

THE RELUCTANT ROOMMATE



CHAPTER 1

When Is a Job Not a Job?

Morgan pulled up the collar on her coat and huddled into her scarf as the wind whistled around the Colorado State Capitol Building and swirled down Broadway, mussing her blond hair. She stepped around a puddle, careful not to get the toes of her good leather shoes wet. It wasn't yet time to break out the snow boots, but it wouldn't be long until she needed something cozy and waterproof.

She passed the coffee shop where she got her morning Americano and hurried on. Not for the first time, she wished the sandwich bar at the bottom of her building would reopen—preferably without the health-and-safety citation that had caused it to close in the first place. But until then, the Snarf's Sandwiches on the next block would have to do.

Ahead of her, a woman stood in the middle of the sidewalk scrolling on her phone, a bulky backpack at her feet. Despite the weather, the woman wore only jeans and a light jacket over a nubby sweater. Morgan moved right to give her a wide berth.

The woman pocketed her phone as Morgan approached. "Excuse me, I was wondering if you know where Foxies has moved to?" The woman's accent was strange. Not American, not quite British. She indicated the building behind her.

Morgan glanced at it. A bar. Right now, the neon signs in the window were dark, and she could vaguely make out stools upended on tables inside. A light flickered above the bar, which was devoid of bottles. Definitely a closed bar. Likely a closed-down one.

Morgan flicked her another glance. She looked harmless.

She stopped, keeping distance between them. "I don't, I'm sorry. The sign doesn't mention it?" She pointed to the handwritten sign taped to the inside of the door.

"No." The woman sighed. "Just that it's closed while they seek new premises. End of lease. Their website doesn't give a new address, but I don't think the site's been updated since about 1990."

"I doubt they had a website in 1990," Morgan said. One part of her mind wondered why she was engaging this way with a stranger.

"Whatevs." The woman shrugged. "I was offered a job here. Guess it's not happening."

Australian. Her accent was Australian. Or maybe New Zealand. Was there a difference? She frowned. "It's weird they'd offer you a job if they were closing."

"Well, to be accurate, a friend of the owner said that Foxies was always hiring, and, being queer, I would already be top of the list. Seems they get a lot of bi-curious straight girls working there, which is great, but they don't often stay long."

Queer? Straight girls? Morgan glanced at the dark frontage of Foxies. For the first time, she noticed the Pride stickers on the window. "This is a queer bar?" The stickers were hard to miss, but she'd managed it. But then her sort of bars were more upmarket, places that called themselves a bar and grille, not narrow-fronted, shabby-looking premises on busy streets.

"Yeah. Or it was." The woman flashed her a smile. "Thanks for stopping. I guess I'll find a backpackers' hostel and figure out my next move." She tilted her head. "Don't suppose you know anything about Capitol Hill Backpackers? Like, is it safe for solo women?"

Morgan shook her head. "Sorry. Maybe you could check some reviews or something."

"You can't trust reviews. The last place I stayed had awesome reviews, but the place was filthy, and every night, the owner's friends would come around and party. It was impossible to sleep."

Her smile was infectious, and Morgan found her lips twitching in response. The woman was interesting looking, with short brown hair and long bangs flopping over her forehead. A purple streak colored one side. Her eyes drew Morgan in; they crinkled appealingly when she smiled, and were a warm brown, framed by thick, dark lashes. Morgan had instant lash envy.

"You could ask to see the room before you stay." There was no way she'd stay anywhere without seeing it first. The unknown hostel sounded like death by bedbugs.

"It doesn't work like that in hostels." The woman picked up her backpack and shrugged into it. "No worries. Thanks for your time."

"Good luck." Morgan offered a small smile and continued on up the street to Snarf's.

As she turned in the door, she glanced back. The woman bounced on her toes a couple of times to settle her pack, then turned and trudged back up Broadway.

Strange. What sort of person turned up somewhere on the vague promise of a job? It seemed haphazard and disorganized. Most people would have called ahead, spoken to the owner, checked the address... All sorts of things that made sense.

Morgan shrugged. *Not my problem.*



The afternoon ticked on. Morgan feigned interest in a Zoom staff meeting and made several client calls, touching base. She acted on written instructions from some, used her best judgment on others. When she looked away from her computer screen, the Denver skyline lit up the night sky. Muted conversations reached her from around the office. With many of their clients based overseas, long and strange hours were the norm at Mattingley Financial.

Morgan yawned and glanced at the clock. Seven twenty. Her workmate, Manuela, had waved goodbye almost an hour ago. She should leave, go home, try to summon the motivation to make a nutritious dinner, one with real food, not just something processed beyond recognition. Chicken that had run around a farmyard at some point in its life rather than something simply infused with chicken flavor. Maybe a glass of wine. Maybe she'd sleep better tonight and be less tired tomorrow.

Yeah, right.

She glanced at her remaining task sheet, checking that everything could be left until the next day. They all could...except... *Damn.* A share transfer for one of her overseas clients. She couldn't leave that, but it was a routine task that shouldn't take too long, and then she'd finish up. She stifled a yawn. She could pick up a burrito on the way home—that would count as real food. Steaming vegetables could wait for another day.

