

STRAWBERRY SWIRL & SUSPICION

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CHAPTER ONE

"You what?" I yelled over the whistling of the espresso machine. "I don't think I heard you right." Bart, my boss, was of a certain age (that age being eighty-five). He had a low, grumbly voice that had grown grumblier over the years.

"I said, I decided to sell," he repeated, raising his voice half an octave.

I used the back of my hand to push Einstein (my nickname for the dark, unruly hair springing from my head) out of my face and placed his vanilla latte on the counter. "Sell what?"

Waiting behind him, Ms. Low-Fat Cap began tapping her Jimmy Choo on the tiled floor, with lips pursed and a "shut up and let her make my drink!" glare locked, loaded, and pointed at the back of Bart's sparsely haired head, as if about to fire laser beams from her eyeballs. If there's one thing I had learned in my six years of managing a café, it was that people took their coffee seriously. Very seriously. Life or death seriously. I will literally kill you and your entire family if you don't steam my milk to 102 degrees seriously. It was much like dealing with my daughter Lilly on the brink of an epic toddler meltdown, except I could

put her in timeout. Here, I had to smile and nod and duck as the "I said extra whip" mocha came flying at my head.

"Your drink is coming right up," I told her.

She stood up straighter and feigned obliviousness, placing her manicured hand over her chest as if saying *Oh me? I'm just patiently waiting.*

Sure you are.

"Cambria, listen," Bart pressed, with his business face on.

"Yes, sorry. What are you selling?"

"This place," he said. His bushy brows were covering his eyes, making it difficult to tell if he was being serious or attempting an *I'm old so I can get away with it* bad joke. I found no humor when it came to my livelihood. Not when I was on my own with a toddler to feed and bills to pay and one of the many freckles dotting my face was a shade darker than the rest. According to WebMD that needed to be looked at by a professional—pronto. And professionals were expensive.

"You're telling me you're actually considering selling the café? No way. This is a joke," I decided, shaking my head. He'd opened Bart's Café in the sixties, never married, no kids, and he told me he planned on dying behind the bar doing what he loved. How could he die here if he didn't own it? He'd be hard-pressed to find a buyer willing to agree to those terms.

"I'm not selling the café. I'm selling the building. This is a large lot. Someone could do something really great for the community here."

"Bart, it's Los Angeles. What could anyone possibly put here to help the community? Another strip mall? Where is this coming from? I told you, I'm all in. You don't have to worry."

He pulled his collar up to his jawline and sighed. "I signed the papers this morning. It's a done deal," he said.

"What?" I shrieked, dropping the pitcher of hot milk I was frothing. It hit the counter, knocking over the row of paper cups

waiting to be filled, and splashed its contents down the front of my apron. The boiling two percent seeped through the thin fabric, turning the metal button and zipper of my jeans into an iron, branding "Mossimo" onto my pelvic region.

Certain situations are beyond profanity.

This was one of them.

Squealing and hopping around in agony, I managed to make it to the stock room before yanking my pants down to my ankles. The first aid kit was located in the office, a good seven-foot journey. *Too far*. Frantic, I hobbled to the freezer, grabbed a carton of strawberry swirl ice cream, and pressed it on my burning unmentionables. Ice cream was my coping mechanism. I kept a stash at work for emergency situations. Those "situations" were typically stressed induced—barista no-showed, monthly budget not balancing, I was hungry—not burning flesh wounds.

The cool paperboard calmed the sting. I fell back against the wall and slid down to my butt, sighing the entire way. Mike, one of many part-time baristas, darted around the corner, saw me lying on the floor with my pants down holding ice cream to my crotch, and quickly twirled around to face the opposite direction.

"Um...you OK, boss?" he asked, staring at the required safety signs covering the wall. I imagined his face was as red as the hair on his head.

Not a good day to sport my granny panties.

"Yeah, I should be fine," I answered through gritted teeth, lifting the tight elastic of my grannies to take a look at the damage. A shiny red line ran down my lower abdomen. Not too bad. No blisters, no blood. There would definitely be a scar—a small one that would blend in with the stretch marks.

First degree, I thought.

"OK, um," Mike stuttered, still staring at the Safety Guide-

lines as if there would be a test later. "Err...Bart is on the patio, and he said for you to come out when you're finished."

Oh, that.

A scalding milk bath had a way of erasing all other troubles. If only for a moment. "Tell him I'll be out in a bit," I said, wincing as I readjusted the carton. I needed time to overthink the situation before I talked to Bart again.

Mike was all too eager to play messenger, dashing out into the morning crowd before the sentence had completely left my mouth.

Poor kid.

I rested the back of my head on the wall and took a deep breath, allowing the new information to settle in. I felt confused and sad. Betrayed. Bart carelessly delivering the news wasn't a surprise. He avoided conflict like the stomach flu. Him selling though... I'd have an easier time believing him if he told me he changed his name to Barry Buttercup and joined the circus.

Of course he'd had offers over the years. We were located near the La Brea Tar Pits—a huge tourist attraction. A man was in here two months ago with plans for a high-rise. Bart chased him away with a broom.

I had the police report on my desk.

Mad, I took it out on the fridge door, kicking it closed with my coffee-stained Converse. This backfired when I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror-like stainless steel. Einstein was pointing in every direction but south. My blue eyes were cushioned in red, puffy bags, and then there was the whole granny situation. I looked every bit the sixty-five years I felt, except I was only twenty-eight.

I closed my eyes, wishing my life had a *Refresh* button. If it did, I would have selected pants *without* a zipper. I could have refreshed the day that Bart pulled me aside and told me he'd like to leave the café to me after he died. Doing it over, I still would

have graciously accepted, but I wouldn't have banked my future on it. Or maybe gotten it in writing? Signed something? Not mentally designed business cards with "owner" written below my name? Not have spent my own money on trinkets and artwork to spruce up the place...

That's it!

Determined to get answers, I charged out to the patio (after a quick, albeit awkward, aloe vera lather and a spoonful of, now melted, ice cream). Bart was in his usual spot, slouched in a plastic chair next to the parking lot. The patio was full with the regulars: Bob and his laptop; Chris and this week's girlfriend, Rachel, and her Chihuahua; a group of women decked out in expensive tennis clothes chatting over a fresh strawberry macchiato—our new springtime drink.

I took the seat across from Bart, crossing my arms on the table, and studied the old man in front of me. The collar of his navy fleece, the one with the Dodger's emblem embroidered on the upper left breast, was pulled up to his chin. His hair darker and face less crinkled. He had one hand resting atop a thick, unmarked manila envelope.

I couldn't speak. I could only stare and wait. Then I remembered whom I was sitting with. Bart's way of working through a disagreement was "why use words when a shrug will do?" Which is why I handled all personnel problems.

And probably why he was still single.

