

**Here for the Right Reasons**



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**SIMON &  
SCHUSTER**

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First published in Australia in 2022 by

Simon & Schuster (Australia) Pty Limited

Suite 19A, Level 1, Building C, 450 Miller Street, Cammeray, NSW 2062

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Sydney New York London Toronto New Delhi

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN: 9781761104961

Cover design: Alissa Dinallo

Cover image: TBC

Typeset by Midland Typesetters, Australia

Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. Griffin Press holds FSC chain of custody certification SGS HK-COC-005088. FSC promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.





# 1

‘Okay, Cece,’ Murray said to me. ‘We just need to get a few talking-head shots.’

I nodded, shifting around in my chair as I tried to find a comfortable way to sit. The black dress they’d given me for the First Night Party was gorgeous, but the skirt was all tulle and it was itchy as hell.

‘Are you all right?’

‘I’m fine,’ I answered. I hoped the dress wouldn’t show sweat on camera. It was unbelievably hot under the bright lights of the improvised studio.

‘Then sit still. You’re going to look like you’re lying or you really need to pee. Neither is going to look good on TV.’

I sat still. Murray had one of those voices that you obeyed instinctively. He reminded me of a foster mother I’d had for a while as a kid. She’d been nice (if you were grading on a curve, anyway), but if she wanted you to do something, you did it.

‘Okay,’ Murray said. ‘Here we go. Remember to answer in full sentences. The audience isn’t going to hear my question, only your answer.’

‘Okay.’

‘Why did you come on *Marry Me, Juliet*, Cece?’

This was it.

I took a quick breath, and then I smiled the smile I usually reserved for especially difficult customers. ‘I came on *Marry Me, Juliet* for one reason,’ I said. ‘To find true love.’



Okay. Clearly, this was an enormous lie. I had not evaluated all the available evidence and decided that moving into a mansion with twenty other women and a million cameras was the best chance I would ever have to find the man of my dreams. The odds on Tinder might not be that much better, but at least the chances of getting humiliated in front of the entire country were significantly smaller.

This is how I actually ended up as a contestant on the nation’s favourite dating show.

Step one: after we moved in together several years back, my friends Flick and Ayo and I got super into *Marry Me, Juliet*. It started out ironically, but before we knew it, we were the friends who hosted the annual finale watch party. We spent three hours decorating for our party last year and made everyone come as the contestant they thought the Romeo – Brett Sullivan – was going to pick as his Juliet. Suffice to say, it was very much not ironic by that point.

I came as Mary-ellen the medical secretary, and I was

genuinely very upset when Brett picked CJ the personal trainer instead. I still maintain that it was him, not me, who was wrong. He and Mary-ellen had this date where they made out under a waterfall, and sure, it looked a bit like a shampoo commercial, but it was also really hot, and you can't fake that kind of chemistry, you know?

The way he looked at her. Ooft. I just didn't understand how you could look at someone like that and then try to date someone else.

There was a silver lining to my disappointment/Brett's foolishness, though. We made everyone who came to the party chip in a couple of bucks for an expensive bottle of vodka and place a bet on how long they thought it would take for Brett and CJ to announce their break-up after the finale aired. I put my two bucks down for three months and two days, and I was exactly right.

I needed that vodka, too, because I'd had a shocker of a day. I'd had to give a seminar presentation in one of my criminology classes (there's not a lot that I hate more than standing up in front of a room where everyone's looking at me), and then I'd gone straight to my retail job, where I'd got I-want-to-speak-to-the-manager'd by three separate people. I was capital-D-Done by the time I pulled out my phone on the train on the way home, so when I saw Brett and CJ's break-up announcement on Instagram and realised I'd won the party door prize, I was ecstatic.

Step two: Flick and Ayo and I promptly drank my victory vodka. We went too hard too fast and didn't eat anything except for a handful of gummy bears, so next thing we

knew, there we were, filling out *Marry Me, Juliet* contestant applications.

'I'm single,' Ayo said, typing furiously, pausing to knock back the dregs of her vodka orange, and then starting to type furiously again. 'And hot. And I have a tragic backstory. Put me on your show, you fucking fucks.'

'I . . . hate . . . my . . . ex-boyfriend,' Flick said, focused intently on her tablet. 'I want— no, fuck you, not "review"! "Revenge!" Who says that they want "review", autocorrect?'

