

Chapter One: That Era Ended Long Ago

Michael was crying.

His head was dropped, one hand held the bridge of his nose and I could see his shoulders shaking even from where I stood at the opposite end of the sparkly underpass at Bryn Mawr. We met there, at the lakefront running paths on the far north end of Lincoln Park, every morning. It was close to my house and Michael loved it because of the underpass's mural with its mirrored and iridescent tiles. It was as close to a disco ball as you can get on a public street and in Michael's mind, disco balls were one of life's great inventions. This was just one of the many reasons people who knew us both would eventually ask "which one of you is adopted?" That his hair was platinum blonde at the moment compared to my life-long medium brown was another. I picked up my pace to reach him, my mind whirling with possible disasters and bracing myself for bad news.

"It's just so shocking," he sobbed, before I even asked him what was wrong. This moved me from concern to panic. His face was streaked and blotchy and his eyes were rimmed red with sustained sadness. I had never seen him cry like this, not even at our parents' funeral or during those years when so many of his friends died.

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When I asked him what was wrong he shook his head and squeaked something about how horrible it was that Iggy Pop was gone. He sounded like Laura Petrie trying to explain to Rob that she burned the pot roast. My eyes squinted in that wrinkly way he'd been telling me to avoid since I'd hit my 40s, but I couldn't help it. There was no way I could reconcile this underwhelming news with his desperate state. Michael the Drama Queen had reared his annoying head and I felt my panic sour into annoyance. I didn't have time for histrionics.

"I didn't realize you were such a big Iggy Pop fan." Nor did I have time to clear my voice of sarcasm before I spoke.

It was his turn to look at me with disbelief.

"Not Iggy Pop, Lisa. THE KING OF POP. Michael Jackson is dead."

"What?"

"Michael Jackson. 'Billy Jean.' The sequined glove. Massively popular music superstar. I know your iPod is so empty it echoes, but the name rings a bell, doesn't it?"

"I *know* who Michael Jackson is. I just didn't know he died. What happened?"

My brother looked at me with something between pity and contempt and shifted seamlessly into his tenacious trainer voice. "Why am I not surprised that you are the last person on earth to hear that Michael Jackson died yesterday? It's only been all over the news all night. Come on, let's go." With a sniff and a wipe at his face, he jogged away from me, no doubt trying to distance himself from the facts of my life he despised.

I replayed yesterday's calendar looking for places where this big news could have leaked through. There was the conference call with the East Coast H.R. team that took the entire afternoon. That was followed by takeout Pad Thai in my office while I reviewed the laughable

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new bonus plan the comp committee was pushing. I didn't leave the office until after nine. The ride home on the L was devoted to clearing my email inbox, or at least getting close. Once I got home, I fed the cat, prepped for today's meetings and wound up falling asleep on the couch during the opening moments of *The Daily Show*. My best bet for hearing this or any news was when my alarm went off at five thirty, since it was set to NPR. But I bolted awake well before it could click on, like so many days that summer. Two weeks earlier, Michael had made me promise to ignore my Blackberry until after our runs so that I wouldn't be late anymore.

There just wasn't time to stay up on the news. The economy was wreaking havoc on the company I worked for, making it a particularly difficult time to be in Human Resources. My team and I were spending all our time configuring and reconfiguring work groups, looking for places to trim the cost-per-employee of every benefit program and managing a growing number of layoffs around the country. So much of our time was spent dismissing people and dismantling programs that we toyed with renaming our department "Inhumane Resources." That's why Michael designed this running program for us. There just wasn't time anymore to go to the gym and take his kickboxing class. So he agreed to meet me nearly every morning on the edge of Lake Michigan, understanding my psyche enough to know that I'd feel obligated if he had taken the bus from his place in Lakeview to my place in Andersonville to run with me. He also had the foresight to keep his phone off until six so I couldn't text him my regrets. The idea was that the physical exertion would help me deal with the stress I was facing. It wasn't working.