Not knowing what to say, I started with the obvious. "I'm here."

He took a sip of his latte. "This is good foam," he finally said.

I wasn't here to talk about foam, especially not after it had burned my lady bits. "Why did you sell?"

Instead of answering, he stared at his latte and traced the Bart's Café logo printed on the sleeve with his thumb.

"Bart?"

He continued to stare at the cup. He was either too sad to speak or procrastinating. Something told me it was a little of both.

I scooted my chair closer and leaned in. "Tell me what happened, and I'll help you figure it out. If someone bullied or trick you into selling, I'll...I'll...I'll..." Do what, I wasn't sure. But I could be scrappy when need be.

"Things changed..." Bart looked down at his watch and jerked back. "I have to go." He stood so fast his chair teetered.

"Go? Where are you going?" I asked, utterly confused. "Why did you ask me to come out here if you weren't going to say anything?"

Bart looked over his shoulder then back down at me and cleared a rattle from his throat. "Here." He slid the envelope across the table. "Last paychecks for everyone and a little something extra for yourself."

I stared at the envelope as if it were contagious. "What am I supposed to do with that?"

"Let everyone know and hand them out. Then..." He cleared his throat. "Leave the keys on the desk when you're done."

Now it was my turn to spring upright. "Wait, we're closing today?"

He nodded.

"We're not going to have any kind of going out of business sale or...or..." I was at a loss for words. This was bananas! You don't shut down a sixty-year-old business on a whim.

"What do we do with...everything?" I waved my hand around, gesturing to the tables and the chairs and the umbrellas and all the other makeup of the company that had been serving the public since 1960.

Bart opened his mouth, about to say something, when a blaring honking sound coming from the parking lot interrupted him.

I spun around to see who was laying on the horn. Parked in Bart's usual spot was a muscular yellow Mustang with chrome rims and a deep scratch with several scuff marks along the back bumper. Bart had been driving a brown Buick with missing hubcaps for decades. The baristas and I called it the Political Time Machine because he had a bumper sticker for every Republican presidential candidate since Nixon stuck on the trunk.

"Who is that?" I asked Bart.

"I...have...bye." He hurried past me and out to the parking lot. I hadn't seen him move that fast in years.

Bart opened the Mustang's passenger side door and carefully slid in. No sooner did his butt hit the seat than the Mustang peeled out of the parking spot. I could barely make out the silhouette of the driver through the dark-tinted windows. The Mustang revved loud enough for Rebecca's Chihuahua to take cover under the table. Then it sped out of the parking lot, cutting off a UPS truck, an Uber driver, and several pedestrians as it swerved out of sight.

My brain frantically tried to grasp what just happened.

Once grasped, I yanked the manila envelope and unwrapped the string keeping it closed. Inside were more envelopes, each with a barista's name, and then, at the very back of the stack, were two for me. My first name was spelled phonetically—Kambrea Kline instead of Cambria Clyne and scribed in unfamiliar, swirly handwriting. I'd been handling all bills and payroll for the last year. It was hard to believe he'd managed to do all this without my knowing. The first envelope was my last paycheck, paying me through the end of the month—which was in five days. The next check would have to cover my rent and bills until I found another job. I ran my finger under the sealed flap, careful not to add a paper cut to my list of current maladies,

pulled out the check, and held it up, blinking hard at the numbers staring back at me.

Bart wasn't being figurative when he said a *little* something for me.

Great.

Just...great.

I dropped the envelope on the table with a loud thud. And here I'd thought my biggest problem today was going to be whether or not my car would start. Angry, I shoved the envelope under my armpit, snatched Bart's empty latte cup from the table, and...paused.

Bart's keys were on the chair. I knew that faded Dodger's keychain—it was the one I'd bought him two years ago for his birthday. I reached for my phone and pressed "Bart" on the top of my favorites list. Yes, he had just yanked my livelihood from me—but I couldn't help myself. The Baristas called him my work husband, and you let your husband know when he's forgotten his house keys—even when he's just divorced you.

I mean, I think you do.

I'd never had an actual husband before. This ex-wife thing was all new to me.

"We're sorry, the number you have dialed has been disconnected and is no longer in service."

I stared down at my phone, hung up, and tried again.

"We're sorry, the number you have dialed has been disconnected and is no longer in service."

Bart had disconnected his phone.

But why?

CHAPTER TWO

"Maybe he changed his phone number and forgot to tell you?" Amy, my best friend, said from her spot at my kitchen table, hunched over the laptop. The light from the screen reflected off the splint holding her newly constructed nose together.

In the kitchen, I stood on my tiptoes to extricate the bottle of chocolate syrup from the top shelf. The colorful label was coated in a thin layer of dust, but the expiration date gave me the go-ahead. I twisted off the cap then squeezed a blob of chocolate onto our double scoop of Strawberry Swirl. "But I called him *yesterday* morning about a coffee bean order he placed the day before. It went straight to voice mail, but the line was most certainly still connected," I said, adding smashed Oreos to our ice cream. "And why would he place a big order the day before he planned to close?"

"Maybe he ordered the coffee for himself so he could still get the wholesale price?"

"That's a lot of coffee for one person." I placed our bowls on the table and took a seat, moving Lilly's Elsa doll off the chair before I flattened it. "I looked on this website called Zando. It gives you the purchasing history on commercial properties.

There was a lot of confusing information on there, but it did say Bart sold the property to a man named Cash Manahan. I looked *him* up, and he has one other commercial property, but I can't see where it is unless I buy a monthly subscription."

"So?"

"So, Cash bought it for *one million dollars!* Bart's been offered three million and could have easily negotiated more than that. Now this Cash Manahan can turn around and sell it for three times the purchasing price. Why would Bart do that? It doesn't make any sense."

Amy blinked.

"What?" I said.

"He sold for a million and gave you a five-hundred-dollar severance?"

"Yes." Still a little...fine—a *lot* bitter about that. "But—"

"You have got to be kidding!" Amy slammed my laptop closed. "The man asked you to take over his business then sold it without telling you, and then he didn't give you enough of a severance to cover your rent for the next month when he made one million dollars?"

One million dollars may seem like a lot, and it is. More than I'd ever had or ever will. But this was Los Angeles. The land of inflation.

"That's not the point. The point is he sold his café for less than market value, on a whim, turned off his phone, left in a mysterious Mustang, and has yet to be heard from. Doesn't that all seem a bit fishy to you?"

"I think you watch too many crime shows."

That was true, but: "Here's the thing—"

Amy reached over and pressed my lips together. "I came over to offer moral support and help you look for jobs, *not* talk about Bart. Did you ever consider that he sold his café and turned off his phone because he doesn't want to hear or speak to

you again?" *Ouch.* "He's a big boy who can take care of himself. It's time to move on. I'm serious." It's really hard to take someone with a metallic snout and cotton balls shoved up her nostrils seriously—but she did make a valid point.

