



Thanks to a long overdue trip to the post office, Shelby was running late for coffee group the next morning. Finally parked at TexEspresso, she checked her phone one more time even though the ringer volume was on high. Still nothing.

Dennis, who worked at *Buzz Now's* headquarters in L.A., was meeting with the editorial team to review her design choices and decide how in-depth a story to include in *Buzz Now Magazine's* holiday issue. Every minute that passed without hearing from him fueled her growing apprehension about whether or not she chose the right dress designs.

She set the ringer on silent and headed inside the cafe to find her friends.

"Hey, y'all! So sorry I'm late." Shelby whooshed around the table in a flowery wrap dress. She sat down in the empty bistro chair, hung her indigo leather handbag on the curvy metal armrest, and slid her tortoiseshell sunglasses to the top of her head.

"Oh, don't be silly. We're just glad you're here." Blakeley said, tossing her shiny auburn hair over her shoulder.

Years ago, the first week Shelby moved to Houston, she met Blakeley at a networking event. The two friends had remained

close ever since. Together they navigated the journey from corporate grind to part-time professional, full-time mom.

"The post office was a nightmare. Is it Tax Day or something?" Shelby joked.

"For heaven's sake, don't worry about it," Elise assured her. "We just got our coffees."

"I love that dress," Whitney said. With her long, wavy natural-blond hair and soft Southern accent, Whitney was the unsuspecting drama queen of the group. She was known to stir the pot but remained fiercely loyal to the women at this table. "Did you make it?"

Shelby's insides did a little flip. "I did, thanks. And I've missed y'all so much. How is everyone?"

"Look around," Elise said, sweeping her hands mystically over the tabletop like a fortuneteller. "Zero children. I'd say we're pretty fabulous."

As mom of a two-year-old boy and a three-year-old girl just 16 months apart, Elise had every reason to bask in the glorious calm of a preschool day. She hadn't wanted to leave her job as a nurse, but the logistics of caring for two babies so close together combined with her husband's unpredictable schedule monitoring offshore rigs left her with crummy childcare options.

"What is this? Some kind of fairyland?" Shelby said.

"Better than that. It's back to school." Whitney flashed a mischievous grin.

"I honestly didn't know if I was going to make it through the summer." Elise's parents lived in the Philippines, and her husband's lived in Georgia. She had the double whammy of babies close together and no local family.

"I know that feeling," Shelby said.

"Love all your updates on Instagram, Shel. I get exhausted just thinking about how you do it all. Especially the sewing part," Blakeley said.

"I basically haven't slept. In fact, I really need a coffee." Shelby waved to the server across the room.

"You came to the right place. They make everything Texas sized." Whitney lifted her kettlebell of a mug off the table. "Takes two hands to pick this thing up."

"I need one of those. Stat." The server approached, and Shelby ordered a latte just like Whitney's. "Y'all, is it me, or is it freezing in here?"

"I think I had fewer goosebumps on our ski trip," Whitney said, warming her hands on her mug.

"Which doesn't make any sense," Blakeley said. "It's hot enough out there to pop popcorn on the hood of the car, and it's barely ten o'clock."

"Everywhere is over-airconditioned right now. I had to buy an actual sweater." Elise rubbed the sleeves of her satin-lined yellow cardigan.

"That's super cute. Where's it from?" Shelby asked.

"I found it on clearance at *Surface Trend*. It was like \$7.99, if you can believe that. I bought the orange one too. Wouldn't usually go for such bright colors, but just couldn't help it."

"Geez, at that price, you might as well," Shelby said.

"Well, I wasn't about to drag the winter clothes down from the attic. It's a thousand degrees up there," Elise said.

"So, how have y'all been? I feel like I haven't seen anyone in ages," Shelby said.

"We've been absolutely crazy, that's how," Elise said. "Prepping for back to school about did me in. And the kids have been quite the little handfuls. Completely bored with summer. They were so happy to be back in school."

"We did all our shopping online this year. Saved me so much headache tracking down all the supplies," Blakeley said.

