



A NOT SO MEET CUTE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEGHAN
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Prologue

LOTTIE

“Hey, girl.”

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

 The smirk on her lips.

 The overuse of her toxic, throat-choking perfume.

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

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

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

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

 Ohh-kay, what the hell is going on?

 I glance behind me to the row of suited men, sitting upright in chairs, folders on their laps, staring at our interaction. I’ve known Angela since middle school. We’ve had one of those on-again, off-again friendships, me being the victim of the intermittent camaraderie. I was her main squeeze one day, the next it was Blair—who works in finance, or Lauren—who works over in sales, and then the friendship would come back to me. We’re constantly interchangeable. Who’s the bestie this week? I’d always wonder,

and in some sick, demented way, I'd have a hiccup of excitement when the bestie card landed on me.

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

The answer is threefold.

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

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

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

“Angela?” I whisper.

“Hmm?” She smiles at me.

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

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

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

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

“I am.”

Oh, thank God.

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

Wait, what?

“Get on with what?” I ask.

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

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

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

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

Hold up . . . what?

Let me go?

As in, no more job for me?

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

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

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

Angela winces. “Lottie, please don’t make this a thing. You must know how difficult this has been for me.” She snaps her fingers and an assistant magically pops up. Angela rubs her throat and says, “This conversation has truly taken it out of me. Water, please. Room temperature. Lemon and lime, but take them out before you give it to me.” And like that, the assistant is gone. When Angela turns back around, she sees me and clutches her chest. “Oh, you’re still here.”

Uhhh . . .

Yeah.

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

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

They all shake their head.

“See? I didn’t say that.”

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

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

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

“Yes. That’s correct.”

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

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

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She’s lost her goddamn mind.

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

She looks up at me, tilts her head to the side, and then presses her hand to her heart. “Ahh, look at you, fighting for your job. God, you’ve always been scrappy.” She blows me another kiss, waves, and calls out, “I’ll call

you. You can tell me about your horrible boss later. Oh . . . and don't forget to RSVP to our high school reunion. Two months away. We need a head count."

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

Peers watch me.

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

And before I can take my next breath, I'm staring at the obscenely large Angeloop sign outside of the office, box of my office things in hand.

How the hell did this all happen?

Chapter One

HUXLEY

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

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

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

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

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

I turn toward them, my brothers, the two idiots who have been by my side through thick and thin. Who have ridden the ups and downs of our lives. Who have dropped everything to join me in this crazy idea of taking over the real estate market in Los Angeles with the money Dad left us when he passed. We’ve built this empire together.

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

“Does it look like I want to *gab* about it?”

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

Of course they do.

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

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

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

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

But I wanted to prove them wrong.

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

Spoiler alert—I did not convince him.

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

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

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

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

“I believe it was,” Breaker says.

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

“Did you wear lipstick? Not sure his girlfriend would appreciate finding another pair of lips on her man’s ass cheeks.” Breaker smirks.

“I hate you. I really fucking hate you.”

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

“Because we’re Cane Enterprises,” I shout. “Everyone wants to fucking work with us. Because we have the largest real estate portfolio in Los Angeles. Because we can turn a broken-down building into a million-dollar business in a year. We know what the fuck we’re doing, and Dave Toney,

although successful, has some dead pieces of land on his hands that's hurting his business. He knows it, I fucking know it, and I want to take those pieces of land off his hands."

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

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

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

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

Both of my brothers scoff.

"I am a normal guy."

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

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

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

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

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

"How the fuck so?" I ask. "Because he doesn't get invited to celebrity after-parties?"

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

"I'm not flashy."

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

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

"You are," JP says. "The way you live your life is completely acceptable. The house, the car . . . the watch, all earned and rightfully so, but if you want to connect with Dave Toney, then you're going to have to get on a different level. And that doesn't mean dressing down, because he'll

see right through that. He already knows you're a flashy guy. But he needs to see you in a different light."

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

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

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

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

"Could you grab us something?" Breaker calls out.

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

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

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

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

Sit on it.

Sit on my goddamn deal.

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

I push through the elevator doors when they part, weave my way through the busy lobby, and then head out of the office building toward the hole-in-the-wall deli that's just down the road. Two blocks. I don't usually send my assistant, Karla, to grab me food, because it makes me feel like an asshole—despite what people might think of me—and I also enjoy the second to get out and breathe some fresh air. *Well, it's LA, so fresh air is an*

overstatement. But it gives me a second to reset before I get back behind my desk, where I control our billion-dollar operation with my keyboard.

My phone beeps in my pocket and I don't bother looking at it because I know it's JP and Breaker's orders. I don't even know why I told them to text me, because they get the same thing every time. Same as me. Philly cheesesteak with extra mushrooms. And, of course, pickles. It's our go-to sandwich. Something that we don't eat often, but when we do head to the deli, it's our usual.

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

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

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

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

Holy shit, Dave is engaged?

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

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

Usually I'm aware of such—

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

Holy . . . fuck.

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

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

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

He waves to the driver, shuts the door, and then glances behind him, just enough for us to make eye contact. His eyebrows lift in surprise and then he

turns all the way around and waves to me. “Cane, didn’t expect to see you on the streets.”

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

Showtime.

I plaster on a smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yup, this bodes well for me.

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

“Really? Whereabout?”

“Peachtree City.”

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

Yes. Yes, indeed. Especially since my grandma actually resides in San Diego, and I’ve never been to Georgia, actually, but they don’t need to know that. They also don’t need to know I recognize her accent because I dated a girl in college from Peachtree City. All semantics.

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

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

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

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

Which means, I need to salvage this and fast.

But how . . .

How can I possibly make it—

Light bulb

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

Here goes nothing.

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

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

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

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

“Fiancée?” he asks after clearing his throat. “You're engaged, Cane?” There's genuine interest in his eyes and the tension that was collecting in his shoulders is slowly easing.

“Yup.”

“Huh, I'm surprised.”

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

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