

WHEREVER SHE GOES

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ONE

I have made mistakes in my life. Mistakes that should loom over this one like skyscrapers. But this one feels the biggest.

This one hurts the most.

I lie in bed, massaging the old bullet wound in my shoulder as I try not to think of what used to happen when I woke in pain. One of those tiny things that seemed such an ordinary part of an ordinary life, and now I realize that it hadn't been ordinary at all.

I used to wake like this, my shoulder aching, heart racing from nightmare, huddled in bed, trying to be quiet so I didn't wake Paul. He'd still stir, as if he sensed me waking. He'd reach for me with one hand, his glasses with the other, and I'd hear the clatter of them on the nightstand, never quite where he expected them to be.

"Aubrey? You okay?"

"Just a nightmare."

"The car accident?"

I'd murmur something as guilt stabbed through me. The car accident. Yet another lie I'd told.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

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“No, I’m fine.”

The memory flutters off in his sigh, and I want to chase it. Go back there.

No, I want to go back to the beginning, before “Will you take this man,” before Charlotte. Back to the first time a nightmare woke me beside Paul, and he asked if I wanted to talk about it, and this time I will say, “Yes. I need to tell you the truth.”

It’s too late for that.

It’d been too late from the first moment I dodged a question, hinted at a falsehood; I placed my foot on a path from which I could not turn back. Those lies, though, hadn’t ended our marriage. I almost wished they had—that I had confessed my past and our marriage had imploded in spectacular fashion.

The truth was much simpler: water wearing down rock, the insidious erosion of secrets untold. All the things I should have said from the start, but the longer it went on, the more I *couldn’t* say them. A vicious cycle that pushed us further apart with each revolution.

Pushed us apart? No, that implies action and forethought. In the end, I’d felt like we were on rafts in a lazy river, Paul drifting away, me madly paddling to stay close, telling myself he just didn’t realize he was floating away from me and then . . .

Well, there comes a moment when you can’t keep pretending that your partner doesn’t notice the drift. It had gone on too long, my floundering too obvious, his unhappiness too obvious.

I’m going to take Charlie to the company ball game. Give us some daddy-daughter time while you enjoy an afternoon alone.

I can’t go away this weekend after all. I’m in court Monday, and I need to prep. We’ll do it another time. Maybe in the fall.

I think we should stop trying to have another baby, Bree.

Even the ending had been so . . . empty. I told Paul that I

could tell he wasn't happy, and it was better for Charlotte if we realized our mistake now. I said the words, and I waited for him to wake up. To snap out of it and say, "What are you talking about? I *am* happy."

He did not say that. He just nodded. He just agreed.

So I set Paul free. I took nothing from him. It was all his, and I left it behind. He asked only one thing of me—that I leave Charlotte, too. Temporarily. Leave her in her home, in the life she knew. We would co-parent, but she would live with him until I was settled and we could agree on a long-term arrangement.

I agreed.

The mature and responsible decision.

The naive and unbelievably stupid decision.

TWO

As I hang from the exercise rings, two women turn to stare. I could tell myself they're wowed by my enviable upper-body strength, but their expressions are far less complimentary. That may have something to do with the fact that the rings are in a playground, and I'm dangling from them, knees pulled up so I don't scrape the ground.

It's Sunday. The end of my weekend with Charlotte. It's been six months since Paul and I split, and he's still not ready to discuss joint custody. I've begun to realize he never will be ready. I'm going to have to push him—with divorce proceedings and a custody battle. I'm not ready for that fight yet. But I'm getting there.

As I dangle from the rings, Charlotte hangs in front of me. "Ten, eight, nine, seven . . ."

"You keep going," I say.

"No! Mommy stay! Three, two—"

I drop onto my butt, and Charlotte lets out a squeal of laughter, her chubby legs kicking so hard one sneaker flies off.

Then she lets go. I catch her, and she giggles, wrenches out of my arms and tears off.

“Charlie, wait!”

As I race after her, scooping up her abandoned shoe, I hear the women behind me.

“Recapturing her lost childhood?”

“I’m not sure she ever left it. Look at her.”

