

A NOT SO MEET CUTE



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A Not So Meet Cute

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By the same author

So Not Meant To Be

A NOT SO MEET CUTE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Prologue

LOTTIE

“Hey, girl.”

Hmm, I don’t like the cheeriness in her voice.

The smirk on her lips.

The overuse of her toxic, throat-choking perfume.

“Hey, Angela,” I answer with wary trepidation as I take a seat at the table in her office.

With a flip of her bright blonde hair over her shoulder, she clasps her hands together, her body language conveying interest as she leans forward and asks, “How are you?”

I smooth my hands over my bright red pencil skirt and answer, “Doing fine. Thank you.”

“That’s so wonderful to hear.” She leans back and smiles at me, but doesn’t say another word.

Ohh-kay, what the hell is going on?

I glance behind me to the row of suited men, sitting upright in chairs, folders on their laps, staring at our interaction. I’ve known Angela since middle school. We’ve had one of those on-again, off-again friendships, me being the victim of the intermit-

tent camaraderie. I was her main squeeze one day, the next it was Blair—who works in finance, or Lauren—who works over in sales, and then the friendship would come back to me. We're constantly interchangeable. Who's the bestie this week? I'd always wonder, and in some sick, demented way, I'd have a hiccup of excitement when the bestie card landed on me.

Why stick around in such a toxic friendship, you ask?

The answer is threefold.

One—when I first met Angela, I was young. I had no idea what the hell to do during such a vibrant roller coaster ride. I just gripped the handles and held on for dear life, because frankly, hanging with Angela was exciting. Different. Bold, at times.

Two—when she was nice to me, when we were deep into our friendship, I had some of the best times of my life. Growing up in Beverly Hills as the poor girl didn't lend its hand to many adventures, but with the rich friend who looked past your empty wallet and welcomed you into her world—yeah, it was fun. Call me shallow, but I had fun in high school, despite the ups and downs.

Three—I'm weak. I'm confrontation's bitch and avoid it at all costs, therefore—raises hand—here I am, doormat, at your service.

“Angela?” I whisper.

“Hmm?” She smiles at me.

“Can I ask why you called me in here and why the FBI seems to be lined up behind me?”

Angela tilts her head back and lets out a hearty laugh as her hand lands on mine. “Oh, Lottie. God, I'm going to miss your humor.”

“Miss?” I ask, my spine stiffening. “What do you mean, *miss*? Are you going on vacation?”

Please let that be the case. Please let that be the case. I can't afford to lose this job.

“I am.”

Oh, thank God.

“Ken and I are headed to Bora Bora. I have a spray tan scheduled in about ten minutes so we need to get on with this.”

Wait, what?

“Get on with what?” I ask.

Her jovial face morphs into something serious, the type of serious I don’t see very often from Angela. Because, yes, she might be the head of her lifestyle blog, but she’s not the one who does the work—everyone else does. So, she never has to be serious.

She sits taller, her jaw grows tight, and through her thick, fake eyelashes, she says, “Lottie, you’re a true pioneer for Angeloop. Your mastery behind the keyboard has been positively unmatched by anyone in this company, and the humor you bring to this thriving, money-dripping lifestyle blog has made this trip to Bora Bora a reality.”

Did I hear that right? Because of me, she’s able to go on her vacation?

“But, unfortunately, we’re going to have to let you go.”

Hold up . . . what?

Let me go?

As in, no more job for me?

Like a bolt of lightning, three of the men come up behind me, two on either side, flanking me like security. With their heavy-set shoulders blocking me in, one of them drops a folder on the table in front of me and flips it open, revealing a piece of paper. My eyes are too unfocused to even consider reading what it says, but taking a simple guess, I’m thinking it’s a termination paper.

“Sign here.” The man holds a pen out to me.

“Wait, what?” I move the man’s hand away, only for it to bounce back right where it was. “You’re firing me?”

Angela winces. “Lottie, please don’t make this a thing. You

must know how difficult this has been for me.” She snaps her fingers and an assistant magically pops up. Angela rubs her throat and says, “This conversation has truly taken it out of me. Water, please. Room temperature. Lemon and lime, but take them out before you give it to me.” And like that, the assistant is gone. When Angela turns back around, she sees me and clutches her chest. “Oh, you’re still here.”

Uhhh . . .

Yeah.

Blinking a few times, I ask, “Angela, what is going on? You just said I make you a ton of money—”

“Did I? I don’t recall making such a statement. Boys, did I say anything like that?”

They all shake their head.

“See? I didn’t say that.”

I think . . . yup, mmm-hmm, do you smell that? That’s my brain smoking, working overtime, trying to not LOSE IT!

Calmly, and I mean . . . calmly, I ask, “Angela, can you please explain to me why you’re letting me go?”

“Oh.” She laughs. “You’ve always been such a nosey little thing.” The assistant brings Angela her water and then rushes away. Sucking from an unnecessary straw, Angela takes a long sip and then says, “Your one-year anniversary is on Friday.”

“Yes. That’s correct.”

“Well, per your contract, it says that after a year, you’re no longer under restricted pay, but instead receive your actual salary.” She shrugs. “Why pay you more when I can find someone to do your job for less? Simple bottom-line thinking. You understand.”

“No, I don’t.” My voice rises and two large hands land on my shoulder in warning.

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“Angela, this is my life, this isn’t some game you get to play. You told me when you begged me to work for you that this job was going to be life-changing.”

“And hasn’t it been?” She holds her arms out. “Angeloop is life-changing for everyone.” She glances at her watch. “Oh, I have to get naked in five. Spray tans don’t wait.” She twirls her finger at the guys beside me. “Wrap it up, boys.”

Two sets of hands grip me and help me up from my chair.

“You can’t be serious,” I say, still not quite grasping what’s going on. “You’re having security drag me out of your office?”

“Not by my choice,” Angela says, the picture of innocence. “Your hostile attitude is making me use security.”

“Hostile?” I ask. “I’m hostile because you’re firing me for no reason.”