'Does Adam know you hate him and you want review?' I asked, shoving another handful of gummy bears into my mouth.

'We heard the headboard smacking into the wall last Saturday,' Ayo said. 'If you really want review, I have some questions about your method.'

'I definitely want review,' Flick said. 'The fact that hate-sex is very good and very hot does not change the fact that I want review.'

'Should I put the review thing in my application too?' I asked. 'I know it's been a couple of years since Jordan, but there's no time limit on review.'

'Yes, absolutely!' Ayo said, sloshing more vodka into all of our glasses. 'Go for broke. "Hello, I am Cece, a poor abandoned orphan. My childhood was very sad and lonely, and then I fell in love and he abandoned me too because he was a stupid tech bro with no taste." Where's the orange juice?'

'We're out,' Flick said. 'There's pineapple juice, though.'

'Is vodka pineapple a thing?'

'I guess it is now,' I said, getting up and going over to the fridge.

Ayo set her laptop aside and reached over and snagged mine. “I’ve had so little love in my life”, she said as she typed. “Everyone I love always leaves me. All I want is someone to stay.”

‘Get back to your own application and stop making me sound like a Dickensian orphan,’ I said, trying and failing to get the lid off the pineapple juice. ‘You know I hate that.’

‘I was trying to make you sound like Cinderella, but fine, I’ll get back to making myself sound like Cinderella,’ Ayo said. ‘Do you think I can spin those rats that lived in the walls in that one group home into charming field mice who made all my clothes and braided my hair for me?’

I threw a gummy bear at her and took my laptop back. ‘I also live with two annoying housemates,’ I pretended to type. ‘I could use a few weeks staying somewhere else.’

‘Hey,’ Flick said. ‘I wasn’t the one who made you sound like Oliver Twist.’

‘Headboard,’ I reminded her, swallowing half of my vodka pineapple. Hmm. Not bad. ‘We share a wall, Flick. Your review sex is loud.’

I don’t remember actually finishing my application, but apparently I did, because a few weeks later . . .

Step three: There was a voicemail on my phone when I got off my late-night shopping retail shift. ‘Hi Cecilia, this is Carrie, one of the producers from *Marry Me, Juliet*. Just calling to tell you that we loved your application, and we were hoping you’d come to an audition next Monday. I’ll pop all the details in an email for you. Looking forward to meeting you!’

‘I’m not going to go, obviously,’ I told Flick and Ayo.

‘Um, yes, you are,’ Ayo said.

‘Come on,’ I protested. ‘You know how nervous I get when everyone’s looking at me. I’ll be a disaster!’

‘Cece, you have to do it for us,’ Flick said. ‘We need to know what happens behind the scenes. Not want. *Need.*’

‘You applied too,’ I said. ‘Have you checked your phone? Maybe the producers called you too. You could go and get the dirt.’

‘Oh yes, I’m sure Adam would love me going on a dating show. That would go over so well.’

‘It’s back on?’ Ayo asked.

Flick sighed. ‘Yes.’

‘Babe . . .’

‘I know!’ Flick said. ‘I don’t need the lecture.’

‘It kind of sounds like you do need the lecture,’ I said.

‘You can give me the lecture after we give you this lecture,’ Flick said. ‘No changing the subject, Cece. And no not going to the *Marry Me, Juliet* audition because you’re scared.’

‘Ayo could go.’

‘They didn’t call me,’ Ayo said.

‘They might!’

‘One,’ Ayo said, ‘when was the last time you saw a Black woman on *Marry Me, Juliet*, Cece?’

‘There’s been all those #WeNeedDiverseRandJ petitions,’ I protested. ‘This might be the year they actually properly diversify their casting. Plus, you’d be great! We have exactly the same tragic backstory, and you have the distinct advantage of actually being good at talking about it in front of people.’

‘That leads me to number two,’ Ayo said. ‘There’s no way

they're casting me, because you have one thing I don't have, Cece.'

'What?'

'A finished application,' Ayo said. 'Too many vodka pine-apples, baby.'

'Cece, you just have to suck it up and face facts,' Flick said. 'They called you, and you're going to do it.'

'But—'

'It's not like you're committing to do the show,' Ayo said. 'Just the audition. Please. Fulfil our curiosity.'

