

## The First Encounter

The first glance is never forgiving.

I could tell by the focused look on every guy's face that they all thought she was pretty. I picked her to pieces. What bothered me most was that her physical attributes were bland at best. I couldn't figure out what made her so intriguing.

When she pulled a black pen out of the bun sitting at the top of her head, her hair fell over her shoulders, revealing nothing more than straight dark brown hair to match her plain brown eyes. She wrote her name at the bottom right hand corner of her paper with the date and her student number printed neatly underneath it. I closed my eyes so that it wasn't noticeable that I was rolling them at her. She probably thought she was being creative by writing it in a different place than where the professor had instructed. It was only the first day, and I had already decided to dislike her.

Nor did I like the professor. He made us all stand up and give a brief introduction of ourselves as well as writing it down on paper. Just the basics: name, major, why you're taking his class. That would have been fine, but then he added, "Oh, and let's each give a super-duper describing word about yourself that starts with the first letter of your first name!" Apparently, he had never heard of the word "adjective." I assumed he either had young children or he used to teach elementary school. Regardless, undergraduate school was not the place for baby talk or baby introduction activities. I am paying an excessive amount for this class and I would much appreciate if professors would learn to utilize every minute wisely and stop wasting my valuable time and money.

Sarah sat in the very front of the lecture hall. When she stood up to state her name, she pronounced it like *ZARA*. And if that wasn't enough, the adjective she chose was zealous. She can't do that. She can't just completely change her name because it wasn't unique enough for her taste. That's cheating. Sarah is a common name. It's not foreign, and we all know the correct pronunciation.

Sixty-seven students later and class was finally over. In my head, I quickly divided amount of classes in the semester by the tuition for the class and calculated that I had just wasted fifty-three dollars.

I left class and headed to the mall for work. Working at Hollister was not usually the best part of my day, but I was overjoyed that the two-hour block of wasted class time had ended. Sarah bounced in to Hollister today, about an hour after I had gotten there. Her hair was pulled tight into a high ponytail – perfectly straightened, of course, and it swayed as she walked. She looked high fashion. My hair was pulled back as well, but only because I had run out of time to get ready that morning. Strands of hair poked out on top from the frizziness of my hair thanks to the humidity.

Sarah walked behind the counter where I was standing and clocked in on one of the registers. My hands stopped folding as I stared blankly at her. The manager, Billy, came out of the fitting room and dumped a pile of shirts and jeans on the half-folded shirt that I was gripping tightly with my hands. He introduced me to *Zara* – our newest worker who had transferred into our store.

She held out her hand after saying her name and waited for me to introduce myself. As dumb as she looked, I knew she couldn't possibly have been dumb enough to think that we were

going to be friends. She had to have seen the look of disgust wash over my face as she was talking.

The only thing I could think to say was “I know, we were in the same class this morning.”

She lowered her arm when she realized that I wasn’t going to shake her hand. Then she said, “Oh, yeah, seems like it’s going to be an awesome class. What did you say your name was again?”

Just then, a woman probably in her forties threw some clothes down on the register counter. She looked at me and shouted as loud as she could, “I don’t want these. I’m not buying anything from here anymore. I can’t take it – this place is obnoxious. Where is your manager? Tell them that the music is way too damn loud to even think in here.” And with that, she stormed out.

Even when the music was on the lowest setting, it was overbearing for most customers. We were trained to tell them that we’re sorry, but it’s company policy that the music stays that loud to give customers an “experience.” Complaints from anybody over the age of twenty were to be ignored because they were not considered the target audience. The current playlist had eleven songs on it. During my shift, I heard each song about ten times. Even people who were not our customers specifically came into the store to complain because our music could be heard over the food court music. This week alone, Hollister had accumulated three noise violations from mall security. But none of that mattered to the corporate office.

“So how long have you worked here?” she asked.

“A couple of months.” I hate small talk. I’ve never been good at it. And I already knew we’re not going to be friends so I just don’t see a point to it. I pulled the shirt that I had been folding from the bottom of the pile and started refolding.