“Oh, honey, I can’t believe you see it that way,” she says in that condescending voice of hers. “This is nothing personal. You know I love you and still plan on your monthly invitation to brunch. This is just business.” She blows me a kiss. “Still my bestie.”

She’s lost her goddamn mind.

I’m pulled toward the door but I dig in my two-seasons-ago Jimmy Choo heels. “Angela, seriously. You can’t be firing me.”

She looks up at me, tilts her head to the side, and then presses her hand to her heart. “Ahh, look at you, fighting for your job. God, you’ve always been scrappy.” She blows me another kiss, waves, and calls out, “I’ll call you. You can tell me about your horrible boss later. Oh . . . and don’t forget to RSVP to our high school reunion. Two months away. We need a head count.”

And just like that, defeat whips through me, my heels let up in total shock, my body goes limp, and I’m dragged by my underarms through the offices of Angeloop, the most idiotic and absurd lifestyle blog on the Internet, a place where I didn’t want to work in the first place.

Peers watch me.

Security doesn’t skip a beat as they drag me all the way through the tall, glass front door.

And before I can take my next breath, I’m staring at the

obscenely large Angeloop sign outside of the office, box of my office things in hand.

How the hell did this all happen?

Chapter One

HUXLEY

“I’m going to fucking murder someone,” I shout as I throw my suit jacket across my office and slam my door.

“Seems as though the meeting went well,” JP says from where he’s leaning against the expansive wall of windows in my office.

“Seems as though it went incredibly well,” Breaker offers from where he’s lying across my leather couch.

Ignoring my brothers’ sarcasm, I grip my hair and turn toward the view of Los Angeles. It’s a clear day today, fresh rain from the night before eliminating some of the smog in the air. Palm trees reach high to the sky, lining the roads, but look small compared to where my office sits above the rest.

“Care to gab about it?” JP asks while taking a seat in a chair.

I turn toward them, my brothers, the two idiots who have been by my side through thick and thin. Who have ridden the ups and downs of our lives. Who have dropped everything to join me in this crazy idea of taking over the real estate market in

Los Angeles with the money Dad left us when he passed. We've built this empire together.

But the smarmy looks on their faces makes me want to punt their goddamn dicks out of my office.

"Does it look like I want to *gab* about it?"

"No." Breaker smirks. "But fuck do we want to hear all about it."

Of course they do.

Because they were the ones who said I shouldn't meet with Dave Toney.

They were the ones who said it was going to be a waste of my time.

They were the ones who laughed when I said I had a meeting with him today.

And they were the ones who sarcastically said good luck as I walked out the door.

But I wanted to prove them wrong.

I wanted to show them that I could convince Dave Toney that he needed to work with Cane Enterprises.

Spoiler alert—I did not convince him.

Capitulating to my brothers' stares, I take a seat as well and let out a long sigh. "Fuck," I mutter.

"Let me guess, he didn't fall for your charm?" Breaker asks. "But you're so personable."

"That shit shouldn't matter." I slam my finger into the armrest of my plush leather chair. "This is business, not some goddamn parade of nurturing friendships and coddling one another."

"I think he missed something in business school," JP says to Breaker. "Because wasn't fostering business relationships an entire course?" His sarcasm is grating on my nerves.

"I believe it was," Breaker says.

"I went in there and kissed his ass—what more does he want?"

"Did you wear lipstick? Not sure his girlfriend would appre-

ciate finding another pair of lips on her man's ass cheeks." Breaker smirks.

"I hate you. I really fucking hate you."

Breaker lets out a bark of a laugh while JP says, "Hate to say it, but . . . we told you so, bro. Dave Toney doesn't work with just anyone. He's a different breed in this city. Many have tried to break into the vast amount of real estate he owns; many have failed. Why did you think you'd be any different?"

"Because we're Cane Enterprises," I shout. "Everyone wants to fucking work with us. Because we have the largest real estate portfolio in Los Angeles. Because we can turn a broken-down building into a million-dollar business in a year. We know what the fuck we're doing, and Dave Toney, although successful, has some dead pieces of land on his hands that's hurting his business. He knows it, I fucking know it, and I want to take those pieces of land off his hands."

JP grips his chin and asks, "What precisely did you say to him? I hope not that? Because, although your little speech made my nipples hard, I doubt he'd appreciate the tone."

I roll my eyes. "I said something along those lines."

"You realize Dave Toney is a prideful man, right?" Breaker asks. "If you insult him, he's not going to want to work with you."

"I didn't insult him," I shout. "I was trying to get on an even playing field, you know, let him see that I'm a pretty normal guy."

Both of my brothers scoff.

"I am a normal guy."

JP and Breaker exchange glances and then both lean forward, and I know what's coming: a classic come-to-Jesus moment. They like to perform them on me from time to time.

"You know we love you, right?" Breaker asks. And so it begins.

"We're here for you, whenever you need us," JP adds.

I drag my hand over my face. "Just get the fuck on with it."

“You’re not normal. You’re anything but normal. None of us are. We live in Beverly Hills, are constantly invited to premieres and celebrity gatherings, and have been in the headlines on Page Six many times. There’s nothing normal about us. Dave Toney, now . . . he’s normal.”

“How the fuck so?” I ask. “Because he doesn’t get invited to celebrity after-parties?”

Breaker shakes his head. “No, because he’s down-to-earth. Approachable. You could easily grab a beer with him in a bar and not feel the least bit intimidated. You’re the exact opposite. You’re flashy.”

“I’m not flashy.”

JP nods at my watch. “Nice Movado—is it new?”

I glance down at it. “Got it last week—” I raise my eyes to meet my brothers’ knowing looks. “Am I not allowed to spend my hard-earned money?”

“You are,” JP says. “The way you live your life is completely acceptable. The house, the car . . . the watch, all earned and rightfully so, but if you want to connect with Dave Toney, then you’re going to have to get on a different level. And that doesn’t mean dressing down, because he’ll see right through that. He already knows you’re a flashy guy. But he needs to see you in a different light.”

