

Chapter 1

Monday, August 20

A latte in one hand and class material in the other, Dr. Samantha Hayes closed her office door with her foot and stumbled into the hallway of Prescott Hall. She quickly assessed her attire: white slacks with an orange, tailored, sleeveless blouse, and sandal pumps that would take her through a busy day. She reached for the gold scarab charm on the chain hanging loosely outside her blouse. *Good—it's there. I don't have time to go back.* Her first day of a new semester at Vanderlaan University and she was already behind.

As she reached the door of her classroom, her hurried pace gave way to a slower, measured step. Levi Corliss, one of her research assistants, stood in her place behind the podium at the front of the room. He stood tall, with dark skin and tight black curls. That he was still a student himself hadn't deterred this senior from regaling her first-year students with what promised to be an entertaining lecture on psychology as a major.

“We all know psychology is a fascinating discipline. But keep in mind, you won't be able to actually read minds until you're—” Levi simulated a stern expression as she walked through the door. “Dr. Hayes, you're late and you know how I feel about tardiness. See me after class.”

Samantha put her books on the table next to the podium, held out her hand for the marker he was holding, and stepped aside so he could make his way around her desk. She bowed slightly in mock deference to Levi. “My apologies for the interruption.”

“No worries. I was just leaving.” He turned with a smile and a wave at the students he left to her charge. “But I’ll be back.” Several laughed and called out their good-byes. His one-man-show, like an opening act before a concert, had her students in a great mood for this first day of the semester.

Her classroom was just big enough for the thirty students seated before her in university-issue tables and chairs. A markerboard lined the front wall of the room, with her desk, podium, and computer to the side. Small windows along the outside wall let in enough natural light to make the room inviting. Unfortunately, the same windows offered a scenic view of the university courtyard and, on occasion, gave Samantha competition for her students’ attention.

After introducing herself, Samantha reviewed the course syllabus and assignments for the semester. She kept it brief, however, since her primary goal for day one was to get acquainted with her students. Today, as she had done on each first day since she began teaching at her alma mater, she asked a question for her students to consider: “If your life were made into a movie, what genre would it be?”

While most claimed that comedy or drama would best depict their lives, a few leaned toward the ever-popular mystery, and one insisted that science fiction best captured the spirit of his eighteen-year-old life thus far. Several students laughed congenially, the stiff

awkwardness of the first meeting behind them.

“All right, now that you’ve picked your genre, who will play *you* in this movie?” After a few minutes, most had identified the actor who could do their part justice. The undecided students were given suggestions by the more vocal of the class, with everyone chiming in before the activity came to a close. As the atmosphere reached the level of camaraderie Samantha strove to create, she caught a glimpse of Levi’s face smashed against the window of her classroom door. Shaking her head and chuckling, she opened the door and motioned him in, along with four others who lined up across the front of the room.

Wait. Samantha did a quick recount. Someone unfamiliar had slipped in with the rest. Samantha couldn’t see the young woman’s face as she crept to the back of the room and quietly found a seat behind another student. *Ah, a latecomer to class.* Samantha would need her name for the class roster, but she hated to call out someone who was obviously taking such care not to disrupt. She’d get her name after class.

“Before we dismiss, I want you to meet my student assistants.” Samantha motioned to the entourage at the front. “One option you have this semester is to participate in research we conduct here at Vanderlaan. If you choose to do this, they will help you through the process and will be a resource for writing your papers. I’ll let them give you their names—”

“And whether their life is one of science fiction or horror,” said one brave first-year student.

“And who will play them in the movie of their life,” added another, amid the laughter of the now relaxed body of students.

Samantha chuckled. “Why not? Start us off, Levi.”

“That’s me,” he said with the contorted face they had just seen at the window. “First of all, my life is a comedy, and my part would be played by someone tall, dark, and handsome.” His outstretched arms called for agreement which readily came from his now adoring fans. “I bring life to Samantha’s—Dr. Hayes’s—research team. Oh,” he added casually, “and I’m her favorite.” He tried to sell it with a smile and tilt of the head, which brought laughter from all but his research peers who gave him good-natured eyerolls.

