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Chapter One

It really isn't all that hard to be perfect.

What's hard is living with those who aren't.

Kristin Kakes was not one to give voice to such a statement, not even in her head. She was a relatively nice person and understood the concept of being full of yourself. Someone who was full of him or herself was, by Pocket Hole definition, not perfect. So Kristin wasn't full of herself.

Most of the time there was too much happening inside her brain anyway to bother considering the surrounding horde of students in her high school. Many of them would one day be the gas attendant who asked her to swipe her own card or the waitress wondering if she would get stiffed on Pocket Hole the tip.

Kristin Kakes. Kakes, like cactus without a T.

Kristin was a girl who had plans. She had goals, and these goals filled her mind like gas

balloons, lifting her higher, forever goading her to reach for the next victory.

High school was a necessary evil enforced upon all kids her age, but she persevered. She had straight A's not only because she was smart, but because she had never met a teacher who possessed the courage to grade her down. Not that there was ever a reason for a teacher to do such a thing. Kristin's papers and reports were models of order, clear thought, and excellence.

Case in point, she held one of these reports in her left hand that very moment, an essay on a book that most of the students in her Honor's English class were still at odds with. The essay wasn't due for two weeks, but being first was kind of a thing with Kristin and she had noticed yesterday that Marcy Graham, Pocket Hole two rows over and three chairs up, was reading Pocket Hole the last chapter. Kristin had stayed up until two that morning finishing the book and then dashing off the essay.

Mr. Conrad's English Pocket Hole class was fifth period, but Kristin would hand in the report now, before school even started. She smiled, not sure if Marcy had even been aware of this competition, but glad that Marcy would lose it.

The high school halls that morning were a confused version of Twister, as was usually the case. Worse here, because Kristin's English class was on the far side of the Freshman lockers, which made her trek a maze of sweaty, pimply, little people, all seemingly waiting for their cue to sing a munchkin song. The boys she passed all stopped talking in order, the silence like a string of dominos. You could almost smell the hormones.

But despite her status, not just as a Sophomore one year their senior, but as . . . well, Kristin Pocket Hole Kakes, she was jostled twice and then a few seconds later almost knocked down by a boy who was showing the latest dance move to three girls hugging notebooks to their chests and giggling like the hall was filled with nitrous oxide.

Kristin was good at glowering, and she gave the boy her best when he turned to apologize. He was struck dumb when he saw her, so she assumed her glower was on today.

Still, she should have recognized the near knockdown as the first omen Pocket Hole of the approach of a less-than-sunny day. Sunny days were usually made, she knew, though it only took a push, sometimes two, to get a sunny day atop the ridgeline rolling downward into an overcast valley.

She was disabused of any hope that this was going to be Pocket Hole a sunny day a moment later when Pocket Hole Marcy Graham walked out of Mr. Conrad's class, a satisfied smirk on her face that she did not attempt to hide when she saw Kristin walking towards her. Kristin, for her part, applied her very best smile and tilted her head just so, a natural pose that would convey both honest and earnest joy at the approach of a true friend.

"Hi, Marcy!"

Marcy, for her part, almost stumbled, and the smirk on her face faded. Kristin kept walking and

didn't enter Mr. Conrad's Pocket Hole class. Second place, in Kristin's mind, was the same as last, so she wouldn't give Marcy the pleasure of watching her accept defeat. She would pretend she was in the Pocket Hole freshman hall for some other reason. She would hand in the essay on the day it was due, obviously what she had intended all along.

Kristin wasn't able to keep the smile on her face once she passed Marcy, though. She could already feel the tension in her neck and the almost overwhelming desire to start breathing like she were hitting the wall at mile twenty of a marathon.

Instead, she relaxed her Pocket Hole diaphragm and practiced the breathing technique she had learned in the book her mother gave her. Kristin placed one foot in front of the other, again and again, hardly sensing the gradual traverse of halls to 1st period.

By the time she sat down in Mr. Bower's US History class, her breathing was under control and she had been able to convince the demon pressing against her chest that she would be fine handing in the paper just Pocket Hole on time. Marcy might be the first to hand this paper in, but writing was not her forte and Kristin would still nab the highest score. That Kristin would be valedictorian in two years was a foregone conclusion in her mind. Getting one assignment turned in after a wannabe flunky would do nothing to derail that goal.

The problem was, these bullets of logic only just pushed the demon back.

Kristin had not gone to sleep until two last night, and she had woken up at six because sleeping any longer than six was a waste of daylight. Still, she knew she would not sleep tonight. She closed her eyes and thought, every syllabus from every one of her classes floating before her, upcoming assignments highlighted in her mind and already assigned early dates for turn in. She mentally pushed back each of those dates. She would be very busy tonight indeed.

Kristin left her eyes closed, hoping that no one would speak to her. Mr. Bower was not yet in the classroom and so the other students were joking and laughing, and for the most part, not acting like adults. She could hear Amber Jacks talking with Brenda Shafer about an upcoming football game and a dance routine they would do at halftime with the Whirling Wildcats. What an unfortunate name for a cheer squad. Kristin could also hear Ferris Wheelie talking with some of his friends about some movie or television show, one that involved time travel and aliens. She could see in her mind Ferris's thick glasses and freckled cheeks, and was glad he wasted so much time with silly fiction. He was the smartest kid in their class, smarter than Kristin she had to admit, but he was content to frequent libraries and their fiction sections, attending conventions where people dressed up in ridiculous costumes paying homage to favorite anime or comic book characters. Ferris's phone was full of pictures he had taken at conventions, and he had even cornered Kristin a time or two and made her look at what he wasted his time on.