“Ooo, I like that,” Breaker says. “A different light. That’s what he needs.” He taps his chin. “But what would that light be?”

Irritated, I get up from my chair and grab my suit jacket from where I tossed it. “While you two morons think about it, I’m going to grab lunch.”

“If only Toney could see this moment, where Huxley Cane doesn’t ask his assistant to grab him lunch but, like a mere peasant, walks the streets of Los Angeles to fetch his own food,” JP says.

I slip on my jacket, despite the heat outside. Ignoring them, I cross toward my door.

“Could you grab us something?” Breaker calls out.

Sighing, I call back, “Text me what you want from the deli.”

“Pickles. All the goddamn pickles,” JP yells as I make my way down the office hallway to the elevator. Luckily, the doors slide open for me, so I step in, press the lobby button, and lean against the wall, hands stuffed in my pants pockets.

Get on a different level. I don’t even know what that means. And I know I’m a businessman who’s made deals with people I’ve gotten along with, but I’ve also made deals with people I absolutely despise. The difference between me and Dave Toney—I don’t give a fuck who takes my money or who I sell to. Business is business, and if it’s a good deal, I’m going to take it.

I offered Dave a fucking good-as-shit deal today, better than what he deserves, if I’m honest. And instead of shaking my hand and accepting it, he sat back in his office chair, scratched the side of his cheek, and said, “I don’t know. I’m going to have to sit on this.”

Sit on it.

Sit on my goddamn deal.

No one sits on my deals; they take them and thank Jesus Christ Himself for doing business with Cane Enterprises.

I push through the elevator doors when they part, weave my way through the busy lobby, and then head out of the office building toward the hole-in-the-wall deli that’s just down the road. Two blocks. I don’t usually send my assistant, Karla, to grab me food, because it makes me feel like an asshole—despite what people might think of me—and I also enjoy the second to get out and breathe some fresh air. *Well, it’s LA, so fresh air is an overstatement.* But it gives me a second to reset before I get back behind my desk, where I control our billion-dollar operation with my keyboard.

My phone beeps in my pocket and I don’t bother looking at it because I know it’s JP and Breaker’s orders. I don’t even know why I told them to text me, because they get the same thing every time. Same as me. Philly cheesesteak with extra mush-

rooms. And, of course, pickles. It's our go-to sandwich. Something that we don't eat often, but when we do head to the deli, it's our usual.

The sidewalk is more crowded than normal. Summer has hit Los Angeles, meaning tourists are sweeping in, celebrity bus tours will be at their max, and driving on the 101 is going to be a hellish nightmare. Lucky for me, I only live thirty minutes from the office.

As I approach the deli, a familiar black SUV pulls up in front of it. When the door opens, I catch sight of Dave Toney—speak of the devil—stepping out of the vehicle. What are the odds?

Whatever they are, they look like they're in my favor. Nothing like a good follow-up to try to secure the deal. Maybe JP was right, Dave Toney might change his mind when he sees me picking up lunch. That's definitely *on a different level*.

I button my suit jacket and pick up my pace. Never miss an opportunity in business. Never. As I grow closer, I'm dangerously caught off guard when I see a feminine hand pop out of the vehicle behind Dave. I slow down and zero in on the hand . . . the small hand with a VERY big engagement ring on it.

Holy shit, Dave is engaged?

I'm assuming he is, since he's holding the woman's hand.

But engaged . . . hell, how did I miss that?

Usually I'm aware of such—

My thoughts pause and I blink a few times as the fiancée turns, giving me a profile view.

Holy . . . fuck.

Looks like the engagement isn't the biggest surprise of the day.

Thanks to her tight-fitting dress and slender frame, there's no doubt in my mind that Dave Toney's fiancée is pregnant.

Dave Toney, engaged with a baby on the way. How . . . when?

He waves to the driver, shuts the door, and then glances behind him, just enough for us to make eye contact. His eyebrows lift in surprise and then he turns all the way around and waves to me. “Cane, didn’t expect to see you on the streets.”

Yeah, neither of us expected to see each other, but I’m not going to let the shock of this new development rattle me.

Showtime.

I plaster on a smile.

“Just enjoying the sultry California sun while on my way to get lunch for me and my brothers.” I walk up to him and extend my hand. He gives it a brief shake. “This deli is our favorite.”

“Is that right?” Dave asks in surprise. “It’s Ellie’s too. I’ve never been, but she was telling me they have the best pickles.”

“My brothers are a sucker for the pickles as well.” I hold my hand out to his fiancée. “You must be Ellie.”

“Shit, that’s rude of me,” Dave says with an awkward laugh. “Yes, this is Ellie. Ellie, this is Huxley Cane.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Ellie says in a very sweet southern voice. One that I’ve heard before.

I shake her hand and then let go, only to say, “Let me guess, you’re from Georgia?”

Her smile brightens. “I am. You could tell?”

Yup, this bodes well for me.

“My grandma is a self-proclaimed Georgia Peach. I spent many brutal, humidity-filled summers out on her screened-in porch, rocking on chairs with her as she filled me in on the latest town gossip.”

“Really? Whereabout?”

“Peachtree City.”

Her eyes widen in delight. She presses her hand to her chest. “I grew up in Fayetteville, just east of Peachtree. Wow, what a small world.”

Yes. Yes, indeed. Especially since my grandma actually resides in San Diego, and I’ve never been to Georgia, actually, but they don’t need to know that. They also don’t need to know

I recognize her accent because I dated a girl in college from Peachtree City. All semantics.

Delighted with the small connection I'm making in Dave's world, I turn toward him, only to be met by a very territorial-looking man. Uh-oh. Jaw clenched, brows narrowed, his eyes find no humor in our small . . . very small world.

Dude is practically marking his territory with that angry snarl. I wouldn't be surprised if he started circling Ellie and peeing all around her.

