

# One



A few hours before I quit my job, I'm stuck at the light on Rose and Pacific, watching a string of kids wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the name of their preschool—"Blackberry Atelier"—as they cross the dirty asphalt. Harried teachers urge them onward while supermodel-beautiful moms in Fred Segal sweatpants bring up the rear, tapping urgently on their cell phones.

Another perfect day in Venice, California.

I'm stuck on my bike, even though the only people in Los Angeles who ride bikes to work are fourteen-year-olds and people convicted of multiple DUIs. And me. I'm not a drunk or a kid—or even an eco-warrior—I just have no other way to get around.

When I pull up at the Date Palm ten minutes later, Pete—the baby-faced, twenty-three-year-old manager—is outside smoking a cigarette.

"You're late," he says, flicking his cigarette toward the sand-filled ring surrounding the public trash can.

"There was a toddler pileup on Pacific," I say. "It was a bloodbath."

I give him a nudge with my shoulder as I pass. There's a mild flirty thing we do, even though I'm six decades older than he is—okay, six years, but that's a lifetime in L.A.—and if I can get him laughing, he'll forget that my shift started five minutes ago.

“Seriously, Jess,” he says without cracking a smile. “I need you back there. The new hire’s standing around with his head up his ass. Go tell him what to do.”

I stare at Pete. So much for flirting. Also, what new hire? There’s no room on the schedule for another counterperson. In fact, I’ve been looking to pick up a couple of extra shifts, but Pete’s been stonewalling, and I’m increasingly paranoid. “Wait, you hired someone new?” I say. “Are you still going to put me on mornings?”

Pete eyes the still-smoldering cigarette butt. “We can talk about this later, Jess, okay? Just get in there.”

I push through the warped wooden door and into the near-empty dining room. This is so not how I envisioned myself on the cusp of my thirties. Recently divorced, back in L.A., starting over. This isn’t even square one, it’s square negative two.

From behind the counter, Jayne chirps, “Hello, luv” as I stow my purse.

She sounds chipper, but I know she’s pissed I’m late. She cloaks her bad attitude behind her Manchester accent, wide, hazel eyes, and masses of pre-Raphaelite hair.

“Hi,” I say. “Sorry.”

She shrugs. “This is Kenner.”

I shoot a sidelong glance at the new guy: young, sleekly androgynous, and twitchy in a not-entirely-unappealing way. Could be worse. But *Kenner*? What kind of a name is Kenner?

I give him a facsimile of a smile as I tie my green polyester apron around my waist, which he takes as an invitation to start talking.

“Jayne’s told me all about you,” Kenner says enthusiastically. “I’m so excited you’re going to be training me. Don’t you love working at the beach?”

I can feel a twisted smirk replacing my faux smile, so I grab a pan

of warm gluten-free croissants and start shoving them into the display case. Who the fuck eats a gluten-free croissant? People who live in zip codes that start with a 9-0, that's who.

"A lot of celebrities have houses in this neighborhood, right?" Kenner continues. "Fiona Apple, have you ever seen her? I mean, I wish I lived closer, but I love driving here from the Valley. Once you get over the Mulholland Pass, there's a change in the air. I swear the temperature drops ten degrees and the people are just so interesting. I heard Julia Roberts has a place down the street. Does she ever come in? Oh my God, I don't know what I'd do if she ever came in. I guess I'd—"

"Kenner," I say, whirling around and wiping my coconut-oil-slicked hands on my apron. "You need a star map from the twenty-first century."

Kenner looks hurt and toys with a pocket on his Nigel Cabourn jeans, which, hello? If he can afford six-hundred-dollar jeans, what's he doing at the Date Palm?

Truth? It's the invocation of Julia Roberts that pushes me over the edge. I mean, I'm a huge fan of abject starfuckery, but can't he find a timelier object of infatuation? Shouldn't he be making references to hip, obscure microcelebrities? It feels like he's reaching into the oldies bin for a star I've actually heard of.

"Sorry," I say, grudgingly. "I know I've only been here three minutes, but I'm already having a day."

"No problem," Kenner says, but his body language says otherwise.

As Kenner sulks, I help a pseudo-Goth kid hidden beneath a scrim of dyed-black hair, who whispers his order for a decaf coconut milk chai latte.

"How much is that?" he mumbles, not making eye contact.