With a sigh, she rose and went to the office kitchen to make herself another coffee. Maybe this was the reason she slept so poorly at night, but, equally, caffeine was all that got her through the day.

Giving up caffeine was another thing for future Morgan.

CHAPTER 2

Not Very Private

Heidi sat on her bunk at the Capitol Hill Backpackers and closed the privacy curtains. She'd been in Denver for three days, and her efforts to find where Foxies had moved to was a bust. She logged in to her banking app. The balance was perilously low. Since when did an uncomfortable bunk in a dormitory shared with eleven other people cost seventy bucks? No amount of free happy hour wine could make up for that. Her plan to eat big at the advertised complimentary breakfasts and maybe sneak some food into her pocket for lunch was a nonstarter as well. Breakfast was sliced white bread with peanut butter or jelly, zealously guarded by a staff member who made sure no one took more than two slices.

The manager had shrugged when she'd asked if they wanted someone to work for a few hours in exchange for a free bed. "Put your name down here." He'd pushed a clipboard across. "If we need someone, we work from the top down. First to answer gets the work." There was half a page of names already. Heidi had scrawled her name on the next blank line and added a smiley.

The hostel job board was similarly disappointing. Telephone sales, cold calling, or taking orders for a floral delivery service. Minimum wage, no commission. Another sales job that had promised a decent hourly rate turned out to be a phone sex line.

Heidi had thought she could give that a crack—how hard could it be? But when the interviewer asked her to roleplay a scene where she acted the submissive virgin, even with the prompts and a script outline to follow, she kept giggling. The lines were like something out of a bad porno. "Oh, sir, you're huge. How is that enormous cock of yours going to fit into my poor little pussy? I'm so wet for you, but you're so big, I won't be able to take you." Heidi got through the lines with only a couple of snorts but then couldn't stop laughing. "Do people really fall for that shit?"

The interviewer was silent for a moment. "Thank you, Ms. Lincoln. I've heard all I need."

She didn't get the job.

"Knock, knock. Heidi, you there? Are you asleep or on your way to your second big-O?"

"I bloody wish." Heidi flung back the curtain and peered out at Lula, who had the bunk opposite. "What's up?"

Lula's hair fell forward over her dark face as she bent to stare at Heidi. "Girlfriend, they're hiring for a bar on the southside of downtown. Tips *and* an actual hourly rate. They want a server and a bartender. C'mon, move your ass and get dressed. Open interviews are on now."

Heidi didn't move. "Is it a topless bar? A front for an illegal brothel? Or do they just have slime for management?"

"No to the first two. As for the third, most management are." Lula held out a hand and, when Heidi took it, yanked her to her feet. "We're going to apply. If I don't get it, it's back to Oklahoma for me, to let my mom hover and sympathize and feed me chicken-fried steak and cornbread. And I don't want to go back." She rolled her eyes.

"Okay. Let me get changed, then I'm with you."

They took a bus to a part of the city Heidi hadn't been before. The LoDo lofts hadn't spread out this far. Houses were small and a bit shabby. She looked around the street as they walked to the bar, trying to imagine what it would be like after a late shift. Maybe it would be okay. Maybe the bar organized rides for its staff, or maybe there would be someone to carpool with. And, of course, she didn't know where she'd be living.

The lack of dollars in her bank account flashed again before her eyes. Who was she kidding? If they offered her the job, she was going to take it—at least for now. Even if it was only to make enough to buy a cheap vehicle and get the hell out of town. Find Serena and confront her, demand her money back.

Lula stopped outside a low brick building set back from the street. The Fly Inn had high-set, narrow windows. Anyone inside wouldn't be able to see out—and vice versa. Was that a good thing? Or did it hide who knew what?

Lula pushed open the door and went in. Heidi followed. The bar area was dark, with low lighting, even though it was barely eleven a.m. It was well worn, a locals' place, rather than somewhere people went for a night

out. Two middle-aged Latino men nursed glasses of beer at the counter, and the only other customer was an elderly white man having a conversation with himself in one of the booths along the wall. Timber flooring with dents and scratches. A pool table with wear marks on the felt.

They went up to the bar and waited.

"Luis!" one of the men at the counter shouted without looking up from his beer.

A minute later, a skinny white man appeared, wiping his hand on a towel. Without a word, he poured two fresh glasses of domestic beer for the men at the bar, then turned to Heidi and Lula. "Whaddya want?"

Heidi smiled. "We're here about the job ad. You want a server and a bartender?"

"Yeah, I guess." Was he even old enough to drink? "I'll get my uncle." He disappeared.

"Jeez Louise," Heidi muttered. "Should we get out while we can?"

Lula nudged her side. "Camera," she muttered with a barely discernible tilt of her chin. "Smile. And this is okay. So far, at least."

Heidi's lips twitched. She was overreacting. She'd been in bars a lot worse than this in Australia.

"Ladies." An older version of the skinny kid appeared and opened the counter to come around the bar. His gaze flicked over them from head to toe. "Hear you're after a job. Got any experience?"