Given what he knows about me, flashy, a flirt, Mr. Page Six—not recently, thank God—he must think I'm a threat. Which, I'm not. I mean, yeah, Ellie is a petite bundle of blonde. Pretty, with blue eyes, but she's also pregnant—total nightmare—and she's engaged, therefore, completely off the market.

But given what my brothers said, Dave probably doesn't see it that way when it comes to me.

Which means, I need to salvage this and fast.

But how . . .

How can I possibly make it—

Light bulb

Did you see that brilliant flash of light? Yeah, an idea has emerged. It might not be smart. It's definitely not the most intelligent thing I've ever thought of, but Dave seems to be growing more and more tense by the second, so . . .

Here goes nothing.

Please don't come back to bite me in the ass—famous last words.

"Fayetteville, huh?" I wet my lips. Here goes. "Wow, crazy. I think my fiancée's parents are from Palmetto. Isn't that just north?"

Yeah, fiancée. Told you it wasn't intelligent, but it's the best I've got.

"Yes, Palmetto is just north of it," Ellie says with such joy, while Dave moves his hand around her waist in a protective embrace.

"Fiancée?" he asks after clearing his throat. "You're

engaged, Cane?" There's genuine interest in his eyes and the tension that was collecting in his shoulders is slowly easing.

"Yup."

"Huh, I'm surprised."

I can't read him. Does he believe me? Is he testing me? Am I making this exponentially worse? I hope to fuck not. I don't want to lose this deal.

I refuse to let it slip through my fingers, not when I'm so close. To have those properties would be exponentially beneficial to our portfolio, especially with what we have planned for them. And to snag a deal with the illusive Dave Toney would make me that much more victorious. My business mind takes over, leaving my common sense to the wind.

So, before I can change my mind on what's about to come out of my mouth, I swallow hard and say, "Yup, engaged and . . . expecting."

The minute the lie leaves my lips, a gross feeling takes over, because fuck, I know how hard some women try to get pregnant, and to lie about something like that . . . hell, it doesn't feel right. But like I said, common sense is nowhere to be found at this moment, it's pure idiotic instinct.

"Really?" Ellie cheers. "Oh my gosh." She rubs her belly. "So are we. Dave, isn't that exciting?"

"That really is." Dave's face morphs from unsure, protective boyfriend to . . . to a look I haven't seen on him before. Compassion.

Understanding.

Dare I say—camaraderie?

I stick my hands in my suit pants pockets to keep them from fidgeting as I tell the biggest goddamn lie of my life.

"Yeah, my grandma introduced me to her back in Peachtree. It was one of those love-at-first-sight meet-cutes."

Ellie clasps her hands together. "Oh, I love meet-cutes."

I shrug. "Yeah, and we hit it off quickly." I attempt to gaze off toward the sky as I think about my imaginary pregnant

fiancée and how much I *gulp* love her. “We did things a little backwards, with getting pregnant first, but I guess we’ve never done anything right, according to society’s timelines.”

“Same,” Dave says, and I see it, right there in his eyes. A new appreciation for me. This is what the boys were talking about. This was what Dave needed, to see me as a “human.”

This is me, meeting Dave on a new level. Connecting on a new level. In this moment, he doesn’t see me as the flashy, take-no-prisoners businessman, but rather, someone he can ask out for a beer and talk through his worries about becoming a father.

This might very well be exactly the kind of in I needed. A little chitchat, an acute white lie that isn’t going to hurt anyone. He doesn’t have to actually meet this imaginary girl. He doesn’t even need to know much about her. Just the idea of her makes me that much more appealing.

Huh, maybe this wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

Maybe this was actually pure brilliancy at its finest.

Mark my words—by this time tomorrow, he’ll be calling me up, no longer willing to sit on my offer, but more likely willing to take it.

Huxley Cane, you’re an absolute genius.

“Dave, wouldn’t it be absolutely divine to have Huxley and his fiancée over for dinner?”

Ehhh, what now?

Dinner?

Ellie clasps her hands together and continues, “It would be so lovely to talk with people in our same situation.” Leaning forward, Ellie says, “Family has been less than thrilled about us waiting to get married until after the baby is born. My parents are quite traditional.”

Sweat breaks out on my upper lip as I try to keep my face neutral.

A dinner date.

With my “fiancée.”

Oh . . . fuck.

Abort, Cane. ABORT!

“That would be wonderful,” Dave says with a jovial smile.

FUCK!

“How does Saturday night work?” he continues.

Saturday night?

Double fuck!

That’s four days from now.

Four fucking days to not only find a fiancée, but a pregnant fiancée.

Huxley Cane, you’re no genius, you’re an absolute moron.

“Oh, give him a second to talk about it with his girl,” Ellie says. I’d say thank God for Ellie, but the anxiety-ridden dinner date was her idea. “Why don’t you get back to Dave and then let me know if it’s a go. I love cooking. I could make us a real southern meal if you’d like.”

My mind is already formulating excuses as to why my fiancée and I won’t be able to make Saturday work.

“And maybe we can talk about the deal some more,” Dave says with a genuine smile.

Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Can’t say no, now. Not at the risk of securing the deal.

Christ.

Despite the desert that is my mouth, I swallow hard and nod. “Yup.” My voice cracks. “Saturday sounds great.”

“Wonderful.” Ellie claps her hands. “Oh, I can’t wait. I’m going to make my best peach cobbler and collard greens. Dave will exchange information with you.”

“Perfect,” I say with a shaky smile. What the hell am I getting myself into?

“Oh, babe, we’re going to be late. Let’s stop by the deli after our class—that okay?” Dave asks.

“As long as I can get double the pickles,” Ellie says while pressing a kiss to Dave’s lips.

The PDA makes my stomach roll. It’s not that I find them

repulsive, but it's a stark reminder of the hole I just dug for myself.

"Okay, we're off to Lamaze class. Talk soon," Dave says with a wave.

I give them a wave in return, hoping my hand doesn't look shaky, and without going into the deli, I turn around and head back to the office, my mind swirling with how to get out of this fuck-up.

Huxley Cane, you're a complete and utter moron.

