

# MixPool Novel

by

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## Chapter One: Are we friends yet?

Nicole was talking on the phone to her friend Ally back in Kansas City.

“You are not going to believe what I am about to do!”

“What?”

Nicole looked at her own image in the mirror critically. She was wearing a blue summer dress with two spaghetti straps on each shoulder. I need a necklace to go with that dress, she thought to herself. She picked up a turquoise necklace and held it up against her neck with her free hand.

“You know that MixPool site I had told you about the last time we talked? I am going out to meet some people I connected with through them.”

Ally was her best friend. They had known each other since grade school. She knew what Ally would say. *Watch out for the weirdos. Don't give your phone number to anyone. Make sure you meet them in a public place...*

“Who are these people? Have you googled them? Are they on Facebook?”

“Ally, I know them. They are all serial rapists, deranged muggers, or Guiliani supporters. That's why I want to go out with them.”

This was a standing joke between them. When Nicole was offered a job in the publicity department of Trans National's NYC office, her mother kept bugging her about why she wanted to go to such a dangerous city. Exasperated by her provincial prejudices, Nicole had started telling her that she was going to New York City to meet serial rapists, deranged muggers, and Guiliani supporters. The last part was just to stick it to her mother who had been an ardent supporter of Guiliani in the last presidential primaries until he flamed out. Needless to say, mother was not reassured by Nicole's flippancy.

“If you already know these people why do you need MixPool to go out with them?” Ally demanded to know. It was a fair question.

“I know them but not well enough to ask them to hang out with me. I know three of them from Facebook and one from a Meetup group.”

“So, they asked you to meet them? What did they say: we don’t really know you very well, but will you hang out with us? That’s kind of weird.”

“No. No one invited any one. You just let MixPool know when you are available to hangout and who you want to hang out with and if some of them are interested in hanging out with you at that time, MixPool brings us together,” Nicole explained.

“So, this Mixtool, or whatever, contacts these people and says Nicky wants to play with you, do you want to play with her?”

“Don’t be so daft, Ally. No. From what their users have told them, MixPool tries to create groups of people who are all interested in hanging out together and tells everyone in the group ‘You may not know it, but you all want to hang out with each other’. You get it now?”

“That’s cool, Nicole. So, no one has to call anyone and say, ‘I don’t know you very well, but will you hang out with me.’ But yet MixPool brings together people who want to hang out with one another.”

“Yep. That’s the idea. Maybe, I’ll make some real friends in this damned city.”

Nicole had moved to New York City from Kansas City a year ago. She had imagined then that she would have a fantastic social life in the big city. And why wouldn’t she? She was, after all, an out-going, attractive twenty-three year old. She was going to work in PR. She was going to meet people all the time. Although she couldn’t really afford it on her salary, she had rented a studio apartment in 10 Hanover Square, a trendy new building in the financial district. It was filled with people like her and she would have no problems making friends there, the realtor had assured her. Bright lights, big city, here I come, she told herself jubilantly.

It didn’t turn out that way. The people at 10 Hanover Square all lived behind closed doors. Early on she tried to chat up some girls in the elevator who lived on her floor but they looked at her as if she was hustling in some way. Now when they saw her in the hallway they made a point of not being friendly.

The only person in the building who wanted to be her friend was a recently divorced middle-aged guy named Hank who stared at her wolfishly. He had approached her in the building gym, muscles rippling, sweat dripping, and introduced himself as “Hank, the hunk.” My really good friends, wink, call me “Hunk,” if you get my drift, he had declared. Nicole had indeed got his drift, which at the moment carried some ripe BO.

She had made some friends at work. They were all very nice to her. But most of the people she knew at work were family people or already had their tight circle of friends. Dolores, who was the assistant director of publicity in the office, invited her over for dinner at her home in Brooklyn. Nicole had a great time playing with Jake, her four-year old son, who wanted to become Nicole's boyfriend. My last boyfriend wasn't much older than you emotionally, Nicole had told Jake confidentially. Did you marry him, Jake asked jealously. No, I ran away to New York, Nicole had replied. To meet me, Jake had asked. Yes, just to meet you, Nicole had replied and hugged him. Jake was a very happy little boy the rest of the evening.