'We need it,' Flick said solemnly.

The conversation was a little longer than that, but let's not pretend it took that much arm-twisting. You don't get as invested as I was in *Marry Me, Juliet* and not go to the audition.

At the audition, they evaluated both my psyche and my urine – according to Flick, who did some deep-dive internet research to prepare me, the number one reason people didn't get on the show was herpes. This was followed by some pretty excruciating group exercises, which reminded me of an awful 'togetherness and trust' workshop a social worker had once made me and Ayo and some other kids from our group home attend. Finally, they sat me down in front of a camera. 'So,' producer Carrie said. 'Tell us a little bit about yourself!'

'I'm Cece James,' I said, squinting and shading my eyes from the light. 'I'm twenty-six, I'm in the last year of my Criminology Masters, and I work in a boutique chocolate shop to pay the bills.'

'Criminology. Wow,' Carrie said, smiling. 'Tell me about that. Are you a caped crusader who fights crime?'

‘No,’ I replied. ‘That’s not what criminology is. It’s not, like, vigilante crime-fighting. It’s about thinking through criminal behaviour from a social perspective. The causes, the impacts, the mitigation strategies, that kind of thing.’

‘What made you get interested in that?’

‘I grew up in foster care,’ I said. ‘Most of the time, people assumed that we’d end up as criminals, if we weren’t criminals already.’

‘That must have been horrible.’

‘It sucked.’

I hoped if I didn’t elaborate, she’d change the subject, but no such luck. ‘So you went into criminology,’ Carrie said. ‘To push back against that line of thinking?’

‘That’s the goal, anyway. I’ve got to finish my degree first.’

‘You’re kind of like Batman. Lost your parents, and now you’re pursuing justice.’

‘Um . . . I guess?’ I said. ‘Though I think I could come up with some more sensible plans than Batman. If I had all that money at my disposal, I’d be funding some programs and grassroots efforts rather than running around at night in a cape.’

Her laugh was the kind of laugh people do when they recognise you’ve made a joke and they’re trying to be polite. Surreptitiously, I tried to wipe my clammy hands on my jeans.

‘Can you tell me a little bit about your parents?’ Carrie asked. ‘How did you lose them?’

‘They were in a car crash when I was two.’

‘I’m so sorry.’

She was giving me Dickensian Orphan Pity™ eyes. I shifted uncomfortably in my chair.

‘Is that when you went into foster care?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ I said.

Carrie looked at me expectantly.

I’d watched enough *Marry Me, Juliet* to know that if she were the Romeo, and I were on the show right now, this was when I’d be expected to spill the beans. The Romeo would give me the same look she was giving me, and I’d be poked and prodded until I talked all about my childhood trauma. I’d cry, and he’d cry, and then he’d kiss me and give some long talking-head interview about how happy he was I was being vulnerable and really letting down my walls, before he eliminated me two episodes later.

‘Now here I am,’ I said, digging my fingernails into my palm.

I clearly wasn’t the first go-off-girl-give-me-nothing contestant Carrie had ever dealt with, though, because she kept going. ‘Is that why you’re looking for love?’ she asked. ‘Because you’ve been on your own for so long, and you just want someone to lean on?’

I dug my fingernails into my palm even harder. Fucking Ayo. Had I left that line she’d written about having zero love in my life and desperately wanting someone to stay with me forever in my application?

Fucking vodka pineapples.

‘... Maybe?’ I said. ‘I haven’t had great luck in relationships. I’ve fallen in love, but no one’s ever fallen in love with me. I’ve dated a lot of dudes who turned out to be dicks.’

‘Very relatable,’ Carrie said, smiling at me. ‘All right, Cece. I’m guessing that’s not what you want from the Romeo, so tell me what it is you are looking for in a romantic partner.’

I was extremely ready to stop being the centre of attention, so I opened my mouth to say something that would make them cross me off the potential contestant list forever, like, *ideally, a rich old man on the verge of death who'll die and leave me his fortune.*

'I want someone to kiss me under a waterfall the way Brett kissed Mary-Ellen,' I blurted out. 'Like he might die if he let me go.'

Carrie raised her eyebrows.

'I know he didn't pick her in the end,' I said, 'but just once, I'd like someone to look at me the way he looked at her.'



