

**THE  
HASHTAG  
HUNT**

**KRISTINA SEEK**

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# CHAPTER ONE

Lauren

LAUREN TAPPED HER BEER BOTTLE against her best friend's martini. "To Ivy, for knowing where to find a man bun."

"To hipster baristas!" Ivy raised her glass and returned the clink. "And to my girl Lauren, for being another hashtag closer to ten grand."

"Cheers to us!" They enjoyed the first sip of their drinks, and the laid-back atmosphere of Barkley's Pub was what Lauren needed to catch her breath. It had been over two hours since she started hunting hashtags, and she knew she'd be at it for several more hours if all went well. She picked up the menu on the table and said, "I should eat something while we're waiting."

"Let's split something we can eat in a hurry," Ivy suggested as she set her martini down on the high-top table. "Once you get the text, we'll have to book it out of here, right?"

"Right." Lauren drank more of her IPA. "But only if the photo is accepted. If it's not, I'm out, and we can take our sweet time eating all the comfort food Barkley's has to offer." She grabbed her phone off the table and reopened the #HashtagHunt app. Her wide grin waned. "No news yet. I'm still in fourth place."

"Out of how many people?"

"Lots." Lauren's smile returned. "Over a thousand people signed up, and there are around six hundred still in it."

"And you're in fourth place?!"

"I hope I can stay in the running with the next one. There's no telling what I'll have to find." The friends read the menu, debated their options, and settled on the fried pickles. After they ordered, Ivy leaned forward. "Man bun was number four, right?"

"Right. Eight to go. I'm in for a long night."

"Seems like an easy way to win ten thousand dollars."

"I thought so too, but nothing about this has been easy," Lauren said. "Which is why your drinks and pickles are on me. Finding the man bun so fast must have helped my cause."

"Happy to help," Ivy said as she lifted the olive garnish from her martini. "You'll win the prize money, and Paperback Vinyl will be open for business before you know it."

"From your lips to God's ears, woman."

Ivy took a deep breath. "On the off chance you don't win this contest, let me loan you the money." Lauren rolled her eyes as Ivy kept talking. "It would be a loan, not a gift. You would have to pay me back, but with zero interest." She smiled and tapped the garnish stick against the rim of her glass. "We could have a contract drawn up and everything."

"I love you for offering...again, but my answer will always be, 'No thank you, Ivy.' Doing this on my own is nonnegotiable."

"I know, I know." Ivy shrugged and passed the cocktail stick across the table. "For what it's worth, my offer never leaves the table. A loan, investment, silent partner, whatever."

"I love you too." Lauren accepted the trio of olives and slid the first one off with her teeth. Ivy's grimace made her laugh. "You could hold the olives, you know. Or order a different garnish."

"And deprive my best friend of the world's nastiest snack?" Ivy faked a shocked expression.

"You're the best."

Ivy put her elbows on the table and leaned toward Lauren. "Listen, I heard you about doing this without any help, but what if someone else gets the store on Main Street?"

Lauren's heart ached at the thought, but her brain, as always, course corrected. "Then it wasn't meant to be," she said before she ate the second olive.

"The location and building are perfect."

“Would be a dream come true.” Lauren closed her eyes and transformed the eyesore on Main Street in her imagination with ease: retro storefront signage, creative displays of used books and classic albums, vintage record players and turntable stands sold on consignment. Despite the positive feedback on her market research and a rock-solid business plan, she could not renovate the building or stock her store without some serious cash flow. Lauren lacked the collateral to secure a bank loan, and her pride refused to entertain the idea of investors. Her savings account had grown over the years, and if she continued to squirrel away most of her disposable income, she would have the funds to start Paperback Vinyl...in time. A windfall like the Hashtag Hunt’s ten-thousand-dollar grand prize would speed up the loan process.

“If I win this contest in the morning, Main Street could still happen,” Lauren said. She ate the last olive, clenched her jaw, and tapped the plastic stick on the table. The server appeared with their food and asked about another round.

Lauren declined. “I need to drive and focus tonight.” She looked at the waiter and pointed to Ivy. “She will have another. Hold the olives, please.” After the server left, Lauren said, “See? Easy.”

“But I like how it looks leaning against the glass.” She held up her martini and said, “It looks naked without the olives.” Ivy shivered. “I’ll never understand how anyone eats the slimy, salty, mushy balls.”

“It’s because they’re delicious, especially with cheese and wine.” Lauren lifted a fried pickle and dunked it in ranch sauce.

“Let’s agree to disagree,” Ivy said before pinching a few pickles off the pile. “Back to the Hashtag Hunt. How did you hear about it, anyway?”

“I saw the link on Twitter,” Lauren said. “I spent the morning reading the website, studying the fine print. Signed up on my lunch break, and the first text went out at five o’clock sharp.”

“What was it?”

After wiping her greasy fingers on a napkin, Lauren picked up her phone and scrolled through her messages. When she got to the first text from the Wizard, she showed Ivy the screen.

### ***Challenge 1 of 12: #ParachutePants***

***Time Remaining: 12 hours and 0 minutes***

“Parachute pants? Are you kidding me?” Ivy asked. “What did you do?”