Chapter Two

LOTTIE

Hands on the steering wheel, I stare out at my childhood home and also current place of residence, a small bungalow that has been in the family for years. I mean . . . years. Grandma Pru bought it back in the fifties and passed it on to my mom, who raised me and my sister, Kelsey, all by herself.

The white stucco has faded over the years and looks more cream than anything, and the red clay tile roof needs more repairs than what Mom can afford despite her live-in boyfriend of thirteen years, Jeff, wanting to replace it for her.

Speaking of Jeff, he's out in the front yard in his oversized jean shorts and classic white undershirt, pushing his mower. Jeff always has an unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth, because even though he doesn't smoke it, ever, he finds comfort in knowing that he could if he wanted. Don't ask me about the psychology behind it; he's great to my mom and he's been a wonderful sounding board over the past ten years for me and

my sister as well. So, if a cigarette dangles from his mouth, so be it. Could be worse.

But Jeff being in the front yard creates a flaw in my ability to bring my box of office things into my room without questions. And I don't want any questions from Jeff or my mom. They can't find out about Angela firing me. That would be a debilitating disaster.

No, they can NEVER find out.

Why?

Well, because they were the ones who begged and pleaded for me to find another job that wouldn't include me working for someone with whom I've shared a toxic relationship for years.

But you know how it goes. Parents know nothing, we know everything, and then we have to eat our freaking words later on when we realize . . . should've listened to said parents.

Ughhh.

Not wanting Jeff to become suspicious, I get out of my dilapidated VW Bug, leaving the box in the back, strap my purse over my shoulder, and plaster on a beautiful smile that I know will bring joy to Jeff's day.

"Hey, Lottie Bug," he says, using the nickname Mom gave me years ago.

"Hey, Jeff." I wave as he turns off the mower and adjusts his sunglasses on the bridge of his nose. "Yard is looking great."

"Thank you. I think the beautification committee will have to notice us this year."

Oh, Jeff, always so hopeful.

You see, we live on the border, and I mean, one street over, from The Flats in Beverly Hills. And every summer, there's a committee that walks from house to house, picking out the best yards in the neighborhood and awarding them prizes. We've always walked through The Flats, taking in the fabulously manicured lawns curated by professional landscapers, not the actual owners. It's a bloodbath the week before the judges take their walk, including here at our house, because the last house on the

route is across the street, and in order to see the house, you see ours, just past the bushes, and Jeff is bound and determined to be noticed.

“You’ll have to get Mom to fix the roof if you want any shot at it.”

There’s a fat chance in hell that our yard would ever be noticed. The beautification committee is made up of a bunch of rich snobs who would never look across the street. But it’s nice to give Jeff hope, especially since he works so hard.

His shoulders slump in defeat. “I told her that. I need the roof to be pristine. Those broken shingles will never get the win. I think I’m going to call the boys over one of these days and fix it while she’s at work. Act first, ask for forgiveness later.”

“Very smart approach.”

“How was work?”

I pause in my pursuit of the front door. Keeping my smile in full force, I say, “Great. Just a typical day.” Yup, a typical day of meandering around the streets of Los Angeles, killing time before I could return home, knowing full well my mom and Jeff are aware of my schedule and if I arrived home any earlier than normal, they’d be suspicious. And luckily for me, during my meandering, I was told to go buy some pantyhose by an endearing homeless man who scowled at my bare legs. I bought some consolation mint ice cream, which fell victim to the summer California sun and ended up dripping down the front of my white blouse, and, to top it off, I tripped over a street grate and tore a heel off my two-seasons-ago Jimmy Choo shoes, which is why I’m walking barefoot into the house.

It’s been one of those days.

“Promotion is in a week, right?” Jeff asks. “Are you excited? You can finally find a place of your own.”

Insert the deep sigh here.

I give him a thumbs up. “Super pumped.”

Without another word, I open the door to the house and

immediately smell Mom's homemade fish sticks. Lord Jesus, not again.

This girl can't catch a break.

"Jeff, dinner is almost ready."

"It's me, Mom," I say, heading to my room, but before I can get too far down the hallway, Mom peeks her head around the doorway to the kitchen.

"Lottie Bug, just in time for dinner."

I wave my hand at her. "Not really hungry." I grip my stomach. "Late lunch. I might have an apple later."

"Don't be ridiculous. Go wash your hands"—yes, she still makes me wash my hands before a meal—"and freshen up. I'll have a place setting waiting for you."

Sighing, I say, "Thanks, Mom." I reach my room, shut the door, and then slide down against it until my butt hits the floor. "God, I need booze." I pull my phone out of my purse and text my sister.

Lottie: *Booze needed. Day drinking when Mom and Jeff leave tomorrow. You in?*

Kelsey, my Irish twin as Mom likes to call her, is only twelve months younger than me, and is an up-and-coming organizer—yeah, I was confused when she told me that little nugget of information as well. Basically, she's started her own organizing business where she goes to different people's houses to show them how to organize their pantries and closets to be more functional—so, how to not be pack rats. I asked her how she differs from everyone else jumping on *The Home Edit* trend, and her answer blew me away—because it was actually well-thought-out. She focuses on organizing sustainably. Instead of encouraging all of her clients to use clear acrylic bins, she works with a company that offers sustainably sourced organizational products, as well as products made from fully recycled materials. Better for the environment and better for your home. See? Blown away. Apparently, she's one celebrity away from being discovered. I believe her. She makes just enough right now to

grow her business and to afford a small studio apartment in West Hollywood.

My phone beeps with a text.

Kelsey: *Shouldn't you be at work tomorrow?*

I stand from my spot on the floor and untuck my shirt before texting her back.

Lottie: *I should . . .*

I set my phone down and undress, tossing my clothes in my hamper, not even bothering with the stain. The damage has been done. I put on a pair of shorts and a tank top and tie my long brown hair up in a knot.