"We did too," Shelby said. "Between school supplies and her birthday, Paisley is officially addicted to the mail."

"So, Shel, we all really want to hear about yesterday." Whitney leaned toward Shelby, as if expecting to hear a juicy secret.

“Your hair looked amazing in the teaser. How did it go?” Blakeley asked.

“Thanks. The style team was over the top. Hair and makeup were a blast. We had a bumpy start with Paisley not smiling, but in the end, I think it went well.”

A server delivered Shelby’s massive latte to the table. A five-point star reminiscent of the Texas flag floated in the froth, courtesy of the barista. Shelby pulled her phone out of her purse to capture the steamy spectacle resting before her. Artistic espresso could collect a heap of likes on a hump-day morning.

“Any idea how the pictures turned out?” Whitney asked.

“The ones the photographer showed me looked great. Plus, they’re going to airbrush the tar out of them. I left feeling pretty relieved. Haven’t slept through the night in weeks I’ve been so nervous.”

“Well girl, you shouldn’t be. You look absolutely stunning,” Whitney said. “Did you get lashes?”

“Oh, thanks,” Shelby blushed. “Yeah, and not just that. Short of Botox, I think I’ve had everything done you can possibly do. I haven’t looked this polished since our wedding day.” She smiled and fluttered her eyelash extensions, still getting used to the ethereal way they brushed against her cheeks when she blinked. “I think I dropped close to a mortgage payment on all this, not to mention my trainer and all the accessories. Let’s hope I can recoup some of it in dress sales.”

“Your hair looks so natural. Did you go to Veronica?” Whitney asked.

“I did. She’s every bit as quirky as you said she’d be.” Shelby combed her fingers through her effortless-looking waves, strung along from yesterday’s styling session with the help of her miracle-working dry shampoo.

“She’s also every bit as expensive,” Blakeley said.

“It was crazy expensive. Biggest hair bill of my life,” Shelby said. “But I’m okay with that because when I have highlights, I

don't have to wash my hair every day. That's three less morning showers a week. Huge time saver."

"So eventually, it pays for itself." Elise shrugged.

"That's what I explained to Bryan," Shelby said. "Apparently he doesn't do math the same way we do."

"None of them do," Whitney said.

"So, what's the latest with y'all? How is Wylie doing two weeks into Kindergarten?" Shelby drew in a long, frothy sip of latte.

"So far, so good," Blakeley said. "We're really glad he did the bridge year. Y'all know, the whole summer birthday debate. He can focus so much better than this time last year. And by that, I mean focus on something other than baseball."

"Nice. And now for the real question," Shelby said. "How are *you* enjoying Kindergarten?"

"Oh, I'm loving it. My life is so much calmer. The bus picks him up and drops him off. It's five days a week and, best of all, we're not paying an extra cent. So I pocket all the money from the consulting calls."

"That's amazing, Blake. That sounds like my dream right now," Shelby said. "We're paying a fortune for Paisley's Pre-K, and it's only three days a week. I could really use those extra two days, but who can afford that if you're not working full-time?"

"I just wrote the September tuition check for Scarlett and Jeremy," Elise said. "I'm pretty sure a semester of college costs less."

"Ouch!" Shelby said. "I know what I'm paying. Can't imagine that times two."

"Jason wants me to pull them out," Elise said. "I told him I'd happily do that when he quits his job and I go back to work."

"We know how that one ends," Whitney smirked.

"Exactly," Elise said. "Which is why we will continue to fork it over to St. Sebastian's."

"Double the tuition, double the fun," Whitney said. "I cannot believe you're already trying again."

“You’re trying?” Shelby’s shapely eyebrows arched up toward her starry highlights. She knew Elise and Jason wanted more kids ... eventually. But it felt like only weeks ago, baby Jeremy was starting solids and pulling up for the first time. A few blinks later, he was tinkering away with manipulatives in the two-year-old class. “That’s so exciting!” Shelby managed to say.