“Oh, here, let me help you. They’d actually look a lot better if you did it this way,” she reached over and unfolded what I had just worked on. “I’ve been with the company for like five years, so it kind of just comes naturally now.”

I looked away without saying anything. That didn’t even deserve a response. Was I supposed to be impressed that she has been working at a *minimum wage* job for *that* long? Congratulations, *Zara*, I’m sure Hollister will help you go really far in life.

\* \* \*

After a few weeks, it seemed like Sarah was the newest manager of the store, instead of just an employee. She was efficient, I would give her that much, but she was just so rude and I still didn’t like her. The managers stepped aside most times and allowed her to “help” other employees become better workers.

She micromanaged the new hires, as well as the employees who had been working for a while, like me.

“The Regional Manager is coming tomorrow, so I just wanted to make sure that you know what look policy is, since you don’t seem to be in look policy today,” she said.

“What?” I whipped my head around really fast and some of my hair flipped in her face. On purpose, of course.

“Your jeans need to be double cuffed, hairbands on your wrist are not allowed, and that’s an old shirt so just make sure that you’re wearing one of the new ones tomorrow.” My hair flip didn’t seem to phase her.

“Kay.” My sister once told me that a one-word answer can make someone more irritated than anything else, so I tried it.

“Excuse me?” She squinted her eyes. She was testing me.

I laughed just loud enough so that she could hear and then walked away.

I’m not the type of person that needs to be liked by everyone. Actually, I find it quite entertaining when someone doesn’t like me, especially when it’s because of my bold personality.

Sarah walked away to follow behind the store manager and give “helpful suggestions” as she liked to call them. He gives her the task of training the new guy who has just walked in for his first official shift, probably just to put her off onto someone else.

The new kid was the epitome of the Hollister look. Blond hair quaffed to the side, tall and tan, grey-green eyes, with muscles that could easily be seen through his shirt but weren’t obnoxious. He looked vaguely familiar, and after a few seconds, I pinpointed it.

“You’re on the bag.” *Shit*, I thought. I looked down, let my hair fall over my face, and hoped the music had been loud enough to drown my words.

He was clocking in on the register next to mine and he glanced over and smiled.

The first glance is never forgiving. He stood stunningly before me, a very attractive man (not even close to as attractive as Ryan Gosling, who I’d seen one time in the airport) and yet the only thought that passed through my head as I looked up was *hmm, a little less attractive than his picture on the bag*. He wasn’t at all my type, but I could definitely see the perfection in his bone structure and quirky half-smile that would make every typical Hollister girl love him.

“Let’s keep that just between us, okay? I wouldn’t want any special treatment because of that.” He said it like we now had some sort of secret bond. “Name’s Jake, by the way.” He leaned over and squeezed my hand instead of shaking it.

He definitely knew how to work a room. He made every girl feel special with his little side comments, as if each was the only one who mattered to him. Every girl was determined to be with him besides me, because all I wanted in the moment in time was for him to want me. It was only the first day, and I had already decided that he *will* like me. I don't like him, but that's not the point. He just can't like Sarah.

I could tell that Sarah was interested in him like all the others, but she cared too much about her stupid minimum wage job to let that get in her way. She trained him without any cordials or small talk and was very unforgiving about mistakes. She enjoyed being manager of the day just a little too much. Nonetheless, he consistently flirted with her and she continuously pretended like it didn't affect her.

Billy, the store manager, comes to the registers to announce that his birthday is tomorrow and he's celebrating at one of the bars tonight. He doesn't technically invite anyone because he knows that's strictly prohibited according to the handbook. Managers are not allowed to fraternize with part-time employees. But he knows that by saying it out loud, he can get around the rules if they all just happen to show up there.

"I'll be there!" Sarah shouted over the music. It was so obvious that she was just trying to let Jake know.

Everything about the way that they treated her bothered me. She complained that she wasn't getting scheduled enough hours, so the managers guaranteed her thirty hours a week, about triple the number of hours than anybody else was getting. Nothing about that was fair, but I guess they wanted to make sure that their best worker didn't quit.

