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## Chapter 1

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A chorus of sputtering and spitting worked together with the frustration of the Buick's owner who was in the process of swearing at the ignition. Under normal circumstances, she logically understood talking to a vehicle did nothing to encourage proper functioning. However, these were not normal circumstances and she didn't have time to be dealing with this. She shoved the driver's side door open.

Opening her apartment front door, with fingers crossed that her roommate didn't have any plans, she shouted, "Hey, Katie! Could you do me a huge favor?"

The girl popped her head around the corner. "Depends on what you're asking, crazy."

"My car won't start, and I'm supposed to be meeting some guy for drinks in fifteen minutes."

"Sure, I'll take you... will I need to pick you up too?"

"Depends on if he makes a good impression or not. C'mon though! Being late more than five to ten minutes goes from fashionable to tacky really quickly."

Katie grabbed her keys from the hook and the two of them practically raced to her car. As she passed from sidewalk

to parking lot, her heel got stuck in a crack and she went tumbling.

Her roommate laughed... a lot, but she was too irritated to see how funny the situation was. Righting herself, she declared, "We need to leave a note at the office. We are way too pretty to have to deal with this broken up parking lot."

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At the bar, she was nearly stampeded by an anxious guy with a phone in his hand. She had barely entered the building. I mean, she was hot, but damn. Could he be a little more chill about it?

"Are you Jennifer Caman from Cupid Match?"

"Er, no. I'm not, sorry." It bothered her to lie, but she knew it would bother her much more to sit and have a conversation with this man for an entire drink. He was wearing dirty, work boots on a first date!

"Are you sure? You look a little bit like the girl in the photo. You're not meeting anyone?"

"No, sorry. I'm just here to sit by myself and have a drink. I've had a pretty rough day. How late is your date? If she's more than fifteen minutes late, I'd just assume she's not coming and save yourself the hassle."

Thank God, her Cupid Match photo was from when she was still blonde.

Jennifer sat at the bar and ordered herself a cosmopolitan. Granted, now she was going to be paying for this drink herself and wouldn't be able to get a coffee before school again for the next three weeks. However, she couldn't just leave now.

"Couldn't help overhearing... why are you having a bad day?" The bartender asked after delivering her cocktail.

"My car isn't starting, and I need to find a job, but I'll be all right. I always am."

“Can you bartend? We’re hiring here!”

“Thanks for the offer, but that’s not the sort of job I mean.” People didn’t understand. She lived – er, wanted to live – too luxuriously to just accept any old job. Bartending would not look good on her resume.

She just needed to get in with a wealthier crowd...

Her train of thought was cut short as the bell above the entrance dinged. Her young heart raced and her stomach turned into butterfly knots as she glanced over her shoulder to see the mysterious man entering through the bar’s front door. He was the most gorgeous man she had ever seen in her twenty-one years of life. She shocked herself by maintaining a brief, but memorable moment of eye contact with the stranger. Typically, men who were clearly out of her league made her cower and hide. This unlikely interaction was the one exception. Before she knew it, she had offered a timid smile. Even more surprising was the kind reaction she received from him. His eyes crinkled in a return smile.

Man, was he something to look at: tanned skin, muscular arms held tight by a short sleeve shirt, and those eyes... She couldn’t wait to tell her friends about him.

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Now, that it was the next day, she couldn’t decide whether or not to tell her girlfriends about the man from the bar. She had this horrible habit of getting her hopes up too soon and didn’t want to deal with any lectures from her well-meaning pals. They wouldn’t see it as anything special, she was a little bit boy crazy after all, but that right there had to be proof this had been different. He was clearly a man, not some boy.

She had lost herself in thought and when she came back down to earth, Jenn found herself to be still maneuvering her hairdressing mannequin’s coarse hair into thick rollers. How

she had managed to keep on working without dropping anything was a mystery, but she had to admit she was quite proud of herself for being so slick.

Where had her girls gone off to? This was always happening on her more daydream-y and unfocused days. She would get lost in the work she had at hand, look around, and realize her clique had been long gone, probably off to wax someone's coochy or shampoo each other's hair for the fourth time this week.

Jennifer had decided to tell them when she saw them coming back from the secluded shampoo room. Lola had a bleach stained towel tied into a knot at the back of her head and was settling into a chair while Mikayla plugged her blow-dryer into the adjacent station's outlet.

Steph was trailing behind and looking like she needed something to do with her hands. She was most likely 'helping' Mikayla with the project of styling Lola's hair. She had to give Steph a bit of credit, however. It was quite possible Mikayla might need assistance as Lola's hair was a pain in the ass to work with. Her hair was much longer than the others' and there was also the added challenge of working around her tape-in extensions. Lola would usually end up brushing them herself as they were easily tangled and all of us were afraid of ripping one out.

"What's that excited look for?" Lola asked me with a hint of laughter already streaking across her pretty face. She was definitely the friend who Jennifer would save the most ridiculous of stories for.

"You're not going to believe me, but I fell in love and I think we're going to need to start planning a wedding as soon as humanly possible."

