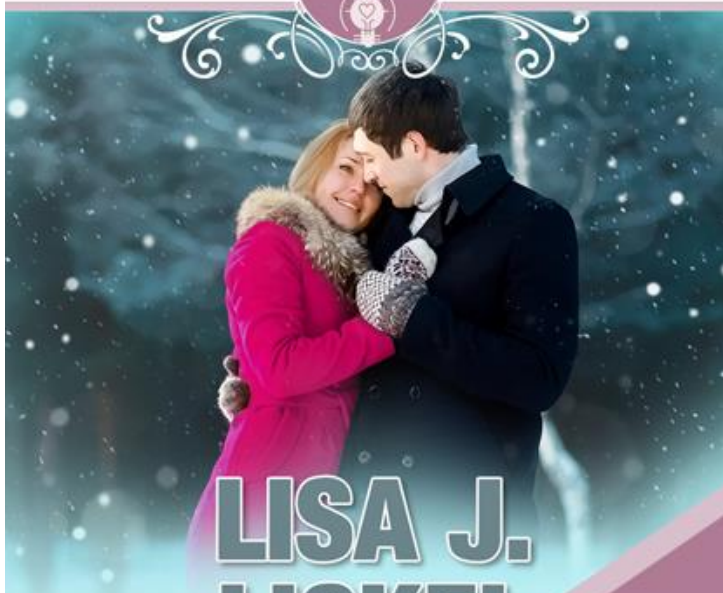


Ponder This...



**LISA J.
LICKEL**



*Whatever is
True*

*Everything
about
Us*

Everything about Us

Lisa J. Lickel

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Everything about Us
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Prologue

The man grasped her gold pen and studied it as if he'd never seen a writing instrument before. Shelly Colter hoped Mr. Pettibone's quirk choice for a replacement in the romantic lead knew how to use it. If only he wasn't so rugged, so handsome. And he could be less *fragrant*.

Waving her hand in front of her face to dispel the disagreeable farm odor wafting from his dusty navy blue T-shirt and jeans, she pointed again at the line on the contract. Springtime in the country. Wisconsin. At least it was a nice day, plenty warm enough outside for short sleeves and pure sunshine.

"Right here, Winston. Sign your name. Mr. Pettibone, the company owner, has already signed, and I'll be your witness. Filming is behind schedule, and we have a lot of work to do." She wanted to add the tired cliché "time is money," but she doubted he'd hear.

Around them, the best boy calling for more extension cords, a pow-wow among the writers seemed to grow heated, and Jordan, the director, created a familiar, exciting cacophony.

Harry from costuming waited anxiously in her shadow, fiddling with the measuring tape around his neck and shifting from foot to foot. Winston was a

different build from the recently fired celebrity, and Harry had spent weeks creating and fitting a wardrobe on that loser, Seth Taylor. Shelly's publicity campaign now needed to be reworked too, so Harry was, by far, not the only person to lose money after Seth's unexpected exit.

Food service set up a coffee buffet under a spreading oak in young leaf on this June day.

Shelly was hungry, but nerves made her choke at the thought of anything but coffee. Winston Daniels, the man she was supposed to turn into a heartthrob in less than a week, seemed distracted by everything and kept looking up at every clash of equipment or prop placement.

So much pressure—could Shelly do it? She was good at her work. Pettibone trusted her.

"C'mon, Danny." Jen, Winston's sister, stood next to him, trying to encourage him.

"Time is of the essence, Winston," Shelly said in her steel-coated tone. Pettibone had given her five days, including this one, to whip a country hick into the next mega-movie-star sensation, and she couldn't afford to waste a second.

"You sure?" Winston whispered to his sister, a small woman who'd struggled to get baby weight off in time for her role as the best friend of the female lead. It was quite a coup for Jen, since she'd only had walk-ons and a couple of commercials under her belt.

Jen whispered, "It'll pay for the..."

