

--- CHAPTER 1 ---

If she had known that she would see Jake Hanson in the elevator this morning on her way to work, she would have taken the stairs. All twenty-four flights.

She ducked behind her brown Flying Moose travel mug. *Please don't notice me, please don't notice me*, she thought, while memories of her teen years flashed before her eyes. A quick shoe count revealed five people in the elevator, leaving only three individuals as human foliage for Lisa Johnston to hide behind—or rather in front of.

Just seconds earlier, after hustling to the elevator then settling into the front spot—leading the pack, so to speak—she'd been musing about how great her life was. She had even splurged on a skinny latte from the Green Bean as a small way of celebrating all of the reasons she had to be happy. While enjoying the milky warmth of her latte, she'd gotten that sixth-sense feeling that a good-looking masculine specimen was in the vicinity. She'd scanned the mirrored interior of the elevator, covertly verifying her hunch. And she hadn't been wrong. Her eyes landed on the reflection of a man standing in the back, to the left of a woman wearing glasses with lime green frames. He was indisputably gorgeous. And for a few seconds at least, that's all he was.

His light blue eyes glinted like crystals and smoldered with coolness under his dark eyebrows. His brown hair was cropped short and his sideburns accentuated his angular face perfectly. She could see the trace of a dimple, ready to dazzle when he smiled. She wondered if modeling was his day job.

As her eyes had lingered on his smooth lips, another sixth-sense feeling crept under her skin. The face seemed . . . familiar. She couldn't remember having met him recently. She was generally good with names and faces, and wouldn't have forgotten a face as striking as that. Had he been in a Calvin Klein ad? A Target flyer? Maybe he'd been on television.

Then—*Oh . . . my . . . God.*

Lisa had dropped her eyes, her heart had spasmed, and the elevator's interior had shrunk to claustrophobic proportions. It was not only a face she recognized, but one she had hoped to never see again—*ever*.

And now, here she was, hiding behind a moose on a cup.

Hefting her purse farther onto her shoulder, she took a deep breath. A heady bouquet of something floral consumed the already too small space, adding to the pressing anxiety rapidly filling her chest. Keeping her eyes pinned to her cabernet toenails showing through her favorite sandals, she resisted the urge to check if the man indeed was who she thought he was. She could recall with uncomfortable clarity just how good-looking *that* guy had been; that when he smiled those blue eyes crinkled cutely and a dimple *did* form in his right cheek. Did the man behind her really have a dimple or was it a scar?

She could sense, even three people deep, that the man was probably in great shape, like the person she had known. Any curiosity about how big his muscles were wasn't enough to make her want to peek, not because she couldn't appreciate a fine-looking man when she saw one, but because if it was Jake Hanson, *that* changed everything.

Behind her moose cup, she shook her head. It couldn't be him. *No way*. Sure, she'd thought about him once or twice over the years; even imagined meeting him. But in an elevator? Where she worked? With no escape? Even

she couldn't have made up such a scenario. Her mind had to be playing tricks. The brain could do funny things, like match a familiar face to a stranger's; she'd read about it.

What if they got off at the same floor? The thought made her shudder. If that happened they were bound to make eye contact, because that's how it was when you got off the elevator with someone else at the same time. You locked eyes as if to say, "Please, go ahead. No, you go; I insist. Very well, thank you." Maybe she'd get lucky and they'd do the eyes-down shoulder shove. Or what if she got off first and he glanced up, because that was another law of elevator riding—*always look to see who got off first*.

She heard the high-pitched ding of the elevator bell as the door opened to the thirteenth floor. She cringed, trying to remain calm while bracing for the inevitable. The two men standing behind her, both wearing shiny black loafers with tassels, opted for the shoulder tactic. Their momentum pushed her to the far right corner, causing her purse to bump with wrecking ball force into the button panel. *So much for remaining incognito*.

Her cheeks hot, she glimpsed back into the mirrored reflection and saw that the guy she thought she recognized hadn't moved an inch. Their eyes met and the right side of his mouth perked up a tiny bit, denting his cheek with what definitely was not a scar. She pretended not to notice and glared at the backs of the exiting men, throwing invisible chains around their necks. The slight puff of cool air that sneaked in as the elevator closed provided no comfort against the sweat that had sprung up on her skin.

Freaking out was unwarranted, she reasoned, even if he was who she thought he was. Just because she recognized him didn't mean he would recognize her. Regardless, she willed herself to melt into the wall. The muscles in her neck wailed their protest as she turned her head as far to the right as possible. Her hands were sticky as she tightened her grip on the leather strap of her purse. She took another sip of her celebratory latte, which now tasted lukewarm and less cheery.