"You're crazy, with who?" her loyal friend replied, not a trace of shock invading her tone. Big proclamations like this

were obviously typical for mid-Tuesday conversation headlines.

“You know how I was meeting that guy for drinks on Friday? Total loser, showed up with work boots on, but another guy came in and bought me a drink. He was absolutely perfect and he was wearing a suit! He didn’t stay very long, but we’re meeting there again this Friday.”

“Sounds exciting. What’s his name?”

You know, you’d think she would’ve asked that...

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As much as Jenn wanted to sit around and think about her upcoming date, she knew she couldn’t set everything else aside, like her job hunt. She had to find the right salon for her, one where she’d make good money and be surrounded by the right people.

Jenn had scheduled herself to attend a class at Gilberts Salon today. She had visited a slew of salons in the past few weeks, and each one had presented its own red flags within the first fifteen minutes of her visit. Everything from something as minor as not offering the textured-hair services to being straight up nasty and leaving her with a horrible feeling in the pit of her stomach. Those trips had left her wondering if she had gotten herself into the wrong line of work.

During the entire drive she reflected on how lucky she should feel having been invited to attend this class, as it was mainly for Gilberts’ staff, and there was the potential she would be one of the only attendees who didn’t have her cosmetology license. She took it as a compliment they had thought of her in the first place.

She followed her GPS, instructing her to turn right into a parking lot that was part of a strip mall. This struck her as strange as she had previously imagined Gilberts as an upscale

salon. But here it was appearing the same, from the outside, as any old nail salon.

As she parked, a Range Rover pulled in next to her on the left. Her 1999 rusty Buick wasn't able to put up a fight in contrast to this sexy vehicle. She reminded herself she should just be happy she was getting herself out of her comfort zone and doing things like this, while her fellow classmates made a desperate effort to make it to school on time, and to do so without their shower caps still covering their cheap weaves.

She and the other driver both made their way towards the salon. Instead of thinking of her inferiority, she chose to see this woman as an example of what her prospective future looked like.

Jenn was content with a seat in the back. The expansive room was already filled with chattering stylists. You'd be crazy not to admit that simply being in a room with this many beauty queens was overwhelming. Hairstylists are known for their big personalities and the room was just about bursting with the energy that was bubbling up and over. Jenn noticed her new friend had decided to sit by her, still keeping her distance with a seat in between them. They were clearly not adjacent seats level yet.

"Hey, I'm Ashley. I hope you don't mind me sitting by you. Have you ever been to Gilberts before?" The brunette made her introduction.

"Oh, gosh. Is it that obvious I'm a newbie?"

"Well, I was in your same place three years ago when I came to one of these things by myself, too. So I think I kind of sniffed you out because I remember that feeling so vividly. Also, your hair case does say 'Levitation Beauty Academy' so I kind of assumed you were still a student." She laughed. "I remember being nervous too so you're okay. You can relax."

The room quieted as a man walked to the front. "Welcome to Gilberts. I do understand we have some students who have

come to learn with us and I would like to take a second to recognize each of them.”

He called off four names and had the ladies stand up as the room greeted them. None of the names had been ‘Jennifer’ and Ashley took it upon herself to fix that.

“Oh, we have another in the back. This is Jennifer.”

The room kind of heard, but kind of didn’t. It was an awkward ordeal and Jenn wished they would’ve just let it slide. At that moment, Mrs. Gilbert apologized to her.

“I’m sorry. I had no idea you were coming.”

“It’s all right. You and your husband teach a business class at Levitation once a month. We were introduced there, remember?”

It was an uncomfortable conversation to be having in front of the entire room. Mrs. Gilbert nodded as if she remembered, while it was obvious to everyone that she had, in fact, not remembered.

Halfway through the day, Jenn had resigned herself to the fact she would have to reach out to other salons. This was after listening to many covert and outright jabs to her self-esteem. Playing their due part were comments about how she needed to figure out what she wanted because there was no way you could do hair and work in fashion as well. There was also an insult dressed up as constructive criticism in which the guilty party nearly convinced her she should never wear glasses again as they only served to emphasize the fact her profile was not symmetrical and, therefore, not ideal. The rest of the day she spent pretending to listen and be attentive while she was really fantasizing about fucking the man from the bar. You could say she didn’t learn much.

How had that girl from the bar managed to catch his attention with just her smile? Was he that desperate to get laid he would spend his time thinking about some otherwise unworthy-of-note girl? Hell, she could've been half his age, but business had been such a headache as of late. He had taken to coming home completely and utterly alone so as to not have to deal with anymore meaningless drama. You would think working with some of San Francisco's hottest stylists would be any man's wet dream, but not in Anthony's case. However, it would be a lie if he didn't acknowledge the fact having her petite and appealing frame instead of his usual glass of bourbon this evening was all too tempting. He tried not to despise himself for it, but those big eyes full of innocence had been refreshing.

He couldn't permit himself to be distracted, but here he was continuing to fantasize about a young woman as his unaware business partner sat rambling on about finances and budgets. His partner deserved much greater respect than that, but he just couldn't help himself.

He could not wait to meet her again.