Shelly tapped her foot. "Are you in? Because there are plenty of other actors who would jump at this role." There weren't really. Pettibone had run Seth Taylor off the set early this morning when he'd shown up too high—again—to even remember what role he

was playing.

Filming was in disarray, and costs were rising. Pettibone was determined to make the Academy Award cut-offs this year, and if Shelly couldn't bootjack this new guy to fit the bill of a swoon-worthy romantic rancher, it would be a long, lonely path to owning her own publicity company.

Or getting another job in public relations.

Anywhere.

She wanted to hurry—if only Winston would cooperate. A little faster.

As soon as Winston dotted the *I*, she snatched the paper contract and shouted at Pettibone's assistant. She waved for Harry to start taking measurements for size and fit.

"We can talk while you're being fitted," she said. "Fred, get that camera out of here. Not now. I'll tell you when we're ready. You'll just make him nervous."

"Pettibone says I'm to film it all. We'll use the footage for publicity later."

"That's my job as publicity director to decide what to use for promotion. Everyone understands that."

"We do. Don't get twisted up about it."

Before she could get into a really good rant, Winston tucked his elbows against his side and turned pale. "E-everything? But I don't know what to say. I haven't even read any lines."

Harry frowned and lifted Winston's arms straight out from his sides again.

"And you are all supposed to do the vlogs. At least once a day," Fred muttered. "Even you, Shell. Probably all the time for him."

"What's that?" Winston.

"Video logs, like a spoken diary." Shelly set her

hands on her hips and walked around Fred, circling Winston, thinking about what she'd say in her vlog and what she'd have to tell Winston to say. "I'll explain it later—no time now. Harry, how much more?"

"Getting there." He clicked a few keys on his tablet. "Nice shoulders. Good hips. Long legs will help with the action shots. Six-one? You work out?"

"Uh, sorta."

Shelly winced at Winston's pronunciation. "First thing...well, second...no, third thing we must do is work on your voice. I think we'll call in Roma. Jen, what are you doing here? Don't you have to be somewhere else? As if there aren't enough distractions. Winston, listen up! Harry, line up wardrobe from the third date scene, you got it? The one where they're at the—"

"I'm on it!" Harry trotted away.

Shelly reached up an uncomfortable distance—he was taller than she'd thought—to take Winston's jaw and turn his face left and right. "Face straight ahead, please." What angle would capture those delicious grooves alongside his mouth? Thank goodness his ears were normal.

"Smile. Wider. Show me teeth. Are you listening?"

The new leading man took a step back, stuck his thumbs in his belt loops, and looked down at her five-foot-two height. "First of all, I didn't quite catch your name. Secondly, I don't know what's going on, and third, don't I need a script to study, or something?"

"Shelly Colter, company promotions manager. My job is to make sure you are turned into the public face of this film. You are a complete unknown. Why Pettibone insisted on stuffing not only an unknown, but also a completely untried actor on his film I have

no idea, but I will make it work. Fortunately for you, stepping into a Seth Taylor role will jumpstart the publicity, but I must insist it stay positive. Are you a drug or alcohol user? Involved in a messy divorce or break-up?"

He shook his head.

"Anything else I should know about that could negatively affect this publicity campaign?"

"Just what you see. I've never acted before. Except in a play once, uh, in school."

Shelly smiled. "Well, this movie is a lot of action, so I think you'll be all right. You already do...farm work, I believe?"

At his nod, she let her smile slide into a smirk. "Since you'll be portraying a rancher, you're partway there." She studied him up and down again. "Hair next. Then a preliminary photo shoot. Margo, the production assistant, can explain how we do things on set, what's expected of you in your role, and the AD..." At his blank look, she amended, "Assistant director can teach you blocking. When Roma gets here, she can help you with proper pronunciation. We'll have your teeth bleached." Shelly narrowed her eyes. "Winston Daniels will become the next new Hollywood buzz boy and a household name by Thanksgiving. The picture is expected to release at Christmas. Come."