Kelsey: *Don't tell me that ho fired you.*

Lottie: *Consider me unemployed.*

Kelsey: *I FREAKING told you this was going to happen. She's such a . . . God, Lottie, if you ever talk to her again, I'm going to disown you. Do you hear me?*

Lottie: *Trust me, Angela is dead to me now, despite what SHE might think.*

Kelsey: *Let me guess, the narcissist still thinks you're going to be friends.*

Lottie: *Yup. Anyway, I'm not telling Mom and Jeff, not until I can figure something out. They still think I'm moving out next week when I get my "promotion"—aka, downgraded to unemployed.*

Kelsey: *Your secret is safe with me. I'll be over around nine with tequila and margarita fixings.*

Lottie: *Can you come with the idea notebook?*

Kelsey: *Already packing it. I got you, sis.*

Lottie: *I love you.*

Kelsey: *Love you. And don't worry. We'll figure this out.*

Feeling relieved, I set my phone down on the dresser, because if Mom sees a phone anywhere near the dinner table, she snatches it away and tosses it in the toilet. I've fallen victim to such thievery once and only once. After drying your toilet-water phone in rice overnight, you quickly learn to never do that again.

I head down the hallway and to the dining room, where I catch Jeff press a chaste kiss to my mom's cheek. He whispers "thank you" to her before taking a seat. He's changed his clothes as well, hands free from any landscaping dirt. I know he'll be right back outside after this, but I appreciate his understanding for my mom's rules at the table.

"Smells good, Mom," I lie as I take a seat. Jeff loves her homemade fish sticks. I loathe them. But I eat them because I was taught at a very early age, you eat what's on your plate and you don't complain about it. Be happy you have food at all.

"Thank you. I made some of your favorite cobbler for dessert."

Now that's something I can choke down fish sticks for.

"You're amazing. Thank you."

Mom takes a seat, and then as a cute family of three, we link hands, Mom leads us in a prayer, and then we dig in. Thankfully, Mom gave me smaller portions. I can easily take this down for the promise of some fresh cobbler.

"How was work, sweetie?" Mom asks while putting a dollop of tartar sauce on her plate. She passes the sauce to Jeff, who takes a scoop as well, and then to me. I load up my plate with the pickle-ridden dipping sauce because it's the only way I can chew through the sticks of fish.

"It was great," I answer, the lie feeling raw on my tongue.

Three things I learned while growing up with a strong, independent woman—you don't lie, you don't cheat, and you always work for what you want. Well, I just lied, but I can't possibly stomach telling the truth. Not when Mom and Jeff told me—just like Kelsey—what a bad idea it was to take a job from Angela. Hot and cold Angela. Narcissistic and erratic Angela. They told me to wait out the job market, that something would come along for a graduate from UC Irvine with a master's in business.

Something would come.

Anything would come.

Nothing came.

Absolutely zero opportunities.

I became desperate.

Student loans were knocking at my door, responsibility was flooding around my feet.

I needed a job.

Angela was my only option. She offered me temporary placement within the company, a low-ball salary that forced me to live with my mom so I could maintain living in Southern California, and a promise that if I performed my job well, that after a year, my salary would triple—yes, triple, that’s how much of a pay cut I took—and she’d give me a permanent position. Mom and Jeff said I’d be a fool to take it. That she’d screw me over somehow.

But I had no other options. Absolutely none. So, I had no choice, in my mind. I took it.

And I slayed.

Over the next few months, I saw extreme growth of the lifestyle blog. Celebrities started backing it, and before I knew it, Angeloop had become a household name. I was a part of that. I threw a “told you so” right at Mom and Jeff after our first featured spot on the *Today Show*. I said I had to put the time in, and good things would happen.

Can you hear the sarcastic laughter now?

Not only do I have no money, but now I have no job, and in a week—unless I want to tell Mom and Jeff the truth—nowhere to live.

As Rachel Green would say, isn’t that just kick-you-in-the-crotch, spit-on-your-neck fantastic?

“Did you sign a lease yet? I know you found a place over in West Hollywood near your sister you liked.”

That I did, but thank God for my fear of commitment, because I didn’t sign the lease. That would’ve just added to this nightmare.

“I didn’t quite like that place; the vibe wasn’t there.”

Jeff laughs. “Maura, do you remember being twenty-five, searching for a place to live based off a vibe?” He playfully clutches his chest. “The memories.”

My mom chuckles and smooths her hand over his back. “I remember I found a one-room square over in Koreatown where the toilet was next to my bed and I’d use it as a nightstand. It was in those nightstand-toilet-seat moments that I thought, *wow, the vibe here is real . . .*” Mom looks at me. “Real poor, that is.”

Chuckling, Jeff nods. “Toilet nightstand, got me beat there. I just had a neighbor with a broom that wrecked my vibe all the time.”

I look between the two of them. “You know I’m borderline a Gen Z’er; the sarcasm can cut deep at times.”

They both laugh and then Mom says, “You’re a soft millennial. That’s okay, honey. You can stay with Mommy and Step-daddy for as long as you want. We love having no privacy.” She smirks and I know she’s teasing. She’d never kick me out of the house, but I also know they’ve been looking forward to my departure for a while.

“If you like having no privacy, then we might as well have a slumber party tonight. We can all cuddle up in your queen-size bed.”

Jeff holds up his hand. “Please, spare me.”

Poor Jeff, such a good guy, and I can see that he does want to have some privacy with my mom. He’s been with us since I was fifteen. I think he’s ready to have some serious alone time with my mom. And just like that, the guilt builds. Does it suck that Angela fucked me over? Of course, but what sucks even more is if I don’t figure this out, I’m going to be fucking Jeff and my mom out of the freedom they’ve been looking forward to.

“We really want to walk around naked,” Mom says out of the blue. When I give her a horrified look, she says, “Whenever you’re hanging out with your sister, that’s what we do. We turn on some Harry Connick Jr., strip down, and then dance naked in the living room.”

“Oh my God, why are you telling me this?” I set my fork down, the possibility of eating dwindling. Yes, Jeff and my mom are attractive people; Jeff lifts weights in the garage and Mom keeps up with her physique, but good Christ! Not something you want to envision.

