

## Chapter One

If you knew men the way Cassandra Marrin knew men—well, one in particular—you'd be crossing them off your bucket list, too.

So, her radar sounded right from the get-go when her best friend, Ashley, suggested they connect over dinner and drinks at Dimone's, the one watering hole in town with the most active TGIF pick-up scene.

To add to her frustration, being somewhat attractive didn't make things any better or proclaim she was available or on the prowl. She had recovered from the near-fatal disease "man-itis." Despite that, men always read "I'm hungry and thirsty" the wrong way.

Fortunately, an unexpected turn of events brightened her awful evening.

Shoving her way back to the dining table, Cassandra dropped in her seat and gushed breathlessly, "You won't believe who I just met, Ashley."

Ashley Persel peeked over the top of her menu. "Did you come plunger-to-plunger with Mr. Roto-Rooter when you went to the potty?"

"It was the lieutenant governor!" she cried. "He's in the sports bar area with my father. I was a babbling fool and probably came across as sloshed." Her hands shook as she grabbed her margarita to drown away her social ineptness.

"*Greyson DuBois!*" Ashley sat erect and chucked the soup du jour selections. "He's tall, dark, and a heart-stopper. Eye candy. Who knew a potty break could bring you face-to-face with a dignitary? But what's your father doing with him?"

"I was too star-struck to ask, but the Tallahassee capitol building is nearby."

Like an owl, Ashley's eyes widened as she twisted her head to steal a glance at the man in question. With her view blocked, she did the next best thing, grilled, "So, what's DuBois like?"

"There wasn't time to notice." Cassandra kicked off her shoes, and her size six pencil skirt rode up as she crossed her legs.

"Nothing? You noticed nothing at all?" Ashley squealed, bug-eyed. "You are a disgrace to all women."

She waved the idiotic criticism away and slurped her alcoholic elixir for its calming qualities. "He's classy and is more handsome in person than on TV. A fantastic dresser, he was wearing a white shirt, a three-piece grey suit, and a Ferragamo tie."

"You noticed plenty for a woman who didn't notice anything." Ashley moved closer and gaped in wonder. "Tell me more... I want the whole scoop... Don't leave anything out."

Cassandra's flaxen hair landed midway on her back when she tossed it over her shoulder. "Gee whiz, I didn't interview him. We chatted for a few minutes. What more can I say than he's personal with a continental flair and charming?"

"Aha! He oozed animal magnetism. I knew it! Oh, be still my heart!" Ashley's full figure fell against her chair with a deep, dying breath.

She loved her BFF, but Ashley tended to be melodramatic and ran in the theatrical fast lane. "Who mentioned magnetism?"

"With a decent guy thrown in your direction, things are picking up for you. It's a good thing you're wearing your Michael Kors ensemble and heels. They accentuate your fabulous figure and shapely legs."

The “good thing” was debatable, with her toes crammed into the stilettos and her feet killing her. Yet, on the positive side, with the statesman towering over her when they shook hands, the lofty footwear added extra inches to her five-two height.

Her upbeat tablemate continued to ramble. “Today, the hombre second-in-command, and next week, the top honcho.” Ashley frowned. “Nope, chuck the honcho. Governor Hockfield’s married. Go for a prime minister. *Vive la France*,” she chanted while waving her napkin overhead, almost taking out a waiter’s tray laden with drinks.

Cringing, Cassandra sipped her cocktail, failing to transport her to a faraway destination.

Returning to reality, Ashley said, “And do not tell me you’re turned off because he’s African American. In that case, I will gladly take him off your hands.”

Black, White, Asian, Indigenous person, or Martian, none of those factors fazed her or were noteworthy. The closed, no vacancy, and no solicitation signs dangled from her front door. In plain English, scam!

“You know I’m not into men at the moment, Ash. So, be my guest if Greyson’s unattached.”

“Oh, it’s *Greyson* now, is it?”

Cassandra rolled her eyes and fiddled with condiment jars and bottles, repositioning them by size.

“Leave the darn condiments alone. You are deflecting.” Ashley snatched the ketchup bottle, plopped it before her, and wiped a hand on her jeans.

