

Nine Dates

by shosier

Finalist, 2011 Valley Forge RWA "Sheila" Award... John and Paul have build a strong foundation of love between them. Will Beth be added strength to their relationship... or a wrecking ball?

An Unusual Lunch

Chapter 1 of 1

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The following is an excerpt from my latest novel, **Nine Dates**. For the entire month of October 2012, I will donate 100% of my royalties from this book to **one n ten**, an LGBTQ youth support group. For more information and purchasing links, please visit my website at www.shanynhosier.com

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An Unusual Lunch

"You look fantastic today," a familiar, deep voice purred.

Beth Mitchell looked up from her computer screen to smile welcomingly at her flatterer. There was nothing particularly special about the knee-length skirt or sleeveless top she wore. He was just being his usual sweet self, saying the same thing nearly every day.

"Thank you," she said simply, sighing inwardly.

What was the point of flirting with John O'Brien, anyway? Sure, he was sweet and smart and funny and charming. And drop-dead gorgeous with his black, slightly curly hair and sparkling blue eyes and a smile that made her breath catch.

He was taken. And even if he weren't, it wouldn't have mattered.

"Did you need something? Marilyn's in a meeting until one today," she said, randomly spinning the mouse wheel beneath her fingertip, losing her place in the document as it scrolled up the screen. Their boss was currently sequestered in a conference room, mediating between a team of her employees and a jury of her superiors.

John shook his head. "I'm procrastinating, as usual. I'd rather spend time with the cute girl than working on my stupid presentation."

Beth giggled. It wasn't much of a compliment, really; software engineering firms like theirs were thickly populated with very nice, very smart, but very unsociable males who were walking fashion tragedies, more often than not. The few other women employed there were either older, married types (usually wed to other engineers) or those who contented themselves with cat ownership.

It was part of why John always looked so good in comparison. His broad, athletic body was always sharply dressed in tailored trousers and button-down shirts, well-fitted

clothing that left nothing of his trim build to the imagination. At first, she'd assumed his professional attire indicated he was gunning for a management position, ascribing to the old adage, *Dress for the job you want, not the one you've got.*

That was before that horrid morning a month ago. The morning that cow, Patti, from Accounting whispered in her ear, "You know he's gay, right?"

Beth had whirled around on the woman. "Why would you say such a thing?" she demanded, about to berate her for spreading malicious gossip. How typical of small-minded people like Patti to assume a fashionably dressed, single man had to be gay. Everyone Beth grew up with would likely have made the same judgment, after all.

Patti's answering smile looked more like a sneer, clearly relishing Beth's comeuppance. "His car's in the shop again, and his boyfriend's dropping him off at work. See for yourself if you don't believe me."

Beth had stepped up to the window of the break room, which happened to look out on the parking lot, intending to give such gossip a cold shoulder. Then, as if on cue, she'd watched as a mud-flecked, doorless Jeep pulled up. Even from this distance, she could see John in the passenger seat and another man was driving. John leaned across into the driver's seat... and *kissed him.*

She still felt a hollow ache in her chest every time the vision of that moment came to mind. Any chance she imagined she had with him had gone up in smoke.

"What's the occasion?" John asked, leaning on her desk. "Hot date?"

His voice yanked her back to the present. She smirked. "I wish."

"C'mon, now," he teased her. "You don't have to spare my feelings."

"Please don't force me to admit to my non-existent social life out loud," she groaned theatrically. It had been months since she'd gone out on a date and more than a year since she'd broken it off with her last disastrous attempt at a serious relationship. It wasn't as if she wasn't looking for something more...just that she wasn't finding a damn thing she was remotely interested in. *Aside from this lovely little fucked-up crush, that is* she cruelly reminded herself.

"That settles it, then," he said, beaming another knee-weakening smile her way. "I'm taking you *out* to lunch."

Beth snorted even as her heart fluttered a tiny bit. "Ah, a pity date. How appetizing."

"Don't be ridiculous," he scolded her teasingly. "Pick you up here around noon?"

"Today?" she spluttered, stunned he'd been remotely serious.

He cocked one eyebrow. "You have better plans?"

Of course she didn't. She'd just confessed to the fact. Not that she wouldn't have dumped them in a heartbeat for the chance to spend extra time with John, no matter how painful such delusional fantasies were. "No," she mumbled, mortified by the warm sensation on her face heralding a blush.