By the time she'd taken five steps, she realized Winston was not behind her. "Winston?"

He stood there, brooding, feet shoulder-width. Shelly might have been interested in him, tried to flirt with this handsome hunk of guy, if she wasn't in such a rush and he wasn't so...aromatic. "What?"

"You seem to have some mighty case of pride, there, Miss? Missus? Colter. You might find people a

mite more willin' to work with ya if you didn't treat them worse than I treat my cows."

Shelly raised both eyebrows. "We have a very tight deadline. Your contract is specific about that. You will receive a sweet reward and a bonus if you do what I say. If you do not, you will be fined just as handsomely. Now follow me."

When she peeked back to make sure he obeyed her order, Winston's forehead had grown worry lines and his arms hung limply at his sides. "I don't remember that in the contract."

"It's there. I assure you." She turned, stepped over some taped electrical cords, and ducked under a boom, glad to hear his boots in her wake.

"At least call me Danny," he said. "My own name's good enough. Don't know why ya had to go changing it around backwards and all. Folks around here will laugh."

"You are now Winston Daniels, a role model for every boy and man in America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. Everyone will want to do what you do, look like you, wear what you wear, talk like you— *be* you. You are not a Danny with a crooked haircut who wears shirts with ragged collars, slouches except when on camera draped against a white fence, or mumbles with a backwoods accent when he speaks. Got that? And don't let your upper body lead the way, like a bull moose. Stand up straight."

1

Six months later

Danny Winston, Hollywood's newest movie star, stood in the icy rain next to his creaky family barn, staring across the edge of a wide, bare gravel bed. America's future heartthrob watched another little avalanche of clay and pebbles erode the foundation of his way-behind-schedule fish farm and tried not to groan at the reality of Murphy's Law.

Unfortunately, this was not a movie set where he emoted for the camera, nor were there any members of his fan club nearby to impress. His dreams were spread out across the former upper pasture of his western Wisconsin farm, where three generous outbuildings were supposed to hold his tanks, hydroponic gardens, and education wing.

"Supposed to" being the operative words.

At least Shelly wasn't here to see him like this. The girl of his dreams, love of his life, and head of the marketing firm promoting his business shouldn't have to witness such failure. He clenched his fists inside his soaked jeans pockets and bent his head against the pelting storm. Too much rain for autumn.

Weather—not in his control. Danny looked

upward and was rewarded by a couple of cold drips in his eye and one up his left nostril. He lowered his face. If it were true, the old wives tale saying chickens were so silly they'd stare up at the sky in the rain until they drowned, what would the old wives say about him?

No common sense whatsoever. He had one major motion picture under his belt. He'd been a walk-on who happened to be in the right place at the right time while visiting his sister Jen, an actress.

The movie he'd made for Jovian Productions last spring hadn't even been released yet, and he'd already spent most of his pay.

Danny wiped his face. He sucked in a damp breath of earthy late fall air at the sight of his father plodding through the mud of the yard from the house toward the barn. Danny retreated to the overhang but stayed in the open door frame. He wasn't trying to hide. Behind him in the former feed bins and hayloft lay piles of pipe, boxed aerators, and filters, manuals, nets, monitoring and testing equipment for the recirculating aeration system. Office supplies were safe in the house, along with reams and reams of paperwork and the designs Shelly worked on for the future retail store and education center.

His dad, Bernie Winston, scraped some of the muck from his work boots and bobbed his grizzled head. "Son."

"Here Pop." Danny kicked at some paper and packing accordions skittering around the barn floor.

"Had to take the phone off the hook," Bernie said. "Gal by the name of Amber is fierce trying to get ahold of you. Said you weren't answering your cell or email."

"Yeah. Sorry about that. Maybe we should change our home number. Or unlist it."

Bernie frowned and faced the house. "Everybody has that number. I grew up with that number."

As if Danny needed something to feel worse about right about now. "I'll tell her to stop calling," he muttered.

Bernie tightened his mouth, nodded again. "Sure is wet out there."

