

CAN'T PAY MY RENT

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INTRODUCTION

I became an apartment manager by accident. My husband and I were in the market for an affordable, a.k.a. *super* cheap, two-bedroom apartment. We'd just had our first child, and the shoe-box-sized studio we were currently squished into was picking at my sanity.

We began our search at a property management company downtown. Their signs were plastered all over the rental properties we had driven by, so we figured it was a good place to start. A frazzled agent greeted us with an *I'm seconds away from losing my mind, but how can I help you* smile. After we explained what we were looking for, she handed us a list of available units and circled one of the addresses with a yellow highlighter. "This two-bedroom is nice, and we don't have an on-site manager on this property any more. Want the job?"

"Really? Um... *sure?*"

And that was it. No interview. No application. Just a quick check of my rental history and BAM—I was a bona fide apartment manager complete with a pager and laundry room keys. Call it luck. Call it fate. Call it pure stupidity on the management company's part, but to us, two broke college students, it

felt as if we'd been bumped to first class. Granted, it was a small building, but they paid seventy-five dollars a month, and we got a garage. A garage in a city with no parking was worth all the gum I had to chisel off the stairwells.

There was one caveat—location.

My husband and I differ on this subject. I say the area was... *sketch*. When I say sketch, I mean it was a pleasant surprise to find your car still parked where you left it, daily graffiti clean-up, the high-speed chase you're watching on television ends on your street because the driver is your neighbor, *sketch*.

To my husband, bless his optimistic heart, we lived fifteen minutes from the ocean (the Port of Long Beach). Therefore, we were practically at Bill Gates status.

For the record: The homeless man I caught using the community dryer as a urinal was with me on this.

Soon after moving in, we learned our apartment had been vacant for nearly a year (never a good sign), and the previous manager had been fired because she wouldn't stop watering the sidewalks. I learned this from the previous manager herself, because she was my neighbor. *Awkward*.

Less than a year later, armed with a degree and experience, I moved to a bigger community in a less "sketch" area, started The Apartment Manager's Blog and began writing the Apartment Manager Series.

During my time as an apartment manager, I found myself in many precarious situations, putting out fires daily—both figuratively and literally. You can find those tales on The Apartment Manager's Blog. Yet through it all, there were two problems I could always count on.

One: Residents who think sidewalks are an ashtray, trashcan and toilet.

Two: Collecting the damn rent.

Come the second of every month, I felt like Oprah, passing

out three-day notices like, “*You* get a three-day notice! *You* get a three-day notice! *You all* get three-day notices!”

Once the notifications to “pay now or move” were distributed, the excuses began rolling in, and if I was lucky, a check or two.

I understand life can thrust tenants into financial hardships without a moment’s notice—loss of job, sickness, accidents or even death. These, however, were the exception. Not the rule.

The rule went something like, “I’m not paying my rent because I can hear my neighbor pee every morning.” (True story.)

When it comes to the rental payment process, roughly two zillion entities must be considered: planet alignment, wind speed, sport season, whether it’s a leap year...

Just when you think you’ve seen and heard it all, a resident tells you he or she is not paying the rent because, “A ghost stole my money order.” (*Jina, Arizona*)

I posted to my Facebook page and on my blog, asking apartment managers to share the best “I can’t pay my rent” excuse they’d heard. Hundreds of hilarious replies pinged my inbox. I laughed at all of them, but had to condense them into a month’s worth of excuses. Thirty-one reasons life (and misplaced priorities) got in the way of people paying their rent.

This is the kind of stuff my main character in the Apartment Manager Series, Cambria, has to put up with. Well, when she’s not busy watching detective shows or pining over the cute maintenance guy. Cambria starts out completely clueless, but quickly learns she must stand her ground if she wants to keep her job. So she’ll be weighing in on each excuse. Some reasons are decent, some reasons are unbelievable... all are real excuses real people gave to real apartment managers.

Because if you’re going to be late, at least make it entertaining.

DAY ONE

DAY ONE

Excuse heard by Myranda from Toledo, Ohio:

“I’m a male model for Walmart, and my accountant is out of town.”

Cambria’s verdict:

Unless your paycheck is “Always a low price” too, your modeling stint should cover the rent.

DAY TWO

DAY TWO

Excuse heard by Beth from Nova Scotia:

“Rent’s gonna bounce cuz I need drinkin’ money for the long weekend.”

Cambria’s verdict:

Hey, emergency situations come up. I get it. Not that this is one of those, but I’m sure it felt like it at the time. Especially if you’ve been having the weekend I’ve been having. Still gotta pay that rent though. Plus late fees.

DAY THREE

DAY THREE

Excuse heard by Hailey from North Texas:

[Pulling into the lot in a brand-new car]

“After buying this baby, I didn’t have much left of my paycheck. I’ll pay you when I get paid again... in two weeks.”

Cambria’s verdict:

I’ll have your unit re-rented in two weeks.

DAY FOUR

DAY FOUR

Excuse heard by Chris from North Carolina:

“Please don’t file court papers on me this month. It’s my college graduation, and I just HAVE to see Beyoncé in concert tonight! And since this is such a *monumental* milestone, I just *know* you’ll understand. Can you put me on a payment plan instead? Please?”

(Chris reports “it took everything in me to not sing ‘to the left, to the left, everything you own in the box to the left...’”)

Cambria’s verdict:

“I could have another you in a minute...” And trust me, as a Single Lady, no one loves Beyoncé more than me. Still, even Beyoncé pays her “Bills, Bills, Bills.”

DAY FIVE

DAY FIVE

Excuse heard by Jeannie from Deer Park, Texas:

“I had no money left for toilet paper, so I used my rent money.”

Cambria's verdict:

I'm curious, did you use the rent money *to buy* toilet paper or *as* toilet paper? Never mind, I don't want to know.

DAY SIX

DAY SIX

Excuse heard by Mandy from St. Louis, Missouri:

“My dad froze my bank account because he found out that I like to party and that I was sleeping with my teacher.”

Cambria's verdict:

Let's hope your teacher has a couch you can sleep on.

DAY SEVEN

DAY SEVEN

Excuse heard by Michelle from Shreveport, Louisiana:

“I can’t pay my rent because it’s too expensive.”

Cambria’s verdict:

Sometimes paying the rent doesn’t seem fair. And sometimes collecting rent from people who should have known better doesn’t seem fair either.

DAY EIGHT

DAY EIGHT

Excuse heard by Diana from Wisconsin:

“I can’t pay my rent this month because I need money too!”

Cambria’s verdict:

You and me both, honey. But you still need to pay up.

DAY NINE

DAY NINE

Excuse heard by Lloy from California:

“The owners have more money than I do, and they don’t need it this month!”

Cambria’s verdict:

Then I guess you don’t need a roof over your head this month!

DAY TEN

DAY TEN

Excuse heard by Gina from Western Montana:

“I’ve been under a lot of stress this month.”

Cambria’s verdict:

I sympathize with you, I really do. Because I’ve been under a lot of stress from people who don’t pay the rent.

DAY ELEVEN

DAY ELEVEN

Excuse heard by Laura from Wooster, Ohio:

“I used a payday loan to pay for my vacation, and now I have to pay them back.”

Cambria's verdict:

Enjoy your trip! While you're there, ask if they have vacancies for the next few months—looks like you're going to need a place to stay!

DAY TWELVE

DAY TWELVE

Excuse heard by Irene from Napa, California:

“I didn’t pay my rent because I was on vacation and didn’t even think about it till I was already gone.”

Cambria’s verdict:

I might have accepted this excuse if you brought me a souvenir.

DAY THIRTEEN

DAY THIRTEEN

Excuse heard by Courtney from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma:

“I just need to pay the last installment on my Jamaica vacation.”

Cambria's verdict:

“Jamaican” me crazy!

DAY FOURTEEN

DAY FOURTEEN

Excuse heard by Bill from Nevada:

“Someone broke into my apartment and took all my toothpaste and the money order. I couldn’t call the cops because they’d confiscate my weed.”

Cambria’s verdict:

Look on the bright side: At least they didn’t steal your weed.
Now fire up that rent check.

DAY FIFTEEN

DAY FIFTEEN

Excuse heard by Adrian from Durango, Colorado:

“I can’t pay my rent because you made me get the electricity in my name.”

Cambria’s verdict:

Shocking! Get it? *Shock-ing.*

DAY SIXTEEN

DAY SIXTEEN

Excuse heard by Mary from San Jose, California:

“My rent isn’t late. The money order is dated the 5th. I just didn’t bring it to you yet because I don’t have a pen. Don’t charge me a late fee. You can see the date is for the 5th.”

