

beneath these **EXPECTATIONS**

A Beneath World Novella

by Meghan March

Chapter 1

“And it has to be in a tropical location.” Paulette flicked to a new slide of the PowerPoint presentation.

Levi wanted to flip her laptop shut, pretend this afternoon had never happened, go back to bed, and start this day over.

But Paulette was totally oblivious to the sinking, twisting feelings in his gut.

She just went right on to the next slide of her “Outline for an Acceptable Marriage Proposal for Levi and Paulette.”

“There must be a professional photographer present, and here are some ideas for setup and shots. This is super important, Levi. I need pics for socials. Are you paying attention? A videographer is optional, but preferred. Bonus points really.”

Levi leaned back in his chair at the café and wondered why on earth she wanted to present this to him in public. It was absolute insanity. So far, they’d been through nearly a dozen slides of acceptable rings, specifying shape, size, color, clarity, and carat; then off-limits holidays, including her birthday, when he couldn’t propose; followed by requirements that her hair, nails, eyelashes, and makeup be freshly done. And of course, slides on who could be there, who couldn’t be there, and what the day had to be like in order to qualify as a potential proposal day—no bickering or arguing of any kind beforehand or at least three days prior. The whole thing was madness.

Reality hit Levi hard. This wasn't happening. Ever.

He rubbed a hand over his face, and the next thought in his mind was, Fuck it.

He stood up as she clicked to the next slide.

"Do you need another coffee?" Paulette asked. "If so, can you wait until I'm done? I only have a few more."

"No."

She pouted. "Okay. Well, I guess if my wishes aren't important to you ..."

"No, just no. To all of it." He pushed his chair in. "I can't do this anymore."

She blinked slowly—because with the weight of her massive eyelashes, rapidly wasn't an option.

"I don't understand." From her tone, it was clear she really didn't.

"This isn't going to work."

"What do you mean?"

Levi didn't know how to make it clearer. "We're done, Paulette. It's over."

Reality dawned as her eyes widened. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"Yes."

Her lower lip trembled, and his heart squeezed as it looked like she was about to cry.

Dammit. Levi hated to hurt her.

"But ... but ... what about all your brother's money and your trust fund?"

Instantly, the guilt that had started to creep up vanished.

There it is. The truth. Finally.

He'd long suspected that was her primary motive in dating him, and there it was. No more guessing.

"Have a nice life, Paulette. I wish you the best." Levi turned and strode out of the café, feeling lighter and freer than he had in months.

As the soles of his shoes hit the cracked New Orleans sidewalk, Levi sucked in a breath of humid, semi-fresh air.

“Thank you, God,” he whispered, feeling like he’d just dodged a killer bullet.

He pulled out his cell phone and tapped his brother’s contact.

As soon as Lucas picked up, he said, “Dude, you’re not going to believe this.”

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