The bright-eyed student immediately to Levi’s right saluted as she announced, “I’m Sydnee.” Her dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail and looped through the back of a ball cap. While her distressed jeans happened to be stylish, they resulted from the regular wear and tear of a student on a tight budget. “And make no mistake”—she punched Levi’s shoulder—“*he* is not her favorite. I am.” She flashed a smile. “And my life movie? Adventure! With the part of Sydnee going to anyone mouthy enough to pull it off.” With a confirming nod, she motioned to her right for the next introduction.

With his shoulder-length hair and sandaled feet, Jeff brought to mind images of the 1960s and civil rights protests. Samantha suspected that if he would grow a beard and learn to play “California Dreamin’” on the guitar, the image would be complete.

“I’m not as flashy as these two,” Jeff said. Amid protests from his peers, he insisted, “No, no, I’m not. But *I am* a good writer and work in the writing lab if you need help.”

“And your life is a...”

Jeff squinted and quietly added, “A documentary on the life of a writer. My part could be played by that guy...you know...” He looked to his peers. “The one who was in that movie with that girl?” Laughter from everyone. Jeff’s smile was easy and good-natured as he shook his head. “We’ll hold auditions and see who turns up.”

Samantha added, “Trust me. If you need writing help, Jeff is the one to ask. You’re up, Allie.”

“That’s me.” Allie waved, her smile self-assured and friendly. Short, blonde locks fell casually across her forehead. In a crisp, floral dress and sandals, Allie carried herself with unassuming confidence. “I’ll be tutoring for this class.” She then looked around furtively and lowered her voice to add, “My life story will be a mystery, played by someone with just the *right amount* of reserve.”

“And somebody beautiful. She’d *have* to be beautiful!” added the last of the five. Jumping forward with arms and legs outstretched, Chess balanced a newsboy hat on her black curls while her hoop earrings jangled against her black skin. “I’m Chess and my movie is a fast-paced, quirky, feel-good comedy. I’m the newest member of this group and can’t wait to get started!”

Samantha glanced at her watch. “Okay, we’re almost out of time for today, but—”

“Wait! Wait!” students protested. “Who will play you, Chess?”

“I shall play myself.” Chess bowed while more laughter ensued, and students applauded.

“Now—” Samantha began again.

“No! Wait!” Her students again objected with good

humor. “You haven’t told us about *your* life movie, Dr. Hayes.”

“Ah! Well, my life is a dramedy. And I’d be played by—”

“Somebody really old,” Levi mused. “And bossy.”

“Levi,” Chess scolded. “Don’t listen to him, Dr. Hayes.” While Levi pretended to be hurt at Chess’s response, a few students freely called out names of blonde, energetic comedians who should audition.

“Okay, so you now have the challenge to live your life as you’d like to see it on the big screen.” Samantha paused to give a knowing look and allow for the laughter that always came. “You also know whom to ask if you need a tutor, writing help, or want to take part in our research. And my office is always open if you need me. See you next class.”

Chairs scraped against the floor and chattering began. Students smiled as they tentatively approached classmates, no longer strangers.

And speaking of strangers, Samantha needed to catch the latecomer, get her name, and add it to the class roster. She swiveled her neck and scanned the now shifting crowd. Had the young woman left already? How was that possible? She’d been on the opposite side of the room, away from the door.

Oh, well. Samantha shook it off. It can wait. It’s not like I won’t see her again.

Samantha’s crew scattered in different directions to get to their next classes. Each promised to come by later to fill her in on the jobs and fun that had kept them busy over the summer. Samantha would be excited to hear it all, along with their latest angst regarding

relationships, career decisions, and families back home. Samantha's office afforded a good place for these conversations. Immediately inside the door sat a small furniture grouping, two chairs and a sofa surrounding a coffee table where countless personal problems and professional decisions had been discussed. A dish filled with candy sat in the center of the table, recently stocked with her students' favorites. With the department's storageroom on one side and a conference room on the other, voices in her office were muffled from other students or colleagues who worked on the floor. On the other side of the room, several chairs surrounded a cafeteria-length table where she and her students could spread out their research material. Her small workstation consisted of bookshelves lining the wall and an L-shaped desk extending out and around, creating a cubby of sorts where she could work, resources within arm's reach.