Cambria’s verdict:

See this pen right here? The one I’m writing your eviction letter with? You can borrow that one.

DAY SEVENTEEN

DAY SEVENTEEN

Excuse heard by Marisa from Washington, D.C.:

“You took too long to cash my check, so I didn’t think you were going to cash it. I had other bills to pay. It’s your fault it bounced.”

Cambria’s verdict:

The next thing that’s gonna bounce around here is you.

DAY EIGHTEEN

DAY EIGHTEEN

Excuse heard by Birgit from the Greater Albany area, New York:

“I didn’t have any money left after you made me buy all those cleaning supplies when you failed my apartment inspection for housekeeping.”

Cambria’s verdict:

The Dollar Store has a variety of supplies for—you guessed it—a dollar. Generic Windex may smell funky, but it works like a charm. Or, you know, you could use a trashcan instead of the floor, and your inspections should go a lot more smoothly.

DAY NINETEEN

DAY NINETEEN

Excuse heard by Lisa from Texas:

“I can’t pay the rent, my mom passed away.”

(Except according to the apartment manager’s notes on the conversation log in the file, this happened several times. And then one time the mother called and said her son would be late with the rent!)

Cambria’s verdict:

Perhaps you can cultivate your ability for bringing people back from the dead and turn it into a paying gig. One that pays the rent.

DAY TWENTY

DAY TWENTY

Excuse heard by Judy from North Dakota:

“I can’t pay my rent because my grandma died.”

(This person used this excuse three times in six months.
That’s a lot of grandmas!)

Cambria’s verdict:

You could have two grandmas, some step-grandmas and even some grandmas-in-law, so I’m going to let this slide. For one day. During that day, I suggest you find someone to remove the hex on you before another one of your grandmas dies!

DAY TWENTY-ONE

DAY TWENTY-ONE

Excuse heard by Sheila from Austin, Texas:

“I didn’t pay my rent because I had a dream I was going to need the money.”

Cambria’s verdict:

That’s funny, I had a dream you would pay the rent... then I woke up.

DAY TWENTY-TWO

DAY TWENTY-TWO

Excuse heard by Marisa from Washington, D.C.:

“I’m in New York City right now, and there’s a snowstorm coming, so FedEx and the post office are closed.”

(It was sixty degrees. With a possibility of flurries... in two days.)

Cambria’s verdict:

Mother Nature can be cruel. But not as cruel as my boss when I don’t collect all the rents.

DAY TWENTY-THREE

DAY TWENTY-THREE

Excuse heard by Sheila from San Antonio, Texas:

“I can’t pay my rent because I couldn’t leave my pad, because my wife saw a snake cross the sidewalk by the front door.”

Cambria’s verdict:

This may almost be a legitimate excuse. *Almost.*

DAY TWENTY-FOUR

DAY TWENTY-FOUR

Excuse heard by Kelli from South Carolina:

“My car got broken into yesterday.”

The apartment manager asked if they had called the cops.

“Well, no...”

Cambria's verdict:

That timing is not suspicious at all. Nope. Not. At. All.

DAY TWENTY-FIVE

DAY TWENTY-FIVE

Excuse heard by Kat from Charlotte, North Carolina:

“I can’t pay my rent because my identity was stolen.”
(That happened seven times during the lease term.)

Cambria’s verdict:

Might I suggest you stop giving out your social security and bank account numbers to anyone who asks for them? Specifically Nigerian princesses in distress contacting you via email?

DAY TWENTY-SIX

DAY TWENTY-SIX

Excuse heard by Jenni from LaGrange, Georgia:

“I had to get my baby’s Christmas gift off layaway before they put it back.”

Cambria’s verdict:

I have a three-year old daughter, so I get it. But you’re going to need an apartment to put that Christmas tree and presents in, aren’t you?

DAY TWENTY-SEVEN

DAY TWENTY-SEVEN

Excuse heard by Cara from Sacramento, California:

“I didn’t pay my rent this month because it’s December, and it’s Christmas... I thought you would understand.”

Cambria’s verdict:

I sympathize, and I understand. But I’m still gonna need that check. Merry Christmas!

DAY TWENTY-EIGHT

DAY TWENTY-EIGHT

Excuse heard by Leah from Panama City Beach, Florida:

“I can’t pay my rent because I got arrested during Spring Break and had to use it for bail money.”

Cambria’s verdict:

If you’re going to use this excuse, then you’ve got to tell the whole story.

DAY TWENTY-NINE

DAY TWENTY-NINE

Excuse heard by Amanda from Texas:

“I laid my money order on the passenger seat of my convertible, and well, the top was down and the wind picked it up and took it away.”

Cambria's verdict:

No problem, it could have happened to anyone. Anyone who has a convertible and doesn't understand how wind works.

DAY THIRTY

DAY THIRTY

Excuse heard by Jack from Orange County, California:

“I didn’t have enough to pay the security deposit on my new apartment.”

(Said to the Superior Court Judge hearing the tenant contest the apartment manager’s eviction.)

Cambria’s verdict:

Out with the old and in with the new. Still, I’m gonna need your last month’s rent.

DAY THIRTY-ONE

DAY THIRTY-ONE

Excuse heard by Daisy from New York, New York:

“I didn’t pay my rent because I was too lazy to mail it.”

Cambria’s verdict:

When all else fails, be honest. Pay the late fee, and I’ll forgive you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Huss is a blogger and bestselling author. She can change a diaper in fifteen seconds flat, is a master overanalyzer, has a gift for making any social situation awkward and yet, somehow, she still has friends. Erin shares hilarious property management horror stories at [The Apartment Manager's Blog](#) and her own daily horror stories at [erinhuss.com](#). 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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OTHER TITLES BY ERIN HUSS

The Lost Souls Lane Mystery Series

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Read on for the first chapter from the first book in each series.

A LOST SOULS LANE MYSTERY SERIES

Chapter One from Making a Medium (Book One)

"Take a seat."

I do as told. The chair is straight-backed with no arms. Not constructed for comfort or style, this chair is practical and to the point. Much like the man sitting behind the desk. I cross my ankles, pick off the few strands of cat hair stuck to my skirt, and rub my hands together.

"Are you cold?" Brian Windsor asks.

"No." I pull my scarf tighter.

He checks the thermostat. "It's seventy-five degrees?"

"I'm perfectly fine, thank you," I say with a smile, even though it feels like we're sitting in an igloo. "Here is my application." I slide the papers across the desk and concentrate hard to keep my teeth from chattering.

Brian skims the first page. "*Zoe Lane*. Any relation to Mary and John Lane?"

"They're my parents," I say.

"I didn't know the Lanes had children."

"It's just me."

Brian's brow is wrinkled. I'm sure he's wondering how in a town of fewer than 2,000 people, he and I have never crossed paths. He's not much older than I am, and my parents are real estate agents. Their faces are on everything from grocery carts to park benches. Everyone either knows John and Mary Lane or they know of them. Heck, this is Fernn Valley. Everyone either knows or knows *of* everyone.

Except me.

I don't get out much. I would blend in with the wall if I could. And nearly do. The floral wallpaper in the lobby looks awfully close to the pattern on my blouse.

"Why do you want to work at *The Fernn Valley Gazette*?" Brian leans back and adjusts his glasses.

"*The Gazette* is a respectable publication," I say, trying not to sound too eager. "I read it every week. My favorite column is 'Squirrel of the Month.' I enjoy the crossword puzzle and reading about the town events. The article you wrote about our Fourth of July parade was compelling journalism."

Brian blinks a few times then flips to the second page of my application. "You forgot to fill in your work experience." He clicks a pen and stares at me. I think he's waiting for me to rattle off my previous employers. There's only one problem.

"I've never had a job, per se."

He flips to the first page of my application to verify that, yes, I am in fact twenty-three years old.

"I write the MSL descriptions for my parents' listing," I quickly add and hike up my sock, which has managed to slip below my kneecap. "I just don't get paid to do it. But I'm a quick learner."

Brian puts my application down and rocks in his chair with his fingers steepled. His desk is pristine, and the room smells freshly Lysolled. His brown hair is parted on the side with wisps

around his forehead. His glasses are dark-rimmed, and he smiles without showing his teeth—all this, of course, I know from his black-and-white editorial picture printed in the paper every week. What I didn't know before now was that behind those glasses are gray eyes with specs of brown in them. I didn't know he had freckles across his nose. I didn't know he was tall, at least a foot taller than I am.

I didn't know he was even more gorgeous in person.

"Unfortunately," Brian starts to say, and my stomach plunges. "We're looking for someone with more experience."