Still, I kept trying. Chicago's lakefront was gorgeous in June and if nothing else, I could have been using the time to revel in the fresh air filling my lungs, watch the morning sun bounce like diamonds on the vast blue expanse of Lake Michigan, marvel at the green canopy the trees

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along the path provided or pick up on the calm vibe of the group of elderly Asians doing Tai Chi in a shady circle. But the scenery was a blur until I spotted my building in the skyline as we neared Montrose Harbor and the flood of the day's To Dos surged through my brain where the endorphins of a good run were supposed to be. I felt the whole day slipping away and nudged Michael to tell him I was turning back. He was clearly out of sorts because he simply turned and started running north without chastising me for cheating my body out of several more miles.

Back at the Bryn Mawr underpass, we slowed to an eerily quiet walk to cool down. Usually, that was the part of our morning when he'd regale me with tales of how he spent the previous night. He was even further into his 40s than I but had yet to lose his taste for nightlife. He regularly checked out new restaurants, met friends for drinks or danced until dawn with his coworkers from the gym. For a long time, he'd call to invite me along. And for a long time, I politely declined because I had to work. Eventually, he stopped asking.

When he started to sway his arms back and forth in front of him, bent upward at the elbows, I knew instantly that he was mentally stepping through the choreography of a Michael Jackson video. I rubbed his shoulder as an offer of sympathy.

"Oh, Lisa, remember how we used to run down to the TV lounge in the dorm every time they played 'Thriller' on MTV?"

Actually, I remembered how *he* used to run, push all the furniture out of the way and start calling out the dance moves to anyone who would listen. He was a born aerobics instructor, even back then. I reminded him that memorizing the choreography in Michael Jackson videos was his thing. I hadn't been much of a fan.

"Oh right. Too common for you. You liked those obscure New Wave boys."

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“I studied most of the time in college.”

“Right. You studied in college. Music, right? Or should I say musicians?”

“I did! I did very well in college, thank you very much. Unlike you, I carried a full course load...”

“Except for that semester you spent following the band...”

“I graduated with honors,” I snapped, emphasizing my desire to end the conversation. I hated it when he dredged up the past, particularly his skewed version of the past. Those conversations always went the same way: him rhapsodizing about the idyllic past, sounding for all the world like an old man reliving the “good old days,” and me contradicting his every statement like an unrelenting, stern-faced fact checker until the whole conversation devolved into snippy, adolescent arguments. It would make great dialogue for Greg and Marcia, but it seemed ridiculous coming from people our age.

I didn’t know why his memory worked that way – burnishing the positive and not even acknowledging the negative. Michael and I were born only a year apart. We grew up together in the suburbs, went to college at the same central Illinois school and settled into nearby Chicago neighborhoods as adults. In many cases, I was an eyewitness – if not an outright participant – in the stories he told of the glorious past. Yet *my* perspective and the things *I* remembered were never part of his recollections.

Like the 80s. We both graduated from high school and college in the 80s. Yet for Michael, those years were all about the launch of Madonna, how cool it was to wear neon and shoulder pads, how greed was good. For me, it was about working hard in school only to end up with a pile of student loans and flimsy job prospects. I also married my college boyfriend in the

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80s, and that turned out to be a flimsy prospect as well. My divorce was finalized in the 80s. Our parents' car accident was in the 80s. The decade was so much more than big hair and Feed the World, but you would never know it from reminiscing with Michael.

We reached the corner of Clark and Bryn Mawr just as the 22 bus rolled into the stop. On any other day, Michael would sprint into traffic to catch it, but his heart just wasn't in it that Friday.

"Now that Jacko's gone, it's the end of an era," he sighed, tears again welling in his eyes. I gave him a brief hug and a light kiss on the cheek, genuinely sorry that he was upset. But I couldn't have disagreed more. The King of Pop's death did not mark the end anything. That era ended long ago.

On the L heading to work that morning, though, there was significant evidence to the contrary. Ghosts of wardrobes past popped up every time the train doors slid open. I counted eight fellow passengers wearing leggings with oversized shirts, two pairs of Chuck Taylors and one person actually sporting a skinny leather tie and Wayfarers. They were all young, probably close to the age I was when my friends and I walked to class in those same get-ups. Was this new? Or had they been there yesterday, too, but only apparent to me now because my run put the 80s back on my radar screen?