Then a chilly sensation tickled the back of her neck. She had an urge to brush the hair out of her eyes—which was ridiculous, because she had no hair in her eyes. While pushing away the bothersome, nonexistent hair, she felt a shift in the elevator and heard a baritone voice say, "Looks like it'll be nice today."

She glanced over ever so slightly, noticing that the void left by the black loafers had been filled by brown, expensive-looking Italian leather shoes tied neatly with slim, chocolate laces. Her eyes followed the shoes along the creases of a pair of crisp tan dress pants, to a black belt with a muted gold buckle, and up a modestly striped powder-blue tie to his face. Sure enough, although older and with a bit more ruddiness in his cheeks, the very person Lisa had been hoping to avoid looked directly at her with a lopsided, hey-baby grin and that trademark dimple. He was *exactly* who she thought he was. Her mind blanked. The elevator bell dinged again and this time opened to her floor. She mumbled some form of agreement to his weather forecast then leapt from the elevator like a lion released from a cage.

The first time Jake had seen the woman, he'd been on his way to his first day at the new job.

Standing off to the side in the lobby of his new office building, he'd been checking his watch—not wanting to arrive too early—when, like a linebacker, she'd barreled through the revolving doors. A coffee in one hand, her

eyes glued to a magazine in the other, she hadn't even bothered looking to see if anyone was coming and narrowly missed a head-on collision with a guy equally intent on texting. The guy looked up at the last moment and swerved out of her way, clutching his cell phone like a wide receiver. While most women would have yelled, this woman had only regarded the man coolly and continued on her way, unfazed. Jake had been amused and wondered if the woman was also employed with the law firm of Smith, Hakkula, and Schuler, or as he and his colleagues called it between themselves, "Smacker."

She hadn't shown up at his forty-third-floor office, which at the time he thought was probably just as well. His opportunity with Smacker had been his big break—his first opportunity to run with the big dogs—and he wanted to make a good impression. After law school, Jake had taken a job with a small firm in the Twin Cities suburbs. It was a good place to work, but he had spent most of his time drafting wills and divorce decrees. He hadn't become a lawyer to be a paper pusher; he'd become a lawyer to defend justice. He wanted a piece of the action. Smacker was a much bigger, high-profile firm in downtown Minneapolis and, so far, had proven to be the perfect boost for his career. The paperwork hadn't gone away. In fact, in less than two months, it had already tripled in size. But he got to go to court, the cases were more interesting, and he'd finally be able to afford that Audi he had his eye on.

Since that first day, he'd spied the woman twice more: once again in the morning, and once during a lunch break, plowing unwittingly through the lobby like an errant bull, her eyes fixed on her reading material. What kind of woman did that? Either she had some kind of internal GPS or trusted people to clear a path, because she seemed to have this thing about reading and walking at the same time.

Nevertheless, she'd caught his attention and he couldn't shake it.

So this morning, when she blew through the doors, he knew he would talk to her. Already standing by the elevators, he gauged the timing of her arrival with that of the elevator's. Surprisingly, today she only had a travel mug of some sort in her hand. Looking straight ahead, she locked in her trajectory toward his elevator. The doors opened and he stepped in with several other people, taking a spot in the back, confident she would arrive. As predicted, the woman squeezed between the doors just before they closed, and she turned to face forward.

Despite the two men in front of him, both with graying hair and matching bald spots and who partially blocked his view, Jake studied the woman as best he could. She wasn't unusually tall, so that didn't explain why people parted for her. Short people could be all elbows when they wanted to assert power, but she wasn't unusually short, either. He guessed she was about five feet five.

Jake followed the contours of what he could see of her body, confirming what he could make out in the reflection of the mirrors, and filling in the gaps with his imagination. He scanned her legs and found well-defined calves below the hem of a navy blue skirt that landed straight and sensibly just above the knob of her knee. She appeared to be slender but not skinny, and he wondered if she worked out. He craned his neck a bit to the left, but couldn't see enough of her front to make any kind of determination.

But his senses nagged him, insisting there was something about her; what, exactly, he didn't know. His skin tingled with the curiosity of just how powerful she was. What did she do for a living? Did she work in the building,

too? Why wasn't she reading today and why was she holding her coffee cup so close to her face that it looked like she was trying to rest her head on it?