A depressing point.

Perhaps it was easier for me to except the thought of a third-party forcing his hand rather than accept Bart did this of his own free will, and he really did think this little of me (five hundred dollars little).

Truth is, no matter how or why he sold—I was still unemployed.

Maybe it was time to move on?

Ugh.

Divorce is hard.

If only I could get rid of this nagging feeling there was more to the story.

I took a spoonful of my sundae. The beautiful blend of calories danced across my taste buds, easing the budding stress in my shoulders. Ice cream had a way of making everything better. If only I had the same response to cauliflower, maybe I'd be able to squeeze my butt back into my pre-Lilly wardrobe.

"Oh, oh, oh!" Amy bounced around in her chair as if she had to pee, and I nearly dropped my bowl. "I've got the perfect job for you. The People Perfect Party Place is always looking for characters. You wear a costume for an hour and get compensation *and* tips. And they'll pay you under the table. I made a hundred bucks as Cinderella two weeks ago."

"I'd rather perform my own colonoscopy."

"That's...*kinky.*"

"We moved to LA so *you* could become an actor—not me." I'd tagged along for the ride because that's how our friendship worked.

Amy gave me the same look I gave Lilly when she refused to

try her vegetables. "You wouldn't have to act. They don't need princesses. All you'd have to do is wear a costume and stand and pose for pictures. No one would even see your face."

"Not a chance." Performing in front of a crowd went against every natural instinct I had. Memories of my sixth-grade piano recital filled my head. I had barfed all over the keys during a slow rendition of "Alouette."

"You need a job, and I found one for you. Try it."

"No."

"You might fall in love with performing," she said.

"Fine, I'll think about it." If I didn't fake compliance, she'd be able to talk me into it. She was good at that. Convinced me into sporting an A-line bob when we were in middle school. It would complement your face, she told me. In the end, it had looked like I had a Pomeranian glued to my head.

Amy swiped her finger across her phone and smiled. "I'll give Deb a call right now."

"Wait, wait, wait." I yanked her phone away. "I said I'd *think* about it. Let's hold off on calling Deb for now, and you can help me with...um...*shoot*..." I shuffled the papers strewn across my table around until I found the application for Coffee, Tea, Smoothies I'd been working on before she arrived. "You can help me with this. They need three references. Since I don't have Bart's contact information anymore, I could only think of one person to put down."

"Who?"

"Tom."

Amy chuckled silently, as to not disturb the new nose. "What did you write? Thomas Dryer, guy-I-still-pine-over slash friend-zoner slash one-nightstand-turned-baby-daddy slash *pro-bone-ing* everyone but me, attorney at law?"

"Shh!" I scolded, jerking my head in the direction of the living room, where Lilly was hanging upside down on the couch

fixated on *The Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*. The tips of her dark curls brushed the floor as she giggled in joyful oblivion—just as it should be.

"Oops. Sorry," she whispered. "I forgot she was here. But you know..." She paused for dramatic effect. "Deb never checks references, *and* I know Lilly *would* think it was super cool if you dressed up like the characters from her favorite shows for a living."

"I told you I'd think about it." *Not a chance.* "I'm not *that* desperate yet. It's only been a day. I'm sure I'll find a job worthy both of my skills as a manager and as a strong, hardworking, independent woman before I'm forced to wear a costume to get by."

CHAPTER THREE

Two weeks later, and I was questioning every life choice I'd ever made. If hiking uphill while wearing an Easter Bunny costume doesn't do that to you then I don't know what will.

The customer requested I not park near the home, so as to not offend partygoers with my "unsightly" Civic, and that I dressed in the car, so as not to offend the bathroom with my Target clothing.

"Whatever you wish," I responded, eager to please. This Beverly Hills Easter bash for five-year-old Razor and thirty of his closest friends carried promise of a big tip.

Rent was counting on it.

My car provided limited changing space. Lilly's mammoth of a car seat took up most of the back seat, making my bunny transformation difficult. *"When slipping on the costume, you say goodbye to Cambria Clyne and hello to Easter Rabbit. An enchanting figure who loves children, carrots, and eggs. Got it?"* Deb, from The People Perfect Party Place had explained during my twenty-minute training session this morning.

I'd nodded, taken the costume, left my dignity, and proceeded to the party. Problem was, the bulky polyester fabric

was uncooperative. So were the clown-like white paws, bowtie, blue vest, and ten-pound smiling rabbit head. There was no "slipping" into anything. Except out the car door when finished, as if my Civic just birthed a bunny. I landed on my back, partially on the sidewalk and mostly in the gutter with my over-size fluffy foot tangled in the seat belt.

It's said a rabbit will panic and die if flipped onto its back. I concede. A small piece of me croaked right there.

I engaged in an awkward combination of rocking and thrusting and kicking and swearing before a police officer pulled over and propped me upright. After I passed the sobriety test, I made the uphill trek, swathed in polyester, chanting *rent, rent, rent, rent* to keep from crying. Physical activity is *not* a strength of mine.

The gate securing Razor's McMansion was a lovely, intricate design of wrought iron with swirls and scrolls and a *W* in the middle...or...actually...an *M*. It was only a *W* from my upside-down position, draped over the call box, puffing air through the mesh peephole of the rabbit head.

Note to self: You are broke. Suck it up.

Once she granted me entrance through the gate, Razor's mother met me at the front door, leaning against the jamb with a mimosa in her diamond-encrusted hand. She had on a low, low, *low* (hello, navel) cut floor-length sheer turquoise dress. Her platinum hair and makeup looked professionally done, and her teeny wrists were wrapped in diamonds and her neck draped in gold, like she had put on every piece of jewelry she owned for the occasion.

"They're out back," she told me, stepping away so as not to accidentally come in contact with Easter Bunny. Not that I blamed her. Inside, the costume reeked like vomit and sweat with a hint of Febreze. I assumed the outside didn't smell much better.

The Mother led me into a vast entryway, through a kitchen filled with shiny appliances, marble counters, and a round island big enough to double as King Arthur's table. Even through a rabbit's teeth (where my mesh peephole was located) the house looked lavish and immaculate. The creamy drapes appeared to waterfall from the ceiling, and the dining room chandelier was the size of my car. The walls looked as if they were constructed of gold and imprinted with vines and flowers and women with bare backs down to the top of their butt cracks. *Must be a rich people thing.*

The backyard was mostly pool. The Mother instructed me to wait at the back door while she gathered the children, and I stood as ordered. Hot. Nervous. Mortified.

"Here, children! Here, here!" The Mother shouted, as if calling for the dog. "Look who it is."

That's my cue.