“Just so you know what we’re looking forward to.” She winks and then dips a fish stick in tartar sauce casually.

“I could’ve done without knowing.” I lean back in my chair and cross my arms over my chest.

Mom waves her fork at my plate. “Eat up, sweetie. Cobbler is waiting for you.”

How could I forget?



FROM BEHIND A BUSH, I peek through the branches and watch as Jeff pulls my mom in for a kiss, gives her ass a squeeze—ugh, old people—and then they both get in their cars and head to work. I don’t pop out of the bushes right away, instead, I wait another two minutes just to make sure they didn’t forget anything. With my luck, they’d return home just as I was busting open a bag of chips.

When I feel the coast is clear, I move around the bush, attempting to not snag my black pencil skirt on a branch—can’t afford to lose any good interview clothes—and I trudge across the street in my generic black heels. Thank God for seven-foot shrubs, because I don’t think they noticed a thing. I tiptoe up the sidewalk to the house, unlock the door, slip inside, and then let out a deep breath.

Mission accomplished. *Although, now I’m wondering why I didn’t just drive to Kelsey’s place rather than worry about all this subterfuge.*

The hum of the fridge fills the rather quiet house. Everything is in order, not a throw pillow out of place, not a single dish in the sink. Mom probably wants this. Peace. The ability to enjoy the home she’s worked so hard to keep.

Not that I'm loud or obnoxious or a bad "roommate," but there's something to having a house to yourself, being able to do what you want without the repercussions of someone walking in on you. That's what Mom and Jeff want desperately.

I know this because they mention it almost every day.

I need to find a job, and quick.

Not only because I want to be able to give my mom peace with Jeff, but because this girl doesn't have much in the bank account and student loans won't pay themselves. Not to mention my high school reunion is coming up and wouldn't it just be a freaking cactus to the armpit if I show up, unemployed, up to my eyeballs in student loans, wearing a dress from five years ago, and still living with my mom?

And it's not as if I can't show up, because if I don't show up, Angela will know why, and I can't give her the satisfaction of knowing I relied on her.

No, I need to figure this out.

I head back to my bedroom and change out of my work outfit and into a pair of shorts and a ratty Taylor Swift shirt that I've had for over a decade.

As I make it back into the living room, my phone beeps with a text.

Kelsey: *All clear?*

Lottie: *Clear.*

A few minutes later, Kelsey comes busting through the door with tequila and margarita fixings in hand. "The items to forget all your troubles are here."

I walk up to her, take the tequila, and then give her a hug. "Thank you for coming over."

"What are sisters for? Plus, I have a light day today. Just fielding some emails. I brought my computer with me so I can get some work done as well."

"While drinking?" I ask, brow raised. "Doesn't seem like a smart idea."

"We're going to take it slow." She gives me a pointed look.

“Alcohol can ease the pain, but it’s not going to fix anything. Unless . . . have you decided to tell Mom and Jeff? Because if that’s the case, I’ll get shit-faced with you right now. You say the word, and our heads will be battling for prime-time toilet space in two hours.”

I shake my head. “No, I’m not telling Mom and Jeff.” Margarita fixings in hand, we both walk to the kitchen, where we set everything on the counter. “I don’t think I have it in me to tell them. You should’ve seen their faces last night when they were talking about having the house to themselves and having the opportunity to finally dance around naked.”

“Ew.” Kelsey’s face scrunches up.

“Tell me about it. It was a visual I didn’t need while trying to choke down Mom’s fish sticks.” I grab two glasses and a shaker from the cabinet. Kelsey goes to the freezer for a tray of ice cubes—Mom doesn’t believe her fridge needs to be updated, just like the roof. “But they were excited about me leaving, and to tell them that there’s no end in sight at this moment, it makes me want to drink this entire bottle of tequila.” I press my hand to my face. “I’m such a failure, Kelsey.”

She slips in behind me and gives me a hug. I wrap my arms around hers and hold her tight, letting myself take advantage of the sisterly hug.

“You’re not a failure,” Kelsey says. “You’ve just hit a bump in the road.”

“You all told me she was going to screw me over at some point, and maybe I thought that in the beginning, but after finding a groove with work and proving my worth at the company, I thought I could trust her. I truly thought I’d found my place.” I shake my head. “I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot.” She pats my hands before releasing me. “But maybe you make some bad decisions at times.”

“I make so many bad decisions. Remember that time you told me not to ask out Tyler Dretch because you said he liked you, but I tried to prove you wrong and asked him out anyway?

He told me he wanted to date the younger version of myself. That was in high school. HIGH SCHOOL, Kelsey.”

She chuckles. “I know. I told you not to.”

“And then when I bought those peach-colored seersuckers? I convinced you they were the newest fashion but it just hadn’t hit the market yet, and I wore them to the beach only for them to tear in the crotch seam when I bent over? My ass crack never cinched up so tight and so fast in my life.”

“I can still see the horrified look on your face as you felt the first ocean breeze cross your lady bits. Not wearing underwear, another bad decision.”

“You see? I don’t even know what a good decision is.”

“That’s not true. Those are just small things. You’ve made some good decisions.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask, pouring the margarita ingredients into the shaker. “Please, regale me with my amazing decisions.”

Kelsey leans against the counter and taps her chin. “Uh . . . you . . . well, there was the time . . . hmm, oh, what about . . . eh, maybe not that . . .”

“Please, keep them coming,” I say dryly. “You’re showering me with all my good decisions. I can barely breathe from all the flattery.”

“Just give me a second, sheesh—oh, you got your master’s in business. That was a great idea.”

“Was it?” I ask her. “Because I’ve spent the last year using my measly paycheck to pay off my hefty student loans. And that master’s in business did absolutely nothing for me other than land me a job with Angela, which . . . we know how that ended.”

“Oh, I forgot about the student loans. Are they bad?” Kelsey’s face scrunches up.

I shake the mixer and say, “I honestly can’t even look, I’m too scared. I have them on autopay right now.”