The older lady standing next to Jake bumped into his right elbow as she fiddled with a large quilted handbag. Her green glasses matched her outfit and she smelled like lavender and talc, reminding him of his grandmother. She beamed a smile of bright red lipstick, raised her eyebrows, and shrugged an apology. The lady rummaged through her bag a few seconds more, then snapped the clasps together before swaying back to her own spot. He subtly exhaled, clearing his nose of her overpowering scent and powder.

He heard a bell and the elevator slowed to a stop. The two men in front of him moved forward, simultaneously crowding the woman he'd been watching as they shouldered their way out. The woman scowled and readjusted her purse on her shoulder. She was leaning so close to the far wall—into the mirror, really—that her body looked like it had two heads. Her face had a natural look about it, which meant she probably didn't wear a lot of makeup. Then her eyes flickered and their gazes briefly met in the elevator's reflection. Her eyes were blue. He gave her a small smile. She darted her eyes to another corner of the elevator, and brushed her hand along the side of her face. Her hair was up, honey-colored strands neatly twisted into a bun that was playful, yet professional enough for the office. After the doors closed, he sidled into the vacant spot next to her. Closer, he could smell a hint of a whimsical fragrance. Her face looked a little red. Was it hot in here? He didn't think so.

"Looks like it'll be nice today."

As soon as he said it, he knew it really was as stupid as it sounded. Talking about the weather; what a dumb ass. Before he could think of a new topic, the elevator stopped again, the woman said something he didn't quite catch, and then she stepped out.

In the reflection, the green-glasses grandma was still smiling.

--- CHAPTER 2 ---

Lisa made a beeline for her cubicle, hung her jacket in its designated spot, and flung her purse under the desk before grabbing her laptop and folder of handouts. Her heart palpitated in time with her steps as she walked briskly down the short length of hall to her first meeting of the day. When she approached the glass-encased conference room, she saw her boss, Susan, arranging a silver-colored plastic tray with some packets of creamer and sugar and several mugs bearing the foundation's logo. A pleasant aroma of coffee floated through the room and Lisa inhaled deeply as she set her own limp latte on the long black table and took a seat.

She flipped open her laptop and watched it go through the start-up motions. *Jake Hanson. Wow.* Her heart, although considerably calmer, continued to flutter as she replayed the last two minutes of her life.

What *were* the odds of seeing him again? While she'd *hoped* she would never run into him again, it wasn't realistic to expect she'd *never* see him again—especially if they were both living in the Twin Cities. It was statistically bound to happen. What that exact statistic was she didn't know, but seemed to recall some hazy data on the subject in *Shape* magazine. Even if there hadn't been a study, just last week she'd bumped into her old babysitter at First Avenue, so she had enough evidence right there to convince her that running into Jake in an elevator shouldn't be surprising at all.

But “Nice day, isn't it?”—What was that all about?

Lisa's coworker, Ingrid, entered the conference room. She poured herself a cup of steaming coffee, placing her own armload of paperwork on the table as she settled into the black leather chair next to Lisa. She felt Ingrid sizing her up as she stared at the paradise-beach landscapes rotating on her screensaver.

“Were you just running?” Ingrid asked.

“No. Why?”

“Your face is flushed.”

Lisa could still feel a slight remnant of heat warming her face from her encounter with Jake. Taking one more breath, she clicked on a folder icon. “No. Nothing like that.”

Ingrid sorted through her own handouts, laying them out neatly in five small stacks. “But there is something.”

Should she get into it? Should she not get into it? Was it worth getting into? Lisa said, “I just saw someone.”

Ingrid stopped straightening papers and turned toward her. “Oh?” And it wasn't that kind of *Oh?* that implied, *Okay, you can stop talking now.* It was the kind of *Oh?* with that rising inflection that begged her to tell more.

Before Lisa could respond, Susan stepped between them, placing a small assortment of muffins on the conference table, and asked, “Are you ready for the meeting?”

“Yes,” Ingrid answered for both of them, while Lisa pulled up her PowerPoint presentation. Lisa shook her head, determined to rid her thoughts of Jake. Susan looked at Lisa, smiling politely, yet quizzically. It was Susan's Minnesota-nice way of shouting, “What? How can you not be ready?”

“We’re ready,” said Lisa, switching from shaking to nodding her head. “Everything’s right here.”

The worry lines across Susan’s forehead smoothed out and she patted Lisa on the shoulder.

Lisa loved her job. It was one of the things she had been celebrating this morning before seeing Jake in the elevator. She worked for the Little Flower Foundation, a nonprofit organization whose primary mission was to improve the lives of children. One of the foundation’s current projects, which Ingrid and Lisa had been assigned to, was the building of a park in the heart of the Nicollet neighborhood in Minneapolis.