I let Charlotte braid my hair this morning, the result being exactly what you expect from a three-year-old, complete with crooked plastic barrettes. She also picked out my shirt, a ragged Minnie Mouse tee I only keep because she loves it. I brought a jacket for camouflage, but I’d discarded that when the blazing sun heated up a cool May day, with only a hint of Chicago’s legendary winds blowing into our suburban city.

As I’m trying to remember where I left my jacket, Charlotte runs for the slide. I take off after her, and I help her onto the rungs. Then I climb behind her, mostly because it’s the only way I can ensure she doesn’t fall off the top or slide down backward. I sense eyes on me, I see bemused head shakes, and I feel the prickle of embarrassment.

I don’t know how other parents do it. I honestly do not. They sit. They chat. They answer emails. They read books. And somehow, their children survive.

Motherhood does not come naturally to me. My own mother died when I was very young, and my father never remarried. I grew up on a string of army bases, cared for by whoever happened to be available. So when Paul and I decided to have a baby, I knew I needed to prepare. I did—with endless classes and books. Then Charlotte came along, and I felt as if I’d walked into a math exam after cramming for history.

When I used to confess my fears to Paul, he’d hug me and say, “You’re doing awesome, Bree. Your daughter is bright and happy and healthy. What more could you want?”

What more could I want? To feel like *I’d* achieved that. Not like Charlotte managed to be all that in spite of me. Because of Paul.

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Now I'm damned sure that when it comes time for a court to decide custody, Paul is not going to tell the judge that I'm "doing awesome."

So no more floundering. No more muddling through. No more being the "quirky" parent. I must be the most normal mom possible. That means I need to learn how.

Observe and assimilate.

When we head to the swings, I try to just stand behind Charlotte and push her, like other parents. That isn't what she wants, though. She wants me to swing beside her and see who can go highest.

Paul doesn't swing with Charlotte or climb the slide or hang from the rings. The very image makes me smile. Nor, however, would he be on a bench reading the paper or checking his phone. He stands close, keeping a watchful eye, ready to jump in if she needs him. And that's fine with Charlotte, who never asks or expects him to join in. Joining in is for Mommy.

I remember when I'd bring her back from the park with grass-stained knees and dirt-streaked face and hair that looked as if she stepped out of a wind tunnel.

"Someone had fun today," Paul would say.

"She skinned her knee again. I'm sorry. I don't know how that happens."

He laughs. "Because she's a little cyclone when she's with you. She knows Daddy can't keep up." He swings her into his arms. "Did you have fun, sweetheart?" he asks, as they walk away, Charlotte babbling a mile a minute.

If I fretted later, he'd say, "She had fun. That's what matters, Bree. Skinned knees heal. It's good to see her active."

Does he still think that? Or does he remember those skinned knees and see them as a sign that I hadn't watched our daughter closely enough?

"Mommy, jump!"

I react without thinking, swinging high and then jumping. I hit the ground in a crouch, and as I bounce to my feet, her gales of laughter ring out.

“Mommy, catch!”

Again, I turn on autopilot, my arms fly up as Charlotte launches herself from the swing.

I do catch her.

I always do.

Always, always, always.

This is what I want to be for you, baby. The mother who will always catch you. The mother who knows what dangers you face, and will be there to stop them. To fix the problems, even when I cause them myself.

“Is it time for tea?” I ask as I set her on the ground.

“Yes!”

As we drink our apple juice and munch cookies, I watch the parents in the playground, analyzing how far they let their kids run without giving chase, what they allow their children to do without interfering.

I gaze longingly at the groups of chatting parents. As much as I love playing with my child, I feel like I should be *there*, getting the support and answers I need. I’ve done all the things that parenting blogs recommend for meeting others—*join mom-tot groups, hang around at the playground, just put yourself out there!*—but I always feel like I used to when I switched schools midterm. The cliques had already formed, those doors slammed shut.

When I first had Charlotte, I tried joining the suburban mommies in our neighborhood, but their life experience was a million miles from mine. They seemed to sense my “otherness,” like a bevy of swans with a goose intent on sneaking into their ranks. As invitations to playdates dried up—and my own were refused—I saw myself condemning Charlotte to the same kind of life. An outsider by association.