“We’re very excited. And a little terrified thinking about going through the newborn stage again. But we’ve always known we wanted three kids, and Jason and I are ready to get the brutal sleepless part over with.”

“So, Shel, when does the magazine come out?” Blakeley jumped in.

Shelby welcomed the change of subject even if it twisted the spotlight back to her. “Well, it’s the holiday issue, so it should be out in November. And get this. Carrie Underwood is slated for the cover.”

“Are you kidding me?” Blakeley nearly dropped her mug on the table.

“I love her,” Whitney said. “Too bad you don’t get to meet her.”

“I know. That would make this whole thing even more unbelievable,” Shelby said.

“*Buzz Now* gets the best celebrities.” Elise took an enormous bite of a chocolate muffin.

“Shel, this is all so exciting! How are you feeling about all of it?” Blakeley asked.

“Umm ... a little nervous, not gonna lie,” Shelby replied. “I’ve known about it all since February, so part of me is like, okay, it’s finally happening. But when I think about walking into the grocery store and seeing the actual issue of the magazine, I want to go hide in my car.”

“Well, it’s gonna be awesome. Everything comes so easily for you,” Whitney said.

“Thanks.” Shelby took in a mouthful of latte, its foamy star

dissolving. She had poured so many hours into every dress, in addition to the massive undertakings of creating a brand and generating a following, all while running a business from home with a child who was always there and a husband who never was. Nothing had come easily. The compliment, though surely well intended, made Shelby feel somehow ... discounted. "It's been a long road."

"So, what will the dresses look like?" Whitney asked.

As the server swept in to remove crumb-filled plates, Shelby held up her phone and revealed screenshots of the chosen designs.

The group erupted in a chorus of oohs and aahs.

"Oh my goodness! I want them both," Elise said. "Scarlett would look so cute in the mini one."

"Thanks. That's such a relief. I just submitted these last night, so I'm still waiting to hear back from the design team."

Blakeley scrolled back and forth between the two dress images. "Girl, they're gonna love these."

"I really hope so," Shelby said.

Everything, it felt, was riding on that.



SHELBY'S PHONE finally rang as she stepped out of the coffee shop into the steamy bake of the day. Her fingers trembled as she retrieved the device from her purse pocket and lifted it to her ear. Maybe there *was* such a thing as too much coffee.

"Dennis, Great timing!" The shake in her voice gave her away. Too excited, too eager. "Great to finally talk to you. Busy couple of days around here."

"Tell me about it," Dennis said. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"Yes, now is great." Shelby sat down on a wooden bench not far from her parking spot. Ever since she won the contest, her calls with Dennis were a bright spot, offering industry

insights and clarity. She knew from a few video calls that Dennis was a stylish Asian man in his late forties whose signature look was a black blazer over a white T-shirt. Even having never met him in person, Shelby was certain she could pick him out of a crowd.

“I talked to Felipe. He loved your dresses, and he adores Paisley. He said she was charming and delightful and gorgeous. Just like her mama.”

“Aww, thank you, Dennis.” Shelby blushed even though no one was looking. “He’s such a wonderful photographer. So talented. And so patient with us.”

“He said your pictures are, and I quote, ‘mesmerizing.’ And that’s coming from a self-proclaimed perfectionist.”

“Ha! I don’t know about that. Maybe after the editors erase a few fine lines.”

“The thumbnails look great. He’s sending over some images this afternoon. And Gwen has already turned in the copy from your interview. We’ll have you review the feature before it goes to print.”

“Feature?”

“Yes. We’re doing three full-page spreads.”

“Six pages? That’s ... amazing!” Shelby nearly fell off the bench. Collecting herself, she added, “I can’t believe a story that’s not coming out until November is already written in August.”

“Many of our stories are time sensitive and can’t be touched until closer to print. We were able to push this one along sooner.”

“Well, I guess that’s one thing to feel ahead on. I’ve felt so far behind during this whole process. You got my email last night, right?” Shelby tugged at the tips of her hair, pinching the crunch of yesterday’s hairspray.