Up until a half-century ago, this area of the city had been home to up-and-comers and the affluent. Anyone who had been anybody important had an affiliation with this neighborhood. Over time, with the aid of urban sprawl, the families there had packed up and moved to the suburbs. The beautiful homes left in Nicollet had been converted to cheap housing and the businesses, which had once thrived on the wealthy, had either dried up or relocated with their customers. Today, the community struggled with the usual inner-city issues and was desperately in need of some positive growth and renewal.

The “vision” of this park was monumental in size and involved converting four city blocks into a safe community space for children and families. Whenever she talked about the project, she put the word “vision” in quotation marks, since it was one thing to have an idea and an entirely different thing to make it a reality.

The conceiver and chief financial backer of the “vision” was Grant Hollow, a lawyer and senior partner from the firm Smith, Hakkula, and Schuler up on the forty-third floor of the building in which she worked. His professional success came from a career in corporate litigation, but he was known for having a sizeable portfolio of familial wealth as well. Lisa’s boss, Susan, was a personal acquaintance of Mr. Hollow and when he decided he wanted to make a philanthropic gesture for the community in which he grew up, he’d contacted Little Flower to execute his vision. Sometimes, though, Lisa couldn’t help but question his motivation. As much as she was all for improving Nicollet, she wasn’t fully convinced that this magnanimous offering didn’t have anything to do with some kind of covert personal-identity crisis.

On cue, Mr. Hollow and another man entered the conference room. Susan welcomed them each with a handshake and greeting. As usual, Mr. Hollow planted himself at the head of the conference table. Susan shifted her pile of paperwork over to the seat on Mr. Hollow’s left. Lisa was annoyed that he took such liberties with someone else’s conference room. None of their other clients did that. Mr. Hollow had a weathered exterior like chewed-up rawhide that reminded Lisa of Clint Eastwood from his cowboy movies. “Good morning, ladies,” he said.

The rasp of his voice made the Clint imagery immediately take shape. Lisa mentally dressed him in the standard cowboy issue consisting of boots outfitted with silver spurs, some leather chaps, a Stetson hat, and a red paisley bandana.

“I’d like you to meet one of our junior partners,” he said, indicating his guest. “This is Mark Schoenfelder. He and another one of my guys are going to be overseeing the rest of the park project for me. He’s got my complete trust and confidence. Mark, this is Susan Karowitz, president of the foundation, and these two gals are Ingrid White and Lisa Johnson.”

Mark smiled then said hello as he reached across the table, extending his hand first to Ingrid and then to Lisa. He was way younger than Mr. Hollow, with absolutely no cowboy aura whatsoever. He looked to be around

thirty and was a few inches taller than Lisa, with short sandy hair, a slightly receding hairline, and brown eyes as dark as coffee beans. From his looks, Mark was probably the kind of guy she usually thought of as “the son of my parents’ best friends” type.

Although she hated to break eye contact with the handsome newcomer, she turned and looked directly at Mr. Hollow so he would know that she was talking to him. “It’s *Johnston*,” she said, clearly aspirating the *t* in her name. She smiled, hoping it would make her correction sound less like an admonition.

“Excuse me?” Mr. Hollow asked, as he flashed back a grin of impressive pearly white dentures. His teeth gleamed, producing a light of their own. She bet that if the sunlight hit them just right, they would sparkle.

“My last name is Johnston. With a *t*.”

“Oh, right. Mark, you’ll be working with these girls.” Mr. Hollow picked up the first sheet from his stack of handouts. “Now, let’s see what you’ve got for us today.”

The man hardly skipped a beat.

It drove her crazy how frequently people got her name wrong. Her name was Lisa Johnston—not Lisa Johnson. Arguably, her last name was as common as Erickson, Hanson, or Smith, and yet unfortunately had been consistently trumped by Johnson. That *t* between the *s* and *o* clearly stood out next to its smaller neighbors, who stopped short of the dashed blue midline, and was the single distinguishing trait that separated her from the masses named Johnson.

Lisa had spent many hours of her childhood speculating on how the name Johnston came to be. Maybe it referred to John’s Ton, and told the tale of a man named John who had great wealth or strength. Or perhaps there had been a naming trend in which people made common names more unique by adding, deleting, or changing one letter. Thus, Erickson became Ericsson, Smith became Smyth, and Johnson became Johnston. Or maybe it had been a nickname for a certain part of old John. No wait. That would be Johnson—*again*, but in this case, she didn’t mind not being associated with that kind of moniker.

