *the*

wedding they were talking about in the diner. Looking down at the paper in my hand, I skimmed the text.

*The Wedding
Of*

*Dwayne Ernest McElfish
&
Jasmine Fairchild*

*11:00 a.m.
July 21, 2019*

I smiled. Maybe I'd stick around and see if Dottie would win her bet of the bride running out on her groom. Sliding my suit jacket back on to match the attire of those filling the pews, I checked out the men who had formed at the front of the church while I'd been praying. The groom looked to be slightly panic-stricken. Not that I'd be any different in the same situation. He had a neatly trimmed beard that was streaked with white, something I had yet to be able to grow. Stupid babyface. He wore glasses that he kept pushing up the bridge of his nose from excessive sweating. That could have been the heat or the situation. Poor guy. I wouldn't want to be him. No way. I just didn't see it happening for me. Ever.

The groom leaned over to talk to his best man. Their eyes flicked back and forth to the entrance, where I could hear the wedding party gathering to enter. The minister came out to stand in front of a small altar. He wore a long dark robe with a golden stole over his shoulders. He opened a thin black binder and flipped the pages absently while off to the side, a piano started playing. The first few notes of "Clair de Lune" danced in the air. A missed note here or there indicated that the pianist wasn't quite as skilled at this song as she might want to be for an event so grand.

By the end of the song, the church had nearly filled on the groom's side, where the bride's side was thinly attended. I suddenly felt bad for being on his side. She was the clear underdog. Thinking about how the women at the diner chatted, she had likely been singled out for small-town ridicule. I was about to get up and move when the song shifted into the clear wedding processional.

A rail-thin teenage girl with braces wearing the expression of abject misery came first. She had a small basket of flower petals that she threw unceremoniously in clumps on the ground. A man in the first pew glared at the girl until she treated the petals with more care. Next came Gladys in that same awful hat that nearly blocked the woman behind her.

The woman behind Gladys was tiny by comparison, slightly panic-stricken eyes, and wearing the same god-awful color as Gladys. Her steps down the aisle were not in time with the music as she struggled to keep a smile on her face. So far, this wedding party seemed thrilled to be here. A handful of other women, all wearing the same tacky dress, made their way down the aisle and stood in wait on the opposite side of the groomsmen.

Shifty-eyes glanced over at the groom, and they locked gazes before they both turned their focus on the floor. *Naughty. Naughty. The groom and the bridesmaid have a thing.* Maybe Dottie would make her ten bucks after all?

The music swelled and the back doors opened. Collectively, we all stood and turned our eyes toward where the bride would emerge. There were a few coughs as people held up their cameras to capture the bride in all her glory. If the bridesmaids' dresses were any indication, the woman about to come down the aisle would be nothing short of a doozy.

And then the moment we were all waiting for. I observed a few as they smiled politely. Some had tears in their eyes, while most waiting held smirks. Oh, the gossip that must surround this couple!

That was when I turned to take in the bride myself.

The sun was bursting in from behind her, creating a heavenly halo effect. Oddly familiar even though she was wearing a veil that obscured her face. When she got closer to me, I heard her whisper.

"Hey there, stranger." She waved at a little boy, who beamed back at her, but my head cocked to the side.

Hey there, stranger.

I'd heard that phrase before... This morning. And every time I'd gotten off lately. Holy shit.

It was her.

The woman haunting my dreams. This was it. My sign. The reason I came to Erwin. It was for her.

She wasn't a fantasy. She wasn't fictional. She was real. I had asked for a sign. Something to show me the way, and then, poof, the literal woman of my dreams walked past me. The woman I was meant to be with. The same woman who was about to marry another man.

Standing frozen in shock, I watched as she went to stand beside her soon-to-be husband. Beads of sweat formed at my temples and my stomach churned. Was this really happening? Was this a nightmare I'd wake up from? It had to be, right? God wouldn't answer my prayers by sending me a married woman, would He?

People around me started to sit, and as much as I wanted to jump out of the pew and run to her side, claim her as my own, I felt myself settle onto the pew. My hands balled into fists as I watched the minister clear his throat to begin the ceremony.

This couldn't be real. Was the world as cruel as to take away not only my mother and my sister but also the literal woman of my dreams? After it had opened up the skies to shout 'her!' to me? After all the pain and suffering I'd endured these last few years, did I not deserve some glimmer of happiness? Had I not repented long enough? Why show her to me only to be told I couldn't have her? What kind of torture was that?

The sounds around me became muffled as the room shifted under me. I reached out and held on to the front of the pew to stop the world from spinning. Soft, muted tones of the minister reading from his script entered my ears, but I couldn't process the words. The pounding of my own heart drowned it all out. And then, out of nowhere, a gasp from my left. Suddenly, the sounds around me sharpened.

"What?" I heard the bride say.

"I'm sorry. I should have told you sooner. Emma and I are in love. And have been for some time now." Her groom took a step away from her, then reached out a hand to one of the bridesmaids across from him, who looked both shocked and blissfully happy at the same time. The woman took his hand, and together, they ran out of the church, threw a sea of shocked witnesses.

I glanced back at my future wife as she stood there, covered from head to toe in a wash of cream tulle. Her posture was ramrod straight, giving away nothing about what mental stress she must be under. For several

seconds, no one dared to speak as every single eye focused their collective attention on her, waiting to see what she would do. Including me.

That was when my phone vibrated in my pocket. I reached out to silence it when I noticed what the alarm was for. 11:11 a.m. The exact time my sister died. The moment I knew my life would never be the same again. I looked up at the ceiling, almost expecting to see Anna there, smiling down at me, proud of the gift she'd just given me.

Was it possible? Had the universe conspired to give me exactly what I wanted? Even in a perfect stranger? It made no sense, while at the same time, it was as though the lights had been turned on. This was her. The woman I'd spend the rest of my life with. I had no idea what she looked like, but I knew I wanted to marry her. This woman currently without a groom.

WHAT? THAT'S WHERE THE STORY ENDS? Technically, it's where it begins. Find out what the woman of Shawn's dreams does next in [Where You Left Me Vol. 1](#).

OR CHECK OUT THE FULL SERIES HERE

[Where You Left Me Vol. 1-5](#)