

**A HOLLYWOOD
CLASSIC**

J.C. Patrick

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A Hollywood Classic

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ISBN-13: 978-1537048154

First Edition: August 2016

Dedication

For Lyle, my favorite hiking partner.
And for Sophie Mae, my favorite furry friend.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my husband Lyle and my sister Kelly who saw me through the creation of this book. I also want to thank family and friends who encouraged me as a writer, especially my brother Greg, the entire Runser clan, and my book club friends, the Lovely Ladies of Nottingham Forest.

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Epigraph

Always be a first rate version of yourself
and not a second rate version of someone else.

~ Judy Garland

1 BAD LUCK

My mother once told me I had luck following me around. Only she would proclaim something so preposterous to make me feel good about myself. And I'd believed her for a while, that is, until I left home for good, and bad luck seemed to follow me around.

In fact, my latest venture with luck happened yesterday as I sat across from L.L. Larry, my boss at Easy Electronics, a man I rarely saw on a daily basis.

"Sophie, you've done a fine job since you started a few months ago." He smiled, rewarding me with a glimpse of his dingy yellow teeth.

"I've been with the company ten months, sir," I corrected him, wondering how he could not remember. The entire accounting group had celebrated my first day on the job with a big cake. He'd even eaten the part where my name had been scribed with frosting, and I'd resented him slightly because of it.

"Oh-" Larry looked down at the paper in front of him for the longest possible moment.

I was uncertain why Larry had called me into his office on a Friday, when all of my team members were mysteriously absent. Perhaps he knew I'd played hooky the prior day when pleading a migraine.

"Would you excuse me for a moment?" Larry abruptly raised his large angular frame, scuffed awkwardly toward the door, and closed it behind him.

I could feel nervous energy start to build in my stomach. *Surely, he wasn't going to promote me already?*

A minute later, the door opened, and Larry returned, placing a large manila envelope on the desk in front of him. When he took a deep breath, unable to look at me, I suspected the news couldn't be good.

"Sophie, we have to let you go," he said quickly.

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I could feel heat flood my chest as I watched my boss shakily dab the perspiration atop his brow, a frown settling upon his face.

"The company's not doing so well. We needed to let a few people go, and since you were the last person hired..." his voice trailed off.

I nodded slowly and then looked past Larry as the news took effect.

In my generation, hardly anyone stayed at a job for more than a handful of years, but if there were a competition, I'd surely get a medal. Including Easy Electronics, I'd had five jobs in eight years, having been laid off for a myriad of reasons, from downsizing to restructuring - supposedly.

My longest tenure had been about two years at Safety Insurance, whose motto was: Because safety feels good. I'd taken the motto to heart, too, until the last earthquake and fraudulent claims had run the company out of business.

No, this was all real. The feeling was familiar. L.L. Larry was telling me my services were no longer needed. I hated him and this place.

I managed to leave the room without shedding a tear and then gathered up my things, feeling numb as to my uncertain future.

* * * *

When I got home, I grabbed the half-eaten bag of kettle chips from the counter and plopped down on my futon, with the intention of contemplating life's next steps, when a text from Piper saved me.

"Party tonight! Cute guys! Call me!"

Piper was my one true friend in Los Angeles. I'd met other friends through work, but those relationships had been fleeting, as I moved from job to job and so did the others. Transient relationships seemed the norm for me in this city of dreams.

As much as I tried to hide the bad luck that seemed to follow me around, my mother still managed to pry details out of me. "Sophie, you should move back to Kansas, dear. Big city life is not for you," she would insist.

But my mother would never understand the allure of Southern California. I didn't want to give up my dreams of living near Hollywood and amidst its movie stars. I loved that any day I could frolic on the beach, meander around an outside shopping mall, or cruise down Sunset Boulevard.

Piper had been my saving grace. She was fun and outgoing, unlike me, and quite happy to pull me out of my doldrums, time and time again. We'd met by accident during my first week in LA, after she rear-ended me at a stoplight in Santa Monica, then teary-eyed, and begged me not to sue.

I didn't want to attend this party, not tonight of all nights. Getting laid off wasn't exactly a good reason to celebrate. What I needed was a classic Hollywood movie to put me in better spirits. After all, movies had worked

wonders before. The DVD's stacked in my living room were like prescription drugs that could improve all sorts of moods.

However, common sense told me sitting in front of the television with a box of tissues and bag of potato chips wasn't a solution, either. Piper, my social butterfly of a best friend, was my life-line to the outer world. Maybe this party was the short term remedy I needed.

* * * * *

In my small, very unimportant opinion, chances of meeting someone I know at a private party in an LA aquarium should be about a billion-to-one, like winning the lottery. And yet, as I stood next to the wall of glass filled with fish, I stared in disbelief.

Hank did not have an ounce of class, and this was a classy party. His hair was cropped short, and he wore a formal suit, attire I'd never witnessed him wear. My ex-boyfriend was talking to a man, but I was certain Hank had escorted a woman here.

I turned toward a sea-spectacle and quickly contemplated my options to avoid Hank. Piper drove, so I had no escape route unless I was willing to take an expensive cab ride home. On the other hand, the aquarium was a big place, and I was hopeful the seahorse and jellyfish exhibits could capture my interest for a prolonged period of time.