But if the Johnsons had thought that adding a *t* to their name would give them more distinction or inflate their social standing, they were mistaken, because she knew with absolute certainty that it had done the exact opposite. Anyone named Johnston would be repeatedly referred to as Johnson and this innocent mistake made over and over would eventually erode one’s identity until one became what one really wasn’t: Lisa Johnson.

High school had taught her this lesson well. With fifteen hundred students in her school, she’d had the misfortune of being cast into a class where there were ten other girls named Lisa, one of whom was named Lisa Johnson. Not only students, but teachers, too, confused them. Class schedules, test scores, notes from their parents; all of these things got mixed up from the time they were freshmen, all the way through their senior year. She wouldn’t have minded so much except for two critical differences. First, she was white and the other Lisa was black. Not that she cared at all about skin color, but how could anyone confuse that? Secondly, the other Lisa was a six-foot basketball star and she was a scrawny mouse who categorically shied away from sports. Her parents about fell over from shock when they got a call from a recruiter offering her a scholarship and a spot with the Ohio State

Buckeyes. Lisa Johnson's parents were similarly stumped when they received a letter stating that their daughter had achieved highest honors at band camp and invited them to attend the end-of-summer farewell banquet.

To twist the knife further into the ongoing misnomer situation, there was a Lisa Johnson in the grade ahead of her and one in the grade behind her, so that, even in her senior year, she could enjoy no notoriety. She was the only Lisa Johnston in the whole damn school, drowning in a sea of Lisa Johnsons. It was somewhere between getting called into the nurse's office for a pregnancy test and basketball star Lisa Johnson getting *her* letter of recommendation from their English teacher when she decided to defend her name and correct anyone who got in her way.

--- CHAPTER 3 ---

Jake eyed the gigantic clock bolted to the concrete wall above the security desk, wondering if he'd see her again that morning. If he did, he'd be sure not to talk about the weather. Just as he arrived at the bank of elevators, he saw the woman from the day before push her way through the revolving doors. He pressed his thumb firmly into the up-arrow button while watching her out of the corner of his eye. She walked about fifteen feet into the lobby, then stopped and turned back to retrieve a magazine from a square glass coffee table. Jake recognized the cell phone perched on a mountainous pile of landfill as the cover photo of the very same edition of *Time* he'd been paging through at the grocery store.

He heard the mechanical whir of the elevator's arrival, then the soft metallic click and slide as the doors opened. People pressed around him to get in while he remained standing just outside the doors. Intently focused, the woman lingered by the coffee table, her finger pointing to a spot in the magazine, her lips pressed tightly together.

If the magazine interested her that much, she should just take it. He didn't think there'd be a strong case for criminal prosecution as long as she returned it. He could argue that if she worked here, borrowing a magazine from the lobby of her own office building was kind of like borrowing from an extended collection of company resources. If the article she was reading pertained to her job, then this furthered the odds in her favor.

Jake heard the elevators threaten to close and placed his hand across the doors.

From inside the elevator came polite coughs. He looked in and saw an older woman checking her watch, while others fidgeted or shifted in place, all eyes fixed on imaginary locations. Then a forty-something guy, outfitted with white earbuds and a white cord that snaked into the front of his gray sport coat, looked directly at Jake and jacked his thumb upward. Jake delayed a few seconds longer until he was sure he'd gone past the point of good manners and got in. As the doors began closing, he glimpsed a woman's gold watch loosely fitted on a slender wrist. His hand darted out and smacked the button panel. The doors shuddered to a jerky halt before reversing their course.

The woman stopped just short of the doors as she and Jake made full-frontal eye contact. The black outlining on her lids and the mascara, coupled with a shimmery smudge of eye shadow a shade darker than her fair skin, enhanced the watery blue of her irises. They were so vivid Jake could follow the faint lines radiating from her pupils. He remembered that he'd promised to go kite surfing with his friend Scott before it got too cold. Her hair was down today and he noted the blond and gold highlights, like light through honey. Her lipstick was a dark pink, something bolder than yesterday's lighter look. Jake smiled generously, offering her space next to him.

The woman swayed on the threshold as two more people squeezed past her and murmured thanks.

"Going up?" Jake asked, ignoring the restlessness of the other passengers.

"Uh . . ." She looked over his shoulder, to the left and then to the right. She stepped back. "No." After a pause, she added, "Thank you." It sounded like a question.

The doors bullied Jake's hand, insistently pressing against his palm, while he processed her answer. Usually a person was grateful when someone holds an elevator for them. The woman's look resembled that of a deer caught in the headlights. Maybe it wasn't him she was responding to; maybe there were too many people in the elevator.