“How much do you have in the bank?”

I wince.

It's bad.

And I knew she was going to ask the question, but it doesn't make it any easier.

I pour the margaritas into their respective glasses. "I don't know. Once again, too scared to look."

Kelsey takes a deep breath, picks up her drink, and says, "Well, if we're going to figure out what you're going to do, then we're going to have to rip the bandage off and take a look at what we're working with. We need to know your level of desperation."

She pulls her computer from her bag and nods toward the dining room table.

"It's time," she says.

Crap . . . I'm afraid she's right. It is time.

I stand there, lift the glass to my lips, and take a very large sip. I'm going to need it.



WE BOTH STARE BLANKLY at the wall in front of us.

Not a word.

Not a movement.

Just . . . staring.

The air conditioner will kick on every few minutes, blowing cool air over my heated body. But that's it. That's the only movement in the house, a slight wisp of my hair floating across my grief-stricken and incredibly shocked face.

I've heard of rock bottom before. I've read about it. I've even seen it on some people.

I thought I was at rock bottom yesterday.

But I was wrong.

This . . . this right here is rock bottom.

Finally, after at least five minutes of silence, Kelsey says, "So, I'd say our level of desperation is DEFCON 1."

I tip back my drink and finish the contents. “Yup,” I say simply.

Over thirty thousand dollars in debt, less than three thousand dollars to my name.

Not enough for a deposit and first month’s rent for my own place.

Not enough to keep paying off my loans.

Not enough to consider some money to fall back on.

Nope.

DEFCON 1 is precisely what we’re dealing with—nuclear war.

“You really weren’t making much, were you?” Kelsey asks.

“No, I wasn’t.” I press my hand against my forehead, the severity of my situation really starting to sink in. “I hate to admit it, but I think I have to start stripping.”

“What?” Kelsey asks.

“Yup, stripping. I’ve seen how much those girls make. They’re raking in the dough.” I lift the collar of my shirt and peer down at my body. “I have nice boobs, maybe smaller than what some might enjoy, but guys like that, right? They’re perky enough. And I can . . . sway to the music.”

“Strip clubs aren’t looking for people to sway to Taylor Swift music, they want you gyrating. Do you know how to gyrate?”

“You’re never too old to learn something new. Gyrating is just thrusting your pelvis, right? I say we look up some strip clubs and just, you know, scope out the competition. See what’s getting the penises up around Hollywood these days.”

“I’m going to tell you right now, it’s not the kind of two-step, side-to-side dancing you do. Also, Mom would murder you. And you realize, you’d have to dance in a thong, and your boobs would be out for everyone to see.”

I roll my eyes. “I know what strippers do. I’m not an idiot.” I tap my chin. “Do you think if I get my nipple pierced, that would help my chances?”

Kelsey actually gives it some thought. “Maybe—wait, no.” She shakes her head. “You’re not going to be a stripper. There has to be a better idea than exposing men to your bare-breasted two-step.” She stands and holds her hand out to me. She helps me stand as well and then says, “Let’s go for a walk. Fresh air will clear our heads. Booze is always a good idea to forget, but we can’t forget, because we’re in DEFCON 1 mode right now. We need ideas, not sorrows.”

“Are you saying I’m not allowed to wallow?”

She shakes her head again. “No. We have no time for wallowing. Not unless you’re ready to tell Mom—”

“No way in hell.”

“Then get your shoes, because we need to get thinking.”

Not bothering with sneakers, I slip on my sandals, we lock up, and then we head out of the house. Kelsey walks across the street and turns right.

“You want to walk through The Flats?” I ask her. “Do you want to depress me?”

“Being surrounded by rich, elaborate houses might be exactly what you need. Inspiration.”

Dragging my feet, I follow her, and we start our walk through the neighborhood of the most elaborate and ornate houses in Los Angeles. The sidewalks are immaculate, with not a crack in the cement, and the grass is so pristinely cut that, from a quick glance, one would assume it is AstroTurf, that’s how perfect it is. A mixture of palm trees and old oak trees line the roads, while cascading bushes and wrought-iron gates protect the dwellings of the wealthy.

“This is depressing,” I say as I go to turn around.

“No, this is inspiring. You have to have a mindset change. Who knows? Maybe by walking these streets, we’ll run into someone rich who wants to work on a charity case—you.”

“Aren’t you cute.”

She chuckles. “Seriously, though, you never know who we might run into. Haven’t you heard those stories about people

who meet an investor on an airplane and next thing you know, their product is in every Target in the country?"

"No," I answer. "I haven't heard those stories."

"Well, they happen. You never know who you might run into." She laughs. "You could possibly meet a rich husband, walking these streets." She glances at me and then looks me up and down. "Well, not dressed like that, but—"

"You know, that might not be a bad idea," I say.

"What? Meeting a rich husband?" Kelsey asks. "Sis, I was joking."

But it's not a joke in my head. And, yes, it might be the tequila—what little we had—talking, but there have to be men around here looking for someone to marry, right? Some singletons looking for a romp on their luxury mattress that could very well turn into a lifelong coupling? I'm not opposed to impressing with my sexual exploits to snag a man. Remember, DEFCON 1.

"No, this could be something."

"Oh, Jesus," Kelsey says in an exasperated tone. "Lottie, I know you're desperate, but we need to be smart-desperate. Finding a rich husband isn't the solution to your problems. What are you going to do, get married next week?"

"Love can happen that fast."

"I'm going to stop you right there—this isn't a solution. We need something concrete, something we can control."

"No." I gesture to the houses around us. "Look at these places. You can't tell me all these people are living the perfect life. I bet there are some bachelors here looking for someone to keep them warm at night." I point to my chest. "That person can be me. I'm warm. I have snuggly arms, and I'll put out. I have no problem with such behavior."

"Jesus, help me," Kelsey says, pressing her hands together while looking up to the sky.

I lift my phone and open my browser.

"What are you doing?" Kelsey asks.

"Looking up how to snag a rich husband."