I started to turn in that direction, and much to my relief, I spotted Piper engaged in a conversation with a woman I'd never met. They looked ready for a third party to join their fun.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" The deep and rather smooth sounding voice was all too familiar. Hank had stepped into my path.

I gripped my drink tightly. "Excuse me," I said as politely as possible, pretending not to recognize him, as if that were even possible.

"Sophie Oliver, I didn't know you got out this way." He raised his bottle of beer to me and then took a sip.

Some things hadn't changed. Hank was still drinking bottled beer, even at a celebration like this where any drink was on the house.

Hank did not budge, and I could feel my heart race. His sensual light brown eyes and crooked smile were less than a foot away from my face, too close for comfort. It had taken me over a year to stop wondering why our relationship ended so badly, although its end was the best thing that ever happened to me.

"Please," I said stiffly, barely able to look at him.

Surprisingly enough, Hank stepped aside, something he would not have done during our relationship. "Let's catch up sometime," he called after me.

I pretended not to hear him.

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Piper greeted me like the old friend she was and put an arm about me. "We saw you. Is everything ok?" she whispered, peeking over my shoulder in Hank's direction.

I nodded and then looked at Piper's friend, with her dark exotic looks.

"I'm Maria Valdez, newly divorced. I was married to a *cheater*." She sounded bitter.

I managed a small smile. "Sorry, he still has the ability to rumble my nerves," I muttered.

"First your job and now this-" Piper patted my shoulder, while Maria studied me with large sympathetic brown eyes.

A few minutes later, Maria found me crying in the ladies room.

"I think I can help," she declared.

* * * * *

My trip to the aquarium, somewhat fortuitous, had also brought me my first stint of luck in a long time. I reported to Advent Pictures in Hollywood on Tuesday morning to meet Maria's brother, Juan Valdez, about a job.

I could feel the spring in my step as I walked up one flight of stairs from the parking garage into the company's lobby. Although I wore my old blue suit, a remnant of all my previous job interviews, I felt the day had new possibilities. After all, I was interviewing at a company that made something I loved – movies!

Juan, a human resources manager, seemed mellower than his sister with his gentle voice and contagious laugh. He was a stocky yet polished dresser in his light gray business suit and appeared to be about my age.

After we got through the niceties of how I met his sister and how we both loved movies and LA, Juan gave me an overview of the company.

I sat there half-listening to Juan explain the history of Advent and why it was a great company to work for, but what I was really thinking was how this all seemed too good to be true.

"Sophie, how do you deal with personal conflict?" Juan asked.

It wasn't a question I expected right off the bat. He hadn't even told me about the job I was interviewing for.

"I...umm...never really had any at work," I stammered. It was surely a lie.

Juan was watching me thoughtfully, saying nothing.

My nerves ratcheted up a notch. "I guess I'm pretty easy to be around," I quickly added.

Juan clasped his hands together and smiled. "Super! That's great! Our company is always looking for people who don't rock the boat." He laughed a bit. "Know what I mean?"

I slowly nodded a couple times, wondering where he was going with this.

Juan continued, "We like to think we have a *strong* team environment with excellent leaders. We *trust* the direction of our leaders and *look up* to them, because *here at Advent*, we feel our leaders have our best interests at heart. Can you relate to that, Sophie?" He smiled broadly.

I swallowed, feeling heat begin to permeate my cheeks as it did when someone made me uneasy. Maria's brother was starting to remind me of a used car salesman.

"I guess employees should make every effort to respect superiors," I managed to say, gripping the ball point pen I'd brought with me. "It's the right thing to do," I mumbled.

"Exactly," Juan said, leaning forward with hands clasped together atop his desk. "I feel the same way. Sure, leaders may have very unique personalities, but I think looking for the good in others really makes me, personally, feel better about myself. It gives me a real sense of job satisfaction. I'm sure you can agree?"

"Sure," I murmured, unable to look at Juan, but instead looked down at the blank pad of paper and the extraneous ink marks I'd made without thinking. I was beginning to realize that this was not an interview to discuss my accounting, typing, or phone skills. Juan seemed to be working very hard to convince *me* of something.

"So, when can you start?" Juan asked, his words pulling me back to the present.

"Is this it?" I asked hesitantly, flustered by his abrupt offer.

"Is this what?" Juan laughed and then smiled.

"I mean, will I have another interview?" I paused briefly, before continuing, "You know, with someone else?"

Juan sat back in his chair and smiled. "Nope, this is it, Sophie."

My eyes settled on the tips of Juan's short, greased-up hair. I could have been interviewing for a guest spot on a talk show for all I knew. I wanted to ask about the job, but the words never made it to my lips.

My pulse suddenly went from normal to racing. After all these years, after all the bad luck, I'd finally landed a job in Hollywood, the place that had lured me away from home so long ago. This had all been too easy. Perhaps fate was paying up for all the jobs I had lost.

Juan looked down at the application I'd completed, printed, and brought along to the interview. "Of course, you'll have to go through the regular background checks we make everyone go through." He looked up and smiled at me. "Sophie, would a five percent pay increase over your last salary work?"

Thirty minutes later, my picture ID had been processed, and the security guard told me it would be waiting for me when I reported to work the next Monday as an executive assistant to Tyler Adams. Tyler sounded like a nice name for a man, and I was certain he would not resemble L.L. Larry.