My desire to get pashed under a waterfall aside, there was no way I would have ended up on reality TV if it wasn't for step four. I don't like attention, I don't like crowds, I don't like talking about myself, and even though I hadn't got laid in a while, I wasn't especially desperate to find love.

But there was a step four.

The pandemic.

'I'm sorry, Cecilia, but I'm going to have to let you go,' my boss told me on the phone. 'We kept you on as long as we could, but the new restrictions mean we can't open the shop for at least a couple of months. Without that cash flow, we can't afford to pay you.'

'Please,' I said, a horribly prickly feeling descending on my skin, like someone had thrown a net made of ice and bees over me. 'This is my only income. I need this job. Is there anything else I can do? I could pack orders for people and send them

out. You know people are going to want to comfort eat! I could go and work with the chocolatiers and run errands for them! I could—’

‘I’m sorry, but we can’t afford it.’

‘How am I supposed to pay my rent?’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said again. ‘Maybe when this is all over, we can hire you back. Goodbye.’

After she hung up, I sat in my room staring at my phone for a long time, like that would suddenly make it ring again.

*Sorry for the confusion, Cecilia, my boss would say. Of course we’re not firing you! We would never fire someone who’s worked for us loyally for five years and never complained about anything, especially not right in the middle of a pandemic when we know she’s got rent to pay! In fact, we’re promoting you. You’re going to be the new queen of the franchise.*

My throat tightened. Dots started swimming in front of my eyes, like a screensaver had suddenly started up on my phone screen and then slowly spread to the world outside it. There was a rushing in my ears, a roaring, and the air felt hot, thin.

*‘You’re eighteen now. We don’t get funding for you any more. You’re on your own.’*

*‘But I don’t have any money.’*

*‘Not my problem, kid.’*

Oh God. Oh God, oh God, oh God—

My phone rang.

I snatched at it, not even bothering to look at who the caller was. ‘Hello?’

‘Hello,’ the man on the other end of the phone said. ‘Is this Cecilia James?’

‘Y-yes,’ I said, swallowing a couple of times.

‘Are you all right? You sound like you’re about to cry.’

‘I’m fine,’ I said tightly, scrubbing my hand over my eyes.

‘Sorry, who is this?’

‘My name is Murray O’Connell, and I’m a producer on *Marry Me, Juliet*. I’m just calling to tell you that we were really impressed with your audition.’

I blinked. It had been a few months since the audition by that point, and I’d relegated it to the ‘humorous stories to tell at parties (in several thousand years’ time when we were allowed to go to parties again)’ section of my brain.

‘We’re just finishing up our casting for this season,’ Murray said. ‘If you’re willing, we’d love to have you as one of our Juliets.’

‘I – uh – just a minute.’

I took the phone away from my ear and googled ‘how much do marry me juliet contestants get paid’.

*The pay for Marry Me, Juliet contestants is not high, it read. An anonymous contestant reported that the Juliets get paid in the range of \$100 a day.*

A hundred dollars a day? One hundred *whole* dollars a day?

That was seven hundred dollars a week. Had I ever made seven hundred dollars in a single week before? Ever?

I should have thought about it. I would have thought about it, had Murray called at any other time but this.

But with one hundred dollars a day on the table? No job? A pandemic destroying basically any chances I had of finding

another one? Rent? Bills? Food? Whatever the fuck else was in that bottom layer of Maslow's hierarchy of needs?

I couldn't think about it. Like, I don't think I was actually physically capable of giving it a second thought.

'Sorry about that, Murray,' I said, trying to keep my voice breezy and not like I was about to burst into tears with gratitude. 'Yes. Please. I would love to be one of the Juliets.'



'This is not an ordinary season of *Marry Me, Juliet*,' Murray lectured us when we were all gathered a couple of weeks later in the lockdown hotel. 'You might have noticed that there are not as many contestants as there would normally be. Only fifteen women will be competing for our Romeo this season, instead of the usual twenty.'

I hadn't noticed, probably because we were so spread out. They had us in a giant hotel conference room in socially distanced seats, so we took up a lot of space.