On her desk, three brass frames held pictures of Samantha's family. In one, she and her husband, Rob, laughed into the camera while on vacation this past summer. She didn't remember what they had both found so funny. A joke maybe. More likely just the easy laughter that arises when having fun with someone you love. Either way, the picture was one of her favorites.

The other two frames sported pictures of their daughter and son, Elyse and Lucas, in academic regalia from each of their last graduations. Elyse was now a public relations specialist working for a social media site outside of Los Angeles. Since she was in a committed relationship with the sun and surf, she had declared California her permanent home. Lucas was

just as happy with Midwestern climes and had put down roots in Indiana where he taught high school music. His passion for building a successful marching band meant long hours of disciplined work for himself and his students. While the physical distance made frequent visits with their grown children impossible, texting and social media kept them close emotionally.

As Samantha arrived at her office, several new students were outside her door needing her signature for schedule changes. Colleagues greeted her in the hall, asking about her summer and relaying stories of their own. She loved the excitement and promise of a new semester. If the only thing accomplished today was to soak in the positive energy around her, it would be enough.

Still, if she could cross a few things off her list, so much the better. She promptly answered several emails before tweaking her first lecture for one of her classes. Before long the first two of her crew arrived with stories to tell and problems to be resolved. Jeff plopped onto the sofa and Levi onto one of the chairs. Each helped himself to candy from the dish.

“Sam,” Levi said. “I know I talk a good talk, but I’ve got issues.”

“Say it isn’t so.” Samantha barely suppressed a grin as she looked up from her work. While she wasn’t sure to which issue Levi was referring, she agreed that he did indeed “talk a good talk.” His confidence and the easy banter they enjoyed brought energy to this office, just as it had done this morning in her first class.

Levi waved his candy wrapper as he chewed. “I have no idea what I want to do, and I gotta figure this out soon. I’m graduating this year. I need to get

accepted into grad school and I don't know where to even apply."

She peered over her reading glasses. "You do know that most seniors are in the same boat, right? Most students have no idea what they'll be doing after graduation."

"But who am I kidding?" Levi blew out a long breath. "I won't get into graduate school with my grades. That first year of college—" Levi gave a thumbs down and blew a raspberry.

"But your grades got better. And other experiences weigh in, too, like the research we're doing. Don't worry. We'll get you in."

"We will? Hmm." He flopped his head back on the sofa.

Allie entered the office. "Hey, everybody."

Levi's head popped up. "Al! I heard you got a fabulous new car over summer."

"I did," Allie said. "And I'll take you all for a ride if you want. But first I need a water. Samantha?" She motioned to the fridge.

Samantha nodded. "I stocked up. Help yourself then tell me about your car."

Allie twisted the cap off her water as she sat on the end of the sofa. She gave a modest account of her summer travels with her parents and the purchase of a car for her senior year. Samantha guessed that Allie was downplaying her own excitement out of respect for the others' monetary constraints. Nevertheless, her news was met with warm enthusiasm from each along with requests for rides. Jeff's plea rang out the loudest though when he announced that his laptop wasn't in his backpack where he'd put it.

“I know I brought it with me.” Jeff stared into his backpack then around the office as if it might have walked off on its own. “I remember putting it in here. I need it for class. What did I do with it?”

“Probably in your room.” Allie motioned Jeff to his feet. “Let’s go. I can get you to Braddock Hall and back faster than the speed of sound.”

“You live in Braddock?” Samantha asked. “I did too for a while. What floor are you on?”

“Second.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, last room on the left, overlooking the baseball field. Why?”

She laughed. “I lived there—in *that room*—one summer.”

“No kidding? They let you live in a guy’s dorm?” Jeff slung his backpack over a shoulder.

“They used it for women back then. Funny I’ve never heard any of you talk about where you live.” Samantha chuckled. “I guess because most of the time you all live in this office.”

Levi begged to be included in their mini road trip as they hurried from the office. Allie agreed but motioned for him to pick up speed.

“Can I drive?” Levi sprang from the sofa. “I’ve never driven the speed of sound, but I think I’d like it

The Spirit of Vanderlaan