I consider charging him an extra dollar because he made me

strain to hear the word “coconut,” but I’ve already hit my limit on groundless irritation for the day.

“Seven seventy-five,” I say, and his flat-ironed hair waves in a single sheet as he nods his assent.

I fill a white paper cup halfway from the steaming glass carafe of black chai tea waiting on the warmer, then dump a few inches of organic coconut milk into a steel pitcher and foam it up on the espresso machine. When I push the cup across the counter, he peers at me with one kohl-rimmed eye.

“Did you steam the milk with the same wand you use for dairy?” he says.

“Of course not. We only use that one for almond and soy. And the occasional coconut, obviously.” I wave my hand toward the other side of the behemoth machine. “Dairy happens over there.”

He flips a quarter into my empty tip jar, and shuffles away.

“You’re definitely going to hell,” Jayne says, laughing.

“I don’t get it,” Kenner says.

“That steamer hasn’t worked since I’ve been here,” Jayne says.

I bring Kenner to the kitchen to watch the line cook whip up a batch of famous secret-recipe Date Palm granola. If you ask me, it’s nothing to get excited about. I make a granola of my own with dried cherries and pumpkin seeds that blows it out of the water. The Date Palm version is eight dollars a bowl and has more saturated fat than a rib eye, but the tourists line up to buy souvenir bags of it for twenty-two bucks a pop.

When we return to the front, Jayne has emptied her tip jar onto the freshly wiped counter, stacking the bills in neat rows. I’m no fashion expert, but that’s when I notice that Kenner’s wearing a pair of leather sneakers that cost more than my car. Oh, wait, make that more than my *repossessed* car.

“Those are some impressive kicks,” I say. “Are they Prada?”

“Rick Owens,” he says in a weird monotone. “They were a gift from my last boss.”

“Wow, generous boss.”

“Hazard pay,” Kenner says.

“What’d you do?”

“I was his personal assistant.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that like?”

“Hazard pay,” he repeats, then turns to wipe down the already clean counter.

“How’d you do?” I ask Jayne, nodding toward the stack of bills.

“Not bad.” She folds the cash into two unequal piles. “We were slammed until three.”

I look around at the empty restaurant. “Must be nice.”

The day shift at the Date Palm is the cash cow, but Jayne gets first pick of the schedule, so I’m always the weekday closer. The differences are staggering. She stacks twenties while I’m happy to get an occasional five. Which sucks, because I’m trying to scrape up some savings. I don’t even know why at this point—maybe I just need one stable element in my otherwise unbalanced life. It’s clear that my ship of youthful exuberance has left the dock. Don’t get me wrong—in almost any other town I’d be considered viable. Here? They’re about to set me adrift on an ice floe.

Jayne tucks the smaller wad of cash into the pocket of Kenner’s fancy jeans. “Here, luv,” she says. “You killed it today.”

Kenner throws his arms around her. “Oh my God, thank you so much. You’re the best.”

Hold up. I’m barely covering rent and Jayne’s tipping the new guy out on his first day? And also, *what*? Did Kenner work the day shift before I got here?

“Wait a second,” I say. “Did you work lunch today?”

Kenner looks stricken. “I, um . . . yes?”

“Since when?”

“Since Pete, uh, hired me for them?”

Holy shit. *Kenner* is getting the day shifts? I shoot a side-eye in Jayne’s direction and she shrugs innocently, but I know she’s got details.

Pete picks that moment to roll in. He sees Jayne and me gnarled in a counter knot, and says, “Two horses walk into a bar, and the bartender says, ‘Why the long faces?’”

He’s big on bad jokes, which might have something to do with the fact that he’s twenty-three and perpetually stoned.

“Dude,” I say. “Are you giving Kenner day shifts?”

“Well, nothing’s decided for sure,” he says, and his eyes flick toward the door.

“Really, Pete?” I can’t keep the hurt from my voice, and I take a deep breath before continuing. “We talked about giving me days. Or putting me in the kitchen. You know that’s where I’ll kick ass.”

“We don’t need another cook, Jess.” Pete rubs his temples and sighs. “I’m not trying to be a dick, but c’mon. Kenner fits the demographic around here. You’re . . . well, you know how it is.”

Yeah, I know how it is. I was born and raised here. Beauty talks, average walks. I’m a solid size eight—sometimes a ten—with plain brown eyes and plain brown hair that I’ve been dyeing auburn since my late teens, with the exception of that one unfortunate flirtation with platinum blond, which ended in a pixie cut and tears.