A boyfriend wasn't high on Nicole's agenda right now. She had felt suffocated by her last relationship and was happy to put that behind. She had dated Peter for five years all through college and beyond. He had become a boring jock and she had blossomed into an environmentalist. When the Trans National offer came Nicole was ready to put that relationship into the 'over and done with' basket.

But, now as she was getting ready to meet her "friends," she couldn't help wonder if she would meet a cool guy. That Richard does have something about him, Nicole thought as she bit her lower lip. She had liked his comments on Facebook about the environment—they were so thoughtful and yet so amusing. He seemed to have some interesting Facebook friends. And his relationship status said he was single. Yes, she had 'facebook stalked' him, and she wondered if he had done the same to her. And now she would find out if he lived up to her expectations.

They had agreed to meet at Rossi's, a casual Italian bistro near South Street Seaport. Nicole was the last one to arrive. Richard was there, laughing at something Amanda had said. Nicole didn't need to introduce herself; they all recognized her, just as she recognized them. Richard said, "So, we meet at last, Nicole," like this had been a long quest of his. Amanda, another one of her Facebook "friends," said, "You look different from how I remember you." Nicole wanted to know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Before Amanda had a chance to respond they were interrupted by the maitre de wanting to seat them at their table. There were five of them. Nicole was seated between Paul and Gwen and across from Richard, who was seated between Gwen and Amanda.

Nicole took quick stock of Richard seating across from her. He had long dark hair, not quite pony tail length. He wore a two-days old manly stubble on his chin. She figured he was about twenty-five or twenty-six. He had a mischievous twinkle in his eyes when he spoke, which she found endearing. He had on a Greenpeace t-shirt. She liked that. She had often thought that it would be nice to be in a relationship with someone who had some substance to him, someone who was committed to some cause. A serious guy with a great sense of humor, that's what she wanted.

It was odd. They all knew one another and they didn't. They immediately started exploring how everyone knew everyone else. Nicole had met Amanda and Gwen at some PR shindig and had 'friended' them on Facebook. Nicole knew from Amanda's pictures that she travelled abroad often for work but didn't really remember what Amanda did for work. She 'knew' Paul through her hair stylist who was exhibiting some of Paul's graphic design work at her hair salon. Nicole had made some complimentary comments about the work, and next thing she knew, her hair stylist, who had a passion for bringing together people, had introduced them through email. Paul and Nicole had exchanged some emails and he had 'friended' her. But it had never gone beyond that. Nicole had met Gwen before in a Meetup group on social media. And she had met Richard through an on-line discussion group on environmentalism, but never in person before. Amanda and Richard had gone to the same high school in Long Island but they had known each other in school only very slightly. Gwen had dated a friend of Richard a couple of years ago and had met him at some parties. She had met Paul when he did some book cover designs for the publishing company she worked for. They had connected through LinkedIn but had never met each other socially.

After they had placed their orders Amanda took charge immediately. She couldn't stand to be in awkward situations and her instinctive response to them was to take control. They had been busy with the menu and the orders, but now what?

"Say, guys, how did you find out about MixPool and why did you join? I am curious."

No one said anything. They all looked at each other mutely. Amanda jumped right into the hesitant silence.

"I'll go first. Well, I kept getting these notifications that this or that "friend" of mine had joined MixPool and wanted to turn me from a "friend" into their friend. I thought, yeah, whatever. You get so many notifications and invitations from so many apps. You know, Slimy Bugar invites you to join pickUrNose.com, or whatever. So I just ignored it the first few times. But then when I was on Facebook stalking a friend, I saw this ad which had a picture of a stalker and it asked 'Are you a Facebook stalker?' And I thought, OMG, that's me. It said, stop stalking and start meeting your 'friends'. Or, something like that. Have you guys seen that ad? "

They all nodded to indicate they had seen the ad. Amanda continued.