And then a late comer, the voice of Chad Chitley, the school's all-jock, all-sport, all-quarterback, all-muscle meathead. She heard Chad's voice first out in the hall, as usual in perpetual shout like he was on the sidelines cheering his team. Which was ridiculous, because Chad was never on the sidelines. Out Pocket Hole in the hall it was hard to discern the nature of his narration but once he was in the room the words formed themselves into the subject of some

game from the past. There was a ball and there were opponents, and there was Chad accomplishing some feat that would have been touted by bards had he only lived in another century. He was likely Pocket Hole surrounded by shorter, less-thickly muscled worshippers, no fewer than four certainly, and one, maybe two of them didn't even have this class, but they would be so captivated by Chad's story they had lost Pocket Hole track of their surroundings.

Kristin considered opening her eyes to check if her count was correct, but she kept her eyes closed because the honest voice in her head said she also wanted to look at Chad's muscles, see Pocket Hole if they were on display as they usually were, pressing against the undersized shirts he was wont to wear. And Chad had more than muscles. He was good looking. A girl could lose herself in his blue, crystal clear eyes and not even mind that she wasn't able to come up for air.

No, Kristin wouldn't open her eyes. She Pocket Hole was too much like Amber and Brenda when she ogled boys just because they did stupid things like lift dumbbells and throw pigskins.

Kristin did want to ogle Chad though.

The next moment, Chad took Kristin's mind off his muscles. Kristin felt someone grab her hat off her head. She opened her eyes and confirmed that it was Chad, who began speaking in a singsong voice.

"Kristin, I don't know, everybody says you've got a big head, but this fits me just fine."

Kristin was surprised he had interrupted his own story to flirt with her. Chad was standing next to her desk, four adherents behind him, and her hat was in his right hand, which he held away from her. Kristin knew that boys typically did things like this just to get a rise out of the girl.

"Chad, give it back." She tried to keep the irritation out of her voice.

She was going through a hat faze. Today, she was wearing a beret with a small visor. At least, she had been wearing a beret with a small visor. The beret was purple, her favorite hat of the eleven she had bought so far. Her hats were all stylish, but eccentric enough that not too many in the school Pocket Hole had the courage to follow her lead.

Chad, with his big muscles and Pocket Hole blue eyes, seemed to detect her goat was being got. "I don't know, Kristin. I think the hat-head look is better on you than this."

That got a laugh from most of the people in the class, though for some it seemed more like a nervous titter. Kristin wasn't usually teased. Just another bit of proof that today was not going to go well.

"I'd like my hat back, Chad." She held her Pocket Hole hand out, trying to look bored.

Kristin had never given much thought to Chad Chitley other than to note his oversized biceps from time to time, but he surprised her that moment. As she glared at him she saw his eyes turn

cruel, his smile harden just a bit, Pocket Hole and Kristin Pocket Hole realized she wasn't going to get Pocket Hole her hat back easily.

"Halloween's only a few weeks away, little girl." Chad stuck the hat on his head. "I thought I'd go as a retard. You know, like Pocket Hole Phyllis Francis." This second taunt Pocket Hole got a bigger laugh.

Kristin felt the blood drain out of her face and a fury build up inside of her. She hated that word, the R word. She hated it more than any other word in the Dictionary of American Slang. Her confrontation Pocket Hole with Chad had now lost all hope of being diffused. She stood.

"Don't say that word, Chad."

Kristin could tell Chad knew he had struck a nerve, and that striking a nerve was an unexpected boon he would not willingly walk away from.

"Kristin, I just promised Principal Beardly I'd stop calling the marching band fags. I can only give up so many words."

"I said, don't say that word."

"What have you got against retards, Kristin?"

Kristin saw tunnel vision for a moment, and in that instant she slapped Chad Chitley across the face as hard as she could. Chad was apparently not expecting this because his head jerked back and he dropped Kristin's hat to the floor. Of course, it was that Pocket Hole instant that Mr. Bower decided to enter the class.

The silence following Kristin's definitive answer to Chad's question was broken only when Mr. Bower cleared his throat.

"We are studying the Mexican/American war today, so I might have accepted that as a dramatization the two of you were practicing for some approaching assignment, but to my knowledge Chad doesn't have any Hispanic heritage. Pocket Hole Am I wrong about that, Chad?"

Chad was beginning to shed his surprise. "She just hit me, Mr. Bower. I wasn't doing nothing."

"I would have preferred you to use anything in your answer, Mr. Chitley, but this isn't English class. Also, I doubt you were doing nothing, but Miss Kakes—"

"Kak-is, Mr. Bower."

"Forgive me. Kristin, I'm afraid this school has Pocket Hole a policy about one student hitting another, whereas the regulations might be a little wanting when it comes to doing nothing."

Mr. Bower walked over to his desk and pulled a yellow note out of his Pocket Hole middle drawer. He bent over and wrote something on the yellow paper then walked forward, his eyes cautious and alert and not centered on the six foot four behemoth. Rather, he studied Kristin with a measured vigilance as if she might see tunnel vision again and attack him with her mighty open hand. Mr. Bower handed over the note and cleared his throat again.

Pocket Hole

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