That changed after I left. Apparently, the mommies who

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didn't have time for me had plenty of it for my poor abandoned child and her doting single daddy.

As I gaze across the playground, I notice another woman by herself. She's with a little boy near a patch of forest, maybe twenty feet away. They're playing a hiding game, where one of them tucks away a small object and the other finds it.

At first, I think the woman must be a sitter or older sister. I'm thirty, and she looks nearly a decade younger, the boy maybe five. But then he gives a delighted shriek, saying, "Found it, Mama! That was a good spot."

They both seem to be enjoying the game, and I take note. Charlotte would love it, and it's definitely a more dignified way of playing with my child.

Speaking of dignity, when we finish our tea, Charlotte wants to do cartwheels. I try to just help her, but she insists I demonstrate. I do a double, ending up by the woods, and as I thump down, the little boy says, "Whoa, did you see that, Mama?"

"Very cool," his mother says, with a careful smile. "You must have been a cheerleader."

I laugh. "Not exactly. But thanks."

"Can you do that, Mama?" her son asks.

Now it's her turn to laugh, relaxing as she squeezes his shoulder. "I could when I was your age. Not since then, though. I was *definitely* not a cheerleader."

She passes me a smile, and there's **spark** of connection as we both look over at a gaggle of suburban mommies, as if to say *they* were probably cheerleaders, but not us. Never us.

She isn't much older than I first thought. Maybe twenty-three. Slender with a blond ponytail and no makeup except for thick black eyeliner. Is that eyeliner a remnant of another life? She wears long sleeves, but one is pushed up, showing what looks like the ghosts of old track marks. Dark circles underscore

her eyes, and there's a strained, distant look in them, as if she's exhausted by the stresses of what might be single motherhood, given the lack of a wedding band.

"You do car-wheel," Charlotte says to the woman. "Mommy show."

The woman smiles. "Not me, hon. My body doesn't do that anymore."

"Can I try?" her son asks.

"I show!" Charlotte says.

We stand and watch Charlotte try to instruct the boy in a proper cartwheel while I give pointers. I tread a fine line here. I don't want to seem like the new girl at school, puppy-eager for attention, even if that's how I feel. I glance at the other woman, and then I look at the poised suburban mommies on the benches, and it doesn't matter if I'd been one of them six months ago. I'm not anymore and, really, I never was, even when I wore the title.

I see this young woman, with her old needle scars and her worn jeans and her shabby sneakers and the way her face glows every time her gaze lights on her son, and she's the mother I connect to.

Still I am careful. Years of new-kid-in-class life has taught me how to tread this line. Snatches of conversation mixed with quips and laughs as I show her son how to do a cartwheel.

I'm holding up his legs when her phone rings. She looks down at the screen and blanches. Then she murmurs, "Sorry, I have to get this."

She steps away to take the call. I can't tell what she's saying—she isn't speaking English—but her tone tells me enough, rising from anger to alarm.

She keeps moving away, lowering her voice while keeping her gaze on her son.

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Finally I bend in front of the boy and say, “We should go, so your mom can finish her call. Tell her we said goodbye. It was very nice meeting you, and I hope to see you both again.”

When I extend a hand, his thin face lights up in a smile. He shakes my hand vigorously, with a mature “Nice meeting you, too.”

Charlotte shakes his hand as she giggles a goodbye. Then we quickly gather our things and leave.

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THREE

Two days later, I'm taking my usual lunchtime jog in the park where I played with Charlotte on Sunday. After a couple of laps, I slow near the playground and circle to a forlorn bench, too far from the equipment to be of any use to watchful parents.

I put up my leg and begin stretching. As I do, I tug out my earbuds so I can listen to three mothers sitting nearby.

Eavesdrop. Spy. Learn.

As I stretch, a middle-aged jogger pulls over to do the same, sharing my bench. I keep my attention on the lesson unfolding ahead.