“Okay.” Jake removed his hand, smiled again, and kept his eyes on her until the doors closed. He sensed a collective sigh of relief as the elevator ascended. He didn’t mind the dirty sideways glances or the knowing looks exchanged between the strangers around him. What really bothered him was he didn’t normally get that kind of reaction from a woman.

As the elevator closed on his smug face, Lisa reeled from the shock of seeing Jake Hanson two days in a row. In nearly ten years, their paths had never crossed, and now it had happened *two days in a row*. Her mouth felt dry and she realized it was hanging open.

She heard another elevator descend and the doors opened on an elevator two down from where she stood. A lone man in a black fall trench coat with a matching briefcase exited. Lisa turned and treaded carefully the short distance, then peered cautiously into the elevator’s vast, shiny emptiness. It stood gaping, beckoning her. For once, there wasn’t anyone elbowing her for space. Lisa looked over at the door labeled EXIT with a picture of a stick man running up three steps.

She shook her head. It would be ridiculous, not to mention neurotic, to walk up twenty-four flights of stairs. A normal person would take the elevator and consider the benefit of getting to work on time. She was a normal person. She watched the empty elevator close on itself and waited for the next elevator—just to be safe.

When she got to her floor, she stepped out, half-expecting Jake to jump out and yell, “*Boo!*” It was silly, but she couldn’t restrain herself from peering into each rectangle of window as she made her way to the office.

She marched straight away to Ingrid’s cubicle and said, “Okay, it’s official. He exists and he is here. In the building.” The way Ingrid winced made Lisa think that maybe she had shouted.

“Who?”

“The guy I saw yesterday.”

“What guy? You mean Mr. Hollow’s guy?”

“Yesterday I told you I saw someone. I just saw him again. In the elevator.” Lisa jabbed her index finger toward the general direction of the accused apparatus, as if it was the elevator’s fault.

“In the elevator?”

“Yes. And this time he held it for me.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It’s not nice. It’s annoying. Ingrid; that’s two days in a row. What am I going to do? What if he works here?”

Ingrid came closer and placed her hands on Lisa’s arms. Her brows furrowed with concern. “Calm down. Now, who is this guy?”

“Jake Hanson,” Lisa said, enunciating slowly. His name felt rubbery in her mouth. Saying it out loud was weird, like she had violated a sacred pact by voicing the secret password.

Ingrid leaned in, with face clouded and her blue-green eyes narrowed. “Did he hurt you? Like—physically?”

“No. I just—can’t stand him.” She’d almost said hate, but heard her mother’s nagging voice in her head, *Don’t hate*. And anyway, she hated brussels sprouts, which made her gag; Jake made her see red. “I *loathe* him.”

Ingrid loosened her hold on Lisa. “But he did do something, right?”

Her mind spun through her Rolodex of memories. How could Lisa sum up all of the citations she’d counted against Jake? It would not only sound childish, it would minimize the significance of all that Jake had done if she began with an explanation that was reminiscent of, *This one time? At band camp?*

Before she could answer, a woman from human resources passed by them and said good morning. Lisa looked around the office space the foundation shared with other nonprofits. It had an open floor plan filled with cubicles so small she and Ingrid called them cubbies. Sometimes she could hear others breathing. She was sure the receptionist was eavesdropping because, although her desk was at least ten feet away, the young woman seemed unusually quiet as she meticulously unpacked a small box of paperclips and set the clips individually in a holder shaped like a goldfish. The more urgently she wished for privacy, the louder the smattering of click-clacking on keyboards across the cramped sea of cubicles sounded.

Lisa lowered her voice. “I can’t explain it now. The point is: what am I going to do if I start seeing him every day on the way to work?” *Hi, Jake; sucks to see you* didn’t seem appropriate or adequate. Just then the receptionist was upon them, a white plastic pitcher in hand, watering the thriving spider plant closest to Ingrid’s cubby.

Ingrid drummed her fingers lightly on her lips “Okay, based on what you told me, I think you’re overthinking this. If you see him again, just ignore him. That’s what I do.”

“But what if he talks to me?”

“Just ignore him.”

“And if he persists?”

“*Fake* it. It’s probably just a coincidence, anyway.”

“But it’s been two days. In a *row*.”

“Maybe he’s somebody’s client. Which reminds me; we have another meeting with that Mark tomorrow. It’s first thing, so don’t be late.”

Lisa’s anxiety eased down a notch. “Maybe he’s somebody’s client?”