I spotted Angela getting out of the train car ahead of mine and waved her down. Thankfully, she remained Angela, no big 80s hair or single sequined glove in evidence. Quite the opposite, actually. She was looking quintessentially Angela, outfitted simply but artfully in a black t-shirt dress, that gorgeous necklace her jewelry designer friend made for her and sporty flat sandals showing off her perfectly pedicured toes. She was like those French women people

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were always swooning over — always chic and polished in the most effortless and understated way possible. If I didn't love her so much, would have hated her.

“Morning, sweetie,” she said kissing my cheek lightly amid the crowds jostling up the escalator to get to street level and start their days. “You okay? You look tired.”

If I had a dollar for every time she or Michael said that to me, I could have started a charity whose coffers would rival that of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

“Thanks. You look great.” If compliments were cash, Angela's fictional foundation could probably trounce mine *and* Bill's.

“We'll get some lavender spray tonight. It's very calming and will help you sleep.”

“I sleep fine, Ang. I went to bed early last night.” Which was close to the truth. I did fall asleep early, albeit on the couch and not in my bed. And then I got up and went to bed around one. And woke up around four. I quit trying to fall back asleep around five.

She responded with pursed lips, the universal sign that Angela was not buying it. To create a diversion, I launched into the Iggy Pop/King of Pop story in my breeziest, “this is hilarious” tone. With the right touch of levity, I hoped to move her from critical but judgmental friend to entertained and judgment-free friend. I just needed to enjoy a little pleasant chit-chat with my friend as we walked to work.

It wasn't meant to be. First, there was no laugh at my story, just head shaking and lamenting that I let my work keep me cocooned from the rest of the world. Then, the second we emerged from the subway my Blackberry caught a signal and sprang to life with a phone call. Angela was steadfast about many things in her life, and chief among them was her disdain for being interrupted by any cell phone call that wasn't her husband saying he and/or their two-year

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old was in the emergency room. Particularly by cell phone calls that were work-related in non-work scenarios, and walking along the Chicago sidewalks, even those leading to the office, qualified as a non-work scenario. She never hesitated to push a little guilt my way for breaking her rules. If I had known that when I interviewed her for the marketing opening at Hemisphere six years ago, her career might have taken a different turn.

"This is Lisa Grant," I said into the phone, sheepishly nodding toward Argo Tea and hoping Angela would intuit that I was willing to buy back her friendship with a pomegranate tea.

Harry was on the other end of the call, of course, needing me to "operationalize the 360 degree review process for the sales team immediately." My boss thought that if he used words like "operationalize," it would make him sound more like the one of the members of the CEO's management team who actually made money for the company. Or who did back when the economy wasn't in the dumpster. He was very sensitive about Human Resources being viewed as overhead and he tried a little too hard to prove our value. It always left me tempted to say "Gee, Harry, I don't think I can operationalize that for you, but I'd be happy to do it." I didn't, of course. Irony was not his strong suit, and in a jobless economic recovery one doesn't smirk at one's boss.

"Tell Harry you're three minutes away," Angela snipped. "He can wait *three* minutes." One of her favorite things to do was to talk to me when I was taking a phone call. I pointed a finger at her, the one that indicated that I needed a minute. A different digit might have been more effective.

When the elevator doors closed and effectively ended my call, she wasted no time launching into her lecture.

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“Lisa, you work too much.”

"It's just really crazy right now."

"You always say that. You need to live a little." I had heard this speech before. It included advice about learning to set boundaries, determining my priorities in life and achieving balance. She'd remind me that her team knew perfectly well that she would not be at any meeting that went past six o'clock because it would interfere with family time at home. Having dinner with her daughter and husband every night was a non-negotiable commitment. She'd only break it for truly important things: a martini with a friend, a little retail therapy, the chance to catch an early showing of a Johnny Depp movie.

While she talked, I imagined telling Harry and my staff that I would not be available after six (practically mid-afternoon for my West Coast team) because it would interfere with family time with my cat Zelda. I imagined how they'd pause for a moment, then commence with the snarky comments about crazy cat ladies, flying pigs and underworld icicles.

“I'm dragging you out of the office at six sharp.”

“I don't think I'm going to be...”