Pete looks at me imploringly. “Jess, you’re awesome, but you are kind of . . . aging out of the barista scene.”

*I fucking knew it.*

“Please don’t make this into a thing.” He sounds earnest and

heartfelt, which is unfortunate, because *nice* is my kryptonite. “I can’t give you those shifts. I’m sorry, I just can’t.”

“Yeah, okay,” I say. “I get it.”

Pete gives me a look of gentle empathy, so I sidle into the bathroom before I well up, or worse, bust out the full ugly cry. Once I start the ugly cry, it’s pointless trying to hold it back.

## Two



When I get back to the dining room, Pete's on the landline, which only happens when someone places a to-go order or checks our hours. He's smiling, and when he catches my eye I brace myself for another assault of kindness. Then he says the words that are so much worse than *You're fired* or even *I hope we can still be friends*.

"It's your mother," he says, proffering the receiver in my general direction.

A fizzle of adrenaline blooms at the back of my head, snaking up my scalp and down into my arms.

"*Seriously?*" I mouth, and Pete nods and looks at me quizzically, turning one palm up, and shrugging his shoulder, like *What's the problem?*

I swear to God, my mother has a sixth sense about when I'm feeling vulnerable. It's no coincidence that she's calling right now, this minute, as opposed to twenty minutes ago when I was just garden-variety irritated. It's like she can smell my fear pheromones all the way in Reno.

I give Pete the "shut it down" gesture, flapping my hand in a sawing motion across my throat.

"Christ, Jess." He cups his hand over the receiver. "C'mon, it's your mom."

“*Not here,*” I whisper.

“She’s right here,” Pete says, and he tosses the receiver onto the counter between us, like a rapper dropping the mike.

I must look stricken because his face morphs from mild managerial disapproval—no personal calls at work—into genuine concern. “*What the fuck?*” he mouths, eyebrows raised. “*Are you okay?*” He’s probably wondering why an old lady like me doesn’t want to talk to an older lady like my mother. Isn’t that what old ladies do all day, talk on the phone and watch soap operas?

I wave him off with an attempt at a smile. It’s ridiculous for me to not be fine. I can’t be not fine. I’m totally fine. The receiver sits there for what feels like a long time. I wait for it to explode, or start leaking green slime, or turn into a snake and slither off the counter.

Eventually I pick it up. What else am I going to do? “Hello?”

“Well, there you are, cupcake,” my mother says, sparkly and brittle as a drugstore Christmas ornament. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

My mother never calls me by name. It’s all *sweetpea* and *cupcake* and *lamb chop*—a whole arsenal of diminutive food names that she’s used in rotation for as long as I can remember.

I duck my head into the receiver like I’m trying to use it as camouflage. “Hi, Donna,” I say. “What do you want?”

“I’m just calling to check up on you, sugar pop. How’s it going down there in Tinseltown?”

I snort a half laugh. “Seriously, Mom, how did you even get this number?”

“You gave it to me, honeypie.”

That’s a total lie, but there’s no point in going there. “Whatever. What do you need?” I guarantee that she is not calling me at the Date Palm at five P.M. on a Tuesday to *check up on me*.

“Well, I’m having a bit of a crisis, and I could use a tiny bit of help.”

“I figured,” I say. “How much?”

“Oh, sparkle, no. This is important.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Donna.”

“You’re so cynical,” she says, and I can tell she’s irked; no big surprise. Donna does not like to be called on her shit. “Maybe it’s something *really* important, sugarplum.”

“So let’s hear it.”

“Well, you remember my friend Emily, don’t you?” She pauses for my assent, which I don’t offer, because I have no idea who she’s talking about. “She just had a big health scare and she hasn’t been herself at all, poor thing. I mean, she can’t work, she can’t drive herself to doctor appointments, nothing. I’ve basically been taking care of her twenty-four hours a day for the past four months.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I say.

I can feel Pete and Kenner listening without even looking in their direction, and the hair on the back of my neck is waving like cilia. I’m sure I sound like the worst daughter in the world, but I’ve spoken to Donna maybe three times in the past five years, and every single time it’s been about money. “Let me guess. In taking care of your friend in her time of need, you’ve fallen a bit behind in your own obligations and you were thinking that maybe I could dip into the imaginary money from Gloria.”