“Yeah.”

“Which would make his visits temporary.”

“Or sporadic,” Ingrid added. “It’s not a big deal. Now try not to have any more meltdowns before noon.”

At that moment, Susan stepped out of her office, one of the few reserved for executives that outlined the perimeter of the cubbie corral, with a door and windows facing the outside world. Ingrid dropped into her chair and turned to her computer while Lisa settled into her own cubicle.

That was what she loved about her friend. Ingrid could take a crisis and smack it down with one irreverent swat.

After a few hours of answering emails and making phone calls, Lisa opened a tab for Google on her Internet browser to search for any new funding sources or deadlines she didn't already know about. She sat for a moment meditating on the search box. On the other side of the partitioned wall, she heard Ingrid step away from her desk. The intern on her other side was out sick. Her fingers flew over the keys. *Click.*

The first hit was for the fictional character from the popular '90s television drama series *Melrose Place*. The next was for a Jake Hanson in California. She skimmed through the list. There were thousands of Jake Hansons mentioned in every conceivable forum. She typed in "and Minneapolis" after his name. Just as she was about to tap the mouse, Ingrid returned and said, "Hey, how about a lunch break?"

Lisa nearly jumped out of her seat. *Yep, no big deal.*

Skipping her jog, Lisa headed straight home after work. She sat on the couch petting her five-year-old tortoiseshell cat, Leroy, as her eyes roamed the living room. With the exception of two small paintings and a family picture, books lined nearly every inch of wall space. She rationalized that if she wanted to see some culture, she could visit a museum. This logic, however, did not apply to books. To say she had a love of books was an understatement. It was an obsessive love affair of the mind. There were some stories she had found so moving that she wished she could eat them, so as to forever carry them inside of her.

She'd lucked out when she had found this apartment, which was on the ground floor of a renovated Victorian house. The building was at least a hundred years old and had a screened-in porch with a large, white porch glider where she liked to read. It was located right in the heart of the artsy, eclectic part of Minneapolis's Uptown neighborhood. To be near Uptown was so unbelievably cool that her actually living there made her feel cool by association. The apartment was also only three blocks from Lake Calhoun, where she liked to run. She had a roommate whose parents paid half of the rent while their daughter was in the Peace Corps in Botswana. The place was all hers.

She stood, letting the cat hop to the floor, and went over to a shelf next to the narrow hallway leading to the kitchen. She walked her fingers over the bindings, stopped, and slid a tall book from the bottom shelf. It felt weighty and purposeful—a book with many stories. The binding was tight, the white and blue leather clean, the bear emblazoned on the cover still in good shape. She thumbed through it, letting the pages fall open at random.

The freshman class. The golf team. The football team. The choir. The cast of *Pride and Prejudice*. She recalled seeing a classmate of hers who'd been in the play on a reality TV show called something seductive like *Love in Paradise*.

Jazz band. The lunch ladies. The senior class. The senior class president. The senior class vice president. The treasurer. The secretary. Her eyes went back to the senior class president.

This was a time when having a cell phone created a clear distinction between the haves and have-nots. Reality shows like *American Idol*, *Survivor*, and *The Bachelor* were the entertainment equivalent of three square meals and Disney movies weren't just for little kids anymore. It was cool to listen to '80s music, because it made the youth seem retro and wise. Never mind about Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher, that the Berlin Wall had fallen, or that Sandra Day O'Connor had become the first woman appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. All they really

cared about was the big hair, Duran Duran, Cyndi Lauper, Pac Man, and movies like *Goonies*, *Top Gun*, and *Pretty in Pink*.

That year they had won the state hockey tournament and the volleyball team had switched from wearing bun huggers, those underwear-like “shorts,” to the still-too-short but more respectable spandex bike shorts. Their principal, Mr. Wicker, had announced that he was taking a sabbatical abroad to partake in a special research project in Italy. This was code for: *I’m cracking up because of you kids, my marriage is on the brink, and I need a break. See you next year.* Lisa watched it all from the fourth chair in the clarinet section of pep band. *Go Bears! Grrrr!*

Lisa thought of the famous Dickens line: *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.* Almost ten years ago, she had been a senior at Big Bear High School in the Twin Cities suburb of Big Bear. As cliché as it sounded, it definitely had not been the best of times and had certainly been the worst of times. She had been a nobody. A well-liked nobody, but a nobody nevertheless. How could someone be a well-liked nobody?

Aside from the whole name situation, she had been a plain Jane with dull brown hair, boring blue eyes, and no remarkable features. That wasn’t to say she’d been ugly; her mother said so and her father verified it. Maybe she was gullible to believe her parents, but hey, she took what she could get.