“I panicked,” Lauren said as she placed her phone back on the table. “Then I figured everyone in the contest would have the same reaction. Believing we were all freaked out calmed me down a bit.”

“Parachute pants, though.” Ivy stabbed several pickles with her fork. “Did you go to Goodwill or something?”

“I considered that but thought it would take too much time to find something so specific.” Lauren opened the app again. Still no change in the leaderboard. “The point is to send a photo as fast as you can, so you get the next hashtag before other players do.”

“Right,” Ivy said. “Oh, I know! You looked online for a *Teen Beat* cover from the eighties or something.”

“I wish.” Lauren lowered her phone and looked at Ivy. “The rules are crystal clear: no pictures of pictures, screenshots, staged pictures, Photoshop, using filters or apps. Every photo submitted has to be of something captured in real time. I can crop the photo, but not much else.”

“How would they know if you staged something? Or used a filter?”

“Not sure how she does it, but the Wizard booted several people for sending in altered photos.”

“She?” asked Ivy. “The Wizard is a she?”

“I think so.” Lauren tapped on the Wizard’s profile picture on the app and passed the phone to Ivy.

A fair-skinned woman with brunette curls was wearing head-to-toe steampunk: a laced corset embellished with gears and buckles, a ruffled ivory miniskirt worn over tight leather pants, Victorian riding boots, and a felted top hat adorned with vintage goggles. She posed on a mossy rock wall in a field, a carved wooden staff in one hand and an oversized antique lantern in the other.

“What...?” Ivy asked as she used her fingertips to zoom in on the photo. “Is she with the Ren

Faire, or is this like the Weird West cosplay we saw at Comicon?"

"I'm not sure, but it's the only photo of the Wizard on the app and website," Lauren said. "Maybe looking like a time-traveling badass while making people jump through hoops for ten grand is her thing."

The waiter set Ivy's second drink on the table and removed her empty glass. Ivy thanked him before asking Lauren, "But what about the parachute pants?" The waiter twitched before he walked away, and they smiled at his confused expression.

"Here, I'll show you," Lauren said as she held out her hand and Ivy placed the phone in her palm. With a few taps of her thumb, Lauren closed out of the app and opened her phone's photo gallery. "I prayed Feral Meryl was still break-dancing for tips. You know how she wears those raggedy black pants with—"

"With all the red zippers!" Ivy squealed.

Lauren nodded. "I drove straight to Center City. Found her by the fountain doing what she does best." Lauren thumbed through her photos. "I took so many photos of her, but this is the one I sent." She handed the phone to Ivy.

The photograph was of an aged African-American woman with deep-set crow's feet and silver dreadlocks. She was break-dancing on a large piece of weathered cardboard. One leg was bent at the knee, and the other was stretched out parallel to the ground as she executed the classic helicopter move. Red zippers were peppered across her black nylon pants.

"Bless it," said Ivy. "Look at her go." She skimmed her fingertips across the screen to zoom in on the image. "Good job getting her busted boom box and tip hat in the picture, too."

"I texted it as fast as I could." Lauren finished her beer. "About five minutes later, I got a text with the next challenge. I checked the app, and I was in eighth place."

Ivy looked up from the phone. "Wait. *Seven people* found parachute pants faster than you?"

"Right?" Lauren twisted the napkin in her lap. "I hope she posts all the photos when the contest is over. I'd love to see how so many people made it past the first challenge."

"Shouldn't you have the next hashtag by now?"

"I'll get it once the Wizard approves the man bun. She's prompt, all things considered. I'm not sure how it's all organized, but it works."

Lauren reopened the #HashtagHunt app on her phone. Nothing new in the standings: @BertieMags in the lead, @JayZeeYou a close second, @ChuckLynn in third, and @Laurenburger hot on their heels. Her smile brightened when she remembered there were over six hundred usernames listed below hers. "Should be any time now."

"Well, I'll help you with as many as I can." Ivy used her phone to check the time. "I have a few hours before I have to go."

"You help like you did with the man-bun photo, I won't let you leave."

"Good luck, my friend," Ivy said. "I have a hot date with Scott Eastwood. Not missing him half-naked in dusty camo, even if you choose to evoke the sacred bestie bylaws. I'm going with Mark to the midnight showing of Scott's new movie."

"Does Mark know your hot date is with Scott Eastwood and not him?"

Ivy jumped in her chair when Lauren's phone vibrated against the table. The text alert rang at full volume, and the screen lit up with a notification. Lauren silently read the newest text message and then passed the phone to Ivy.

### ***Challenge 5 of 12: #HitW (Hottie in the Wild)***

***Time Remaining: 9 hours and 18 minutes***

"Oh, this one is a gimme," Ivy said. "We're in a local bar on a Friday night. There should be hotties as far as the eye can see." She gave the phone back to Lauren and turned in her chair, obviously checking out the male patrons of Barkley's Pub and Pourhouse.

As Ivy looked around, Lauren stared at her phone. She thumbed through the app to the leaderboard. She saw that @BertieMags had fallen to fourth place, moving @JayZeeYou, @ChuckLynn, and Lauren up one position each. She pumped her fist in the air and said, "Yes! Third place!"