"I've waitressed in diners and sports bars in Tulsa and Stillwater," Lula said. "Worked bar too. Done a bit of cooking—pizzas and wings, that sort of thing."

"I've worked bar in Queensland, waitressed at weddings and events," Heidi said.

The man grunted. "Australian accent?" At her nod, he said, "You legal to work?"

"I have a green card and social security number."

"Will need to see your papers. You girls got transport?"

"Not yet," Lula said.

"Week's trial. Afternoon shift. If I take you on after that, you'll get evening shifts too."

"When do we start?" Lula asked.

"Today, if you want. Can get rid of my useless nephew. He doesn't want to be here anyway."

"What's the pay?" Heidi asked.

"Eleven dollars an hour. Plus tips."

Heidi hesitated. That was below the legal minimum in Denver. And it didn't look as if there would be much in the way of tips. The two drinkers at the bar had a pile of silver in front of them. Did they even tip a dollar?

"That's low."

"That's what you get for your week's trial." The man hitched his pants up under his gut.

"And after that?" Was this just a scam to get low-paid workers? Would there be no job after the week's trial?

"If you're okay, you'll get minimum wage, plus tips. You'll do all right on evening shifts with the tips."

It wasn't as if she had much choice right now. At least she should earn enough to pay for her hostel accommodation. Her toes curled in her boots. It didn't feel right, but it would do—for now. She glanced at Lula, gave the tiniest nod.

Lula turned to the owner. "We accept." She stuck out her hand. "Lula Diaz."

"Robert." He shook her hand and turned to Heidi. "What's your name, Aussie?"

"Heidi Lincoln." She shook his hand. "Ready to work."

"Good girl. I'll get Luis to show you the bar. I'll show Lula the kitchen and server area."

"What about paperwork?" Heidi asked. "And when do we get paid?"

"You can do the paperwork after your shift. You're on the clock now. You get paid at the end of the week." He leveled a glare at her. "And there's cameras here. I'll see what you're doing."

Of course he would. Heidi suppressed a sigh. She just hoped she earned enough to get by while she looked for something else.

CHAPTER 3

What a Difference a *D* Makes

A couple of days later, Morgan stepped out of her office building and pulled her collar up. October in Denver and the flakes were already whirling out of the sky. The forecast predicted a couple of inches by morning. She trod carefully over the powdery snow toward Snarf's Sandwiches.

The sidewalk was busy with office workers, most going north to downtown, where there were more lunch options, but Snarf's was closest for Morgan. She could get a sandwich and be back at her desk in under fifteen minutes.

She passed Foxies, the bar where she'd met the Australian a few days earlier. Had she found where Foxies had moved to? Or, more likely, it seemed the bar had simply closed. Nothing seemed to have changed—the bar was still dark, still with the stools on the tables. She reached Snarf's and stamped her feet on the mat before heading up to the counter to order a small turkey and Swiss, and a cup of tomato soup.

Back in the office, Morgan returned to her cubicle and set down her lunch. Out of habit, she tapped the keyboard to see if there were any messages in the fifteen minutes she'd been gone.

One jumped out at her, or more precisely, the big red *Urgent* flag next to it. Her boss. She opened it. *My office. Now.*

Morgan pursed her lips, looked at the cup of soup next to her keyboard. David's summons could be good or bad. It could be an important new client he was throwing her way, one that he wanted her to prioritize—at least in the short while. Or it could be extra reporting he wanted her to take on, or a new staff member to mentor—neither of which she had time for.

She pried the lid off the Styrofoam cup. She'd drink her soup and then go. The sandwich could wait.

She'd managed two sips before the message box at the bottom of her screen flashed again. *Now means now.*

He must have seen her arrive back. Morgan glanced over her shoulder. Sure enough, David was glaring at her through the glass wall of his office. With an internal sigh, she replaced the lid on the cup, pasted a smile on her face, and answered the summons.

"Close the door." David didn't get up from his desk. He waved her to the other chair. "I had a call from Amelia Cargill this morning."

Morgan nodded. One of her more active and hands-on clients—and one of the wealthiest.

"She says you sold shares on her account on Tuesday."

"That's right." Morgan folded her hands in her lap. "She wanted to divest the shares she owned in Walland Industries. She had me do that."

"Except you didn't." David steeped his fingers and leaned forward. "You divested her shares in Wallan Industries. Wallan without the D. Walland crashed overnight. Wallan is showing steady growth. Amelia has, at a conservative estimate, lost nearly three hundred thousand dollars. She's threatening to sue."

Morgan's heart froze, and ice threaded her veins to her fingertips. She was always so careful in any share portfolio, but particularly in Amelia's, which was considerably larger than average. Especially in Amelia's, where some of the investments had similar names. Always in Amelia's because she was her biggest client, one Morgan entertained on Amelia's infrequent visits to Denver, taking her to high-end restaurants on the company dollar—which actually came out of her commission but was still worth it, still oh-so worth it.

Amelia, who gave her lavish gifts at Christmas and thanked Morgan profusely when her advice added to her already considerable wealth.

And now, it seemed, she'd made a huge error. A rookie mistake—careless and sloppy.