I strutted out and stood before a group of kids garbed in their Sunday best, with wicker baskets clutched in their hands. I waved and wiggled my shoulders and shot my thumbs up in the air, as instructed by Deb. And they loved it. The children were starstruck. The looks of enchantment beaming from their little faces was invigorating. It was as if I were a Hemsworth brother or something.

My vision blurred from the sweat dripping down my face. One thing I'd learned during my employment drought was that I sweat, profusely, when nervous.

"OK, gather around, and let's take pictures," The Mother said, and just like that, armies of adults armed with iPhones appeared out of nowhere.

Oh, the carrots.

Deb told me to take them out when I posed for pictures and pretend to eat them. I reached down and grabbed the plastic

carrots from inside my vest and...*oops!* I whacked a child across the face. Of course, he started to cry.

I bent down in an attempt to comfort the little boy I'd just belted. "*Be sure not to bend down too fast,*" Deb had warned—and for good reason. The rabbit head went all exorcist and flipped around, turning my world black and eliciting cries from another four or five children.

Crap! I stood up quickly. Too quickly. I felt sick.

"*Remember to breathe,*" Deb had said. "*You don't want to pass out.*"

Heeding her advice, I took rapid breaths while struggling with my giant paws to spin the head around. Finally, the rabbit head twirled on right. I was able to see again. Mostly black dots and mostly scared little faces and mostly the...ground...

CHAPTER FOUR

I forced an eyelid half open and saw a sapphire sky filled with flying babies. Each towheaded infant was armed with a bow and arrow, with poorly wrapped diapers exposing their butts. *Where am I?*

Then it hit me.

A Nerf dart to the face.

"Told you it was dead," I heard a little boy whisper in the distance. "Watch, I'll shoot it again."

Ouch! I placed my hand on my aching head, feeling the itchy fabric on my face. *What the... Why am I wearing gloves?*

"It's moving!" A throng of ear-piercing shrieks broke out. "Zombie! Zombie!"

The pattering of little-soled shoes jolted my oblongata awake. Everything came flooding back like in a bad dream. The party. The parents. The kids. The carrots. The ground.

"Oh, no. Please, no," I moaned and forced both eyes open.

I took surveillance of my surroundings. Somehow, I had been moved to a room with a mural of battling babies painted on the ceiling. *Must be a rich person thing.*

"Never mind, she's awake," I heard The Mother say. Heels

clanked on the marble flooring until she appeared over me with a refilled mimosa in hand. "I called off the ambulance," she said.

Good thing, because I could no longer afford insurance.

"Can you stand up?" she asked, extending an arm that sparkled with jewels.

I nodded, slipping my paw into her dainty grasp. She heaved with all her little might until I managed a standing position. I felt queasy and embarrassed and green. Very green.

"OK, let's go," The Mother said, dumping the Easter Bunny back on my head. "You have no idea how embarrassing that was for me."

Oh, I think I do.

She hurried me to the front door, past the fancy this and fancy that, determined to get me out as soon as possible. I struggled to keep up, forcing my booted feet to move as fast as she was.

Out the front door we went. "Hold on a second. I have something for you," The Mother said before releasing me into the wild. I waited while she disappeared from my meshy line of sight.

"Afterward, you're responsible for collecting payment. You'll then return the check to me along with the costume, and only then will you get paid. Sometimes they tip. Be sure to act surprised and gracious if they do," Deb had instructed. Acting surprised wouldn't be difficult. My hope for a tip disappeared when I hit the ground. At least I'd get paid, and that should cover rent—if I stopped eating.

The Mother returned with a bottle of water. "Drink this once you feel better so you don't vomit on my driveway."

"Wait, I'm supposed to get a check for 'The Perfect...' I was too woozy to finish the mouthful of a name.

"No, no. I already spoke with Deb, who apologized and agreed I shouldn't have to pay. I've called a friend, who is a

professional performer, to take over. She should be here soon. You can go." Before she closed the door, she paused to give me this helpful tidbit of advice: "I would find a different occupation if I were you."

Gee.

Thanks.

I walked down the driveway with my giant rabbit head hung low. The mansion halfway down the hill was undergoing a remodel, and a dumpster sat at the curb, providing much needed shade. I slid down to my butt and removed the suffocating rabbit head.

I took a sip of water and leaned back, feeling very much like a fluffy failure.

Just then, a familiar revving sound came from behind. I peeked around the dumpster and saw a flash of yellow speeding toward me. The car came to a *screeching* halt at the stop sign.

A Mustang!

The back window was cracked and the roof dented, but the bumper had the same deep scratch and scuffmarks as the one that had taken Bart away.

And is that... I leaned forward and squinted my eyes.

It is!

There was a bullet hole near the right rear exhaust thingy (or whatever it's called). I was sure of it.

Bart!

Before it sped away, I got a good look at the license plate—GH873CZR.

Dangit, I had nothing to write with, and my phone was buried somewhere in this stupid rabbit costume. I was going to have to rely on my brain.

Aren't flashy cars supposed to have easy to remember vanity plates?

"GH873CZR, CZR. GH873CZR, GH873CZR,

GH873CZR..." I chanted out loud to the tune of "Staying Alive." "Ah, ha, ha, ha, GH-873-CZR, CZR."

If I hurried, I'd be able to get to my car and follow the Mustang, call the police, and find Bart, be sure he was OK, and if he was, give him a piece of mind...after I got a letter of recommendation. But mostly I had to be sure he was OK.

I put the rabbit head back on and scrambled to my feet using the side of the bin to pull myself up, still singing, "GH-873-CZR, CZR." But before I could run to my car, there was a click and a squeak and shriek and...there went the dumpster. Rolling down the hill.

"Oh, no, no, no, no!" I yanked the gloves off with my teeth and grabbed the side of the dumpster, using my heels as brakes, because apparently I believed I had Superman-like powers.

Note to self: You don't.

The dumpster slipped out of my grasp and went barreling down the hill, gaining more and more momentum as it went. I ran after it, wobbling as fast as my fluffy feet would allow.

First went the dumpster.

Then came the Easter Bunny.

How this wasn't getting captured on video and going viral was beyond me.

"Stop!" I yelled, as if the hunk of metal and wood hurtling into oncoming traffic had ears.

To my surprise, the dumpster obeyed my command. Stopping at the end of the street before cruising onto the main road. Unfortunately, a car thwarted its journey.

The car: mine.

Right into the driver's-side door.

"No!" I dropped to my knees. "No. No. No!"

Certain situations are beyond profanity.

This was not one of them.

Ah, ha, ha, ha...staying a...live...

CHAPTER FIVE

I fled the scene as fast as my hind legs would take me. The dumpster was fine—my car not so much. I now had to enter and exit through the passenger-side door. I drove from Beverly Hills to the party place, dropped the Easter Bunny with Deb, paid Deb for the damaged costume (asphalt marks on the cotton tail), said a quick prayer the check wouldn't bounce, and drove to Tom's.