“According to you, a man will be considered when The Lord returns. Bah, humbug, and Christmas isn’t for four months.” She folded her arms across her chest. “DuBois is *very* eligible and worth picking over if you’re being picky.”

“You’re not listening... *I’m not interested*,” she singsonged.

“You’ll be thirty-five soon and aren’t the Energizer bunny, Cass. Your biological clock’s battery is almost drained.” Ashley’s fingernail scampered across the pine tabletop and took a death plunge when they reached the edge.

“Real cute. Do you need an ambulance, Ms. Persel?” she asked. “By the way, you’re the same age as me.” She removed the silverware from a rolled-up napkin as a waiter rushed by with a tray loaded with platters. Cassandra’s stomach rumbled as the aroma of onion rings tickled her nostrils.

“It isn’t my fault I’ve had a few false starts,” Ashley said defensively, displaying her finest pout. “Several of my boyfriends suffered from marital amnesia. But who are you to talk?”

Cassandra didn’t relish revisiting her failure to reach the marriage home plate. “Ash, I hate to bring it up, but both our love lives are pathetic.”

“At least I’m looking and will surely find Mr. Right any day now.” Ashley’s comment and curled lip seeped with smugness.

“Sure, any day now,” echoed Cassandra. “And I’m confident you have a solution for my lonely situation—like visiting Greyson’s table and inquiring if he has room on his dinner plate for me.”

“Great minds think alike. I’ll be your emotional support companion and walk over with you. I’ve never been in the touchy-feely range of a politician.” Ashley puffed up her kinky brunette bob and straightened her T-shirt embroidered, *Glamorous*.

Cassandra pitched aside the daily specials menu as her back and tongue bristled, “I shall do no such thing. I don’t believe in asking a man out.”

“Why? Are you afraid they’ll say yes...?”

“I’m old-fashioned...”

“And this old-fashioned woman will turn into an old maid before she blinks. The name Cassandra DuBois becomes you. I can visualize the headlines. The wedding of the decade, if not the century.” Ashley tapped her heart. “‘Beautiful, fair maiden ties the knot with the eye-catching, dark-skinned elected official.’ The marriage will also be spectacular for racial relations.”

“That’s *never* happening...”

Ashley steamed ahead at full speed. “As a human resources manager, you should appreciate the benefits of this match. Affirmative action in the making on both sides of the coin and a win-win for all parties involved.”

Cassandra shielded an eye with her hand. The snub proved futile in deterring her wishful sidekick.

“Greyson will be a shoo-in for the Black and the White votes when running for governor. The Latinos are iffy. Do you speak Spanish?”

Reclaiming the discarded menu, Cassandra buried her face behind the fresh-catch-from-the-sea selections. Management forgot to offer earplugs as a side dish. “Ashley, you’re getting carried away. I didn’t come here to find a man.”

“Hush, I see it clearly.” Ashley’s fingertips rubbed her temples in a circular motion as if connecting by telepathy to a mystical source. “With your combined striking looks, the children will be gorgeous, sport *café au lait* skin, and dazzle with vivid green eyes. And the little dumplings’ hair won’t be blonde, straight, and stringy like yours. It will be sandy-colored and super wavy. Perfect. Just perfect...” Ashley purred with an air kiss.

When Ash got an idea, even if bizarre, she steamrolled with it. The church bells hadn’t even rung—which they wouldn’t—and her girlfriend envisioned Cassandra rocking a little “Greysonette” in a cradle.

“My hair is not stringy, and this conversation is over. I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry.”

“Hungry for sex...?”

Cassandra surveyed the packed restaurant. “It will take forever to receive our food if we don’t order now. So, lay off it...”

“Lay as in the bedroom activity? But you can also do it in the living room...”

Perhaps not commenting would silence her companion’s tirade—no such luck.

Doubling as an unsolicited relationship coach, Ashley didn’t accept her advice being ignored. She slammed a hand on the table. “I’ll have you on a date in one month if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Where should I send your funeral flowers?” Cassandra bared a brilliant smile. “I’m not going out with anyone.”

Quick of mind and mouth, Ashley shot back, “What do you have against residing in the lieutenant governor’s mansion, Mrs. DuBois?”

“Too many steps,” she sneered as a flustered waiter approached their table.

