

Chapter 1: Then

Do you believe in love at first sight?
Oh, I *definitely* do not.
Well, make that: did not. I definitely *did* not.

I mean, I'm not an *idiot*.

Idiot, I told myself as I fumbled with my oar, almost dropping it into the chilly waters of Lake Mendota. *You look like an idiot*. I secured a firm grip on it and shoved it back into the water, hoping I didn't just splash my incredibly attractive partner behind me.

Do not be an idiot, I cautioned myself frantically. *You're in a canoe with the cutest guy you've ever seen! Be cool! Be cool!*

If the Dreamboat noticed my frazzled nerves, he didn't give any sign. Six minutes ago, he was cool as a cucumber at our introduction on Tenney Beach. We had sized each other up, shook hands - *oh gosh, he has such strong, beautiful hands* - and hefted up our canoe to prepare for the starting gun.

I didn't even know attractive men ever signed up for random partners for anything, I panicked to myself as I fought to control my breathing and fall into rhythm. The waves sprayed water in my face.

Why have I been on Hinge? I should have been racing in canoes sooner. My sister Margot had signed me up for this race, complaining that she was tired of watching me swim, bike, and run every June. I *loved* my triathlons, I had told her. I wasn't about to trade in my

annual tradition for a rinky-dink Wisconsin Paddle and Portage canoe race. But she signed me up, and I obliged her. I hopped in her car this morning, green smoothie in hand, and not a care in the world. Whatever little race Margot had signed me up for would be easy. Canoeing was like breathing for me. I was Minnesota-born.

When we pulled up to the parking lot of the race, the event was bigger than I expected. Margot left me with a hurried, 'Good luck!', and I started hunting for my partner.

"Chris Rasbutin?"

It sounded like *Rasputin*. I double-checked the name on my card. Maybe I was saying it wrong. "Chris?"

Because I knew nobody here, I was randomly paired with another solo racer. Solo racer probably meant she was a middle aged mom who couldn't convince her husband to come along for the mid-life crisis racing hobby she had gotten herself into. I bet she was an empty nester too. Christina Rasbutin. Mom of four. There were throngs of people on the beach, and I wandered through, keeping my eyes peeled for anyone else who was looking slightly lost. I expected to have a casual morning workout, to break a sweat, and to get Margot off my back for a few months about my chronic singleness and frightening workout intensity. I expected this to be simple.

I'll tell you what I did not expect. I did not expect a 6'2, muscled, blue-eyed, dark-haired, chisel-jawed man to be calling my name on the beach.

"Jane Freymont?"

"Tha-that's me," I stuttered, shocked to see him. Shocked further as his face lit up in an irresistible grin.

"Jane," he said, grasping my hand firmly in his strong one. "I'm Chris," he grinned at me. I could feel his gaze like it emitted heat. "So, you're a loser without a partner too?" he asked. He still hadn't released my hand.

I wondered desperately if I had green smoothie bits in my teeth, and I found myself speechless. I could usually go toe-to-toe with anyone teasing me. “Guilty,” I think I whispered. I had nothing.

But now, I was making up for it. We were tearing through the water, noticeably pulling ahead of other boats in the lake. We were in rhythm, in tandem, in sync. It felt amazing. I felt like I was getting the buzz of a runner’s high. I was *not* about to disappoint this guy.

The waves were aggressive. Intoxicating. My heart was hammering. When we got to the first portage, we hurtled out of the boat, hefted the canoe onto our shoulders, and ran without having to even say a word. The boat bounced on our shoulders in a controlled chaos, and I could hear his panting echo through the overturned watercraft.

He had a really nice way of panting.

Oh my gosh, you can’t like how someone pants, I berated myself. But a few moments later, I found myself thinking, *Chemistry - is this chemistry? Do we have race chemistry? Is that a thing?*

When we reached the water on the other side, we hit the waves a good thirty seconds before our competitors. Chris gave a joyful whoop from the back of the canoe, and I couldn’t help but laugh in delight as we raced. The water skimmed underneath us, and the spray of it felt nice on my sweaty face. Even early, it was beginning to be a humid morning in Wisconsin. I couldn’t believe I was here, racing, with this man sitting behind me. My two long blonde French braids whipped around as I sneaked a glance backwards at him. He was grinning unabashedly at me.

“What are you looking at?” he called, grinning ear to ear. “Keep your eyes on the prize!”

Oh I am, I wanted to say, but I just laughed and turned forwards to lean into my strokes harder.

Two hours and six portages later, when we lugged our canoe across

the finish line in first place, they set off confetti cannons and blared celebratory music. I jumped into Chris' arms screaming. He spun in circles, making my braids fly. When he set me down, we had only the briefest awkward moment before he said, "Hey, want to grab a beer?"

It was only 10:30 a.m.

I said yes, of course.