"What happened to you?" Tom asked as soon as he opened the door.

I waited for air to return to my lungs then huffed out, "GH-873-CZR, CZR."

"I don't know what that means, but why don't you come in?" He opened the door wider, granting me entrance.

Lilly was on the living room floor with her Easter dress on. Big pink puffed sleeves, sequins, glitter, and a lot of tulle—I'd found it at the Goodwill. Pretty sure it was a pageant dress. She had on her lap a basket filled with colorful plastic eggs, small cheap toys, and a giant chocolate bunny.

Blech.

Easter Bunny has forever been ruined for me.

"Momma!" Lilly wrapped herself around my legs. "Wanna see what the Easter Bunny brought me at Daddy's house? Do you? Do you? Do you?"

"Of course I do," I said. "Let me talk to Daddy real quick, and then you can show me everything. Deal?"

Lilly thought this over before deciding. "Deal. Meet me in my room." She grabbed her basket and skipped down the hall. Unlike me, Tom could afford *two* bedrooms...barely. Pro-bono defense is lucrative in the morals department, not so much in the cash department.

"I thought you had to work today," Tom said.

"I got off early." I plopped down on the couch and grimaced, thinking of all the ladies who had placed their scantily clad rears in the same exact spot. Tom was a handsome, charismatic guy. Tall, very tall, pretty hazel eyes, and a flirty side smirk that made women swoon.

Lots of women.

Like most of Los Angeles County.

"What happened to your hands?" Tom took a seat beside me and ran his finger along the raw spots on my palms from when I heaved the dumpster away from my car.

My stomach began to flutter at his touch. But there was no time for feelings. Bart could be in serious trouble, and as his ex-work wife, it was my job to be sure he was OK. I pulled my hands away and crossed my arms. "I stopped by for a favor. Can you use your contact down at the police station to look up a license plate for me?"

He gave me a curious look. "A license plate?"

"Yes, I need to know the name and address of the owner of the license plate GH-873-CZR."

"What for?"

"It's personal."

Tom stared down at me until I gave in.

"Fine, it's for Bart, my old boss."

"This isn't going to require me bailing you out of jail, is it?"

"No, of course not." At least I hoped not. "I'm worried about him, and he was last seen in a Mustang with the license plate GH-873-CZR. Can you please just do this for me.? Besides, you owe me one, remember." Not sure for what exactly, but it worked. He called his buddy down at the police station, giving the license plate number—repeating it to the same Bee Gee's tune without any further questions.

The yellow Mustang belonged to Victoria Lee from West Covina—a city roughly twenty minutes from Downtown Los Angeles (assuming there's no traffic, and you hit every green light, and no construction zones, and you leave at midnight). Victoria's building looked more like a nice motel than an apartment complex. The lobby was painted in bold hues of blues and orange, and the furniture was sleek and new. Dark wood tiles and trendy rugs. Clean and modern. I liked it.

Victoria lived in apartment 34C.

Easy to remember—it was also my bra size.

I knocked on the door and waited, rocking from heels to toes.

No answer.

So I knocked another dozen or so times.

I peeked through the window. The blind slats were partially drawn, offering limited visibility. But what I did see was an empty apartment.

Crap.

"You looking for Tori?" came a voice from above.

An old man with a cigarette hanging from his mouth was leaning over the railing.

I used my hand as a visor to better see him. "I'm looking for Victoria Lee. Do you know her?"

"Yeah. She used to live here. Goes by Tori."

Tori. Got it. "Do you happen to know where she went?" I asked.

The man puffed out a perfect circle. "Not a clue. One day she was here, the next day she was gone. Good riddance. Terrible neighbor. Always screamin' and yellin' and throwin' stuff."

Screamin' and yellin' and throwin'!

"Did you ever see an older guy with her?" I asked the man.

"Now that you mention it, yeah. I seen an older guy here. He wearin' a Dodger's jacket. Kind of a hot-head, yeah?"

No, not usually. Grumbly, yes. Hot-head, no.

"Do you know where Tori works? Hangs out?" I asked in a panic. Victoria "Tori" was *yellin' and screamin' and throwin'* and had disappeared and had with her a hot-head-looking Bart. I didn't like the sound of this. "Do you know where Tori works? Hangs out?"

My informant scratched the back of his head. "You can try a place called Toil Tavern." He dropped his cigarette over the railing. I watched it fall into the pool. "Overheard her talkin' about it once. Paper thin walls around here."

"Do you know how long ago she moved?"

"Abouts two weeks ago. Was a Monday," he said. "I remember 'cause it was around the same time I had my mole removed."

It was also around the same time Bart's was sold.

"Now, I would be careful before you go messin' around Tori. She ain't good people."

"How so?" I asked.

He shoved another cigarette between his lips. "She's nuts. Shot at me once."

"She shot you!"

"Yeah, missed, but you get the picture. Be careful."

Gulp. "Errrr...ummm...*thanks.*"

Appeared the situation was even more dire than I imagined.

And I had a *wild* imagination.

CHAPTER SIX

Toil Tavern was a restaurant located in Culver City with decent Yelp reviews that, according to Google, catered to a high-end professional crowd. Which is probably why I had never heard of it.

The building was black stone with no windows and a concrete fire pit near the front entrance. The flames dancing behind the polycarbonate protection of the pit gave the building a naughty, villainous type of vibe.

The big velvet door was locked. I knocked, stepped back, and waited as the nerves began clawing at my stomach: Mission Find Bart. *Not the type of people you want to be messin' with* should have been my cue to drop the subject. But the shootin' and screamin' and throwin' stuff kept me going.

I yanked on my collar and leaned down, willing cool air down my shirt as the nerve-sweat pumped from my pits at fire-hydrant-speed.

Of course, this is when the door opened.

A woman twice my height, half my weight, with a quarter of the clothes on stood before me. Her black shorts hugged her perfectly curved butt, and her shirt clung to her double-Ds, stop-

ping at her ribcage to better show off the diamond in her belly button. I had no idea what color her hair was. I couldn't stop staring at the cleavage. I'd never felt so overdressed in my life.

"Um, hi...hi... I'm looking for Tori," I stammered, still pulling at my collar. Between the nerves and the heat and the flames and the red door, it felt as if I were standing at the gates of Hell.

The gatekeeper, a.k.a. Kimmy, per the nametag pinned alarming close to her right nipple, regarded me, batting her goopy lashes.

"Tori? We don't have anyone here named Tori." She twirled her hair between two fingers (the hair being blond with blue tips—finally noticed).

"Tori Lee? Victoria Lee," I tried. "Vicki Lee?"

Kimmy shook her head with each name variation.