The money from Gloria is such a fucking thing. Gloria was my mother’s mother—my grandmother, though I was never allowed to use that word. The gospel according to my mother is that Gloria beat the shit out of her when she was a little girl, but my memories of Gloria are a more benign kind of crazy, like having me erase her crossword puzzles so she could do them a second time.

Gloria mostly raised me, which was a benefit for all of us. Donna was a product of the '70s, and there's a reason they called that era the "me generation." She was hypnotically glamorous and predictably unstable, and sometimes it was just better for her to go off and do her own thing when the mood struck.

Gloria bought me breakfast cereal and shiny plastic headbands; Donna occasionally showed up with a bedraggled stuffed animal one of her dates had won at a carnival somewhere. Gloria watched from the window every morning as I waited at the curb for the bus, waving vigorously until we turned the corner and she disappeared from sight; Donna, on one of the only occasions she drove me to school, made me take my underwear off in the car because she said it gave me a visible panty line. I got sent home from school after I forgot and did a backflip dismount off the jungle gym on the playground.

Gloria attended a couple of PTA meetings every year; Donna was a school-year no-show, although once she picked me up from school on a spring afternoon wearing a bikini, which caused a gossipy clusterfuck with the other mothers that haunted me through middle school.

Gloria made sure I had dinner on the table with at least one vegetable. Donna took me along on dates to dive bars, where my entire meal consisted of a highball glass full of maraschino cherries.

When Gloria died, I was the beneficiary of her insurance policy, which my mother will never, ever, let me forget. She's asked for that money a hundred times in the past decade, for a down payment on a condo, to invest in "biotech," to buy an Arthur Murray franchise. After expenses and taxes, I walked away with fourteen grand. I've told her a dozen times that it's gone, but she refuses to believe me.

I turn away from Pete and Kenner's curiosity, tucking the phone

between my ear and shoulder, and tell Donna yet again that there's no money left from my windfall inheritance.

"Don't be silly," she says. "It's not imaginary. You were her beneficiary and—"

"So it *is* about money. I knew it."

"I'm not calling about money," she says. "Well, not entirely."

Jesus Christ. Donna is the queen of oblique conversation. But short of hanging up the phone, there's really no way to rush her to a conclusion.

"Go on," I say.

"It's just . . ." Her voice falters for a second before she continues, and it's so perfectly timed that I want to applaud her performance. "The doctors aren't sure what's going to happen to Emily and she's not talking to her son and she's miserable about it."

"Sounds rough," I say flatly. "So what do you need from me?"

"I can tell this isn't a good time, honeypie. I want to talk to you, maybe come see you in person, you know."

I *don't* know, actually. Donna hasn't shown any interest in seeing me for about fifteen years, and our relationship works best with five hundred miles between us. "What do you mean, come see me?"

"I've got enough to come for a visit." Her voice turns conspiratorial, like she's letting me in on a delicious secret. "But it might leave me a little short somewhere else."

"So you want to come for a bonding visit, but you want me to fund it?"

"It's okay, peanut," she says. "I'm sure I can pick up some freelance work in L.A."

Donna teaches acting to children at Lights, Camera, Action! in Reno. It's a good living. All those cocktail waitresses line up to spend their hard-earned dollars to have my mother—a genuine child

star!—teach their kids how to smile on cue and hork up a convincing sob.

“Teaching acting in L.A. is a whole different thing,” I tell her. “You know that. Plus, let’s not pretend you’d have anything left over after you paid for a hotel.”

“Your roommate told me your door is always open. Megan’s such a nice girl. And so pretty. You can tell she takes care of herself.”

Okay, first of all? Donna’s never met Megan, my best friend and roommate. Megan politely accepted Donna’s friend request on Facebook, and now my mother acts like Megan’s the daughter she always wanted and never had.

“Listen, Mom,” I say, skittering my eyes around the near-empty dining room. “We’re getting slammed in here. It’s the dinner rush. I’m sorry. I can’t help you.”

“Oh, sweet pea, just think about it.”

“Mom, there’s nothing to think about. I don’t have the money.”

“We’ll think of something. You’re my peanut-butter princess.”

I hang up without saying good-bye. It’s funny how three words can catapult me straight back into childhood. “Peanut-butter princess” is what Donna called me when I was four or five, before the whole *you’re-going-to-be-a-star* thing started, in that brief window when I still loved her fiercely and with abandon.