"So I thought why not check it out. It's not like I don't have real friends in life. I do. Lots of them." Amanda looked around to see if anyone was inclined to question that. "But I was curious to see who I would be grouped with. And here I am with you guys for my very first MixPool event."

“Well, I joined because a good friend told me I had to,” Richard confessed. “He is a friend of one of the founders of MixPool. So he was playing the MixPool pimp, and I didn’t want to disappoint him. But I am glad I did. This is my first MixPool event, too.” He took a sip of his drink and turned his gaze toward Nicole. He continued talking with a disarming twinkle in his eyes. “I had put certain people on my Seek list. You know about that list, right? You say who you prefer to be grouped with on this occasion. MixPool doesn’t guarantee that you’ll be grouped with them but tries its best to group you with them. Let’s say, this time MixPool didn’t disappoint me.”

Nicole started to blush. She had also put Richard on her Seek list. She worried that he may find out some way that she had. But then she remembered that MixPool guaranteed that this information would be kept confidential.

“I joined it because I wanted to play Spin-the-Bottle,” Gwen announced a little dramatically. That’s how I see MixPool. It’s Spin-the-bottle for grownups. You don’t know who you’ll be grouped with. Yes, of course, you make your “friends” list. But you are not going to know which specific “friends” you are going to be grouped with on a given occasion. I like the element of surprise. Of course, I have my Avoid list and my Seek list but in the end it is like spinning the bottle.”

“Are you going to kiss us all, Gwen,” Richard asked teasingly.

This boy is a flirt, Nicole thought to herself.

It was Paul’s turn next. He looked embarrassed.

“OK, I am going to be honest with you guys. I saw this primarily as a networking opportunity. I am a freelancer, you know that. So I am always looking for opportunities to meet new people which might lead to some business for me. I hope you don’t mind that. So when I heard about MixPool—I honestly don’t remember where, probably, in one of the blogs I read—I thought OK I can turn some of my “friends” into leads for work. I am not saying I don’t want you guys as friends. I do. But I also need to generate some new work and MixPool looked like a great way to create new relationships. Sorry.”

No one said anything. Nicole quickly jumped in to end the awkward silence.

“Unlike the rest of you, I joined MixPool because I don’t have any real friends here. No one I can easily call up and say, “Hey, you want to do something together.” I moved here from Kansas City a year ago. It’s been tough making friends. Sorry to be kvetching.” She said the last sentence hesitantly. She was proud of having learnt a few Yiddish words. It made her feel like a New Yorker. “Any way, a friend at work who knew I was looking to expand my social circle told

me about MixPool. I think she found about it in a write-up in some Brooklyn neighborhood newspaper.”

The rest of the group made sympathetic noises. Nicole wasn't sure what they amounted to. She hadn't meant to sound so pathetic. She was concerned that they would think she would be a needy pest. Richard suggested that they drink a toast to Nicole's new social life. Then he added that he hoped he will be part of her “new and improved social life.” Nicole looked at him closely to see if he was making fun of her. “New and improved” sounded ironic to Nicole, but Richard's face showed no tell-tale signs of irony.

After another bottle of wine was ordered and consumed by the group, everyone was feeling mellow. They had been seated in a patio garden area, which was now filled with the soft darkness of twilight and the illumination of candles and small lanterns.

“Are we friends yet or are we still only “friends”. I mean when does one become the other,” Amanda wanted to know. She was referring to MixPool's tagline, “Turning “friends” into *friends*.”

“Depends how you define each term,” Paul replied cautiously. He was careful not to express any strong views around people he didn't know well. You never know when you might blow a possible lead for a freelancing opportunity.