"What about Bart? Older man, typically wears a Dodger's shirt or fleece? Or Cash Manahan?" I said.

Kimmy eyes went wide at the mention of Cash, she took a step back, and then...and then...she sneezed.

A dainty little *a-choo*.

"No one here named Manahan, either," she said, wiping at her nose with the tip of her fingers.

Great, I was all out of names.

"Are you sure you don't mean Jay?" She propped a snout-covered hand on her hip. "Are you here for the assistant manager interviews?"

I stood straighter. "Jay" was not even close to Tori, Victoria, or Bart, but she had me at interview. "Interview for an assistant manager position, here?"

"Is that what you're here for?" Kimmy said.

Well, shoot.

Two birds one stone?

"Yes, I am here about the position." I smiled.

"Oh, like, I totally thought that." Kimmy was pleased with

herself. "Jay is finishing an interview right now. It will be a minute, and then I'll take you back."

"That's perfect because I forgot my resume in my car. I'll be right back." I happened to have a folder with freshly printed resumes in my back seat. Yes, I was here to find Bart. But, hey, I was also unemployed, and catering to the high-end professionals sounded like it paid well. Managing a café was almost like managing a restaurant. I think. And per gatekeeper Kimmy, neither Tori nor Bart were around here anyhow.

I had the ability to rationalize just about any situation.

I returned with my resume in hand. Had I known I'd be going in for an interview, I would have worn my lucky navy Anthropology dress. Instead, I had on my black jeans with a flowy pink top, hooped earrings, and Einstein pulled back in a claw clip.

In my broke world—that was high-end.

The Toil Tavern's fiery theme continued into the interior of the restaurant—red velvet booths with dark marble tabletops. Golden frames showcasing abstract art hung where windows should be. The walls were covered in black wallpaper dazzled in gold and silver specs. A large circular bar with high-backed red barstools took up the center of the restaurant with an empty space reserved for dancing.

In the bright florescent lighting, it looked like a glorified Red Robin. I imagined during operating hours the lighting was dimmed and the scuffed flooring was hidden, giving the room an "I'm here with my two mistresses" kind of vibe.

I followed Gatekeeper Kimmy as she pranced the way. "Do you know the job specifics?" I asked her. Would be helpful to know what I was interviewing for. Not that I had room to be picky at this point.

"It's a full-time assistant manager. That's about all I know," she said over her shoulder.

Sounded like a good start.

We stopped at a booth near the back, occupied by a man who I assumed to be Jay. He had slicked dark hair, large brown eyes, and a thin mustache. So thin, it looked as if he'd drawn it on with a Sharpie.

If this was Hell and Kimmy was the Gatekeeper, then Jay was the Ruler of the Underworld. And he very much looked the part in his black suit and shiny red lapel.

"Jay, this is..." Kimmy froze midintroduction, realizing I'd spit out several names upon our meeting—none of which were my own.

"Cambria Clyne," I said.

"Cambria Clyne," Kimmy purred and placed my resume in front of Jay.

Jay pointed to the seat across from him without removing his eyes from the table. I slid onto the bench, placing my bag on my lap, hoping the weight would keep my knees from shaking. No such luck.

"You're Kelly?" Jay asked, smoothing his barely there mustache with his thumb and forefinger.

"No, I'm Cambria, Master Sir."

Master Sir?

He appeared not to hear, or not to care, or perhaps he was used to being addressed as such. "OK, let's get started." Master Sir Jay didn't bother removing his eyes from the table. "Tell me about your last restaurant, Kelly."

"It's, um, Cambria. That's my name. Came-Bree-Ah. And I managed a café for almost six years until it closed recently."

His right brow twitched upward. "The last place you managed closed down?"

"Oh, no, I mean, yes, but it closed because the owner sold the building. Not because of anything I did wrong. Hejustdid-

n't want to sell but I'm not sure why." The words shot out of my mouth so fast, they bypassed the Filter Station.

Note to self: Think first. Speak second.

"You know, I don't normally dress this casually," I announced, for no apparent reason.

Master Sir Jay lifted his hand and snapped his fingers. Out of nowhere, Gatekeeper Kimmy appeared with a bottle of Bling H₂O. After she poured the expensive liquid into a glass of ice, she scurried back to her post, waiting to be summoned again.

With his pinky finger extended, he took a sip. His movements were slow, as if he were underwater. "Let me ask you, Kelly, do you believe this interview is going well?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"This interview. Do you believe it's going well?" he repeated, still addressing the tabletop.

Is this going well?

What kind of question is that?

Considering I'd had zero prep time, I didn't think it was going *that* bad. Of course, he had no idea I was really here to look for Bart and that I'd found out about this interview ten minutes ago...*and he thinks my name is Kelly...and he hasn't looked at me once...*so yeah, I guess it could be going better.

Master Sir Jay cleared his throat in an "I don't really have anything in my throat, I just want you to hurry up" kind of way.

I sat up straighter. After a moment of deliberation, I went with: "I'm a much better employee than I am an interviewee." Truer words were never spoken. I'd come to the conclusion that I'm a great second-impression maker.

"That's nice... I think we're done here," he said while gathering the papers and pounding them into an orderly stack. He shoved the pile into a leather binder and exited the booth without another word.

"Hold on." I scooted down the red plastic covering, the sweat

making it difficult to slide off the bench easily. I spilled onto the floor in a sweaty mess of Marshalls' finest apparel, spewing the contents of my bag. Great.

Using my forearm, I swept my belongings back in and struggled upright. "I ran a busy café for six years," I blurted out, speaking to the back of Jay's head as he strolled toward the bar. "I handled payroll, scheduling, tips, inventory, and more than fifteen employees. I am the hardest worker you'll ever meet!"

He froze midstep. Gatekeeper Kimmy propped a hand on her hip and watched with an *OMG* gaping expression.

Jay spun around with a surprised face on, as if I had just snuck up behind him and yelled, "Boo!" The heels of his shiny Oxfords clacked across the floor slowly, echoing through the empty restaurant, until our toes met. His close proximity was unnerving. I tried not to squirm. He smelled like scotch and roses.

He studied my face with his big eyes, creasing his brow in deep deliberation before declaring, "I like you."

I felt like asking why but decided to go with: "Thanks?"

He leaned back and tapped his chin with his finger. "I don't think you'd do well here. You do that nervous chatty thing. Not good. Wouldn't work. If you're interested, the place next door is opening another location and currently hiring. I know the owner very well. I'm sure it pays decent, and the tips are excellent. Have you heard of The Palace?"

"Yes, of course I have." *Nope, never.*

He nodded, pleased. "Come with me, and I'll introduce you to the owner."