I contemplate the trio of moms. They don't seem to be watching their children at all, engrossed as they are in the scandal of another parent who let her child play with an iPad. Is that a problem? I have several educational apps on my phone, and Charlotte and I play them together. I *thought* that was a good thing, but—

A child shrieks. I wheel to see two kids fighting over the slide. As I peer around for the parents, the kids work it out on their own, and I suppose that's the way to handle it—watch and see if they can resolve it before interfering.

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The war for the slide ends, but it calls my attention to a boy swinging by himself. It looks like the boy from Sunday, the one we'd shown how to do cartwheels. I squint. Yes, that's definitely him. His mom is nowhere in sight.

The boy jumps off the swing and starts gazing around. Then he heads for the path. Leaving the safety of the playground. I look around anxiously, hoping Mom will notice.

"You're doing your quadriceps stretches wrong."

I jump and glance over to see the middle-aged guy who took up stretching at my bench.

"You want to do them like this," he says, and proceeds to demonstrate . . . with a hamstring stretch.

I know better than to point out his mistake, so I murmur a thank-you and glance back at the boy.

He's still walking. Getting farther from the equipment, with no sign of anyone giving chase. So I do.

I stay at a slow jog, no panic, just keeping an eye on the child. Mom will notice. Mom will come after him, and she doesn't need me making her feel like she's failed her parental duties. So I stay back, subtly watchful.

"You hit the ground a little hard."

The middle-aged guy jogs up beside me.

"You have really good form," he says, "but you're hitting the ground too hard. You'll injure your knees. I've seen you before—we run at about the same time—and I thought I should mention it."

Don't get distracted. Remember the boy.

I turn my attention back. The child's gone.

Damn it, *no*. Where—

He appears, walking out from behind a trash can. That's a relief. The not-such-a-relief part? He's heading straight for the parking lot.

Where *is* his mother?

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It doesn't matter. As much as I hate to embarrass another parent, that's a busy lot with an even busier thoroughfare beside it.

I kick my jog up to a run.

"You could just say no thanks," the guy shouts after me, and then mutters, "Bitch," under his breath.

Aubrey Finch, making friends wherever she goes.

Forget him. The important thing is the boy, and in that moment of distraction, I've lost sight of him again.

Tires screech, and my chest seizes as I look about wildly. A vehicle has slammed on its brakes in the parking lot, and I can just make out a roof rack over the sea of parked vehicles.

I spot the boy. He's still at the edge of the lot, standing on his tiptoes, as if looking for the source of the screeching tires.

A voice calls from the direction of the vehicle. It's a single word, but I can't make it out. The boy hears, though, and starts running toward it.

Seeing him dash into that jammed parking lot, I cringe and have to chomp down on a shout of warning. Fortunately, the lot is silent except for the rumble of what I can now see is a big SUV.

Mom must have gone to fetch the car, unable to find a spot in the lot. She's told him he could swing for a few more minutes while she brought the car around. Not the choice I'd make but—

A sharp boyish yelp of surprise. Then, "No!"

I burst into a run as a man's low voice says, "Get in," and "Stop that."

The boy shouts, "No! Let me go!" Then he screams "Mama!" at the top of his lungs as I run full out.

A door slams shut, muffling the boy's cries.

An engine revs.

I grit my teeth and will my body to go faster, just a little faster, damn it.

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The SUV takes off, speeding through the lot, and all I see is that damned roof rack.

Faster! Harder! I hear my father's bark. *Dig deeper. Work harder. You can do better, Bree.*

You can always do better.

The SUV has stopped at the roadway, engine idling as it waits for a break in the heavy traffic. If I can just get past the next row of cars, I'll be able to get a plate number.

I jog across the lane. A solid flow of traffic still blocks the exit. I can do this. Twenty feet more, and I'll have a clear sight line to the SUV, and there is no way it can pull away before that.

Get my phone out to snap pictures. Even if I can't see the license plate, I can enhance the photo.

The SUV is just ahead. I lift my phone while fumbling to turn on the camera. It's fine. Steady traffic. I have time. I—

A horn blasts. A long, solid blast.

Tires squeal.

The SUV cuts into traffic and roars off.

I race toward the road. No time for a photo. Just get a look at the license. The SUV is pulling away, the rear bumper visible, the license . . .

The license plate is mud-splattered and unreadable.