Her hair was long and always pulled back in a ponytail. Within the safe confines of her pink bathroom she would experiment with all sorts of hairstyles. She tried the sultry look, parting her hair so it angled coquettishly across her face. Sometimes she created sassy tendrils. Occasionally she had pigtails or plaits to express her inner child. Yet when she went to school, she always yanked it back into a conventional ponytail—not even a spiky ponytail or a messy bun. Just a plain, straight, pulled-back ponytail. And her eyes were blue. Not a sparkly blue or an icy blue, or aquamarine, or even a murky, could-they-be-violet blue. Just blue.

She had no jutting cheekbones or pouty lips, no quizzical eyebrows or seductive smile—not even a mole that could be classified as a beauty mark. Her one saving grace had been the absence of bad acne. She had felt sincere sympathy for her peers who had faces reminding her of acupuncture gone seriously wrong. She might have been unremarkable, but she thanked God that she had been spared pimples.

She had especially liked English class, survived calculus, and loved dissecting the cat that she and her lab partner had affectionately named Meow Zedong. She went to football games like everyone else. She went to dances and the prom in her junior *and* senior years—even if it was with girlfriends. She cheered at the pep rallies and painted her cheeks with little blue and white stripes. She even went to Costa Rica on a summer trip organized by her Spanish teacher. She had not been some social leper skulking about in Gothic wardrobe bemoaning and soliloquizing about the horrible injustices of high school. She, at least, had worn regular clothes.

People had known who she was, more or less, and had been friendly for the most part. She suspected that no one was ever quite sure if she was a Johnson or a Johnston. But everyone knew her first name, so in this way she had at least registered as a blip on the social radar.

In junior high, she had been opinionated and vocal about her views. Had she stuck to it, perhaps she would’ve earned a spot on the speech and debate team. However, the eye rolling and mutterings she observed during class discussions in the early days of high school had taught her that her time there would be better spent retreating into books. Call it a coping strategy, but it had been easier to build relationships with girls like Anne Shirley,

Elizabeth Bennett, Nancy Drew—heck, even the gang from Sweet Valley High—than it had been to interact with her peers.

For example, somewhere around the ninth grade the girls had gotten all weird and gaga over the boys. As breast size increased, brain size decreased. The girls, even the smart ones, didn't know the answers to even easy schoolwork anymore. The same was true of boys who didn't know what to do about the inexorable blossoming of their former teammates. But there had been a small group of boys who'd been able to hold it together—to be charming and graceful in the face of all this adolescent strife. They were adored, revered, and idolized by all. In a phrase: they were *loved*. And the leader of this coveted clique was their senior class president, Jake Hanson.

Jake. What could she say about Jake? That he was considered perfect? He did it all: played three sports, got top grades, and was superinvolved in all kinds of activities. But it was his way with people that made him extraspecial. Their senior year, he convinced nearly every student in their class to volunteer ten hours at a drop-in center for street kids. Not a single teacher or administrator had to coax anybody; everyone had gladly done it because *Jake* had asked. Except for Lisa. She'd done it for the drop-in kids, not for Jake. When Jake hosted Senior Skip Day, he came out unscathed. That's how much people loved him. The teachers even let him play hooky.

Of course he'd also been one of the cutest guys in their class. "Beefcake Jake" and "Handsome Hanson" were two of his many nicknames. Jake had played Mr. Darcy in the school play. In his white neckerchief and black top hat, he had a confidence about him that made girls lose all coherence. While holding curtains and placing props backstage, Lisa had overheard countless Jane Austenesque fantasies of fairytale romance involving their own Mr. Darcy, complete with acts of chivalry and horseback riding into the sunset; an extension of every girl's secret belief that Ken would finally marry Barbie and they would live happily ever after in Barbie's pink castle. The drama teacher once commented how pleased she was that so many students had taken such a strong interest in *Pride and Prejudice* that year. Either she'd been brilliant casting Jake or incredibly oblivious.

The last time Lisa had seen Jake had been at their high school graduation. While everyone else wore a normal black graduation gown, Jake had been festooned with gold tassels and a large bronze medal with the school's crest around his neck. He was the first kid ever in the history of Big Bear to be bestowed such an honor usually reserved for adults. He had been class president, homecoming king, and a featured graduation speaker. And she hated him.

Well, no. She had loved him, too—initially. But there came a time when consternation tipped the scales, outweighing any respect she'd had for his otherwise goodness.