"But the ad said it was an entry-level position." I pull the paper from my briefcase. "See, right here. *Entry-level position*," I read aloud. "I'm happy to do office tasks like faxing papers, answering phones, or making a fresh pot of hot chocolate in the morning. Whatever you need."

Brian appears a bit shell-shocked, and I'm not exactly sure why. I make an excellent pot of hot chocolate. "We're looking to bring someone on who has fresh ideas. To shake things up around here."

"I have fresh ideas," I say louder than I meant to. "For example, what if you did squirrel of the *week* instead of the month? Papers would fly off the shelf!"

"I don't think it's a good fit." Brian stands and extends a professional hand. "I wish you luck."

Guess that's my cue to leave. "Thank you for taking the time to meet with me." I slip my hand into his, and he flinches.

"Your hand is ice cold."

"It's a glandular issue," I say with instant regret.

"Uh ... I'm sorry to hear about that." Brian avoids eye contact. "Let me get the door for you."

I pick up my briefcase and wait until his back is turned before I smack myself on the forehead. *Wow*. Brian is right. My hands are cold. Like touching fresh snow. Even my fingertips

are numb. I've had bouts of cold flashes before, but nothing like this. If I weren't currently standing and breathing, I'd swear I was dead. I check my pulse just to be sure. Blood is pumping. Heart is pounding. Good.

Brian clears his throat to grab my attention.

Oh, right. Didn't get the job. Need to leave. Got it.

I exit into the main working space. Desks are pushed together in groups of two. It looks very much like a busy newsroom—minus the busy. Two employees are playing solitaire on their computers, and the woman in the corner is filing her nails. Everyone is dressed casually and appears pleasant, except for the man standing beside the copier, the one wearing a fitted tan suit, dark tie, shiny black shoes, and a vintage homburg hat. He's staring at me with such intensity that a sharp chill runs down my back and through my legs. I rush out to the lobby and push on the door several times until I realize it must be pulled open.

Outside, I take a seat on a bench and check the time. The interview took less than ten minutes. I have an hour before my ride will be here, which gives me enough time to walk down to Butter Bakery and buy two glazed donuts and a scone. I hate to eat my feelings, but I can't help the disappointment.

Jobs are nearly impossible to come by in Fernn Valley. When I read the help wanted ad in last week's paper, I sincerely thought this was the perfect opportunity for me to enter the workforce, gain independence, and maybe even move out—one day.

My parents and I have been reading *The Gazette* together since I was a child. What a thrill it would have been to work for a newspaper. What a thrill it would have been to receive a paycheck. What a thrill it would have been to work alongside Brian Windsor, editor-in-chief.

I'm not exactly sure where it went wrong. I was professional

and polite. My handwriting on the application was pristine, and I have on my best outfit.

Brian wants fresh ideas?

Pfft.

I have plenty of fresh ideas ... I just can't think of what they are at this moment, but I know they're in there. If only I'd been given the chance.

I slip off my pumps, place them in my briefcase, and pull out my walking shoes. There's a smudge near the sole, and I scrub it off with a wet wipe. The shoes mold around my feet, just as the infomercial promised they would. I stand at the crosswalk, look both ways, and step onto the street. My body has finally warmed, and I unwrap the scarf from around my neck. My favorite scarf—a chic, pink chiffon fabric my mother bought me for Christmas—

A blaring horn grabs my attention. I look up just in time to see the car racing toward me. Next thing I know, I'm staring up at the blue sky, and dots dance around my periphery until my vision tunnels and the world goes black.

"You're not dead."

"It sure feels like it." I sit up slowly. A whoosh of nausea hits me, and I fall back down. I'm in Dr. Karman's office, lying on an exam table, and I have no recollection of how I got here.

"I promise you're very much alive." Dr. Karman swings his stethoscope around his neck and flashes a light into my eyes. "You do have a mild concussion."

"Mild?" This doesn't feel *mild*. This feels like a high school percussion band has taken up residence in my cranium. "But earlier today, I was freezing and my hands were—"

"Zoe, dear." Dr. Karman cuts me off. "Like I've told you

many times, it's perfectly normal to get cold now and then. You're a healthy young woman with no glandular issues."

"Except for a concussion," I say.

"Except for a *mild* knock on the head." He turns around and washes his hands in the sink.

I've never been a fan of Dr. Karman. He's got more hair in his nose than he does on his head, and he smells like corn. So does his office. The room has white walls with red trim and a picture of a clown framed above the exam table. The same creepy clown that's been staring at me since I was seven.

"It was Old Man LeRoy." Dr. Karman pulls two paper towels from the dispenser and dries his hands. "I've been telling him for years it's time to stop driving, but he won't listen. This should give him a wake-up call. He's badly shaken up."

That makes two of us. "Where is he?"

"We had an ambulance take him to the hospital in Trucker to be sure he's okay."

Old Man LeRoy is shaken up and taken to the hospital. I get hit by a car, lose consciousness, and am sitting in the pediatric wing of the town doctor's office.

This feels *off*.

"You need to watch where you're going, dear," the doctor says with a stern shake of his finger. "Old Man LeRoy said you appeared out of nowhere."

"Well, Old Man LeRoy is also like a hundred years old." I rub my head. "Shouldn't I get an X-ray or a CT scan?"

Dr. Karman steps on the pedal of the trashcan, the lid flips up, and he tosses his dirty towels in. "All you need is Motrin. I'll be right back." He leaves and closes the door behind him.

I sit up, more successfully this time. My skirt is covered in dirt, presumably from Old Man LeRoy's clunker of a car. I'm not sure he's ever washed that thing.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" intones a deep male voice.

I yelp and nearly fall off the table. It's Homburg-Hat Guy from *The Gazette*, and he's standing right in front of me. "Wh-wha-what at are you doing in—"

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"No. I-I was in the crosswalk and—"

"Everyone can hear LeRoy's Buick clanking from a mile away."

"But ... but ... I was in the crosswalk." I don't know who this man is or why he's here, but I shouldn't have to defend myself to anyone.

Pedestrians have the right of way!

"This is just great." Homburg-Hat Guy paces the room, mumbling to himself. "What a waste of my time."

"Excuse me?"

"You're a dud!" He waves his arm around. "You're wasting my time, and you dress like an old woman."

"I do not." I grasp my pearls. "No one asked you to come here."

"You will do your job." He narrows his eyes. "Do you understand me?"

"I didn't get the job!"

There's a knock on the door, and the doctor returns. Thank goodness. He can kick this rude man out of here.

"I have eight hundred milligrams of Motrin for you. It should take the edge off." He drops the pills into my palm and hands me a small cup of water.

"Thank you." I sit up a little taller and take my meds. "Now, can you please ask this man to—"

Oh, no.

I can smell the Aqua Net coming.

"Where is my daughter?" Mom comes barreling into the

room. "There you are, my baby girl." She hugs me so tight my back pops. "I heard you threw yourself in front of a car. Did the interview go that badly?"

"I didn't *throw* myself. I was in the crosswalk and Old Man LeRoy hit me."

"Oh, you sweet dear." Mom smooths a strand of hair off my forehead. "Everyone can hear Old Man LeRoy's car from a mile away. You need to be more vigilant."

"Told you," says Homburg-Hat Guy. He's now in the corner under the ABC poster, picking at his back teeth.

"She has a mild concussion," Dr. Karman explains to my mom. "I gave her Motrin, and she can have another dose in eight hours." He hands her a pill bottle. "I suspect she'll feel fine by tomorrow."

"Good thing your mommy came to help you," Homburg-Hat Guy says. "How old are you again?"

"You know what." I leap off the table, and the world goes a bit tipsy.

"Hold on." Mom snakes her arm around my waist. "Goodness, Zoe. You're so cold. Let's get you home."

"Good idea." I drape my arm around her shoulders, and she helps me outside. The sun hurts my eyes, and I use my hand as a visor. Dad is at the helm of our minivan and gets out to slide open the door.

"That's your car?" Homburg Guy folds over in a laughing fit like he's never seen a real estate agent's vehicle before. On the sliding doors are pictures of my parents in matching denim, with my dad sporting a Tom Selleck mustache and my mom sporting a perm. He's giving her a piggyback ride, and they both are giving the camera a thumbs-up. *We're in your lane* is printed in blocky neon-green lettering along the bottom. It's the same picture and slogan they've had since they got their license. *It's memorable*, my mom had said. Can't argue with that.

"It's the tacky mobile," Homburg Guy says, still laughing.

"Leave me alone!"

"I don't think you should be walking on your own," Mom says.

"Not you."