"See you then," he said with a wink.

Beth watched as he sauntered off toward his cubicle, her gaze involuntarily focusing on his perfect ass as it receded down the corridor *Oh crap oh crap oh crap* she grumbled silently.

Once he was safely out of earshot, she heaved an audible groan. As agonizing as her dashed romantic hopes were proving to be, John was still her favorite person in the building. They smiled and chatted for a few moments every time they ran into each other around the busy office, sharing inside jokes and funny stories about their coworkers. They shared lunch in the break room almost every day for the past several months...albeit within the safety of a group...and discovered they shared so much in common: taste in music, interest in progressive social causes, books, movies, food.

And men, apparently, she chided herself. It was crucial she keep grounded, constantly reminding herself of the actual state of things. A bitter dose of damned, frustrating reality was unfortunately what she needed most.

But her alternatives were to either attempt to engage the unmarried man-children who worked there...an activity which would necessitate cultivating an obsession with online role-playing games, anime comic books, and cult horror movies...or sink into the bitchy, backbiting mire of the Spinster Cat Fanciers Club. She decided both options simply required too much self-denying effort on her part. So she swallowed her torturous physical attraction to John and spent her time with him anyway.

A choice I am very likely to regret.

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"Ready?"

For some reason, he'd brought both their lunches from the break room refrigerator with him to her desk. She gave him a questioning look.

"I promised you a hot date, remember?"

"Right..." Beth replied warily.

John laughed. "C'mon, you can trust me." And then he held out his hand to her, the beautiful bastard, and smiled that charm-the-pants-off-a-girl smile, and all her self-preservation instincts fled for the hills.

"Okay," she blathered, placing her hand in his.

She discovered his hand was perfectly proportioned, of course. Large and strong and warm as it wrapped around hers. Considerately gentle yet protectively firm, guiding her through the office and into the lobby. Meanwhile, her flighty stomach struggled and strained like an unbroken foal against the lead-like tether in her gut. She was in serious trouble. *Oh crap oh crap oh crap*

He led her outside the building. They stood for a moment just beyond the doors, donning sunglasses and allowing their bodies to adjust to the climate shock of moving from a heavily air-conditioned interior into the midday warmth of Phoenix in May. Like deep-sea divers or Arctic explorers, it required a certain mindset to become a pedestrian. Desert dwellers such as they quickly learned to gird their loins before facing the onslaught of desiccating fire by bending their heads beneath the sun, breathing shallowly, and squinting against the glare.

Taking her hand once more, John led her quickly across the blistering asphalt of the parking lot. Shimmery waves of heat wafted up from below, fluttering her skirt.

"Are we going far?"

"There's a shady spot in a little park down the street from here," he assured her.

Beth's hand was growing embarrassingly sweaty within his. She wished she could somehow wipe it dry without being obvious.

"There's a park nearby? I never noticed."

"I can see it from my cube." After a brief pause, he continued in a slightly accusatory voice, "Which you would know if you'd ever come visit me there."

Beth was stunned and slightly shamed by his indictment. He was right...he was the one who always came to visit her. She never wandered over to his desk to chat, despite how much she craved spending time with him. The truth was that at first, she'd been far too intimidated, then later, too discouraged to do so. "I'm not supposed to leave my desk in case Marilyn needs something," she protested weakly.

John chuckled. "I know. That's why I'm always running into you at the printer or the copier. Or haven't you noticed I've been stalking you?"

Beth was utterly flustered. He'd been *stalking* her? Then John laughed again, and she realized he was teasing.

They reached a small grassy area bordered on three sides by tall buildings. A few concrete benches were scattered throughout, along with a lone metal picnic table. The space was significantly cooler than the surrounding pseudo-kiln the parking lots and sidewalks had become, but was completely deserted, for only the most diehard Phoenicians would brave a lunchtime picnic in mid-May.

They walked toward one of the shaded park benches, and he directed her to sit beside him. He tucked his sunglasses into his pocket, and she pushed hers up into her hair. The concrete seat felt cool beneath. They sat with legs apart and arms held slightly away from their body, the better to catch every little bit of breeze that blew by.