Rain. Four solid days in a row. Could have been snow. Wisconsin occasionally had blizzards in November. At least this weather wouldn't affect the corn too much—his neighbors still had time for the crop to dry out again before harvest.

If only he grew corn to harvest or could rake a last crop of hay to bale. He'd been too full of his acting gig at planting time and Pop had agreed to rent out the fields. Pop didn't blame him, at least not to his face.

"Smells strange," Bernie said. "Now that the girls are gone."

"We still have GiGi and Goldie," Danny replied in defense mode. He could hear them, the remaining milk cows, shuffling and snorting softly in their pens in the lower level underneath them.

Bernie bowed his head. "I was the one who wanted to sell." He lifted his hands, showing the gnarled fingers of a man who might have been eighty, not fifty-five. "Arthritis."

"I know. I just—Pop, I'm sorry. That's all." Danny missed the forty milking Guernseys too, admittedly not as much as his father, but the honest labor they represented. Keeping two made for easy milking and allowed his dad to keep a hand in his cheese-making hobby.

Danny gestured at the scene outside, where the wind picked up and swirled fallen maple leaves in a

sepia kaleidoscope view. "I'm frustrated at the delays. We...I thought we'd be up and running by now. I planned to be shipping out shrimp for the holiday season, and watching the perch grow."

"It's not your fault, son. Things don't often happen the way we expect. There's too much change nowadays." His whiskered cheeks poofed with his sigh. "Your mother would tell you that's not my strong suit."

Danny grinned but hid it quickly. "You agreed fast enough to change over to fish."

Bernie twisted at the waist to contemplate the pile of equipment in the shadowy recesses of his barn. "Seemed like a good prospect at the time."

"Even if I don't particularly like acting, sitting around the movie set was easier than all...this. Danny wiped his face again after his dripping bangs drizzled moisture down his forehead.

"Easy never gets a man anywhere," Bernie said out of the corner of his mouth, echoing the philosophy of generations of hardworking farm folks.

Danny kicked at a knot in the patina of the floorboards. He was not going to be the one to break the cycle of hardworking Winstons by putting words to his feelings. That would be like waving a white flag to his father. A real man didn't waste words. He put truth to them by his action.

A shortage of building materials to create the system of tanks and retractable covers was also not in Danny's control. So, yeah, he could have bought kiddie pools to grow the fish, but he'd wanted to do things right from the start.

Then, there was a rare worker's strike—delivery folks of all sorts declared a work slowdown that turned

into a stoppage, over work hours, overtime, and insurance. And while Danny agreed with them on principle, the material that he had a hard time getting couldn't be delivered.

An outbreak of a bacterial infection at the hatchery he counted on to supply his initial stock of perch and a contract cancelation from the folks who were to deliver his post-larval shrimp further delayed the start of the business.

What business? Danny hunched his shoulders. He glanced at his father out of the corner of his eye and thought again about quitting before he fell into bankruptcy. But Pop and now Shelly were counting on him.

~*~

Shelly Colter rested her chin on her folded hands as she leaned her elbows on her desk and stared at her computer monitor. Reflected in the screen was a still from the set of *Everything About You*. Danny Winston, the untried star, faced the camera, leaning against a rustic fence in an outdoor scene with his boot heel resting on a lower rail.

Mr. Pettibone said the June sunset behind Danny showed off the beauty God made when He created the universe. Shelly was working on that God thing. She'd seen over time how different Danny was from other guys she'd known and the main difference was his faith. She wanted to trust God, but trust was hard for her.

Danny...beautiful inside and out ...to have what he had was worth giving away some of her pride-filled independence.

She ensured this picture became a worldwide sensation. Everyone was counting on her.