Eager for employment, I followed him through a pair of double-swing doors and into the kitchen. It was empty, aside from the barely pubescent boy pushing boxes into the freezer. We walked past a door marked *Office* and another door marked *Security*. Then, through another door and out to the alleyway

we went. The narrow passage was big enough for a few bags of trash, a single dumpster, and the two homeless men who were rummaging through it.

We arrived at a chipped and dented silver door, etched in graffiti. A sign warning passers-by about the video surveillance used "24/7" hung sideways by a single nail.

As soon as the door opened, the delightful aroma of a deep fryer hard at work filled my nostrils. *These are my kind of peeps.* I trailed Jay through another double-swing door. The loud thumping of music drowned the hustle of the kitchen. The floor vibrated with the heavy bass, and the lighting darkened. He pushed open another set of doors, and we stepped into...*boobs!*

They were everywhere.

They were bouncing across the stage.

They were twirling around a pole.

They were gliding across the room with a serving tray.

The club was dark and musky. A geometric display of neon lights lit up the ceiling, and the furniture glowed orange and yellow under black lights. Two small stages flanked the long runway down the middle of the room with a pole at the end.

My emotions hovered somewhere between mortified and flattered.

"This is the manager," Jay shouted over the Kei\$ha club mix, introducing the woman at his side. Her auburn hair was sleeked into a bun, and her shorts were pink, and her platforms were pink, as were her pasties—same color as my shirt. We were practically Pepto twins. "Tori, this is Kelly. She's interested in working here."

"Tori!" I yelped. "Is your last name...*ugh!*" I made some sort of strangled sound and rocked back on my heels, nearly tumbling over.

Bart!

Bart stood up from a table, his shirt unbuttoned and his

pants on crooked and his...*No! No!* I shook my head, trying to unsee what I was seeing.

"I didn't catch that, hon," Tori said into my ear.

"Um, um, um, em, ur." My lips felt numb, and my mind went blank.

Tori followed my gaze to Bart and the goofy grin spread across his face as he giddily followed a woman to a side stage. "You know Bart?" she asked.

I shook my head *no* but said, "Yaiucka." Whatever that means.

"Bart!" She waved her arms to get his attention. "Bart! Get over here!"

Bart looked up, startled, and shuffled over, after he... um...readjusted.

Gross.

Bart joined us. He looked as uncomfortable to see me as I was to see him.

Tori swung her arm around Bart's shoulders. She had at least a foot over the old man, what with her platforms and all. "Bart, you know Kelly? She's interested in working here," she said to him.

"No! Not her!" came a voice from behind. I spun around. A woman stormed toward us. She had clothes on, and, the closer the got, the more familiar she looked. Crap.

The Mother!

Does everyone hang out at the strip joint?

It was like a bad episode of *This is Your Life*.

"She can't work here." The Mother interjected herself into our huddle. "This is the fainting rabbit from Razor's Easter bash that you had to take over for," she said to Tori. "The one who almost ruined my party."

That party took an interesting twist after my departure.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," The Mother said to me in a tone that

said she was *everything* but sorry. "I don't think you're cut out for this type of work."

Agreed.

I held my hand up. "No," I said. "I didn't come here for a—"

The Mother spoke over me. "Tori, all hiring must still be approved by either Cash or myself. We've been over this."

"Cash is here!" I said much louder than I meant to.

"Yeah, he's over there." Tori pointed to a heavily tattooed man in the DJ booth.

I had no idea where Jay went...*oh...never mind*. He was over at stage three.

The Mother glared down at me. "You *know* my husband?"

Oh man...

It dawned on me that a stripper who owns a gun, my ex-work husband, and a very wealthy slash slightly crazy slash jealous woman encircled me. This was not how I wanted to die.

"There has been a bit of a misunderstanding," I said, pulling at the collar of my shirt, feeling the sweat beading around my neck. "I didn't come to get a job. I...w-was just here to speak to him." I pointed to Bart.

"Anything you have to say to Bart you can say to me. He's my boyfriend," said Tori proudly.

Well, OK, now that explained a lot.

Bart shrugged out of Tori's arm. "It's fine. She used to be an employee of mine."

Tori gave me a sideways glance. "I don't remember seeing a Kelly when I was doing your last paychecks?"

Last paychecks!

She was not only the owner of the mustang but also of the swirling writing—I had her to thank for my bonus.

A flush of jealousy and anger came over me. "My name is not Kelly," I said with as much 'tude as I could muster. "My name is Cam-bria Cly-ne, both spelled with a C." So there.

Tori's mouth curved into a Chester cat smile. "Cambria, I've heard so much about you."

I sucked in my gut and puffed my chest.

Tori placed a hand on Bart's shoulder, slowly, like she knew I was currently holding my breath.

"I don't care what her name is!" The Mother stomped her foot. "Bart, can you take care of this? We have work to do. Afternoon rush starts in twenty minutes, and Tori, I need you on stage four!"

"Fine." Tori pouted. "I'll give you two a moment to catch up." She kissed Bart's cheek and then dragged her finger down his arm, flauntingly, as she sauntered away.

I released my breath...*phew*.

"Let's go to my office," Bart said quickly.

We walked past stage two, past the door marked *Restroom* and the door marked *Private Show* and the door marked *Champagne Room* and through the door marked *Office*.

Bart's office looked like a converted storage closet with enough room for a small desk, old swivel chair (the same one he'd had in his office at Bart's) all fraying and taped together, and then there were the unopened boxes of coffee towering next to the safe.

The same order he placed before Bart's closed.

That *was* a lot of coffee for one person.

Bart took a seat in his chair. In the florescent lighting I could now see the hickies dotting his wrinkled neck and possibly a *bite mark*?

Gross.

It took a while for my temporal lobe to conjure up what exactly to say in this situation. Then it came to me. "You sold Bart's to run a strip club!"

Bart leaned back in his chair. "Didn't plan to. Just worked out this way."

"Worked out this way?" I said in disbelief. "Why did you disconnect your phone? I've been worried about you."

"Oh, that. Tori bought me one of these fancy phones with the big screen, and it came with a new number." He pulled the fancy phone with the big screen (aka iPhone) from his front pocket to show me. "Has a lot of buttons on it. I can't figure it out just yet."

I rolled my eyes. Bart had owned a flip phone from 19-some-time since I'd met him. "I still don't understand why you sold and why you sold for less than market value?"

"How'd you know that?" Bart said.

"The internet."

"Nothing private anymore," he grumbled. "Cash came to me a few months ago about buying the lot to put up another club. I said no, of course. But then he invited me here for drinks, and wow, what an awesome place. Right?" He paused to give me time to agree.

"Sure," I said. "Go on."

"I met Tori here. Nice gal. Really sweet. She was in a tough spot though. Living in a bad area with some dangerous people."

"I spoke with her neighbor. He said she shot him, Bart," I said, crossing my arms.