Dad helps me into the back of the van, and I slump down into the captain's chair and close my eyes. My head beats in time with my heart, and all I want to do is sleep.

Dad starts the car and eases away from the curb. "Do you want to stop and get ice cream?"

Homburg Guy is in the seat beside me. "Ice cream? Do they spoon feed it to you, too?"

"Wh-wh-how did you get ..." *Gah!* I can't formulate a sentence. Must be the concussion. I rub my temples and try again. "What are you doing here?"

Mom turns around in her seat. "We were at an open house when we got the call from Dr. Karman and rushed over."

"Couldn't you have come by yourselves?"

Dad looks at me in the rearview mirror. "I'm not sure what you're talking about, pumpkin."

"Pumpkin?" Homburg Guy shakes his head.

"Leave me alone!"

Mom and Dad share a glance then stare straight ahead. "I know you're in pain, sweetie, but there's no need to be so rude," Mom says.

"Me being rude? Wha-how-my. *Gah!* Never mind." I cross my arms and close my eyes.

When I open them, we're home and Homburg Guy is gone. Hallelujah! Mom and Dad must have dropped him off somewhere. It's a good thing I didn't get the job. I'd hate to have to deal with him five days a week. He has a lot of nerve showing up at the doctor's office and making fun of my clothes and calling me a dud.

I'm not a dud.

I'm a respectable, educated, and self-reliant woman!

My parents help me inside, and Mom makes a bed for me on the couch. Dad pulls a blanket up to my chin. "Are you comfortable?"

I nod yes. I'm quite comfortable. There's no place like home.

Jabba, my cat, jumps up onto the couch and nestles close, purring so loudly it sounds as if he's about to explode. I've never heard Jabba purr before. I didn't think he knew how. He showed up on our doorstep ten years ago, and he has never allowed us to pet, cuddle, get near, or look him directly in the eyes. He mostly lies around and eats.

Also, he looks like Jabba the Hutt.

Hence the name.

Mom puts a cool washcloth over my eyes, and it feels wonderful.

"I'll stay with her, and you go finish with the Attwood listing," Mom says to Dad.

"No, I'll stay, and you go."

"Neither of you needs to stay." I peek up from under my washcloth. "I'm fine. Stop fussing. Go work."

"Are you sure?" Mom asks.

"Dr. Karman said it's a mild concussion," I say. "Nothing to worry about. You can't afford to lose the Attwood listing. Please go, and if I need anything, I'll call you."

They hesitate but with a little more coaxing agree to leave and promise to be back shortly. I replace the washcloth and cuddle up with the blanket. Jabba curls up on my chest and even allows me to pet his head a few times before he bites my hand.

What a day.

I didn't get the job, got hit by a car, and was harassed by a man in a hat.

What's his problem anyway? He sees me once and is able to ... oh, I get it.

I chuckle to myself.

It's obvious.

He's in love with me.

Homburg Guy is the town's bad boy, and I'm the shy girl. He's no good for me and he knows it. But he can't help himself and it kills him. When he witnessed the accident, it scared him and he took it out on me. He's angry now, but then one day, while we're passing by each other at the market or when we're caught alone in an elevator, he'll pin me up against the wall, rip open his shirt to expose his chiseled abs, and kiss me. Then he'll stalk off and pretend it never happened. We'll do the back and forth thing for a week or two until I either get knocked-up or we wake up one morning hung-over and married.

I read a lot of hot romance novels, so I know how this kind of thing goes.

Homburg Guy is handsome, I'll give him that. Light hair, blue eyes, square jaw, very All-American Boy.

I'm short with dark blonde hair and big brown eyes. Mom's hairdresser said I should add in highlights, but I don't have a source of income, so dark blonde it is.

Jabba interrupts my thoughts by digging his claws into my chest and hissing.

Ouch!

I throw the washcloth off my face and jolt upright, sending Jabba to the floor.

"Good, you're up," says a familiar voice.

I turn my head. Homburg Guy is in my living room!

Okay, so maybe it's not a hot romance novel but more so a psychological thriller and this guy is my stalker. Or this is some freaky version of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Either way, I don't do bondage.

I scream again.

Jabba hisses.

We do this for a while.

"Stop that. Do you want your neighbors to hear?" Homburg Guy says.

"Yes!" I run to the kitchen and pull out a butcher knife. "Stay away!"

Homburg Guy looks at me as if I'm being ridiculous. Like his breaking into my house is completely normal. As if I'm the one acting crazy in this scenario.

"Back away!" I hold the knife up. "Back off!"

"Put that thing away and get to work," Homburg Guy says.

"I already told you, I didn't get the job!"

"Not at the newspaper, you nitwit. If you want to write about this crap town, I don't care."

"Watch your language."

He squints his eyes. "Crap."

"Stop it."

"Crap. Crap. Crap. Crap. Dammit!" He runs his hands down his face.

Jabba strolls into the kitchen and rises to his back legs, as if to appear taller, and bares his teeth.

"That is the ugliest cat I've ever seen," Hamburg Guy says, staring down at Jabba. "I can't believe I'm stuck with some crazy cat lady."

"I am not a crazy cat lady!" My hands are shaking so badly the knife slips from my grip and falls to the ground. "Leave my house at once," I demand.

"No."

"Leave my house right now!"

"No!"

I grab the cookie jar and hurl it at him with all my might. It goes right through him and crashes against the wall.

Through him!

The cookie jar went *through* his body and is now shattered into tiny pieces on the ground.

I fall into the fetal position. This is the concussion. I'm hallucinating. That's it. Once the swelling in my brain goes down, I'll be fine. Perfectly fine. Fine. Fine. Fine.

"Are you done with your nervous breakdown?" he asks.

"No," I say, rocking with my head between my knees. "You're not real. Leave me alone."

"I can't leave you alone. We have work to do. Now get up and do your job."

"I saw you at *The Gazette*, and now my injured brain has manifested an intense hallucination."

Homburg Guy grunts. "If I were a hallucination, could I do this?" He looks around the room and shakes his head. "I've got nothing, actually ... Look." He lowers to one knee. "You need to put on your big girl panties and act like an adult, because we've got stuff to do and not a lot of time to do it. Suck it up."

My hallucination is mean.

I reach my arm up and feel around on the counter until my hand lands on the cordless phone. My fingers shake as I dial.

"Are you calling Mommy and Daddy?"

I put the phone to my ear. "Mom, I need you to take me to the hospital."

Homburg Guy slaps his hands over his eyes. "We don't have time!"

"Right now," I cry.

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Seeking an on-site Apartment Property Manager for a charming 40-unit community. Applicant must have excellent organizational skills and a calming demeanor.

"Calm down!"

Honk.

"You're not the only one in a hurry."

Hooonk.

"Go around!"

The silver BMW roared past me. I turned to deliver a mad glare, but Captain Douche was too busy looking at his phone to notice.

"Pay attention to the road!" I yelled to his rear bumper. "Honestly, no one can drive in this city." I flipped down my visor. The zit in the middle of my freckled forehead pulsed in the tiny mirror. "You really couldn't have waited until tomorrow?" I asked the zit.

I reached over and grabbed my makeup bag, smothered the monstrosity in concealer, added a touch of gloss to my lips, and mascaraed my lashes into tiny tarantula legs. I had to look my best today. One more week of unemployment and I'd be left with no other option than to become a phone sex operator by night who flips burgers by day. I had applications for both jobs in case this interview led to yet another dead end.

Hooonk!

"Take it easy." I flipped the visor back and continued maneuvering my dented Civic through the crowded streets of Los Angeles. I grabbed the past-due phone bill out of my bag and double-checked the directions scribbled on the back.

Right on City Court.

I looked up as the street sign for City Court drifted by my window.

"Crap." I made a hasty U-turn, which inspired another cacophony of horns. A man wearing a dirty Spiderman costume weighed in on my poor driving habits by flipping me a double-fisted bird. Even if I didn't come *that* close to him or his overflowing grocery cart.

My hand automatically went up as a feeble apology before I made the sharp turn.

And there I saw it. An imposing ten-story building. A cobblestoned walkway led up to a pair of whimsical wrought-iron doors. Brilliant red and yellow flowers were strategically dispersed throughout the lavish landscaping. A sign, welcoming those who were clearly richer than me, hung above a glistening koi pond near the entrance. It was beautiful.

I parked under the sign pointing to the leasing office, shoved the phone bill into my bag, and polished off the pint of French Vanilla wedged between my thighs. Ice cream was my go-to coping mechanism—and I'd been doing a whole lot of *coping* lately. I crawled over the center console and passenger seat to

exit the car. The driver's side door had been stuck shut since an expensive meeting with a runaway dumpster a few months ago. It was annoying and awkward, especially on the days when I managed to squeeze my butt into a pair of skinny jeans. My little Civic still managed to get me from point A to point B (usually), and that was all I could afford to care about.

