

# MIXED BUSINESS



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## CHAPTER 1

# A GOOD PLACE TO START

Oh, good grief! I was going to be late again!

I sat up in bed, snatching the alarm clock off the side table to check the setting. It was on, but I had set the wrong time. It blinked *p.m.* instead of *a.m.*

Dropping my feet over the side of the bed, I sighed and reached for the phone. I closed my eyes, thinking of the number of times I'd been late in the past couple of months—too many to count.

The only reason my boss must put up with me is because I'm good at what I do. Paying me pennies on the dollar might also have had something to do with it. Still, this was not going to look good.

Pushing the hair out of my face, I frowned as I looked over the scattered papers that covered my bed. My current assignment was the reason I was so tired. I considered a variety of excuses I hadn't yet used.



I sighed again and glanced at the clock. If I washed up instead of showering and brushed my hair in the car as I drove to work, I would only be fifteen minutes late. I jumped up from the side of the bed, dropped the phone on the charger, and picked out a black skirt and pink T-shirt from my wardrobe. I eyed the clothes critically and mentally diminished the size of the wrinkles. I grabbed the ensemble and went into the bathroom. After a quick fifteen minutes spent freshening up and dressing, I slipped my feet into a pair of low, black loafers (sans pantyhose) and frantically began looking for my keys.

A few minutes later, I was running out to my car, one arm loaded with work, the other arm brushing my hair, and saying a quick prayer that she—my car—would start up. *She* is a baby-blue Pinto. The year of the car? Don't know, don't care. She's old but still moves.

But Baby, my car, is very temperamental. She starts up only after I pump her accelerator two times before turning the key. Her driver's side door sticks, so I have to pull the latch up while pulling the door open. Her speedometer is off, so I am always driving five miles below the speed limit. And her gas meter always reads empty no matter how much gas I put in her. Yet, even with everything that's wrong with Baby, I cannot part with the first car I paid for without my family's help.

She's all mine.

Yet, as I lurched from the parking spot in front of my duplex, I was reconsidering trading her in for the fifty cents she was worth. "Maybe a sturdier, more reliable model," I said aloud. Baby lurched forward and stalled.

"Something younger," I said meanly. The lurching stopped, and we rode smoothly on the road. Just like a woman to straighten up when you mention youth. I smiled, thinking I should use that tactic more often.

Unfortunately, as I merged onto the highway, Baby lurched again and backfired loudly. Several heads turned in my direction. I ducked my head and tried to nonchalantly roll up my window, forgetting that the only air that blew from the vents was dragon-hot in this late spring heat.

And, I still had more than fifteen miles to go.

About two miles up the road (and away from those who had witnessed the backfire), I tried to roll the window back down, but Baby wanted revenge for my earlier remarks. The window would not come down. The knob turned, but the window remained up. I contemplated breaking it but quickly vetoed that idea. I did not have the money to replace a window. Driving around in an old, baby-blue Pinto was embarrassing, but driving around in an old, baby-blue Pinto with tape over

the driver's side window—well, that was worse than embarrassing. So, I rode the rest of the way to work in 110-degree heat, fanning myself with my hand.

I worried about how the rest of my day was going to go.

I managed to snag a parking spot across the street from the office building where I work. I was shocked at how busy the area was due to the late hour I was getting into work. Gathering up the large stack of papers on my passenger's seat, I held them close to my chest with one arm and made a hasty exit from the car, managing to hold tight to the papers, slam the door shut, and make it around Baby to the sidewalk safely. As I stood on the busy sidewalk, locking the car from the passenger's side, someone pushed by me, knocking my papers from my hand. I sighed and watched as several of my papers skittered across the street into the morning traffic. I looked around to see if I could locate the culprit who had so easily added this havoc to my morning. I watched as a broad-shouldered gentleman rushed across the street and into the Tillman building where I work.

I quickly snatched up any nearby papers and rushed over to my building. I pushed through the glass doors of Tillman and Associates, letting the cool air surround me. I was so happy to be inside the cool building that I forgot about exacting revenge on the man who had pushed me.

I stood in front of the doors, letting the cold air wash over me. I straightened and smiled at Patricia, the front receptionist, who gave me a worried look.

I fanned myself and said to her, “It’s hot out there.”

She nodded at me and continued to look at me with a grimace on her face.

I walked past her, returning her frown. I was never going to get used to some of the snobby women who worked here. Hadn’t she heard that we women must stick together? She was probably one of those women who felt the company was overlooking her real talents and she didn’t deserve to be a receptionist.

I know because I was the receptionist once.

Because the business was still expanding, in the short time I had worked here, I’ve been a receptionist, a secretary, an assistant to an assistant, and now a relations coordinator—my present position. This position had come with a department head salary without the headache of supervising, great health and vacation benefits, and a snazzy title. Fortunately for me, the company had me sign paperwork stating this would be my permanent position. Then they shoved me in a room with two big file cabinets and told me to get to work figuring out what the files meant and how to decipher them—hence, the reason for my tardiness this morning.

Clutching the papers to my chest, I walked past the elevators and ran up the three flights of steps that took me to the office of my current manager, Cheryl. I was reporting to her until my boss arrived. In addition to me learning my new position, she had me working as if I were one of her staff.

I sighed and put on a brave smile. Hopefully, she wouldn't notice I was late.