“Well, I think a friend, without quotations, is someone you would feel comfortable calling up and asking them to hang out with you. But a “friend”, in quotation marks, is someone you know but would not feel comfortable doing that,” Nicole offered.

“I thought when you take the quotation marks from a friend you have a friend with benefits. You mean I am wrong? Well then I have been wasting my time turning you from “friends” into friends.” Gwen pretended to get up and leave the table as she said this. That got a laugh from everyone.

“So you think of the quotation marks as the straps of a dress and taking them off a friend is like stripping them? Yeah?” Richard said this slyly and Nicole thought he was looking at her. She became very conscious of the two thin little straps on each shoulder holding up her dress. She found herself imagining Richard slipping those straps off her shoulders. She knew she was going to bed with that image stuck in her head. It made her feel very sexy.

Soon it was time for everyone to leave. But Nicole had an inspired idea. Like most people outside New York City, her vision of life in the city was shaped by watching episodes of *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, and, especially, *Sex and the City*. This was the kind of New York City life she longed for. She suggested that they meet for brunch on Sundays, at least for the next few weeks, to share

with the others their MixPool experiences. They should go “Mixpooling” at least once a week, but never with anyone in this group, and they should then share their experiences with each other. They could make sure that none of them will be grouped with anyone else in the group by each of them putting the others on their Avoid list.

Richard and Gwen were enthusiastic about this idea. Amanda and Paul were hesitant. But when Amanda saw Richard excited about the idea she agreed to try it out. Paul was then willing to go along with it.

Now it was really time to leave. Richard offered to walk with her. He also lived in the Financial District in a building close to hers. Amanda gave Nicole a jealous look as the two of them walked off together.

The night had gotten dark now. There was a brisk breeze blowing from the East River. The heat of the day had cooled off leaving Nicole a little chilled in her summer dress. It would be nice to have a boyfriend, Nicole thought, who could put his arm around me and keep me warm on a night like this.

They made small talk about how much fun this evening had been. As they got closer to her apartment building, Nicole started to get wary in spite of her sense of excitement. Where was this walk going to, she wondered. To calm herself she asked Richard what kind of work he does.

“I am an attorney,” he said.

“What kind of law? Environmental law, by any chance?”

“Yes. I am second year associate at Glavin and McCarthy. You must have heard of them.”

Nicole felt surprised and disappointed.

“I thought you’d be working for an environmental organization. That was the impression I got from the things you said on the GreenPeace forum.”

“Sorry. It’s big law, at least for now. Got to pay off school loans.”

“But what if your firm asked you to defend a flagrant polluter? In fact, isn’t your firm defending Hallerton in an environmental law suit? You know, the waste recycling firm. They are really sleazy people.”

“Look, even alleged polluters need legal defense, you know.”

Nicole felt annoyed by that remark. She thought he was being patronizing. She was once again uncertain about him. Her mind went back to the “new and improved social life” comment. Had he been mocking her then?

They had reached 10 Hanover Square.

Nicole found herself saying in a thin voice, “I’ll see you next Sunday for brunch, then. Good bye.” She wanted him to know that he was not welcome to contact her before then. She needed time to sort out how she felt about him.

Later that night she slipped out of her summer dress. She thought of Richard slipping that dress off her but the thought did not leave her feeling pleased. She felt very confused about him. On the one hand he seemed very nice and she was definitely attracted to him. But he had been flirtatious, not just with her but also with Gwen. His flirting no longer seemed charming to her. And this was so at odds with his seriousness on-line. There seemed to be two sides to his personality. She needed to talk to Ally about this. But Ally didn’t answer her phone. So she contented herself by tweeting, “Great time at MixPool tonight. Check out mixpool.com.”

As Nicole was falling asleep that night, she thought about her MixPool friends. At least for a few weeks now she will continue to meet them. That was definitely the start of a social life. And who knows what other friendships she may create through MixPool. Thank goodness for MixPool, she said to herself as she drifted into sleep.