Inexcusable. Negligent.

Although... She frowned. "I always double, triple check any transfer. Especially on Amelia's account."

"Obviously not this time."

"But—"

“Don’t suggest the error was our client’s.” David’s voice hardened. “Any error is never our client’s.” He turned his screen so she could see.

There, in glowing pixels was the email Amelia had sent her two days ago. Automatically, she checked the date and time it was received. It was Amelia’s email, no question about it. The email she’d actioned as her final transfer of the day, at nearly eight p.m. After that, she’d left the office, gotten a burrito, and headed home.

David highlighted a section of text, and Morgan’s whole body froze. The email asked her to immediately divest all shares in Walland Industries. Walland with a D.

The error was hers. There was no escaping that. Yes, she’d been exhausted—tired to the bone from insomnia. Yes, it had been the final transaction of the day, when she was already thinking about a pulled-pork burrito and a glass of Sangiovese. Yes, she’d been looking forward to turning the key in the front door of her town house, of relaxing in the professionally designed living area, her peaceful happy place, then sitting at the granite breakfast bar to eat a takeaway burrito in the gourmet kitchen she barely had time to use, before retiring to bed, blinds open so she could admire the peaks of the Front Range through the floor-to-ceiling windows. One part of her mind had been thinking all those things, but the major part, the important part, had been thinking about Amelia’s portfolio and double-and triple-checking her actions.

As she always did; and she’d never made a mistake.

Except, apparently, this time. She opened her mouth, formulating her apology in her mind.

David watched her. “I don’t want excuses, Morgan. The error was yours. Your employment with Mattingley Financial is terminated, effective immediately.”

Had she heard him correctly? She’d worked here for seven years, long hours, hard hours, building up to being one of the leading financial advisors, a partnership in her sights. And now, with one error, one mistake, the first she’d ever made, she was terminated like a junior advisor at the end of probation.

“David, this is—”

He stood. “I’m sorry, Morgan, but my hands are tied. Amelia is incandescent with rage and insists you be fired immediately.”

He picked up his desk phone. "Savannah, can you arrange for Ms. Favola to turn in her security cards and clear out her desk, and for someone to escort her from the premises."

The room spun, and she rested her head in her hands. Tears pricked at the back of her eyes, and she blinked fiercely. She would not show weakness. She took a deep breath, willing away the dizziness.

When it had passed, she raised her head again. "I don't need an escort." She lifted the lanyard with card and keys attached from around her neck and laid it on David's desk. "I'll clear my desk now and leave."

"I'm sorry, Morgan. For security reasons, I'm obliged to have you escorted off the premises."

She closed her eyes briefly. Her cubicle was off to one side of the main floor, a larger area as befitted her senior position, but it was still public enough that everyone—from the senior partners to the newest intern—would see her walk of shame. See her carrying a box of her personal possessions as the security guard escorted her out of the building.

To her knowledge, this had only happened two or three times in the seven years she'd been working at Mattingley.

Savannah must have been waiting for David's call; only a minute later, she arrived along with a security guard.

"The cards are there." Morgan pointed to where they lay on David's desk.

"Thank you, Ms. Favola." Savannah handed her a sealed envelope. "This contains your final paycheck. You are paid up until the end of today, along with the three weeks of annual leave you accrued."

Three weeks. She'd barely taken much annual leave in her time with Mattingley, not wanting to leave her clients in the care of another advisor for too long. A few days here and there in seven years. Never longer than one week at any one time. She'd never had three weeks at once. Well, it looked like she was getting it now.

She schooled her face to an impassive mask and held out her hand to David. "Goodbye, David. It's been a pleasure working with you."

His palm glanced off hers. "You too, Morgan. For what it's worth, I'm sorry it ended like this."

She nodded, then turned for the door and strode to her desk, trailed by Savannah and the security guard. Ignoring the curious stares from

the surrounding desks, she took the archive box Savannah proffered and systematically went through her desk drawers, taking only her personal items: keys, purse, a desk calendar, the fountain pen her parents had given her when she'd gotten the job at Mattingley. She didn't touch as much as a pen or pad of Post-It notes. She didn't want a charge of theft on top of her firing.

She picked up the frame containing photos of her last vacation—five days in Paris in the springtime. How clichéd was that. Well, she wouldn't be going back to Europe anytime soon.

"That's everything." She faced Savannah. "Let's go."

With Savannah ahead and the security guard behind, Morgan raised her chin and strode through the office. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a few shocked faces—but even more calculating ones, no doubt wondering if they could position themselves to take over her accounts.

Manuela stepped forward and put her hand on Morgan's arm. "Morgan, I don't know what happened, but I'm so sorry. Call me."

She managed a smile. "I will." Whether she actually would was up in the air. First, though, she had to get out of the office with her dignity intact.

CHAPTER 4

Who Fucks You Over

Heidi sat on her bunk with Lula, the curtains closed around them for privacy.

"So, six hours at eleven bucks an hour is sixty-six dollars," Heidi said. "I got twenty-one dollars in tips yesterday. Better than I expected when we walked in. Guess Robert was right when he said it would get busy around five when the construction workers finished."