In the screen-saver photo, Danny's arms stretched wide on the fence. It didn't take much imagination for Shelly to pretend she could walk right up to him and he'd wrap those honest farm-grown muscled arms around her. With his head tilted slightly forward, it seemed his eyes studied her. She blinked and turned her cheek. She pushed the monitor to move it out of the range of the reflection. *Danny...*

Shelly hugged herself, sending the charms of her chain watchband jingling. How could she miss somebody so much that it physically hurt? She'd never felt like that about Tommy Lord, the ex-boss, ex-boyfriend everyone on the film crew helped send packing.

She'd never experienced that emotion during the frequent absences of her parents. Her dad, Lou Colter, was always at some movie location, jetting off to some meeting, fraternizing with other bored wealthy people wondering what to do with their money, and convincing them to make a deal with him to produce a film. "Return on investment" were most likely the first words she'd uttered as a child.

Marjorie, Shelly's mother, was in some South American city with a team of street rescuers. Not of orphaned or abandoned children—Lord knew there were plenty of missionaries for that—but to save the dogs. International peace and pet societies adored her mother.

Amber, Mr. Pettibone's assistant, rapped and pushed open Shelly's office door. "Say, Shell, I can't get Danny to respond to my calls. Someone named Bernie—"

“Danny’s father.”

Amber put her finger on the page attached to a fuchsia-colored clipboard. “Oh, right. Anyway, Bernie said he’d take a message. He couldn’t tell me if Danny was at...what was the address again?”

Shelly folded her arms. Amber was a sweet and determined woman, closer to forty than thirty, despite the youthful portrait painted by her sculpted, tan, California physique, and streaked hair. Amber was good at her job, as good as Danny was stubborn about laying low until the publicity tour started. She hoped he was enjoying the sight of the fish farm operation under way. The main building had to be almost done. During her infrequent free lunch hours, like today, she worked on his Liberty Ridge Fish logo and advertising campaign.

Lunch was over. Back to her day job, which was still working as head of publicity for Jovian Productions. Soon, though, she’d be in her own office, directing her own PR firm. Shelly smiled at Amber. “Let me try. I’ll talk to him later today.”

“And remind him he’s still under contract,” Amber said.

Shelly gave a curt nod. “He knows. His idea of vacation and ours is different.”

Amber pursed her lips and shook her head. “The tour starts in a week. I don’t want Mr. Pettibone to worry.”

“Me neither. I promise I’ll talk to Danny.”

~*~

Getting the permits to build and operate a fish farm had been a breeze with Shelly’s help. The thing

Danny hadn't counted on was all the things that could go wrong. His future contracts supplying local restaurants, orders for fish feed he couldn't use for months, his reputation, his and Shelly's, were turning from victory to smoke.

Reputation. So far, his business persona was a pipe dream, nothing more. Fog and mirrors. Who did he think he was? He wasn't a household name, nor was he likely to become one. No one knew he was going to be on the cover of *Fandom* and *PhilmoPhile* magazines in December. Rumors circulated that *Everything About You*, the film he'd stumbled into last spring, was already being nominated for all kinds of awards. However, since the film hadn't been released yet, no one, not even Shelly, the best publicist on the planet, could make people like it or force enough academy votes to collect little golden statues.

Bernie pulled his seed logo cap over his forehead. "Coming in soon?"

He made it sound like he'd asked if Danny was about done pouting yet. "Yeah. Be there in a minute." Danny watched his dad squish back to the white farmhouse they'd shared after Jen went to college, got married, and moved to California. This fall was the first time he realized it wasn't going to be his home anymore, not if Shelly agreed to marry him. She'd need to live closer to Madison, he suspected, to be near the airport. She'd want a home of their own.

The whole weird acting gig last spring was so he could build the fish farm. He never wanted to get involved in the movie business. How did Mr. Pettibone head up an international major film corporation that relied on so many variables and proclivities, and stay sane? How could the seventy-five-year-old mogul

remain true to his Christian stance in such an industry where scandal drove headlines?

Danny wanted to call his own shots, direct his own project. Now he stood here, demoralized because of essentially a rain and supply delay. What would Pettibone do? Pray and trust.