“I checked with *Surface Trend*’s design team this morning. Everyone is on board with the cost-reduction strategy.”

“I’m so glad to hear that. I went back and forth for days but



felt like those styles made the most sense for this first run. That is, *first* and hopefully not only run.”

“The potential for higher margins will make the execs at *Surface Trend* happy. Can’t go wrong with that.”

Over the last few months working with Dennis, Shelby caught on that *Buzz Now* had an intricate partnership with *Surface Trend*. They were separate entities, but their devotion to fashion and celebrity news commingled. More than that, it seemed like Dennis and his team were just plain good friends with the creatives at *Surface Trend*.

Shelby let out a long exhale as she considered her progress along this chaotic but exciting journey. The photoshoot went well. The magazine coverage would be a full-length feature. The design slate for her first run of dresses was approved. Soon all her late nights and early mornings spent piecing together dresses for faraway customers would yield something more significant than a side hustle to cover their family’s growing expenses.

“So, how many dresses will there be?”

“We don’t have the exact numbers yet, but we’re ordering around 30,000 of each piece.”

“Okay, wow. That’s a lot. When will they arrive in stores?”

“There’s typically about a six-week turnaround from when our counterparts in Guangzhou get the order to when the designs are shipped to distributors in L.A.”

Guangzhou was yet another place Shelby couldn’t locate on a map. Based on past conversations, she presumed it was in China.

“We’re looking at the middle of November,” Dennis said.

“Same as when the holiday issue comes out?”

“Yep. That’s not a coincidence.”

Shelby let out a reserved laugh. Her conversations with Dennis always made her feel like such an amateur. “That’s great. Can I just say again how lucky I feel to have this opportunity? I would be so lost without y’all.”

“It’s great for us too. You’re like our own American Idol.”

“Well, that’s a fun way to think about it.” Shelby couldn’t

help but smile. She deserved to let the glory of this victory sink in. Winning *Buzz Now's* By Design contest may have expedited all this exposure, but no one could argue with how hard she'd worked to earn the opportunity.

"So, what should I be doing next?"

"*Surface Trend* will have the samples sent to you. After we have your final approval, production begins," he said. Shelby admired his certainty, the kind of knowing that came from decades of experience.

"Sounds good. I can't wait to see them. Anything else for me?" Shelby asked.

"Keep up the push on socials. Retweet us every chance you get, and we'll do the same. Goal should be for *Treasured Pockets* to gain about a thousand followers a month, however you can get them. The more followers you have when the issue hits, the bigger the bump you'll get from all the promotions."

"Got it. Okay, last thing. Our family is sponsoring a child through the Caring Hope Organization. The info just came yesterday. She's a darling little girl. Can we plug Caring Hope in the social media push somehow? They need more sponsors, and I thought our followers might be interested."

"Sure, whatever you think will get people's attention. You're launching a mommy-and-me line, so that sounds pretty genuine."

"Okay, great. I've got my homework cut out for me. Sounds like you do too?"

"It never ends."

As soon as the call clicked off, Shelby glanced at the time. Only 45 minutes until preschool pick-up. She reviewed her to-do list.

The most pressing item was sewing the next pair of dresses for her backlogged online orders. But she needed several consecutive, uninterrupted hours for that.

Instead, she started chipping away at social media posts, sharing the foamy star latte pic to Instagram and Facebook and

prepping the Caring Hope announcement. She added 'Take a picture of Runa's photo' to the list. Everything would be ready to upload Friday afternoon, the prime time of the social media week when her posts collected the most comments and shares.

The only other task she could complete from a bench at a strip mall was to contact the sponsorship director at Caring Hope. She whipped up a couple lines of Paisley's questions and emailed them to the contact on the letter, then crossed it off her list.

With a few remaining minutes before preschool pickup, the sale posters across the parking lot at *Surface Trend* caught her eye. It wouldn't hurt to peruse the aisles and start to visualize where her dresses would go. And peek at the fall boots.

Only a matter of weeks remained until her dream—and all that came with it—became a reality.