Lula dumped a handful of crumpled notes and silver on the bed and counted it. "Twenty-eight dollars. So, ninety-two total for me."

"Just about enough for tonight's bed." Heidi scooped her money into her hand and shoulder-bumped Lula. "And we're working eight hours tomorrow. I hope there's no hassle getting our wages at the end of the week." If so, she'd have to dig out her Australian credit card. But with the exchange rate and fees, it was a last resort. Jake had said he'd bail her out if she ever had to use it, but she couldn't keep begging off her oldest brother. It had been a bit of a joke between them when Jake was single and they'd shared an apartment, but now that he had Helena and little Darcy, he needed his money.

Her cell phone rang. She looked at the screen. Raine. She gave a little shoulder wiggle. Maybe Raine was calling to say where Foxies had moved to. Maybe they were indeed hiring and she and Lula would have better jobs by tomorrow.

"Heidi!" Raine's upbeat voice echoed loudly down the line. Everything she said ended in an upward inflection and shimmered like a sunbeam. "How's life in Colorado? Has it snowed yet?"

"It's October, Rainey. It's barely snowing yet. Not enough to snowboard." And there was the small matter of no money, but she wasn't about to mention that.

"But you'll go, right? Learn to snowboard without falling on your ass all the time, slice down those mountains trailing a line of starstruck hot chicks in your wake."

"Dream on." Heidi snorted. "I'm more likely to slide down the bunny run on my butt as those hot chicks laugh their tits off."

"I'm calling about Foxies," Raine said. "Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"Let's go with the good news." She raised her eyebrows at Lula. "Has she found new premises?"

"I called Kali. She has new premises, and she's looking for staff."

Heidi frowned. Raine's voice had turned less sparkling sunshine. It was now cloud-covered. "And the bad?"

"If you can get to Maine, you've got a job."

Right. That was the catch right there. Maine was what, a four-hour plane ride? A three-day bus trip? And a whole pile of dollars she didn't have, thanks to Serena.

"And will she still be there when I arrive in Maine, or will she have closed up and moved to Hawaii?"

"Too humid for her." Raine sighed, and her voice softened. "I'm sorry, Heidi. I realize how this sounds. You've already bused for almost a day to Colorado. Now it's turned into Maine. If you've got any sort of good work in Denver, I'd stick with it. Yes, Kali is my friend, but this isn't the first time she's outrun her creditors like this. I guess I should have told you earlier."

"Not your fault." She bit her lip. "I've found work in Denver. I started today, and it looks promising."

Lula lifted her eyebrows. "Really?" she mouthed.

"Then stick with it," Raine said. "At least for a while. Kali's not a bad person, but she's not a *business* person, if you know what I mean."

Heidi did. The trouble with service jobs and the sort of easy-come-easy-go jobs that she usually took was that people often treated you like shit. Sometimes it was unthinking, more often it was a deliberate attempt to fuck you over. Kali was definitely an unthinking shit.

She thanked Raine and ended the call, throwing the cell on the bed and flopping back on the quilt. "Looks like I'm stuck with Robert. At least for the moment."

Lula tapped Heidi's leg. "At least we get our tips daily. Robert's the type of asshole who'll try and shaft us hours at the end of the week."

"I think you're right about Robert—I'll keep applying for other jobs."

She gripped the thin coverlet between her fingers. Damn Serena and her silver fingers—even if those fingers had done magic things on Heidi's body, it wasn't worth the other, less legal, ways Serena had used them. But there was nothing she could do about that. Not unless Serena strolled back into her life—and with twenty thousand dollars of Heidi's money in her possession, why would she?

Her phone tinged with a message. Her feet hit the floor with a thump, and she propelled herself upright. "Gotta go. The hostel messaged. They want someone to clean for four hours in exchange for a free night's accommodation. If I don't answer in five minutes, they move on to the next on the list."

"Go." Lula, too, got off the bed. "You've time to do that before we leave for the Fly Inn."



Heidi poured cheap bourbon, conscious of Robert's eyes on her, no doubt making sure she didn't give too large a pour. She rang up the sale and put the dollar into her tip jar. Across the room, Lula set down burgers and fries then hustled back to the kitchen. It turned out the server's job was also a cook's job, and the cheap food the Fly Inn served brought in a steady stream of customers. Robert obviously hoped they wouldn't notice the overpriced drinks, but it seemed most people were onto him. They weren't drinking, and Heidi wasn't making much in tips.

She ran a cloth around the counter. If Robert wasn't there watching her every move, she could check the job websites, but not while his stare was fixed on her like a coyote in a henhouse.

Lula dropped three baskets of wings in the servery.

"Who are they for?" Heidi asked.

"Construction workers at the corner table," Lula said. "You're a doll." She pushed her dark hair from her forehead and added some jalapeño poppers to the fryer basket.

Heidi returned to the bar and poured the domestic beer the workers also wanted.

Robert tapped his glass on the counter, and she poured him another Bud. Her lips thinned. Lula was working her ass off—it wouldn't kill him to help her.