As I stepped onto the sidewalk, I flattened the front of my dress with my hands and brushed off the lint clinging to my thighs. I had on an Anthropologie dress worth more than my car—the one designated for interviews and first dates only because it minimized my butt, elongated my waist, was dry clean only, and the navy color matched my eyes. Sadly, it hadn't been getting much action in the last—*oh let me see*—four years.

Rolling my shoulders back, I took a deep, calming breath. The irony that I was about to interview for a job as an apartment manager when I was nearing eviction from my own apartment was not lost on me. It had been six months since I was laid off. Finding a job when the qualifications portion of your résumé ran three deep wasn't easy. Neither was being a single mother. The phone call for this interview couldn't have come at a better time. Decent salary, apartment, utilities, medical benefits, and bonuses—it was the perfect opportunity to get Lilly and me back on our feet. I only hoped my lack of apartment management experience would be overshadowed by my obvious desperation.

Setting my focus on the whimsical doors, I charged toward—*oomph!*

There was a step.

A big step.

A step I didn't see until my hands and knees were plastered atop the scorching cement and I was staring at it.

"Are you OK?" A pencil thin, tube top-donning brunette stood over me, sucking on a Tootsie Pop.

"I think so." I peeled myself off the ground and brushed away the chalky debris coating my knees. "That step came out of nowhere."

The brunette flipped her long ponytail over her shoulder. "Yeah, it happens a lot. Like, that's why they put up the sign." She pointed her sucker to the caution sign with a person about to plunge to the ground like I had just done. "But it doesn't seem to help. I totally see people trip here, like, all the time."

"Do you live here?"

"Nope, my Boo lives next door."

"Next door? There's another apartment complex on this street?" Panicked, I checked my watch. The interview was scheduled to start in five minutes. Story of my life—I was never late. I was always *almost* late, enough to be a frazzled, sweaty mess when I did arrive.

She pointed her sucker toward a row of tall shrubs. "Yeah, it's over there."

"Dang it... Thank you!" I yelled over my shoulder as I ran to the foliage fence blocking the neighboring apartment building. This one was smaller. Two-story with gated parking to the left. Pots filled with succulents lined the chipped brick walkway that led to a pair of sad-looking brown doors. No welcome sign. No koi pond, but a mud puddle near the entrance had a cloud of tiny insects hovering above it.

I dug out the instructions from my bag: 10, 405, *Exit SM, Sepulveda, right on City Court. Apartment building on the right. Ask for Joyce.* That was it. That was all I wrote. No apartment name. No address. That would make too much sense.

I ran back to the first apartment complex. Standing between the two buildings, I shaded my eyes with my hand, trying to decide which one might house Joyce. The first building was much nicer. So I turned and ran toward the second one, because running toward mediocrity felt more natural.

When I reached the doors, I rested my hand on the rusty knob. *You've got this*, I told myself. *You are a strong, confident woman with better-than-average abilities and a kid to feed*. I took another deep breath, pushed open the door, and entered...1988?

I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the pink and blue striped wallpaper. A glass coffee table was surrounded by an overstuffed peach leather couch and two floral-printed armchairs. Below my Payless pumps was teal carpet, followed by yellow linoleum with a repeating brown octagon pattern across it. The track lighting gave the room a yellowish, hazy tint, and a ceiling fan clinked with each turn of its golden blades, pushing the stale, nicotine-laced air around the ugly room.

To my right was an enclosed office with a waist-high counter (also teal) overlooking the lobby. A frail old woman with scarlet hair sat behind a desk, her hands clasped and brown eyes on me.

"Hi. Are you Joyce?" I asked, hoping she'd say no and direct me to the spa-like resort next door.

"I am," she answered in a barely audible rasp. Despite the hundred-degree outside temperature, she wore a sweater, which hung loosely around her bony frame. Just looking at the cashmere caused my sweat glands to produce in double time.

"I'm Cambria Clyne. I have an interview with Patrick for the apartment management position. His secretary told me to meet him here at noon."

"You sure you really want *this* job?"

"Yes, I do," I answered slowly, unsure of what that was supposed to mean.

She regarded me for several awkward seconds before speaking. "OK then. Up to you." She stood on shaky legs and shuffled up to the counter. The two-foot journey looked painful. "Nice to meet you, Cambria. I'm the current manager." I took her proffered hand. Her palm was cold, but her eyes had a hint of

warmth to them. "Patrick should be here in a bit. Would you like me to show you around while you wait?"

"That would be great, thank you." I smiled.

Joyce motioned for me to walk around the counter to the door that separated the lobby from the enclosed office. I followed her through the cramped space, squeezing past a row of tarnished filing cabinets and an L-shaped oak desk. She opened the door behind the desk, and—*bam!*

The nicotine air punched me in the lungs, knocking me back against the doorjamb. It was as if I'd walked directly into a cigarette. I placed my hand over my chest, mentally apologizing to all my vital organs.

Joyce stood in the middle of a square kitchen. The blue tiled counters were piled high with boxes and rolls of bubble wrap.

"Once we're gone, this would be your apartment," she said, fanning her arm out like Vanna White. "If you get the job."

I nodded in appreciation and took a gulp of air through clenched teeth, hoping they'd work as a filter. The lack of oxygen caused my head to beat in time with my heart, but I wasn't about to let a little cancerous air stop me. I *desperately* needed the income.

The kitchen looked out to a spacious living room with Smurf blue carpet and two long windows overlooking a courtyard. Asleep in the middle of the room was an old man with a beer in one hand, remote in the other, and *The People's Court* playing on the television opposite him and his purple recliner. Not just any old purple either—a two-toned mauve and lavender corduroy chair with a coordinating couch and love seat. Clearly, someone was colorblind.

I followed Joyce down a short hallway and into a bedroom.

"This is perfect for an office or guest room," she said, sliding the mirrored closet door open to reveal a space larger than my current bathroom.

"I actually have a daughter, and she'd love this room." Truth is, I would too. I'd been sharing a room with Lilly since the day she was born. The *Frozen* décor wasn't doing me any favors in the love department.

"Are you married?" Joyce rasped.

I shook my head.

"Interesting..." She rubbed her chin. "How old is your daughter?"

"She's three going on sixteen," I answered with an exaggerated roll of my eyes.

Joyce let out a laugh that quickly turned into a procession of dry, hacking coughs. She placed her veiny hand on the wall for support as her coughs morphed into more of a gurgling sound. My joke wasn't *that* funny. Nor was it original, and certainly not worth dying over.

I placed my hand on her back, feeling the ridges of her spine under the cashmere. "Can I get you something?"

She took a slow, gravelly breath then brushed off my concern with a wave of her hand. "I'm fine. Don't fuss. Let's move on." She let out one more cough before pushing past me.

I trailed behind, worried Joyce may not make it through the tour.

We next entered a room slightly bigger than the first with an attached walk-in closet and bathroom. Despite the smoke and the blue carpet and the yellow popcorn ceilings, I was in love. To have that amount of space, in a neighborhood I could never afford otherwise was unfathomable. On *Rent or Run* (a trusty app tenants use to rate their apartment building and let prospective renters know if they should rent there or run away) the place had 5 stars for safety, 5 stars for management, and a 4% run rate. Since moving to LA, I'd never lived in anything lower than 80%.

I was moving on up!

A little paint and oxygen would turn it into the perfect home.

"Joyce, I love it." Then, because my mother had taught me the way to any person's heart was through compliments, I eyed a massive oak armoire and added, "This is beautiful, by the way."

"You like it?" she asked, not masking her surprise. "I'll be sure to give it to you when I move."

I feigned excitement. "Really? Wow. You're so kind." I smiled, eyeing the monstrosity I now apparently owned.

I followed Joyce down the hall, past another full bathroom and into the living room. The old man was still lifeless in the chair. "How long have you been working here?" I asked, looking around and mentally arranging my own furniture.

She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her back pocket along with a lighter. "Almost...let's see...it's been about twenty-five years. This retirement is well overdue." With a shaky hand she positioned a cigarette between her pale lips and lit it.

I may vomit.

"OK...there are forty units," she continued, emitting a fresh batch of smoke. "You can take a look around. Just don't go in the third courtyard—ever. Never, ever go there. Trust me." She handed me three pieces of paper with her cigarette hand. "Then come back and fill these out." Ash broke off the end of her cancer stick and rolled down the front of the application.