“Don’t sweat the small stuff. Be flexible and have a backup plan.” That’s what Pettibone said and did. Hadn’t he proved it by taking a chance on an unknown like him to fill the suddenly vacant role in an already well underway potential picture of the year?

Danny needed to earn his way based on what he could do, not on what others thought of him. Surely being true to oneself was always best, wasn’t it?

Liberty Ridge Fish should have been established by now, supplying shrimp to restaurants in La Crosse, Mineral Point, Richland Center, Viroqua, and even Madison by the end of January. The tilapia could be ready early spring, for Lent anyway, and the yellow perch would take longer, a year or even two, but prove more lucrative. He was most excited about the aquaponics experiments and using all of the resources of the farm for environmental stewardship and diversity. Today’s farming was all about adaptation.

But if he couldn’t deliver on the promises, and it looked like he wouldn’t be able to, those restaurants and markets would go to other sources of produce. They’d never believe in him again. Shelly’s reputation as a cutting edge public relations company would suffer, too. Her business, born out of the movie where they’d met and fallen in love, was in its infant stage. She couldn’t afford a black eye because of him. He needed her trust as well, her faith in him, or she’d never want to hitch her star to his.

If the fish farm didn't pan out, there was always Plan B. Danny, aka Winston Daniels, had several movie scripts on the kitchen table back at the house to review—along with an engagement ring he'd picked up last week. Before the rain ruined his new starting date. Danny didn't want to go on pretending to be something he wasn't, no matter how much people like Mr. Pettibone paid him. The two-and-a-half week publicity tour he owed Jovian Productions was the last thing he planned to do for Hollywood.

~*~

Finally, home long toward dark, Shelly watched her screensaver rifle through the slide show while she blew on her carton of reheated sweet and sour chicken. She was fortunate to live in a suite on one side of the Colter estate in Ladera Ranch, south of Irvine, California, and mercifully within an hour driving distance of the Jovian Productions headquarters. Mr. Pettibone allowed her to work from her home office on meeting free days. Much of her post movie production work was on the phone, doing voice communication where the client couldn't tell if she wore a power suit or a tracksuit. While growing up, she'd learned how to tantalize her contacts from one of the best cajolers in the industry—dear old Dad.

Shelly gobbled some rice while watching pictures of Wisconsin fade in and scramble. Milwaukee, where she'd initially arrived before flying across to tiny La Crosse, had little in comparison to southern California ambiance. Someone took a picture of an ice-crusting puddle with the March date stamp circled and exclamation-marked. Shelly couldn't say the last time

anything froze outside her home.

So? She could do ice. Maybe even snow. Skiing. Lots of people went skiing. Snow-mobiling even. She choked and took a deep breath. The slideshow shifted to landscapes of warmer weather, endless evenings of amazing sunsets, the hum of...what were those things? Some kind of grasshopper, Danny said. Lightning bugs. The smell of fresh-cut al-al...falafel? Alfalfa? Whatever.

Shelly sneezed.

The coffee, that was good. Yes, sir. California coffee snobs could not corner that market of that little shop in that tiny village down the road. Shelly grimaced and reminded herself to be nice. It had been a sweet low-key cafe she wouldn't mind visiting often.

A mental image of Lydia Danes arriving by helicopter on the two-lane highway in front of the production set made her laugh out loud. A mega-star who could name her own price, Lydia made out like she'd been invited to the royal palace at Balmoral.

Memories scrolled like the screen saver. Lydia and Danny talking and laughing. Danny's admiration for the diva.

Shelly stabbed a piece of chicken. She'd better get used to being in Danny's shadow. Danny catering to other women, kissing them on screen, signing autographs, smiling, joking, and flattering.

He hated it. That's what he told her.

Shelly watched another computer image come into focus, a white farmhouse that was half two-story and half one-story stuck together behind a fence. Who wouldn't like being in the presence of all that excitement? Famous names? Kissing famous faces and getting paid for it. How could anyone prefer a view of