The nearest bar was one block down from the waves. We didn't wait to see other competitors come in or take our spot on a podium. It didn't seem like an awards ceremony could top the newest prize we had - our chance encounter. The bar, as it turned out, wasn't open until noon, so we grabbed coffee from a corner shop and strolled through the funny diagonal streets of Madison, talking nonstop as if we had known each other all our lives.

A farmer's market on the square of the gold-domed capital building ushered us in, and we spent time poking around the stalls. "You know," Chris told me, draining the last of his coffee. "Madison is the backup location for the DC capitol building, since it's so far out of the way. If DC goes up in flames, the president gets flown here."

"Your information is dated," I laughed. "If American civilians can casually chat about the contingency plan for our government's safety in the event of an attack on DC, I think the cat is out of the bag."

"Look at you, Miss Know It All. You really *are* studying political science. Okay, but who says I'm a civilian?"

I sized him up. If he was a soldier, I think the last bit of my resolve to not *completely* crush on him would waver. "Are you?"

He looked at me with a teasing smirk before answering. All he knew about me so far was that I was a Poly-Sci major at UMD, which probably didn't give him the impression that I loved the army.

"Because," I added, flicking my braids over my shoulder. "If you are in the army, it might be the only thing that can turn you from a 9 into a 10."

“Janey,” he said, draping a strong arm around my shoulder and chuckling, said “I think you and I are going to get along juuuuust fine.”

Noon found us back at the bar, shamelessly the first customers in the door. We didn’t leave our booth all day, until happy hour was over and the golden tinges of sunset were starting to wash over the city. I hardly noticed. It’s like I blinked and it was 6pm. We had been talking so intently, laughing so hard, and eating brats and cheese curds so freely that the entire day flew by. Our poor waitress looked relieved when Chris waved her over and paid for our meals - with a generous tip, I noted, sneaking a glance at the receipt.

We pushed open the bar door and squinted into the golden-tinged daylight - it was still bright out on an early summer evening. Chris fell into step beside me as we headed back towards the beach, where he had parked. He was going to give me a ride back to Margot’s, but as we neared his Jeep Wrangler, he stopped.

“Listen, Janey, this just hasn’t been enough time,” he said. “What are you doing right now?”

“Right now?” I laughed. “We just spent the entire day together.”

“The day’s not over,” he replied. “I think it’s just about to be dinner time.”

“Look at us!” I laughed, motioning to my braids and biker shorts. “I need a shower!”

“How about a swim instead?” His eyes were dancing as he extended a hand to me and nodded towards the beach. He was so *alive*, and so handsome. “I bet we can make it across to that island and back before that pizza place we passed closes.” He had already taken off his t-shirt and flung it in the back of Wrangler before I had time to say no. “Plus, we need to work off those cheese curds. Let’s be honest.”

“I don’t have a swim suit!” I complained, laughing.

“You strike me as resourceful,” he replied, calling over his shoulder

as he trotted towards the beach.

Oh gosh - I think I loved him at that moment. So yes. I stripped off my shirt and chacos, and, in nothing but a sports bra and biker shorts, ran after the man I had just met.

I swam the entire way to the island and back with butterflies churning my stomach. I told myself it was the cheese curds, and that I was jumping way ahead of things. But I wasn't wrong. The butterflies didn't lie. We were just approaching the beach again, breathless and exhilarated, racing each other for the win. I got my feet on the ground first and started running through the knee-deep water, and he grabbed me around the waist and spun me back into the waves. We had a good water-logged wrestle, shoving and pulling and trying to get onto the sand first, shrieking in the evening air. I was laughing so hard that my stomach was starting to hurt and my abs were giving up on fighting him. The sun was low and the beach was tinged orange when we collapsed in a truce in the shallow water and let our laughs fade to a chuckle. He wet his lips and grinned at me, and a sudden bashfulness made my cheeks hot.

"You're blushing," he told me.

"Am not," I replied, barely audible.

"Janey," he replied, his voice teasing. Nobody in my entire 22 years had ever called me Janey. Or at least, they hadn't ever called me Janey twice. But with him, I liked it.

Nobody else was around. So when he tugged me towards him, I let him put his arms gently around me and kiss me. One kiss - sweet and sincere. When he pulled away, I pressed in for one more, a little saltier, and a little longer.

"And here I was-" he said, pulling away and grinning down at me. "Thinking winning the race this morning was going to be the best part of my day."

My teeth were chattering and my heart was jangling inside me,

leaned up against his bare chest. I had never felt so intoxicated by anyone before. I had never kissed someone I had just met that day either.

“Well,” he said, as we headed back towards his Wrangler, “Let’s get a slice and get you home. I would hate to make a bad impression on Margot.” He felt for my hand and held it gently as he pulled out of the parking lot. My heart beat faster, and I held onto that hand like it was the most precious thing I’d ever touched. He smiled over at me and said, “I already am going to have to tell her I’m in love with her sister.”