In her ten-minute break, she looked at the job sites. Server for a Mexican restaurant, must speak Spanish. Person to mind three toddlers during the day, occasional evenings. The pay wasn't mentioned. And toddlers? No, thanks. She preferred people she could have a conversation with. A casino in Blackhawk was seeking cocktail servers—but that was out of town and didn't mention accommodation. Plenty of jobs for short-order cooks—Lula would find another job easily enough, but Heidi's cooking skills weren't that great to begin with, and she was sure she'd struggle in a fast-paced diner.

No, it looked as if she'd be stuck at the Fly Inn for a while longer.

"Heidi!" Robert's sharp voice recalled her to the bar. She pocketed her cell phone and returned to pour beer and cheap bourbon.

CHAPTER 5

Dark Side of the Moon

Morgan opened her banking app. The balance was healthy—but for how long? The mortgage payments on her town house—her luxury town house with the high-end appliances and finishes—would whittle her savings down soon enough. When she'd purchased it, it had been what she could afford, what she deserved—a glorious refuge at the end of a twelve-hour day. Now, though... She ran a hand over the granite counter, then lifted her coffee and went to stare out of the picture windows to the mountains. Early snow dusted the Front Range, and the peaks shone crystalline white. It'd be gone by midmorning. Normally, at this time of year, she'd be buying a season ticket so that she was ready to go when the snow was good. Breckenridge or Copper Mountain usually, but last year, she'd decided to try Vail. She'd been doing well; she could afford it.

This year, though, she wouldn't be skiing. Not if she wanted to keep paying her mortgage beyond the next few months.

Since she'd been fired, she'd changed her status on LinkedIn, reached out to some of her contacts at other companies. But nothing so far. The coffee churned in her stomach. Surely, soon, someone would look past her firing.

Her cell phone rang, and she snatched it up. "Morgan Favola."

"Morgan, hi. This is Jerry Grogan from Blackstar returning your call. New number, I see."

"Yes, I'm no longer with Mattingley Financial."

"You finally moved on, huh? You were there a long time. I heard they promoted Javid to partner. Guess you decided to cut your losses and find somewhere that might value you more."

Javid is partner now? She snorted softly. *Good luck with that.* Javid had started at Mattingley after her and still came to her most weeks for advice.

Or he had until she'd been fired. Morgan squirmed. Even two weeks later, it was still the most humiliating event of her life.

"Yes, it was time to move on." She refocused on Jerry. "I'm taking a few weeks' break while I review my options."

"Right," Jerry said. Silence hung on the line.

She'd seen Blackstar's job ad. A senior position, similar to what she'd held at Mattingley. Jerry and she had a good working relationship, and in the past, he'd intimated that if she ever wanted to move on, Blackstar would be interested in hiring her.

She waited, her fingers clenching harder on the phone with every beat of silence. Nothing. She cleared her throat. "I see Blackstar are hiring. Before I put my application in, I thought I'd give you a call, see how it is there. You've always spoken highly of the firm."

"Yes," Jerry said, his voice flat. "It's fine. Good place to be."

"Can you give me any scoop on the role that's advertised?"

"Not sure it's a fit for you, Morgan. It's more junior than it implies in the ad." He cleared his throat. "We must—"

"I'm more interested in finding a firm that's a good fit for me, culturewise." Her pulse hammered in her throat. She knew a brush-off when she heard one. "And ethically. You've always talked well of Blackstar in that regard."

"It would be a step back for you."

"A step back, maybe, with a view to some strides forward." Her voice had taken on a clipped, defensive tone, and she winced. Not the image she was trying to project.

"I think they might have someone in mind for the role," Jerry said. Beeps sounded on the line. "Morgan, I have to take this call." Was that relief in his voice? "We must do lunch soon."

"Absolutely. I'll give you a —"

He'd clicked off.

Morgan set the phone on the coffee table and dropped onto the white leather couch. *Shit, shit, shit.* Jerry was the third person she'd called whose discomfort had echoed down the line. It seemed word was out about her firing. Of course it would be. Hadn't she been marched out in front of the entire office—senior partners down to the newest intern? The financial world was cutthroat. No one would hold back on spreading gossip, especially if, with a highflier out of contention, it put them in a better position.

Briefly, she thought about calling Savannah in HR and asking what sort of reference she'd be given, whether it would reflect her seven years of excellent performance, her steady rise through the ranks. Or whether Savannah would give Morgan's dates of employment in a monotone and a curt "no" to the question about whether they'd rehire her. Morgan closed her eyes. It would be the latter; she'd bet the house on that. And she didn't need any more downers in her life. It was hard enough remaining upbeat and positive—qualities she'd need if she was to persuade anyone in the financial world to give her a chance.

She reopened the banking app, stared at the figure. What could she do to make her savings last longer? What was the advice given to Gen-Z wanting to buy a house? Less avocado on toast, no takeout coffee. That advice had always struck her as condescending. As if saving twenty or thirty bucks a week would miraculously let them qualify for a home loan.

Selling her car wasn't an option. She needed reliable wheels if—*when*—she found a new position. She could sell some of her own investment portfolio—built up carefully with a view to the long term. But something had to give. Six months. That was how long such shit normally stuck.