What I did notice, though, was that there was a much higher ratio of women of colour in the room than I'd been expecting, given *Marry Me, Juliet*'s terrible diversity track record. There were still a whole lot of blondes (of the white women, I was one of only two brunettes), but the ratio of white women to women of colour was about fifty-fifty, as opposed to the more usual nineteen to one. Had all those #WeNeedDiverseRandJ petitions actually made an impact?

Ayo would be kicking herself that she hadn't finished her application. Hell, I was kicking myself that she hadn't finished

her application. This would be so much easier if I had a friend with me.

A blonde in a daisy-print mask a few seats over from me raised her hand. 'Are we going to have to be socially distanced on the show?'

'It's going to be a pretty fucking boring dating show if we can't make out with the Romeo,' someone behind me muttered.

'No,' Murray said. 'You will not be required to social distance. The show has put in place some very stringent protocols to make sure that no one on set has the virus. We'll be working with a skeleton crew. Absolutely minimal numbers. Both cast and crew will be in strict lockdown in this hotel for the next two weeks and will be tested multiple times in order to ensure that we have a virus-free bubble. When production starts, everyone will be staying on the *Marry Me, Juliet* property, and consequently will be inside that bubble, where they will continue to be tested regularly. No one new will come in, and people will only leave the bubble once they are eliminated from the show.'

Someone else raised their hand. 'Does this mean all the dates will be on the set?'

'Yes, it does. So if you came on the show just to go on a helicopter or a superyacht, then I'm sorry, but this is not going to be the experience you're looking for.'

Another hand. 'Who's the Romeo?'

'Nice try. You'll find out on the first night, same as every other season.'

Another. 'Is he locked down in this hotel too?'

'No. We're not foolish enough to put him anywhere near

you before the show starts, so don't break the rules and go looking for him.'

'What about Tom Zelig? Is he locked down here?'

'Z is married,' Murray said, his eyebrow starting to twitch. 'He's on the show only to host, not to provide a plan B to the Romeo for you. If any of you so much as think of hitting on him, I'll make sure you're edited out of the show entirely. Am I clear?'

Another hand. 'When will the show air?'

'Same as always,' Murray replied. 'We'll shoot for six weeks – about two episodes a week, twelve altogether – then there'll be a gap of a couple of months before the premiere. Any more questions?'

I raised my hand.

Murray nodded at me. 'Yes?'

'Will we be paid for the two weeks we spend in lockdown here before the show starts?'

'Yes, you will be paid at the same rate as stated in your contestant contracts for these additional two weeks of lockdown time.'

I did the maths – \$1400! – and tried to restrain myself from turning into the emoji with dollar signs for eyes.

'However,' Murray said, 'the payment for the two weeks of lockdown is the only additional payment you will receive. As per your contract, once you are eliminated, you will no longer be paid.'

That was all right. That extra \$1400 was just going to be gravy. Because I'd already decided I wasn't going to get eliminated, at least not for a long time.

This was not in my wheelhouse. This was not my skill set. Not even close. But I was broke, and I was desperate, and I knew from a hell of a lot of experience that comfort zones were not things you got to have when you were in my position.

The show filmed for six weeks. If I made it to the end, that was \$4200. Add the extra \$1400 of lockdown money, and that was a sweet \$5600.

That wasn't where the real money was, though.

I'd never had aspirations to be an Instagram influencer. My Instagram was almost exclusively pictures of food and dogs and sunsets, not myself.

But I'd seen the amount of sponcon CJ and Mary-Ellen and some of the top contestants from Brett's season were doing. After hanging up with Murray, the next thing I'd googled was 'how much do marry me juliet contestants get paid for instagram', and my eyes nearly fell out of my head.

Fuck my boss. Fuck retail. Fuck trying to find some kind of a job, any job, in a pandemic when everyone was firing all their staff.

I wasn't getting eliminated. I was going to make it deep. At least to the final four.

It didn't matter who the Romeo was. I was going to make him like me, no matter what. Even if I had to do what Ayo had tried to do in my application and make myself sound like some kind of tragic Cinderella.

And that was going to make me a reality TV personality, and then I was going to sit back and let that sweet, sweet influencer money roll in, and I was never going to have to rely on anyone again.

*Here for the Right Reasons*



‘So you’re here for the right reasons?’ Murray asked me.

‘Yes,’ I replied, smiling my customer-service smile right into the camera. ‘I’m absolutely here for the right reasons.’