Initiating their usual small talk, John complained again about his current work project, and Beth commiserated. They lamented over the typical sixth-inning defensive debacle and utter lack of a bullpen on behalf of the Diamondbacks, picking the bones of the game that had aired the night before. He ate a prepackaged sandwich and cold pasta salad from a local market...she'd noticed before how he never ate leftovers or anything homemade...while she lunched on crackers and spinach salad she'd assembled that morning.

"So, how's our hot date going so far?" His playful smile and the brightness of the day caused him to squint most adorably.

"Very hot. Literally," she giggled and pretended to flick sweat from her brow.

He chuckled as well. "Good enough to maybe say yes to another one? Saturday night?"

Beth choked, nearly spitting yogurt all over herself, and he laughed. "Very funny," she grumbled. "It's not nice to tease a poor girl with no social life."

"I wasn't teasing." His expression suddenly turned very serious.

Beth swallowed hard. What was he playing at? She told herself it was probably yet another generous gesture on his part motivated by pity. "It's a very nice offer, but I'm not sure it's a good idea."

John's brow furrowed slightly. "You have a rule against office romances?"

Office romances? Beth snorted, shaking her head. At least now she definitely knew he was teasing, but the dig stung anyway. "Come on, John. Don't make me say it."

"You've lost me."

She looked down at the ground. Hadn't she known this was a bad idea the moment he'd suggested a lunch date?

"Look... you're a very sweet guy. I really value our friendship, and I hope what I'm about to say won't change that. But I'm not sure I can handle spending time with you outside the office, because it won't mean the same thing to you as it would to me. And I forgive you for failing to notice I've been nursing a little crush on you."

She forced a chuckle, trying to lighten the heavy confession with a stab at humor, despite the fact it was the naked truth. She held her breath during the several seconds of silence that followed, unable to bring herself to look directly at him.

"And you don't think I could feel the same way about you?"

"How could you?" Her patience began to wear thin. There really was no reason to rub her nose in it now, was there?

"Are you seriously asking me how could I feel attracted to a beautiful, smart, funny woman I've come to know over the past few months? Haven't I made that obvious?"

Beth didn't appreciate being toyed with. How could she have been so off base in her estimation of him? He'd always seemed like a decent guy rather than the sort of conceited jerk who didn't know when to drop a joke at someone else's expense.

"What would your boyfriend think of all this?" she countered.

John's jaw dropped slightly. "My boyfriend?"

"Boyfriend, life partner, significant other... my apologies if I'm not using the politically correct term here." She regretted sounding a tad bitchy at the moment, but considering she felt incredibly bitchy, she reckoned the fact she'd toned it down ought to count for something.

He mumbled as if thinking aloud, "How do you know about..."

"I saw you kiss him one morning." She hung her head, feeling a little ashamed for outing him so indelicately. "I didn't mean to spy on you. And you can trust me not to gossip about it. It's your private business, and I respect that," she assured him.

He was silent for several moments, staring at the ground. She gathered her things and stood, assuming he would prefer to be alone. Her own heart felt rather heavy at the moment; she predicted this was likely their last lunch together.

"So, you think I'm... *pretending* to like you... for what reason, exactly?" His tone turned sharp.

His reaction startled her.

"I may not broadcast my sexuality around the office, but that's because it's professionally inappropriate, not to mention nobody's business. I've never lied about it."

"I never said you did," Beth argued.

His ocean blue eyes stared hard into hers. "I'm not ashamed of who I am."

"You have no reason to be," she insisted, confounded by the direction this was heading. They'd discussed all sorts of political hot-button issues before, including the treatment of gay people, lamenting the dearth of tolerance and understanding in the world today. The conversation happened before she'd learned his orientation, but her opinion remained unchanged, having been formed long before she'd ever met him.

"Yet you think I'm only pretending to be attracted to you? That I'm trying to use you for a beard?"

Beth gasped at the leap he'd taken. "No! That's not what I meant!" She sank back down onto the bench beside him, feeling wretched for offending him so callously. "I

didn't realize how insulting that must have sounded. I never meant to fault your integrity. I was only.... I'm just... really... confused," she stammered, her shoulders sinking in defeat.

John took her hand once more. "You understand people come in more flavors than just gay or straight, don't you, Beth?"

