

Chapter One

As a child, Morgan Malone stood in the school playground telling jokes. The other children made fun of her red hair, her large feet. So she started telling jokes. First from the joke books she checked out from the library, then from her head. She found a way to poke fun at her tormenters by turning their behavior into comic material. She studied them as she nibbled on her tofu and sprout sandwich at the last table in the cafeteria. She took notes from the back seat of the bus. She aimed her comic barbs at them and they laughed with open mouths until they recognized themselves in her jokes. Then they elbowed each other and turned away.

She grew into her hair, her feet, and now, at twenty-five, she mixes drinks behind a bar, listening to other's lives, recognizing herself in the young man with his tie at half mast who dreams of adventure beyond the water cooler, the woman with a Jackie O poof gone sideways who was dumped on her birthday.

Morgan turns it into a joke: "Men can't help the way they are, it's in their jeans." But it doesn't work, out loud.

The woman purses her lips around the thin red straw and sucks up Morgan's latest concoction, and keeps her lips pursed.

Morgan starts to tell her something wise, something like, *there are ways to fall gracefully and ways to land broken*, when she hears a voice ordering a Bud, make that two. She pops the tops and slides them down the dark polished oak with a twirl she's mastered, and one of them lands true, smack into the man's palm.

He laughs, impressed.

And that's when she takes measure of Daniel Freeman for the first time.