She didn't have enough money to live on for six months, though, not if she wanted to keep up appearances. Keep the town house. She could live off her savings for three, maybe four, months. After that, well... Her mind stuttered. After that, she would have a job. She would have to.

For a millisecond, she thought about calling her parents, but that thought evaporated as fast as it had landed. Even if they had the money to give her, she wouldn't ask. She was the one who often sent them money, not the other way around. She couldn't tell them she'd been fired. *"Morgan's doing so well in her career,"* her mom liked to boast. *"She's a senior advisor. She'll be partner one day."*

Let her mom keep that pride in her.

Should she get a job where her Mattingley references wouldn't be checked? Nanny, server, telephone sales. Work at Walmart? But what if anyone from her old life saw her there? Imagined shame and embarrassment flooded her. People were professional snobs when it came down to it. "And what do you do?" She'd heard the question a hundred times at corporate events, at dinner parties, on her infrequent dates arranged through a dating site for professionals. "Taking a break" was a euphemism for unemployed, a tacit admission of failure. At least it was in her world.

And what if the likes of Jerry came into a diner where she was the server? What if she had to seat him at a table, hand him a laminated menu, chant the specials of the day, and pour his coffee?

No. That was fine, honest work, and she'd worked her way through college that way. But to do that now would be career suicide and would destroy her veneer of the highly sought-after professional.

What she could do was rent out a room in her town house. Take a roommate for six months. There were two bedrooms, both with en suites. A decent-sized kitchen and large living area. And she could specify the type of roommate she wanted, which she couldn't do on the short-term accommodation and vacation rental sites.

Her coffee was empty. Morgan went to the kitchen and turned the coffee maker back on. A professional woman like herself. Mid-thirties, older, even. Someone out at work during the day and who would retire to her room in the evening. A nonsmoker, of course. No pets. Not someone who loved to cook elaborate meals and then not clean the kitchen properly. Not someone who'd invite friends around at all hours. Or play country music. Or shout on the phone. Or drive a muscle car or large truck that wouldn't fit in her two-car garage. Just someone neat and clean with few friends who was seldom home.

She went online and browsed roommate sites, added a few things to her mental list. No couples—it would be hard enough having one extra person in her space—and definitely no kids. A social drinker was fine. Not a marijuana smoker, but she figured someone who used edibles would be okay if it wasn't excessive.

Morgan broke off a row of dark chocolate from her stash in the kitchen, then sat at her laptop to create an account and draft an ad.

CHAPTER 6

Some Hard Nos

Professional queer female, 34, seeks same to share modern town house in West Wash Park. Large bedroom with en suite (rain shower and half bath), queen bed, heat & AC, wall-mounted TV, large closet, new carpet. Share spacious living area, basement home gym, and executive kitchen. No couples, children, pets, or smokers. Must be employed, neat, clean, and quiet. Garage space for small car. Power and high-speed Internet included.

Morgan stared at her ad. Her headache pounded and seemed likely to turn it into a full-on migraine. Surely the ad was explicit enough? But so far, all the applicants were exactly what she didn't want.

She'd turned down a teenage college student desperate to move out of her parents' basement. Would Morgan be okay buying her liquor?

Not in this lifetime.

The mid-thirties accountant had seemed promising. She was friendly but polite and had described herself as an introverted neat freak lesbian who liked to binge-watch TV series using headphones. Morgan had been about to offer her the room when the perfect roommate mentioned her girlfriend would also be moving in once her lease was up next month, along with her two ragdoll cats.

Uh, no.

But the real low point had been five minutes ago. For starters, Lawden wasn't female. He was a cisgender male with a *Jesus Saves* tattoo, and his MAGA cap told Morgan everything she needed to know about his likely personality and views on queer people. She kept him on the doorstep as she

lied—politely, through gritted teeth—that the room had most likely gone to the last person to see it only fifteen minutes ago.

He tipped his cap back, offered her fifty bucks a month more, then looked her up and down and said he presumed she could cook.

She shut the door in his face and leaned against it, breathing hard. Three busts out of three.

She considered the ad and started to type. *Absolutely no males. No MAGA Republicans, no one under thirty. No parties allowed. Queer only.* She hit submit with a thump.



Heidi pushed open the door of the Fly Inn, grimacing when she saw the dirty glasses and plates still on the tables, the ring marks on the bar, and Robert sitting at the counter staring at the TV.

“You’re late.” He didn’t look away from the Denver Broncos game.

“By two minutes.” Heidi made several trips, collecting dirty glasses and plates and putting them on the bar, then returned to wipe.

It was a job, she reminded herself. And despite the vibe she got from Robert that he would fire her the second someone better came along, she was still there after two weeks. Still being paid at the end of every week. She was getting regular evening shifts now, and the tips were much improved. The new cook, Arnie, lived close to the hostel and often gave her a ride home.

Lula had quit in dramatic fashion at the end of the first week, when Robert yelled at her for being too slow.

“The fuck I’m slow.” Lula had ripped off her apron and threw it on the bar. “You need a fucking cook as well as a server. I quit. Find some other sucker to work for you, you lazy bastard.”