I opened my mouth, about to ask why the third courtyard was off-limits, but she opened the front door before I could get the words out. My need for air overcame my manners, and I dashed outside, seeking refuge for my burning lungs.

I will never take oxygen for granted again.

After several deep, appreciative breaths, I shot an apologetic grin in Joyce's direction. My exit could be deemed rude, yet an arch of her penciled-in brow and stifled smile told me she took no offense.

"There's a picnic table by the pool you can use to fill out the application." She used her cigarette-free hand to point the way. "Bring it all back once you're finished, and remember, no third courtyard." The stern shake of her bent forefinger drove the point home.

Note to self: After job offer, get more third courtyard specifics.

I walked along the cement pathway, exploring the open first courtyard. There wasn't much in the way of color. Brown doors. Brown fascia. Tan walls. Brown staircase leading up to the brown second story. Greenish-brown grass. Greenish-brown shrubbery. Yet, it was clean. Not a single piece of trash or graffiti. No barred windows. No couches in the walkway. It wasn't the koi-pond apartments next door, but it was better than the armpit I was about to be kicked out of.

I strolled through a short ivy-laced breezeway and found the picnic table next to the pool. Taking a seat, I began filling out the application. It wasn't too difficult, and I nailed the first page—name, birthday, social security number, current employer, and previous employer. Unfortunately, a questionnaire was attached.

Please explain how you would handle the following situations:

1) The tenant in Apartment 5 and the tenant in Apartment 6 don't get along. The two call you daily to complain about the other, and both refuse to move.

2) You notice the tenants in Apartment 6 have a constant flow of visitors. The visitors tend to arrive and leave within minutes.

3) The tenant in Apartment 19 plays his drums during the day. The neighbors complain constantly and have threatened to move.

I had no idea how to correctly answer any of these questions. Sure, I could use common sense, and I had enough common sense to know there were legal forms and procedures to follow before one can start passing out eviction notices like candy. I just didn't know what those were.

Self-doubt slithered through my mind like the soul-crushing serpent it was. I should have stayed in college. Everyone warned me when I had taken the year off to find myself that I wouldn't return. They were right. All I'd learned during my quest for self-discovery was that VH1 played an entire season of *America's Next Top Model* in a single day. My one-year hiatus had quickly turned into seven. I'd already moved out to LA from my hometown of Fresno and gotten myself knocked up by the time I realized the value of a degree. I found a job as a barista and worked my way up to manager. I was doing OK until the owner decided to sell the property to support his new girlfriend.

I gnawed on the end of the pen, staring down at the ashy questionnaire, when out of nowhere a pair of work gloves plopped down in front of me. I jumped, dropping my pen, and gazed up at the stranger sliding onto the bench across from me. I froze, unsure of why this random, albeit very attractive, man had shown up. The Universe was not typically this generous.

My eyes ventured down his tan shirt, past the wisps of blond hair peeking out from behind the button-up collar, to the word *Maintenance* embroidered in blue above his shirt pocket. This, coupled with the paint specks scattered across his dark blond hair, plus the gloves on the table, gave me reason to believe he worked there.

Obviously, espionage should have been my chosen career path.

"Do you need help?" the stranger asked, flashing a perfectly straight white-toothed grin.

"Um..." *Breathe, Cambria.* "Sure," I answered in a voice three

octaves higher than my own. I found his scruffy jawline and unkempt hair wildly attractive. A tiny scar under his left nostril made him look edgy in an I-fell-down-when-I-was-a-kid kind of way. I cleared my throat, realizing I was staring. "Hi, I'm Cambria," I said, more even-toned. I then shot my hand out like an idiot.

He slipped his hand into mine. His strong, callused grip caused my insides to dance and flip and flutter and beg for more. It was the most physical contact I'd had with a man in years.

"I'm Chase," he said, prying his hand out of mine. He removed a notepad from his shirt pocket. "What unit are you in?"

"Huh?"

"What unit are you in?" he repeated, this time slower.

"I don't live here. I'm interviewing for the apartment management job." I held up the application in case he didn't believe me.

He scrunched his cute face and looked around. "Joyce said there was someone sitting at the picnic table who needed my help."

Note to self: Send Joyce a thank you card.

He looked around the empty courtyard until his stunning green eyes met mine then ventured downward. I pretended not to notice him checking me out but felt myself blushing anyway. "Not sure if you knew this," he said. "But you have a little something..." He pointed to my chest.

I looked down to see the French Vanilla dribbled down the front of my dress.

"Ah, bleep," I said under my breath.

Chase planted his forearms on the table, leaning forward. "Did you just say *bleep*?"

"Oops, yeah, I probably did." I blushed again. "I try not to cuss in front of my daughter, and now it's sort of become a

stupid habit." I pulled a package of tissues from my bag and began dabbing the spot.

Now I had an ice cream stain dotted with tissue residue. Great.

Chase laughed. "Wait, you replace profanity with *bleep*?"

"Um...yes." I pulled the elastic band out of my hair, releasing my Einstein-inspired dark mane. I tamed Einstein down to a side ponytail and slouched my shoulders. Trying to cover the spot. "Better?"

His face said *no*, but his mouth said, "Sure." And I liked him even more for it.

He slipped the notepad back into his pocket. "What did you need help with?"

I could think of a hundred and two ways he could help me. None of which would be appropriate to ask for, having only known him for about a minute. I glanced at the questionnaire. "Well, I'm curious, how might you handle a tenant who was getting a lot of foot traffic? I'm assuming it's drug-related."

Chase made a *V* with his brows. "Why?"

"There are questions like this on the application. I haven't been an apartment manager before, and I want to get them right."

"I'm not sure. I've never been a manager." He ran a hand through his hair. I resisted the urge to reach over and do the same. "Maybe record all the information in the apartment file?"

I snapped my fingers and pointed at him. "That's a good idea. Then I would call the police once I've gathered enough evidence. Like, who are the visitors? How long do they stay...?" I began writing my answer. "I think the police code for that is, like, 10-50 or something."

Chase shrugged.

"I watch a lot of crime shows," I explained. "I need to get this right because I *really* need this job."

"I'm not sure how much help I can be. But I'll try." He rested his chin on his palm and watched me scrawl down my answer.

"Can't you give someone a three-day notice if they are being loud, or do you have to give them a certain number of warnings before you give the notice?" I asked.

Chase shrugged again. "They told you about Kevin, right? That'd be more concerning than foot traffic."

"Who?"

"He's the owner's son who lives here. He can be a real *bleep*."

My light bulb flipped on. "Does he happen to live in the third courtyard?"

He nodded *yes* then returned his chin to his palm.

"I take it he and Joyce don't get along?"

"You could say that."

I looked past the pool and out to the third courtyard. All I could see from where I sat was another courtyard for Lilly to play in, Chase's left bicep deliciously bulging under his sleeve, and, at the top of the back stairwell, a black door. There appeared to be red paint dripping down the front, and the window beside it was boarded up with fresh wood.

Strange but...*meh*.

It's LA.

I'd encountered every shade of strange since moving here.

If there was anything concerning happening in the third courtyard, it would have been reported on the Rent or Run app. People love to complain.

It would take a lot more than a black door and an unruly teenager to stop me from taking the job, if I were offered it. I still had to get through an interview, and if there was one lesson I'd learned during my employment drought, it was that I was a terrible interviewee. I'd been practicing though. Watching dozens of YouTube videos on what to say, and more importantly,

what *not* to say. I prayed I'd be able to come across as poised, skilled, and normal.

I hurried through the questionnaire without further input from Chase, who was summoned away by a bathroom emergency. His presence served only as a physical motivator anyway—and what a physical motivator he was. A cute co-worker could offset whatever was happening with Kevin.

I think.

I should probably get more specifics on that.

When I swung open the lobby door, Joyce was seated in the floral armchair. She looked to have aged during the time I'd been gone.

"Here she is," Joyce announced, sounding as if she had swallowed sandpaper. "This is Patrick." She motioned toward a tall man with a cul-de-sac of brown hair sitting on the couch.

Patrick half stood and held out his hand. I shook it, hoping he didn't notice my sweaty palms. A casual wipe on his pants afterward told me he had. Great.

"Have a seat." He plopped back down and began rummaging through his briefcase.

"Here, take mine," Joyce offered, sliding off the chair. "I'm going to get some packing done."

"Thank you." I slipped into the floral atrocity, feeling like a child waiting in the principal's office. Nerves crawled through my stomach and down to my intestines, butterflying around in my gut. Authoritative figures had this effect on me. It didn't matter how many deep breaths I took or positive thoughts I had—my nerves still managed to get the best of me.