Bart waved his hand like a small insect was trying to fly up his nose. "Nah. He shot at her first," he said, as if that were normal. As if this were the 1860s Wild West and people shot at each other all the time. "She ran into his car," Bart continued. "And he got mad. She's a really smart gal—terrible driver. That might be how I die." A loving smile spread across his wrinkled face. "I told Cash if he was still interested in buying, then I might consider it if we could partner up. He bought the building for a good price, and in exchange I am a partner in our new venture. Bartholomew's Café Risqué. Has a good ring to it, right?"

I was at a loss for words.

"This way I can take good care of my growing family and die behind the bar doing what I love. Win, win."

I nearly toppled over "Growing family?"

Is that even possible?

"Tori's got three boys, and I'm adopting them." He turned a framed picture of three teenagers leaning against a picket fence. I knew that fence. It was the chipped white fence that surrounded Bart's two-bedroom house.

"Why didn't you just tell me from the beginning?" I said as I lowered myself into the chair opposite him.

"I thought you'd try to talk me out of it."

True.

"Look, kid. I know you're disappointed, but you're young. I've only got a few years left. Best to make the most out of it."

True.

I slouched further into the chair, suddenly feeling very sheepish for tracking Bart down.

The point of this mission was to find Bart and to be sure he was OK. Well, I found the old man, and he was more than OK—he was happy. *Very* happy.

Mission accomplished.

I took his keys from my bag and placed them on the desk. "You might need these."

His bushy brows rose. "I thought I lost those. Had to have new house keys made."

"You left them at the café," I said, my voice small.

He placed them in a drawer. "You find another job yet?"

"I haven't had much luck, but since I'm here..." I swiped a pen from the cup on his desk and held it out to him. "Would you write down the number you can be reached at and a letter of recommendation?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Two months later, with sand in my shoes and the sun on my back, I stretched my arms high above my head and gave Lilly a big push on the swing, sending her to "the moon."

"Higher!" she begged, and I obliged (after a requested "puh-lease" was delivered).

"There's my girl," Tom greeted, walking through the park's overgrown grass, his tall shadow arriving before him. He had on his business attire—suit, white shirt, tie, leather messenger bag crossed over his chest, and his dark hair was gelled to the side.

"Stop me. Stop me. Stop me," Lilly demanded, kicking her feet in panic. I did as told (after a "puh-lease"), grabbing the old chains of the swing and slowing her to a speed she deemed suitable to hurl herself off, not able to wait any longer. She raced over to her daddy. Tom picked her up and threw her high in the air. Too high. I watched with one eye shut.

"You ready to spend the weekend with Daddy?" he asked, brushing a curl out of her eyes.

"Yes!" she replied, squishing Tom's cheeks between her hands. "I can go so high on the swing. All by myself. Wanna see? Wanna see? Wanna see? Wanna see?"

"No way," Tom said with exaggerated disbelief.

"I can. All by myself. No help. Watch." With a cheerful shriek, Lilly twisted out of Tom's arms and raced to the swing. She climbed on the seat and instructed *me* to push her to the moon so *she* could do it all by *herself*. If only such illogical statements were as cute in adults as they were in toddlers, I'd have many more suitors than the zero I currently had.

"Why are we meeting at the park instead of your apartment?" Tom asked from the ledge of the sandbox.

"Fresh air." *Because my work husband left me for a stripper, and I can't find a new job, and my landlord is in the office from nine to three on Fridays, and I don't have rent, so I'm avoiding going home until he's gone.*

I'd be forced to tell Tom about my financial ruin eventually, how my work husband left me for a stripper and I was now living off unemployment and prayers. Hopefully I'd find the nerve before I took up residence on the park bench he was currently standing in front of.

"How's the job hunt going?"

"It's *going*." As in not going well.

"I have something for you." Tom flipped open his bag and pulled out a newspaper. "I'm done reading this if you want it."

"For what?" I wasn't officially homeless. Yet.

"For the classifieds. Here, take it."

I took the paper and looked it over, my other hand still pushing Lilly.

Who advertises in print only?

I hung out at the part for another two hours. By nearly three o'clock, I'd already witnessed one person peeing in the duck pond, two teenagers making out behind the slide, and three drug

deals. I stressed through two McDonald's Sundaes, a half a box of Oreos, and a donut. It was time to go home.

I gathered my belongings: sack lunch, criminal thrillers borrowed from the library, water bottle, and Tom's copy of the newspaper (which I had been using as a barrier between the mysterious goo on the park bench and my butt). I held the paper, eyeing the nearby trashcan. Seemed odd there would be a job listed in the paper that wasn't already on the sites I scoured daily. Did anyone even read the newspaper anymore? Aside from Tom?

It was worth a look. I unfolded the paper, flipped to the classified section, and glanced over the listings. As suspected, all looked familiar. I'd either applied and hadn't heard back, applied and didn't get the job, or the qualifications were well out of my realm. (Not that it stopped me from applying anyhow. Never know.) Near the bottom of the page, however, in bold lettering, was one ad I hadn't seen before. It was either new or had been lost in the filter or perhaps it really was only in print.

Seeking an on-site Apartment Property Manager for a charming 40-unit community. Applicant must have excellent organizational skills and a calming demeanor. Strong problem-solving skills are a must. Applicant must be dependable, punctual, and able to multitask without becoming easily frazzled. Starting at 30K + bonus + benefits + two-bedroom apartment + utilities. Experience a plus.

I couldn't believe what I was reading.

With salary and housing, the annual income would average close to 60K, not counting bonuses. *For forty units? That's it?* The ad was oddly specific on personality qualifications, with emphasis on "must," but without mention of software or education requirements. Seemed almost too good to be true. Yes, I didn't have any property management experience. But I lived in

an apartment, and I had been a manager. Apartment + Manager = Apartment Manager. *Voilà.*

I grabbed my cell and dialed the number listed.

"Elder Property Management," a woman answered.

"Hello, I'm calling about the manager position at the charming forty-unit community. Is it still available?"

"It is. Would you like the fax number?"

Sweet! "I would, thank you. Real quick question first. I wanted to verify—the salary is thirty thousand a year, and the apartment and utilities do or do not come out of that amount?"

"Do not. The apartment and utilities are additional compensation."

Wow. Seemed high for a relatively easy job. Granted, my own apartment manager was probably banging on my door while I was hiding in the park. So, worst case, I would have a tenant like me.

"Can I get that fax number, please?" I asked, fishing a pen and scrap of paper out of my bag. I tried not to get too ahead of myself, but this sounded like the perfect opportunity.

After all, how hard could apartment management be?

To read more of Cambria's story, check out French Vanilla & Felonies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Huss is the USA Today Bestselling author of humorous cozy mysteries. She currently resides in Southern California with her husband and five children, where she complains daily about the cost of living but will never do anything about it.

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