As I pushed open the door that led into the space, I could hear Cheryl shouting out orders from her office. Cheryl had a small, central office located in the middle of the floor. Her staff's cubicles were arranged around her office, so she could see them as she worked. The arrangement seemed to mimic a shepherd and her flock, protective and watching. But after working with her, that image had quickly disappeared. Cheryl would shout orders from her office like she was a feudal lord directing her peasants. Today, she was yelling for the Johnson file.

I paused just inside the door to keep out of the way of her employees as they scurried about, trying to locate this elusive file. The only employee who remained seated at her cubicle was a young lady named Veronica. She remained seated at her desk, working on whatever held her attention. I'd met Veronica when she trained

me as the receptionist. She was hilarious and didn't take any crap from anyone. We had become friends fast.

She looked up, surveying the melee with a scowl. When she noticed me, she wrinkled her brow, puckered up her lips in distaste, and jerked her thumb in the direction of Cheryl's office. I translated this as, "Can you believe this woman?" I put my hand over my mouth, hiding my smile.

I stepped over to a file cabinet that no one had yet made their way over to, placed my disorderly paperwork on top, and opened to the *J* section. As I flipped my way through the *J*'s, I yelled out, "What's the first name?"

Cheryl called out, "Michael."

I picked out several files with the associated name and waved them at Veronica as I passed her cubicle. Her eyes widened as I walked in her direction. She dramatically leaned back in her seat as I walked past her. I ignored her as I made my way into Cheryl's office.

Cheryl looked up as I put the files on her desk and did a double take.

"Who are you?" she said, grimacing. Behind me, Veronica was pushing me farther into the office, holding another stack of files. She plopped them down in a nearby chair.

"What's up?" I said, trying to use my best groggy sick voice.

Picking up the file, Cheryl dryly answered, “Your hair.”

Veronica quickly handed me a compact mirror and a brush. “I can’t believe that you went out like this. You look awful.”

I looked into the mirror at the monster staring back. The sweltering car ride to work had created a new look, much different from the cool, composed one I’d created at home. My shoulder-length hair had become thick and unruly and stood all over my head. The small amount of waterproof mascara that I’d brushed on my upper eyelashes had sweated off to settle under my eyes, giving me a wounded raccoon look. I looked down at my clothes and moaned. The pink shirt and black skirt that had looked slightly wrinkled in my home now held long, deep creases. I had two big wet spots under my armpits, and there was dust on my skirt. I realized now why the receptionist had looked at me so funny.

Cheryl looked at the files on her desk. “Are all these Johnson files?” she asked, grabbing the one on top.

I nodded while brushing my hair in the mirror that Veronica was holding in front of me. Veronica said, “When your shirt dries, you won’t see that sweat stain under your arm.” She reached out with one hand and brushed at my skirt. “And the dust should come right off. What have you been doing?”

Cheryl looked up from the file and peered at me. “You look tired. Are you up for today, or do you want to reschedule? We can have our meeting tomorrow.”

I stopped brushing my hair and turned my raccoon gaze to Cheryl. “What meeting?” I said.

Veronica took the brush and tried to control the mess on top of my head.

“We’re discussing turning over departments, remember? You may be meeting your new boss. I discussed this with you earlier this week.” Cheryl said this while flipping through the file in her hand.

Not wanting to appear totally oblivious, I waved my hand nonchalantly. “Of course I can do the meeting today,” I said to Cheryl, who looked relieved momentarily.

She then turned to Veronica. “Are you about done? We’ve got about ten minutes.”

Cheryl began pulling on a beige linen jacket that matched her skirt. She pulled out her own compact mirror and checked her makeup. Why she was checking, I don’t know. Flawless foundation complemented her creamy skin, and her red hair was always styled and perfect. We were about the same height, but with her style and poise, she seemed taller. Or it could have been the stylish heels she always wore.

Needless to say, Cheryl and Veronica were the type



of women who always looked cool and put together—makeup always done, clothes always stylish, and always in the right place at the right time. They always seemed unfazed, relaxed, and confident in stressful situations. Nothing and no one disrupted their worlds.

I was the complete opposite. I was clumsy and very faze-able. My world came unglued at the first sign of a hangnail. It was ridiculous as an adult how self-conscious I was. Hell, I still had acne. It wasn't as bad as when I was younger, but it was there nonetheless. I mean, what other adult older than eighteen still got pimples? My dermatologist told me it was normal and is called adult acne.

*Whatever.*

I grabbed the mirror, searching my face for any adult acne. Veronica had brushed my hair into some flip that looked pretty good. I snatched some tissue off Cheryl's desk and wiped under my eyes. The mascara smeared into a thick line underneath my bottom eyelash. I turned my head to the side, taking note of the effect it had on my eyes. It gave my eyes a more exotic look. This was a look I could not have achieved on purpose even if I'd practiced in the mirror for an hour. I dabbed the tissue with my tongue and wiped off the excess black makeup. I did the same to the other eye, aiming for the same effect. Afterward, I looked in the mirror.

For once, I looked like Cheryl and Veronica—and just in time for the meeting.

Veronica smiled at me like some proud mother. Cheryl gave me a once-over and nodded with a wry smile. “Are you coming or what?” she said, opening the door.

Remembering how I looked, I followed Cheryl, walking gracefully toward the conference room. As luck would have it, there was an invisible log in the middle of the hallway that only I stumbled over. I fell to one knee and banged my elbow into the wall. Cheryl didn’t notice, or opted not to notice, and elegantly strolled into the room. I stood up and quickly glanced around, happy that no one saw me. I limped into the conference room and hurriedly took the seat nearest Cheryl.

I didn’t hear the deep, throaty chuckle from the other end of the hall.