She started talking to Jake about how she went out every night and doesn't have any money to pay for things she wants because her paychecks just went to partying. This wasn't high school. I don't think he found the fact that she parties to be "cool" like I'm sure she expected.

Just when I thought she couldn't get any more pathetic. A 30-hour week paycheck and she has nothing to show for it? I don't see how that's possible and I don't see how she finds the time to party that often with school.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"23."

"Me too! That's so funny!" She got way too excited.

As she pathetically continued to attempt to impress him, I got bored and walked away. Twenty-three and she still hasn't finished her undergrad. Go figure. I could have said something out loud and made her look completely pitiful in front of him, but I didn't want to play dirty. I was going to win him with fair game.

I walked toward the back to find something to fold and stubbed my toe on a plant. The darkness inside Hollister had always annoyed me. I didn't feel like doing anything, so I grabbed a bottle of cologne and started spraying the store. Luckily, that was considered work here at Hollister.

Five minutes later, Jake was by my side once again. I bet he's wondering why I'm the only one who's not basking in his presence.

"So, can you tell me what I need to know about the job here?" he asked, leaning over the table at the opposite end with one arm on top of the other and his eyes staring past me toward the other girls.

"You fold, that's about it."

He jolted his head down and furrowed his eyebrows. “My shift’s about to end, but I’ll see you tonight for the party, yeah?” he asked.

“Yeah, maybe.” And with that I left the room. I wasn’t about to give in that easily.

I walked to the registers to find Sarah talking to another employee, Noah.

“Who interviewed and hired you?” I overheard her ask Noah. It already sounded like an accusation.

“The old store manager, why?” he replied.

“Wow. Well, just because, I wouldn’t have.”

“What?” Shocked, Noah raised his eyebrows and widened his eyes.

“Hollister is known for hiring *pretty* people. We’re supposed to always be advertising their clothes. That’s why our position is called a *model* instead of a *sales associate*. You’re not... I don’t know. It’s not that I don’t think you’re attractive enough, I just don’t think you fit the look.”

Livid. I showed no emotion on my face as I turned the corner and entered the conversation. I spoke to Noah calmly, as if I had heard nothing. “There’s a human resources number to call for someone who is creating hostility in the workplace and harassing other employees.”

I turned toward Sarah and stared hard into her eyes as I spoke, “I’m sure you’ve heard about the number, Sarah, seeing as you’ve worked here ‘for like 5 years.’”

“I would appreciate it if you learned to mind your own conversations,” she said.

I walked into the back office and picked up the phone and dialed the human resources number that was printed on the paper dangling in front of my face. I filed a complaint against



Sarah and left a tip that she would be “fraternizing with managers” tonight at the bars. I contently left the store as though nothing had happened.

I went home to get ready as if I were going to the party. And by get ready, I mean I spent a full four hours showering and picking an outfit and showering again and putting on makeup and doing anything to make myself look as amazing as possible. And by that I mean hopefully better than Sarah.

I made sure to show up when the bar was closing. I wanted Jake to think that I had been there the whole time but I didn’t really want to go. I hated bars and parties and anything like that. Plus, I was the one who called HR and I didn’t want them to see me there.

When I got there, it turned out that human resources apparently didn’t care about what I had told them. Nobody from home office showed up, I don’t know why I even thought they would. Sarah was hand-in-hand with Jake – I had lost my chance. He caught my eye and starting running toward me.

“Hey, where’ve you been?” he asked.

“What do you mean? I was here the whole time!” I wasn’t fooling him.

“Well, listen, I know you’ve had it out for Sarah for a while but ease up alright? I know about calling HR, a few people said they overheard you. Enough is enough, dude, it’s getting old. Anyway, I’ll see you at work.”

He was so clueless. That’s all I could think. I hope they’re happy together, whatever. Maybe one day he’ll see her for who she really is, like I have seen her, ever since that first unforgiving first glance.