Understanding began to dawn on her, and Beth felt her mouth gape open into a silent Oh. The heaviness in her heart began to lift.*He really does like me?*

"Yes, I have a boyfriend," he admitted. "But I'm falling like crazy for you."

Her heart crashed back to the ground. "But you have *aboyfriend*," she groaned, burying her face in her hands.

"I thought we established this already," he replied coolly.

"You don't seem like the cheating type," she said, sounding somewhat snappish, "and neither am I." Something about this day, this conversation, was persistently slippery. She couldn't seem to find any firm ground to stand upon.

"You're right. I'm not. I would never betray Paul. I love him."

Beth huffed in frustration. "I must be the stupidest, most unsophisticated bumpkin because I don't understand a goddamn thing you're trying to say."

John chuckled softly, gently. "Who do you think encouraged me to finally grow a pair and ask you out?"

Beth sat perfectly still, just trying to breathe, let alone think. She tried very hard to calm her mind and coax a logical thought out of it. But her brain blindly flailed about, hoping to bang into something solid it could hold on to. *John is gay... or he was... no, not gay. He is... bisexual? I guess that's the word for it. He has a boyfriend. Loves his boyfriend. But feels attracted to... me?*

More facts were needed. Because this still didn't make a damn bit of sense.

"Tell me about him."

"About Paul?"

She nodded. *Oxygen. Information. Time. Clarity. These are what I need. In that order.*

John took a deep breath. "What do you want to know?"

Beth shrugged, waving her fingers in a come-hither gesture. "Anything. Just keep the facts coming."

A small, private smile broke over John's features. "He's tall. Beautiful brown eyes and sandy blond hair. Smart as hell. Athletic. Selfless. One of the bravest men I know, actually."

"He sounds like a perfect match for you." She tried to picture the man he described so lovingly, to picture them together *And what more could you possibly want?* she wondered.

"How did you meet?"

"Freshman year. In the universe's infinite wisdom, the random dorm lottery made us roommates. Can you believe it? We've sort of been together ever since. It's been a little over ten years, now."

Ten years!? Beth gulped. *I'd say that qualifies as an established relationship* "How lucky can you get?" she joked weakly.

John's smirk was tinged with guilt. "I know."

"What does he do?"

"He's an orthopedic surgeon."

Beth laughed in disbelief. It was just too much. "Nice catch! A doctor, no less... Well done, buddy."

John laughed with her, a little surprised by her reaction. "Thanks."

"Sorry if this seems flippant, but... if your hot doctor boyfriend isn't enough for you, then what the hell chance do I have?"

John sighed expansively before answering. "Believe me, I wasn't looking for anything else. I was perfectly happy with the way things were. And then..." John paused for a moment. "Then you came along, Beth. Sweet and friendly and genuine and beautiful." He shook his head. "I was blindsided by this. By you."

This, I can relate to. Ditto, buddy "What... *exactly*... is it you want from me?" She braced herself, not entirely sure she was ready for his answer.

"I'm not *exactly* sure," he confessed. "All I know is that something is drawing me to you."

It was some small consolation he felt confused by this, too. *Well, as long as we're being honest..*

"It's not as if the feeling isn't mutual," Beth admitted. "But I'm not interested in an affair, John. I'm not looking for a fling that has no chance of going anywhere, no matter how open your relationship with your boyfriend might be. That's a recipe for a broken heart, and I've had my fill of those. I refuse to break up a long-term relationship like yours."

Beth sighed, reckoning this next bit was going to hurt like a bitch. She slowly rose to her feet once more, taking one long, last look at him. He was achingly beautiful, staring at the concrete path before him, his brow furrowed. Swallowing down the urge to throw away every scrap of decency and dignity she possessed, she forced herself to turn away.

She took one step, but he didn't let go of her hand. She looked back over her shoulder, silently demanding her release with her gaze.

"What if... what if it didn't *have* to be a choice?" He pierced her with those deep blue eyes.

Beth was getting tired of the rug being yanked out from under her that day. The joke simply wasn't funny anymore. "I don't see how..."

"I think that maybe... you... and he... might be compatible, too," he whispered as if afraid of a jealous universe overhearing.

Beth couldn't help her dumbfounded reaction. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?" she stammered.

"Paul and I have a *lot* in common, Beth," he said pointedly. "I'm proposing... if you're open to the idea, that is... that we all just get to know each other a bit better."