

Annika

CHICAGO

AUGUST 2001

I run into him at Mariano's, of all places. I'm poking around in the freezer case, searching for the strawberries I put in my morning smoothie, when a man's voice somewhere off to my right says, "Annika?" He sounds unsure.

From the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of his face. It's been ten years since we've seen each other and though I often struggle to recognize people out of context, there's no need for me to question whether or not it's him. I know it's him. My body vibrates like the low rumble of a faraway train and I'm grateful for the freezer's cold air as my core temperature shoots up. I want to bolt, to forget about the strawberries and find the nearest exit. But Tina's words echo in my head, and I repeat them like a mantra: *Don't run, take responsibility, be yourself.*

I draw an uneven breath that doesn't quite fill my lungs, and turn toward him. "Hi, Jonathan."

"It is you," he says.

I smile. "Yes."

My hair, which used to be waist length and usually in need of a good brushing, is now shiny and straight and stops a few inches below my shoulders. The tailored shirt and slim-fitting pants I'm wearing are a far cry from my college wardrobe of skirts and dresses two sizes too big. It's probably thrown him a bit.

At thirty-two, he still looks the same to me: dark hair, blue eyes, broad swimmer's shoulders. He's not smiling, but his brows aren't knitted together in a scowl, either. Though I've vastly improved my ability to read facial expressions and other nonverbal cues, I can't tell if he's harboring any angry or hurt feelings. He has every right to feel both.

We take a step forward and we hug, because even I know that after all this time—and all we've been through—we're supposed to hug. There is an immediate feeling of safety and comfort when Jonathan's arms are around me. That hasn't changed at all. The smell of chlorine that used to cling to his skin has been replaced by something woody and, thankfully, not too heavy or cloying.

I have no idea why he's in Chicago. A prestigious financial services firm in New York had whisked Jonathan out of Illinois almost before the ink finished drying on his diploma, when what had once been a planned move for two turned into a solo endeavor.

When we separate, I stumble over my words. "I thought you lived . . . Are you here on business . . . ?"

"I transferred to the Chicago office about five years ago," he says. It astounds me that all this time, as I've walked around the city I now call home, I never knew bumping into him was a possibility. How many times have we been within a certain-mile radius of each other and not known it? How many times were we behind or in front of each other on a busy sidewalk, or dining in the same restaurant?

"My mom needed someone to oversee her care," he continues.

I'd met his mother once, and I liked her almost as much as I liked

my own. It had been easy to see where Jonathan's kindness had come from. "Please tell her I said hello."

"She died a couple of years ago. Dementia. The doctor said she'd probably been suffering from it for years."

"She called me Katherine and couldn't find her keys," I say, because my recall is excellent and it all makes sense now.

He acknowledges my statement with a brief nod. "Do you work downtown?" he asks.

I close the freezer door, embarrassed that I've been holding it open the whole time. "Yes, at the Harold Washington Library."

My answer brings the first smile to his face. "Good for you."

The conversation sputters to an awkward halt. Jonathan has always done the heavy lifting where our communication is concerned, but this time he doesn't let me off the hook and the silence is deafening. "It was great to see you," I finally blurt. My voice sounds higher than it usually does. Heat rushes to my face, and I wish I'd left the freezer door open after all.

"You too."

As he turns to go, a pang of longing hits me so hard my knees nearly buckle, and I gather my courage and say, "Jonathan?"

His eyebrows are raised slightly when he turns back around. "Yes?"

"Would you like to get together sometime?" I tense as the memories come flooding back. I tell myself it's not fair to do this to him, that I've done enough already.

He hesitates but then he says, "Sure, Annika." He removes a pen from the inside pocket of his suit coat and reaches for the grocery list in my hand, scrawling his phone number on the back.

"I'll call you. Soon," I promise.

He nods, his expression blank again. He probably thinks I won't go through with it. He'd be justified in that, too.

But I will call. I'll apologize. Ask him if we can start over. "Clean slate," I'll say.

Such is my desire to replace the memories of the girl he used to know with the woman I've become.

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At my initial therapy session with Tina it took my eyes almost five minutes to adjust to the dimly lit room. When I could finally see my surroundings clearly, I realized it was intentional, and that everything in the room had been placed there based on its ability to soothe. The floor lamp in the corner—the only source of light—had a cream-colored shade that threw muted shadows against the wall. The brown leather furniture felt buttery-soft under my fingertips, and the thick rug covering the floor made me want to kick off my shoes and wiggle my toes among its soft, fluffy fibers.

“I ran into Jonathan,” I tell Tina before she’s even shut the door when I show up for my weekly appointment. She sits down in the armchair and I sink into the overstuffed couch across from her, its cushions enveloping me in a way that has always eased my anxiety about being there.

“When?”

“Last Tuesday. I stopped at Mariano’s on my way home from work, and he was there.”

We've spent many hours discussing Jonathan and she must certainly be curious, but knowing what Tina's thinking by the look on her face is a nut I'll never crack. "How did it go?"

"I remembered what you said I should do if I ever saw him again." I brightened, sitting up a bit taller despite the couch's continued attempt to swallow me. "We had a conversation. It was short, but it was nice."

"There was a time when you wouldn't have done that," Tina says.

"There was a time when I would have escaped out the back door and then taken to my bed for two days." I *had* felt drained when I'd finally made it home with my groceries. And then, when I was putting them away, the grief I'd felt about the death of Jonathan's mother finally caught up to me and I had myself a good long cry because now he doesn't have any parents at all. I'd also neglected to tell him how sorry I was even though I was thinking it in my head. Despite my fatigue, it had taken me a long time to fall asleep that night.

"I thought he was in New York?"

"He was. He transferred here to take care of his mom before she died. That's all I really know." Jonathan's appearance had been so unexpected, so random, that I hadn't been capable of articulating many questions. It had occurred to me belatedly that I had no idea if he was married. Glancing down at a man's ring finger is the kind of subterfuge that occurs to me later—and in the case of Jonathan, two full days after the fact.

"What do you suppose was going through Jonathan's mind when he saw you in that grocery store?"

Tina knows how difficult it is for me to understand what others are thinking, so her question does not surprise me. In the ten years since I've seen Jonathan, I've replayed the final weeks of our relationship, and the last message he left on my answering machine, over and

over in my mind. Tina had helped me see these events through Jonathan's eyes, and what I'd realized made me feel ashamed. "He didn't seem hurt or angry," I say, which doesn't really answer her question. Tina knows everything there is to know about the situation, and she could probably tell *me* what Jonathan was thinking. She just wants to hear my take on it. One of the things I like most about our sessions is that I'm the one who determines what I'm comfortable discussing, so Tina won't push. Not too much, anyway.

"How *did* he seem?"

"Neutral, I guess? He smiled when I told him about the library. He started to walk away, but I asked him if he wanted to get together, and he gave me his number."

"You've made real progress, Annika. You should be proud."

"He probably thinks I won't call."

"Will you?"

Though it fills me with anxiety to envision the road I'm about to travel, I answer firmly. "Yes."

I study Tina's face, and though I can't be certain, I think she might be pleased.