“Yaaas, girl!” Ivy turned back to smile at Lauren. “Oh! This is so exciting! Let’s find you a hottie so you can take the lead.”

Both women stood up, turning their backs to their table. Their eyes passed over the crowd, assessing and dismissing each man in turn. While Lauren did not consider the men unattractive, she thought they fell short of what was probably the Wizard’s criteria for a #HitW. If her hottie wasn’t hot enough, the photo would be rejected, and she would be out of the contest.

“Oh, look!” said Ivy. “Over by the...um, never mind.” She discreetly pointed with her pinkie finger. “Unless you can crop out the ridiculous shirt.”

Lauren looked to where Ivy was pointing. When Lauren saw that the man’s gray T-shirt said *Edgy as Heck*, she understood why Ivy was trying not to laugh. “Yeah, he’s more of a cutie than a hottie.”

They resumed their search, checking out the men playing pool and shooting darts. Lauren prayed an Adonis was primping in the men’s room.

“Well,” Ivy said, “Barkley’s is having an off night. It happens.” She did a second sweep of the men playing pool and darts. “I’m sure they all have great personalities, but none of these guys will get you to the next hashtag.”

After taking stock of the guys in the areas around their table, Lauren had to agree with Ivy. She reread the text from the Wizard. “The text doesn’t say it has to be a guy. The hottie could be a woman. Any bombshells in the house?”

“Besides us, you mean?” Ivy joked. They repeated their sweep of the pub, this time taking inventory of the females. Lauren’s shoulders slumped, but the front door creaked open, and a group of women clearly enjoying a girls’ night out entered the bar.

Ivy scanned each woman as they walked past the table she was sharing with Lauren. “Yeah. Not to be all shallow, but cougars—or whatever comes after cougars—won’t win you this round,” she said. “We need some straight-up eye candy.”

“Ugh! You’re right.”

“Should we go back to Port Java?” Ivy asked. “Maybe the poet with the biceps and infinity scarf collection is brooding in his corner.”

“Was he there when you found the man bun?”

“No,” sighed Ivy. “I may have noticed his favorite wingback chair was empty. But he could be there now.”

“I guess we could try there and the twenty-four-hour gym on Woodlawn,” Lauren said. “The owner was on a *GQ* cover a while back. Even if he’s not there, we can always scope out the trainers and members. Anyone at the gym on a Friday night must want to be there.”

“Sold!” Ivy finished her martini. As she placed the glass on the table, the front door opened again.

Lauren said, “I’ll go pay the tab, and we’ll be on our way.”

Ivy gasped and grabbed Lauren’s elbow. “Wait a second...hang on...oh, yes, ma’am! A legit hottie in the wild has entered the building. Holy. Smokes.”

Lauren turned around and spotted the newcomer at once. Her knees buckled a bit, and she played it off by quickly plopping down in her chair as she openly stared at him.

“The Wizard will love him,” Ivy said as she also sat back down. “He is one card-carrying ‘Hottie in the Wild’ if ever there was one.”

Lauren and Ivy watched him walk their way a few steps before heading to the bar. Instead of getting the bartender’s attention, he turned around and leaned his back against the countertop. His eyes narrowed, scanning the room, seeking someone in particular, but his aloof demeanor indicated he’d rather be anywhere else than Barkley’s Pub. The slate gray Henley and dark jeans were a great look, in Lauren’s opinion. The man was tall and fit with dark hair and dark eyes, by far the most handsome man in the bar. And while Lauren found him attractive, his guarded expression made him unapproachable. Lauren thought he looked like a runway model with a wholesome face and absolute confidence, but with a dark, mysterious quality lurking just beneath the surface.

When the bartender approached him, the hottie turned around, giving Lauren the opportunity to admire his physique from the back. She grabbed her phone off the table and said, “Jackpot.”

“Want me to distract him for you?” Ivy asked. “I could spill a drink on his broad shoulders or pretend to flirt with him.”

“Pretend?”

“Hey, I’ll dig deep and take one for the team,” Ivy said with a wink. “Scott Eastwood and Mark will understand I was only helping you get to the next hashtag.”

“Friend of the Year over here,” Lauren said with a smile. “And interesting how Scott Eastwood always gets top billing.” Lauren looked at her friend and shook her head. “Poor Mark.”

Ivy rolled her eyes. “It’s only our second date, so ease up on the sympathies for Mark.” Ivy shrugged one shoulder and said, “He knew I was a stage-five Scott Eastwood fangirl when he asked me to the movies.”

Returning her gaze to the hottie, Lauren watched Jess, a scantily clad bartender, stretch across the bar and squeeze his bicep. His back muscles tensed as he stood up straighter, moving his arms out of the bartender’s reach. Undeterred, she situated her elbows on the bar, tucked her chin, leaned in close, and peered at him from under her lashes.

“Whoa,” said Lauren. “Jess busted out her patented pose in ten seconds flat.”

“Then you better hurry,” said Ivy. “He’s hot, but we don’t know if he’s smart.”