Joyce leaned down. "Good luck. I'm pulling for you," she wheezed into my ear before shuffling back to her apartment.

"You have the application?" Patrick asked. He struck me as a no-nonsense type of guy with his stern face and permanent stress lines around his eyes. He wore khakis, a checkered shirt, a

silver band on his left ring finger, and stark white Nike running shoes. His attire reminded me of Forrest Gump.

I handed him the application and watched as he sat back, crossed his Nike over his knee, and read through it. At one point he squinted and looked closer with a scrunch of his forehead. Perhaps moving the drummer in Apartment 19 next to the arguing neighbors in Apartments 6 and 5 wasn't the right answer. I thought the two could bond over their shared hatred of their new neighbor. Then I'd give the drummer a three-day notice to find a new hobby. Seemed like a creative win-win to me.

Patrick tossed the application on the coffee table and grabbed a yellow notepad. "First, you pronounce your name Came-bree-ah not Cam-bree-ah, right?" he asked with a click of his pen.

"Yes. The correct pronunciation of my name is Came-bree-ah." Then, for no apparent reason, I added, "I'm named after the city I was conceived in. Just two teenagers on a little road trip, and bada-bing-bada-boom, here I am."

Whyyy?

Obviously, my nerves had taken my mouth hostage.

Patrick made a noise I believed to be a stifled laugh or a burp. I wasn't sure. I bit my lip, afraid I would ask. He made note of my stupidity on his notepad then continued to ask sharp questions regarding my previous employment and how I might handle situations that seemed unlikely to ever occur. I stammered through, fidgeting with my thumbs, trying to use the whole "think *before* you speak" notion I'd been practicing. When we finished, he placed the notepad on the coffee table and rubbed his temples with his forefingers.

"I will say this," Patrick began. "I was impressed with how you answered the questions on the application. You seem like a 'think outside of the box' kind of person. That's a good quality

for this job. I like that you've had some management experience. I spoke to your references yesterday, and they all sang your praises."

I'd used my grandma as a reference.

"I need to tell you this," he continued. "The owner's son lives on the property."

"Oh, I know about Kevin," I hastily interrupted, too desperate to recover from the whole "bada-bing" incident to remember my manners.

Patrick's eyes grew in diameter. "You know about Kevin?"

I nodded. "Chase told me *all* about him, and it's not a problem." His gaping expression told me I might have redeemed myself from the unfortunate "bada-bing" incident.

"That's good to know," he said. "I still have a few people to interview today and will be making my final decision tomorrow. Thanks for coming in."

"My pleasu-roo."

Stop talking, Cambria.

THE PODCASTING SISTERS MYSTERY SERIES

Microphones & Murder *Book One*

“Halleluiah we’re here!” Camry drummed a celebratory tune on the dashboard. “And so begins the story of two sisters, setting out on a journey to solve a ten-year-old, cold-as-ice, minimal-evidence- provided, make-or-break-your-career, missing-person case. This moment has to be documented. Say cheese.” She held up her phone and took a picture of us using a big-eyed Snapchat filter. “Why aren’t you smiling, Liv? Aren’t you excited?”

“I’ll be more excited once we get settled.” I unbuckled my seatbelt and peered out the window. Hazel’s home looked like it was plucked from a Thomas Kinkaid painting. A two-story white farm-style house with teal shutters, dormer windows, a wraparound porch, and a beveled walkway lined with roses. This was the type of home where most people would imagine a happy family gathered around a dining room table, stuffed stockings on the mantel, kids playing catch in the backyard—the type of home where nothing bad ever happens.

But I was not most people.

When you spend your waking hours thinking, researching, and talking about murder and missing-person cases, your view on the world shifts. People are monsters. Monsters disguised as the handyman, the boyfriend, or the friendly neighbor in the cozy farm-style house at the end of the street.

Okay, I realize not *all* humans are monsters. Most are well-intended, law-abiding citizens. But I can't help myself. I'm a true crime podcaster, or I'm trying to be. But, as far as I knew, Hazel's house was just as idyllic as it appeared.

At least I hoped it was, because it was about to be my home for the next six months.

Sitting in a rocking chair on the porch was Hazel. Or so I assumed. We had never met. She's my stepsister, Camry's, great aunt on her father's side. I pictured Hazel as Sophia from the *Golden Girls*. In reality, she looked like every stock image of Mrs. Claus I'd ever seen.

"You're finally here!" Hazel tramped down the stairs with her

arms open. "I've been looking forward to this for weeks."

Camry slammed the car door shut. "Aunt Hazel, it's been too long."

The two hugged while I unloaded the car.

"Look how gorgeous you are." Hazel held Camry at arm's length. "I see so much of your dad in you. God bless his soul." She made the sign of the cross.

So did Camry.

My arms were full.

"Come meet my sister, Liv Olsen," said Camry.

Hazel casted her eyes in my direction. "Oh you sweet thing, I

thought you were one of the neighborhood kids helping with the luggage. Come here." She pulled me in for a hug. My

head landed at her chest. When you're five feet tall, you spend a lot of time in boobs.

"Thank you for opening your home to us," I said, once released. "I can't tell you how much it means to me." I guess I could have told her, but I'd probably cry. Free boarding eliminated an entire section of my itemized budget for the show.

"Pffft, that's what family is for!" Hazel grabbed a suitcase. "I could not be more excited about your radio show."

"It's a podcast," I said.

Hazel paid no notice and wheeled the suitcase down the beveled walkway with her arm interlocked with Camry's. I grabbed the last of our bags and stood at the curb, gazing up at the house.

I can't believe I'm here. I'm in Santa Maria. I'm doing it.

Yikes!

Holy crap!

Oh my gosh.

Oh. My. Gosh. I'm doing this. I'm here. I'm investigating a decade old missing-person case. I've quit my job. Invested all my money. Never mind I have no idea how to actually create a podcast from scratch on my own—

I can't feel my legs.

"Liv, are you coming?" Camry hollered from the doorway and waved for me to come in. "Hurry up!"

One foot in front of the other, I told myself.

One foot in front of the other...

The inside of Hazel's house matched the front. To my left was a den with a brick fireplace, velvet armchairs, a floral sofa, and a grandfather clock. The carpet was teal, the walls were papered in a cherry blossom print, and there was a picture on every available surface—old photos in brown hues, modern school pictures of gapped-tooth children, Hazel with a gray-haired man I assumed to be her husband. Another one of Hazel

and her husband on a cruise. Then Hazel and her husband in front of the Eiffel Tower. Then Hazel and her husband at a cemetery wearing all black and standing behind a cherry wood coffin with a splay of daisies on top. Two younger women with dark brown hair and Hazel's narrow jawline were standing beside them. Their noses were red, tissues were clutched in their hands, and their arms were wrapped around each other. The next picture was of Hazel and her husband in front of this home, standing behind a young boy with a mop of brown hair, sad blue eyes, a suitcase in hand, and a stuffed sea lion tucked under his arm.

You could learn a lot from family pictures.

The rest of the house was homey. A straight staircase, cottage windows, and a comfy looking couch in the family room. The dining room was to my right, the table was set, and in the kitchen was a buffet-style spread waiting for us—and fifty of our closest friends.

Oh my word. That's a lot of food.

Camry and I shared a look. We had stopped for dinner in Santa Barbara, but I wasn't about to turn down a meal. Not when Hazel went through so much trouble.

We left our luggage by the door, and I filled my plate with tri-tip, barbecued bread, macaroni salad, beans with bits of bacon tossed in, salsa, and a green salad. I sat at the table and gave my intestines a quick pep talk.

Hazel came from behind and filled my cup with lemon water. "Have you ever had real Santa Maria Style BBQ, Liv?"

"No, but I've read all about it." If you googled Santa Maria, California the first thing to come up would be Santa Maria Style BBQ, the second would be wine, the third strawberries, the fourth a guide to the local beaches (there are many), and the fifth would be a missing-person report for twenty-three-year-old

Amelia Clark who was last seen October 10, 2008—which is what brought me here.

I took a bite of bread. *Oh my.* The crunch of buttery garlic filled my mouth. “This is amazing.”

“These beans are delicious, too,” said Camry with a mouthful. “And I don’t even like beans.”

“Special family recipe.” Hazel winked.

Camry was right. The beans were the best thing I’d ever tasted. Until I dipped the bread into them. Then *that* was the best thing I’d ever eaten.

