



CHAPTER 1

The email squatted on his computer screen like a nasty scar. A rock shattering a window, disturbing note attached. In his office on the 32nd floor of the John Hancock Center high above Michigan Avenue, Michael Janaseck received hundreds of daily communications from colleagues and clients around the world. But this one was different.

They know who you are. Let me help you.

Michael wasn't particularly upset when he read the cryptic message. More curious than frightened. A little pissed-off maybe. He wondered what kind of sick, anonymous spam artist would come up with a stunt like this. More likely somebody he knew, he figured. Somebody's idea of a bad joke. He searched his mental database trying to imagine who might have a sense of humor rotten enough for this kind of sophomoric bullshit. One of the wing nuts in the Creative Department was his best guess.

Michael forced a laugh at the Hollywood absurdity of such a thing. But his black humor quickly turned to outrage at whoever would dare to invade his privacy with such an off-color prank. Angrily, he batted out a terse response: "I don't know who you are, but this is not funny. Whatever you're selling, I'm not buying."

He hit REPLY and glanced up as Maggie poked her head into his office.

"Staff meeting in five minutes, Slick."

"OK."

Michael would not tell anyone about the message. For some reason it embarrassed him. Made him feel oddly violated. Like someone had been in his house when he wasn't home. Veiled threats from mysterious messengers were not part of his vocabulary. The only violence he was even remotely exposed to came uninvited on the evening news. Michael had complained to his wife on more than one occasion about the murders, rapes and gruesome deaths that seemed to be the bread and butter of the local TV programming. Trash that had nothing to do with his life. Garbage to wade through on the way to sports and the weather.

They know who you are. Let me help you.

"Go fuck yourself," he muttered as he headed out the door to his first meeting of the day.



CHAPTER 2

Michael left his office at 6:15 p.m., giving himself barely enough time to hoof it to the train station and catch the 6:35 to his suburban home in Arlington Heights. He had honed his “commuter walk” to perfection, an aggressive stride somewhere between a hustle and an all-out sprint. When called for, he relied on this pace to cover the twelve blocks in record time.

He arrived at the massive Ogilvy Transportation Center with seconds to spare, dodged fellow passengers like a fullback in heavy traffic, and elbowed his way on board just as the doors closed and the 6:35 lumbered out of the terminal. He eased into a seat between a large gentleman sequestered behind his *Wall Street Journal* and a woman having a private conversation on her cell phone, broadcast to the world.

By the time the train slowed for its first stop in Crystal Lake, Michael had become oblivious to his pitching, creaking, babbling surroundings, lost in the backlog of newspapers, advertising journals, and research

reports that made the forty-five-minute journey almost a pleasure. The mysterious email from earlier in the day all but faded from his mind. His reply, as expected, was never acknowledged. He chalked it up to some jerk getting his jollies. Maybe even the wrong address. Michael Edward Janaseck was a successful advertising guy. Senior Management Supervisor with DBB&R, one of the top agencies in town, in the prime of his working life. He knew exactly who he was and didn't need any help from some whack job email author, thank you very much.



CHAPTER 3

The short stroll from the train station in Arlington Heights to his home on Fairchild Avenue was a pleasure on days like this. The same walk could be frozen torture during the endless winter months when Chicago became a sister city to the North Pole. But today was a spectacular day, and Michael smiled as he rounded the corner into the home stretch onto Fairchild.

He spied a red tricycle parked in the entryway, yellow and pink streamers flowing from its handlebars. The vehicle belonged to Allison Grisshoffer, one of the tribe of Grisshoffer children who lived three houses down the street. Michael stooped to set the trike aside, making a mental note to return it to its owner after dinner. His cheery mood was dented momentarily when the toy brought to mind the childless state of his marriage. He and his wife, Vanessa, had been trying to make a baby for over a year, with no luck. This was one of the few disappointments shared by the couple, otherwise content with their status quo. Michael sighed, shook off the

challenge to his upbeat state of mind, set the Grisshoffermobile aside, unlocked the front door, and stepped into the warm comfort of his home.

He bounded up the stairs two at a time to his bedroom, shed coat and tie and slid into faded Northwestern T-shirt, shorts and running shoes for an evening jog. Vanessa wasn't home yet. Probably stretching her way through yoga class. Michael never got yoga. He tried it once, but too much chanting, not enough sweating.

The Chicago weather presented a crisp autumn evening, just before the disappearing sun painted the air a comfortable shade of chill. This was rare Chicago weather for late September that would make anyone lucky enough to be outdoors happy to be alive. Michael Janaseck was happy to be alive and who he was on this fine day. Vanessa would be home soon. They would open a bottle of good wine, chat about the uneventful churn of their day, and retire in the safety and comfort of their comfortably mortgaged home.

As his Reeboks slapped the pavement in steady rhythm with his easy breathing, Michael could not imagine a much more agreeable existence. Not that he was one hundred percent satisfied. Not by a long shot. He had always been ambitious. An achiever, reined in just short of over-achiever. He was comfortable - that was the word. Yet always poking around for that little extra edge that might make him just a bit *more* comfortable. He didn't strive. Striving was for dissatisfied jerks.

Michael was good at his job. Could manage clients and dilettante creative types with the best of them. He fed

on the rush that came with winning big accounts and convincing clients to take the calculated risks that promised the potential for spectacular marketing victories. The tedious, oftentimes pointless meetings, the office politics, the ungrateful, argumentative, arrogant clients irritated him. But he understood how all that came with the territory. And accepted it. Generally speaking.

The only nick on an otherwise spotless resume flagged Michael's tendency toward the occasional outbreak of undisciplined temper. He had been observed, on at least two occasions, letting his short fuse get the better of him. Once, in the heat of a particularly spirited client discussion, he hurled a chair through a glass partition, bringing a sudden end to the proceedings and requiring weeks of ass kissing to calm the client back into the fold. In another explosion of temper, Michael shattered the nose of a creative director in an argument over the typeface in a print ad.

These incidents, though rare, were disturbing. And uncharacteristic of Michael's normally easygoing demeanor. The outbursts came as much of a surprise to him as to those who witnessed the violence. When he lost control, something rose up inside and short-circuited his nervous system. He hated the feeling, but the episodes were infrequent enough that he never gave them much thought, beyond regret and the necessary apologies.

Ultimately, Michael dismissed the fits of rage as evidence of his passion for his profession. Advertising was the only occupation he had ever known. The only career he ever cared about. He found security in his own

competence. Took strength from a deep faith in his ability to beat the odds. He knew he was smart, capable, had life in pretty good perspective. And intended to keep it that way.

The capacity to imagine what waited for him in the dark blue Buick parked down the street from his suburban home at 4707 Fairchild Avenue was beyond his comprehension. It didn't fit his world. Belonged to some other universe he had never personally encountered, and could never understand.

Michael Janaseck was walking that thin line everyone treads between contentment and terror, complacency and chaos. Beneath his feet, invisible fissures were forming, soon to open cracks and chasms that would swallow him whole.