Lula had walked into a job as a server at a new sports bar on the southern edge of the LoDo district. She said it was good and that the second a position opened up, she’d let Heidi know. Lula had also moved into a rambling old house near Cheeseman Park with one of the other servers and her housemates.

It was Friday—payday. That was the good thing. The not-so-good thing was that the hostel had a limit on how long people could stay. And Heidi would reach it in two days.

She acknowledged one of the regulars' tilt of his empty glass, poured him another Fat Tire, and passed on his cheeseburger order to the cook. She poured cheap vodka, opened bottles of Corona, and made a decent gin and tonic for a young couple who had obviously strayed into the wrong bar.

Robert left for the evening, saying he'd be back to lock up, and Heidi breathed a sigh of relief. No more nitpicking—at least for this shift.

Arnie slipped her a burger and a few burned fries, which she ate at the far end of the bar out of sight of the CCTV. She had a job. She had some money. Now she needed somewhere to live.

The roommate site seemed to have a few promising ads, but she quickly found many of them weren't for her. She'd prefer only one or two roommates and, if possible, her own bathroom. She added a filter for LGBT+ friendly, and the potential list shrank even more. She flagged the possibles and went back to work.



Hi potential roomie,

I'm Heidi, 32, a pansexual cisgender woman. I'm Australian, been in the US for a couple of months, new to Denver. I like it here, looking forward to exploring the city and the mountains. I'm working bar five or six days each week. Your place looks great, and I'd love to come over and see if we're a fit.

Heidi threw the cell phone down on her bed. The dorm was empty apart from two new blokes who presumably thought themselves alone as they debated which beds were more likely to be those of "hot girls," going by the possessions and neatness.

She rolled her eyes, and, without drawing back the privacy curtain, shouted that all the women here were hot and that all were more discerning than to want to talk to someone like them.

"Who said anything about talking?" one replied, and they both sniggered.

Heidi waited until they'd left, then stomped over to the manager's office to report them.

"There's always a few like that," the manager said. "Think a mixed dorm is one big orgy. You're stuck with them tonight, but I'll move them to a male dorm tomorrow."

Heidi thanked him. There, right there, was yet another reason she needed to find somewhere else to live.

Her phone pinged with a reply to her email.

Hi Heidi, you sound great, and I'd love to meet you. Do you have your own furniture? The room isn't furnished. One of my other roomies is moving out tomorrow, so it will just be the five of us until we find someone else. Oh, and the price in the ad doesn't include power, Internet, and the weekly kitty for shared food, which together adds another \$420 to the price per month. Hope that's okay.

She flicked back to the ad. Nothing about six roomies, everything about only two bathrooms. And the extra costs pushed the room out of her budget. *No way, José.*

She went to the kitchen and poured a cup of the free coffee. It tasted like dirt, but she wasn't knocking back free. The two jerks from earlier were there, heads together, obviously rating the women in the room.

Heidi ignored them and sat to check her other replies.

So far, she'd been to see three rooms. The first was an older couple whose adult son was finally moving out of their basement. The basement was roomy but stank of frat boy, and the ventilation was poor. Still, she'd been prepared to give it a go as the rent was cheap and there were always scented candles and air fresheners. But then they told her that although the son had moved out, he still came around every evening to play video games on the faster Internet, so he'd be in the basement studio from around nine at night until the early hours. That was a big, hard no.

The second had been sharing with two girls, one of whom owned the condo. Or, rather, her daddy did. The rent was cheap, utilities included, and it was in a great part of town. They had been pleasant, if a bit nervous, in her company. But then one said she could have the room on the condition that she accompanied them to church for three hours every Sunday, and maybe one evening a week. She mentioned the name of the church, and

Heidi knew it as a big, fat anti-gay church rumored to still be doing conversion therapy.

"Your ad says LGBT+ friendly," she'd said. "That doesn't sound very friendly to me."

The tallest, palest girl hadn't smiled. "We are LGBT friendly," she'd said. "We're helping people like you get back on the right path."

Heidi had clenched her teeth to stop the angry words, and, instead, turned and left.

And now this. The expensive share house with too many roommates. She might as well continue living in a hostel.

She continued scrolling down the roommate ads. She was nearly at the bottom, listings that had been there for three or more weeks, when she saw one for a room in West Washington Park. Sharing with one woman who wanted one female roommate. The rent was within her budget—just—and the photo of the room looked great. There had to be a catch, or else the ad simply hadn't been removed when the room was taken. She opened the ad. There, right there, was the catch. The list of attributes for a potential roomie was longer than the ad itself. Heidi read through. Neat, clean, quiet. She could be all of those—if she worked at it. Female, queer. Those were a definite tick. No kids or MAGA. She was starting to like this woman.

The ad had been edited three times. The woman was obviously picky. Picky was okay. Picky she could live with. And West Wash Park was an area she'd love to live but had thought she couldn't afford. She and Lula had gone there on one of their days off. They'd walked around the lake, had coffee at a cute coffee shop, and dropped their résumés off at a couple of small bars located in what were basically back streets.

She opened a message window and started a reply.

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