Hazel took a seat across from us with a plate piled with all the fixings. “I’m going to make pancakes for breakfast tomorrow morning, and I thought you might like to try my homemade spaghetti tomorrow night. For lunch, we’ll do something simple, like salami sandwiches or macaroni salad. I’ll write out the daily menu for you.” She pointed to the chalkboard hung on the wall.

“You don’t have to feed us,” Camry said between bites. “Liv has a detailed budget. She even has a line item for toilet paper.”

“I have toilet paper,” Hazel said. “Is there a certain brand you need? I think mine is double-quilted let me check.” She started to stand, and I stopped her.

“What Camry meant was that we don’t want you to spend money on us. We have plenty set aside for food and necessities.”

“I would never let a house guest of mine *pay* for food or toilet paper.” She appeared hurt by the very notion. “If you want to stay at my house I get to feed you. That’s part of the deal.”

It’s official. I’m in love with Mrs. Claus.

“Sounds like a good deal,” I said.

Hazel settled down. “Now that we’ve got that nonsense out of the way, tell me more about this radio show.”

“Podcast,” said Camry.

Hazel ignored her. “When is it coming out?”

“We’re going to release the first episode on October 10, the anniversary of Amelia’s disappearance,” I said.

“That gives you less than two weeks.” Hazel waved a piece of

bread around while she talked. “You can do a show in two weeks?” “I’ve done as much work as I can from home already. We

should be fine.” *I think. I hope.*

“Camry told me you used to work for a fancy radio station in

San Diego.”

“Podcast,” I said. “And, yes, I worked for *Cold in America*.” I

stuffed bread in my mouth, hoping the subject would be dropped. Talking about my old job gave me heart palpitations.

It didn’t, however, have any effect on Camry’s organs. “*Cold in America* is only the *biggest* true crime podcast in the *world*, hosted by the queen of podcasting herself, Mara Lancer.”

“Wow,” Hazel said in awe. I could tell she was genuinely impressed, which caused my heart to hiccup. “And you quit that job to come here?”

“She sure did.” Camry flung an arm around my shoulders and gave me a squeeze. “The old detective on Amelia Clark’s case sent all the information to *Cold in America*, hoping Mara would do a season on it. Liv read the entire case file and thought it would make an interesting show. She pitched a spinoff called *Missing or Murdered* to Mara with Liv as the host.”

“And what did Mara say?” Hazel asked.

“No.” Camry removed her arm from around my shoulders. “Mara said there wasn’t enough information available, but Liv here thought differently and quit her job.”

Hiccup.

“Bought all the equipment with her own money.”

Hiccup.

“Draining all her savings. Gave up an apartment with a killer view and came here. Basically, her entire future rides on the success of this podcast.”

Hiccup.

Hiccup.

Hazel dropped her fork. “You must be really good at what you do.”

Camry nodded. “Mara said Liv was the best engineer she’d ever worked with.”

Oh geez.

What Camry failed to mention was that while, yes, Mara did say I was the best *mix-engineer* she’d ever worked with, she also said that I lacked the *oomph* required to host and executive produce a podcast under the *CIA* umbrella.

Talk about a punch to the ego.

But after much soul-searching, I realized she was right. I’m a think-things-through, well-organized, wash-my-bra-daily, nonassertive-oomphless person. I’m also a redhead. People expect more oomph from redheads.

Camry didn’t understand. She was born with oomph. Her mother was married to my father. I was seventeen and about to move out when the two got together. My brother was twenty-two and already in the police academy. Camry was twelve. Twelve-year-olds are annoying.

Twenty-two-year-olds are slightly less annoying.

Camry is Irish on her father’s side and black on her mother’s (she hates the term African-American. *What are you? Anglo-Saxon-American then?* she’d say). She had raven hair, bright hazel-brown eyes, flawless skin, lush lashes, and dimples. She was more of the life-of-the-party, wake-up-ready-for-the-runway, loud-assertive type of person. She also lived by the

rule: what's a hamper? Which should make sharing a room for the next six months interesting.

Hazel scooted off to the kitchen and returned with more food. "Have you talked to Richard and Janet Clark yet?"

"Not in person," I said. "We're going to stop by their bakery tomorrow."

"Richard will be there. You'll like him. He's a nice man. But you won't see Janet." Hazel took a sip of water. "Speaking of Janet. If you're looking for a scandalous story for your show, I've got a whopper for you."

I eyed my audio equipment sitting by the front door, debating if I should grab my recorder. My hands were covered in grease. If the story was worth using, I'd interview Hazel later, I decided.

Hazel dabbed her mouth with the corner of the napkin. "I had asked Janet if she'd like to be on the Christmas parade committee, you know, to be polite since she's never had friends. This was shortly before Amelia went missing, and do you know what she said to me?"

Hazel paused until Camry and I said, "What did she say?" in unison.

"She said no! Just like that 'no.' Excuse my language but, what the frog?"

I stifled a giggle.

Camry didn't.

"It rubbed a lot of people the wrong way. Then, of course, when we heard about Amelia's disappearance, I tried to bring the Clark's dinner, but do you know what she said?"

"No?" said Camry.

"She said no! Not that I'm judging. Grief looks different on every person. And there's no grief worse than losing a child." She crossed herself. "All I'm saying is she should have allowed the community to help her. We were all worried about Amelia."

“Did you know her?” I asked.

“Not well. She worked in the same building where my husband, John, got his weekly dialysis. Pretty girl. A little too thin toward the end, but she had a nice face. Rest her soul.” Hazel crossed herself. “As a matter of fact, Amelia disappeared the same day John passed.” She crossed herself again, and I wondered if there was a crossing limit.

“Did you see the YouTube video?” I asked.

Hazel cut her meat while shaking her head. “No. But it’s not right. Why would you take a video of a person and post it online without their permission? It’s awful.”

“It’s hilarious,” Camry muttered while loading her fork. I kicked her under the table. “What? It *was* funny. Why do you think it went viral so quickly?”

I blew out a breath, my lips making an involuntary raspberry noise, and directed my attention back to Hazel. “So, about the video. You didn’t see it, but did you hear about it prior to Amelia’s disappearance?”

Hazel held up a finger, signaling for me to wait until she’s finished chewing the food in her mouth. “Yes.” She paused to swallow. “Of course, I heard about the *incident*. Everyone was talking about it. Poor thing, she must have been humiliated. Channel Two did a whole story on it the day before she went missing.”

“The day *before*? Are you serious?” I’d spent hours scouring the Internet for information on Amelia, and I never came across any news reports published before her disappearance. I made a mental note to contact Channel Two tomorrow. Maybe they knew the true identity of HJZoomer22—the username of the person who posted the video. Neither Camry nor I have had any luck. HJZoomer22 created the account on October 3, 2008, uploaded the video of Amelia, and hasn’t posted a thing since.

“When we heard Amelia was missing,” Hazel continued,

“most people thought she took off because she had been publicly humiliated. And who would have blamed her? Then they found the car with all her stuff in it...” her voice trailed off. “People don’t leave town without their wallet. They just don’t. That’s when the community came together to help find her.”

This I could use.

The parade story? Probably not. I didn’t want to cast doubt on the Clark’s character unless the story called for it.

“I’d like to interview you,” I decided. “Even if you didn’t know Amelia well, I could use the perspective of someone who was around during that time. I want the show to unfold naturally, that’s why I’m not recording all episodes before release.” Which is what Mara does. “I want the listeners to feel like they’re taking this journey with me.”

“With *us* you mean,” said Camry.

“Sure, with us. But I’m the host of the show.”

“And I’m your *peon*.” Camry stabbed a piece of meat with her fork.

“For the last time, you’re not my *peon*. You’re here to help with

audio and research. Which is *exactly* what I said you’d be doing when you asked if you could help with this podcast.”

“Producer sounds a lot nicer.”

Camry made no mention of producer until we were three hours into our trip and it was too late to turn around. The problem with making Camry a producer was she was unpredictable, had a tendency not to listen, and was outspoken. The reason I said yes was because of her investigation skills. If you give her Internet access she’ll find anything about anyone within minutes.

Here, she could use this superpower for good. At home, she used her powers for evil. Like stalking her ex-boyfriend’s new

girlfriends, hacking email accounts, and changing grades. Which is how she got herself kicked out of college and ended up a permanent occupant of our parents' guest room.

"Oh!" Hazel gasped so loud I feared she'd inhaled a chunk of meat, until she said, "I know the perfect person to help you with your radio show."

"Podcast," Camry said.

Hazel ignored her. "You have a cousin who is an Internet star," she said to Camry. "Let me make a phone call." Hazel beelined for the kitchen before we could stop her.

"What do you think she means by Internet star?" I asked Camry.

"I wouldn't know. I'm just the peon."