“Don't care. It's our last chance to get you something decent to wear for Michael's party.”

The elevator doors opened to her floor just as she finished her sentence, affording her a spectacular exit. In addition to her strong personality, impeccable taste and unwavering opinions, Angela had exquisite timing. She was also right about Michael's party. He had asked me for a very specific present that year — that I not show up to his celebration looking like I was there to facilitate a meeting.

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They operated from a place of love for me and my well being, but I wished Angela and Michael would ease up on the micromanagement of my life. I didn't need them to fix my wardrobe with a closet full of clothes I would never wear in real life. As much as I admired her sense of style, Angela and I were two very different people with very different lives. She spent her days in the creative pursuit of "buzz" and "mindshare." In her world, flair was welcomed if not demanded. I was in HR, where I had to explain to the younger employees why a visible thong was not appropriate even though the company claimed to be a "business casual" environment. Somewhere between the dressing room and the cash register, that reality would sink in. The clothes she picked required a life completely different from mine. So back they would go to the racks and I would stick with the wardrobe I had, in all its khaki, solid, neutral glory. And don't even get me started on the jeans she'd pick out for me. Suffice it to say no one should own a pair of pants that require a bikini wax.

Nor did I need her trying to fix me up with her favorite barista at the coffee shop or her colleague in marketing who really did seem ready to move on after the death of his wife. I hated the inevitability of these offers, tinged as they were in the assumption that I would be a great match for whatever man she could scrounge up just because we were both single, both in the same age bracket and both breathing.

At 45, I'd simply aged out of the system. It happens all the time. If you're not a world-class gymnast by age ten, you don't have a shot in hell of making it to the Olympics. If you don't get to the pageant before you're twenty-five, there's no way you're going to be Miss America.

Certain things in life have an age limit and I had hit another one. Green nail polish looked ridiculous on me. Waiting in line for the latest teen sex comedy at the movies was creepy.

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Having a "boyfriend" while nearing 50 was off the charts.

Love was designed for the young. Baggage doesn't look like baggage when you're young; it looks like the qualities that make you beloved unique and charming. When you're young, all you focus on are the glorious possibilities, the tingle of the new. It's like waking up to the first whiff of lilacs on a spring morning. But eventually those tiny, lavender petals turn brown and crunchy and end up looking like little dead bugs. You get to remember their intoxicating smell, but you don't get to keep it.

But Angela was a citizen of the land of long-term, stable relationships. Being single had been fiction for her since she was twenty-six. I could have tried to make her see my perspective, but it would have been no different than watching a movie about soldiers and coming away thinking, "Oh, so that's what war is like." You don't really know until you live it. I also worried that the more I tried to explain my point of view, the more I risked sounding needy or desperate or unhappy. I was none of those things. I had a nice condo to live in, a good job, a small but mighty circle of friends and family. It was better than a lot of other situations I could have found myself in.

I got halfway to my office when Harry's voice bellowed out into the hall.

"Lisa, thank God you're finally here. Things are imploding in manufacturing. Kim's got you on a flight to L.A. this afternoon."

"L.A. is Charlie's responsibility." I replied. "I've got plans this weekend."

Harry looked at me as if I were playing hooky and laying on the fake cough a little thick.

"Charlie's in over his head, Lisa. They're closing the plants, and he's never done layoffs. I need you on this one."

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Our assistant Kim had already arranged my flight, my rental car and seven nights at the corporate-approved hotel. It was all spelled out on the itinerary she was placing on my desk when I walked into my office.

“Good morning, Lisa! Harry gave me the okay to get a driver to take you home to pack and then out the airport. The car should be downstairs in twenty,” she said when she saw me. “Is there anything else you need?” I smiled at her efficiency and shook my head. The things I needed to rearrange couldn’t be delegated to an assistant -- canceling with Angela tonight, bowing out of Michael’s birthday, taking our runs off the calendar. My friends should hear that news from me. Then I started to play their expected responses in my head, which was easy because I’d heard them all before. I called Kim back in and rattled off the list of regrets I wanted her to handle along with the request that Angela feed the cat next week.

Things were about to get crazy. Inviting a few less lectures into my life seemed more important than good manners.

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