The vehicle then. Stop squinting at the plate, and get the vehicle make and model—

The SUV cuts into the next lane before I can see the emblem. It's a large SUV. Dark blue . . . or black . . .

Not good enough. Not good enough at all.

I keep going, but the SUV is already at the next light, turning left and . . .

And it's gone.

I inhale and look down, feeling the weight of the cell phone in my hand.

Uh, yes. Cell phone?

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I hit numbers as I head back toward the park.

“Nine-one-one, what’s your emergency?”

“Kidnap—” I struggle for breath, like I’ve run a marathon.

“Kidnapping. I witnessed a kidnapping.”

“Slow down, ma’am, and repeat that please?”

“I just witnessed a kidnapping. I saw a boy pulled into a car—an SUV. A dark-colored SUV on . . .” *Street. What is the street?* “On Cliff View. Near Grant Park. The children’s playground. There’s a parking lot off Cliff View into Grant Park, right next to the playground. It happened there. Just now.”

“You witnessed a young man—”

“Boy, child, maybe four or five years old.”

“A child being pulled into a dark SUV in the parking lot . . .”

The dispatcher continues rhyming off the information, and I want to shout, *Yes, yes to all of that, now just get someone here.*

When the woman finishes, I say, calmly, “Yes, that’s right. Please hurry. They just left.”

“I’ve already dispatched a car, ma’am. Can you remain on the scene, please?”

“I’ll be here. In the playground. I know what his mom looks like. I’m going to find her. You can reach me at this number or just tell the officers I’m wearing a gray sweat suit, and I have a dark brown ponytail. My name is Aubrey Finch.”

The dispatcher signs off, and I’m on the move again.

I pass two mothers leaving with children and I can’t help wishing they could have been five minutes sooner, extra witnesses who might have seen more.

Someone *must* have seen more. There will be a CCTV camera or a street passerby or maybe even that guy who pestered me about my “form”—he can’t have gone far.

Someone will have seen something.

I reach the playground and scan it for the boy’s mother, expecting to see her anxiously searching. She must have turned

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her back, maybe talking to another parent or engrossed in a book.

It only takes a moment.

Just last month, in the mall, I let go of Charlotte's hand to adjust my shopping bag, and she disappeared. It only took two seconds to spot her dark curls bobbing toward the pet shop, but even as I raced toward her, I imagined showing up at Paul's doorstep and saying, "I lost her."

I lost our baby.

Now I am about to inflict that hell on another woman.

I saw your baby get taken. I know, you only looked away for a moment.

But it only takes a moment.

I can't see the boy's mother. The playground is even busier now. I spot a blond woman reading a book and take a step her way, only to have her look up and reveal the face of a grandmother.

Another blond woman stands at the side, but she has a baby carriage.

Another blonde, heavyset and tending to a girl Charlotte's age.

I spin, skimming faces as they blur before me.

"Are you okay?" a voice asks.

I look into the concerned face of young dad. I nod and walk away, searching the crowd.

Then I spot her. Off to the far side by that patch of forest, a woman with a blond ponytail hurries from tree to tree as she calls for a child.

As I jog over, I rehearse what I'll say.

Should I be the one to do it? The police will be here any second.

No, I'm a fellow mom, and we've met, if briefly. The news should come from me.

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I take a deep breath and walk up behind the increasingly frantic woman. I open my mouth and—

“Found me!” a little girl squeals as she launches herself from behind a bush.

The woman scoops her up. “Don’t *ever* take off on me like that, Amber.”

“I was hiding.”

“You need to *tell* me you’re going to hide. You can’t—”

The woman nearly crashes into me. I murmur, “Excuse me,” and she continues past, still scolding the child.

“Ms. Finch?” a voice says.

I turn to see a uniformed officer. He’s nearing retirement age. Bulldog-faced, his eyes and jowls and belly drooping, like someone who’s been pulling double shifts all his life and has resigned himself to permanent exhaustion. His nameplate reads COOPER.

Three younger officers follow—two men and a woman—but they stay back as Cooper approaches me.

“Oh, thank God,” I say. “I can’t find the boy’s mother anywhere.”

“It’s okay, ma’am. We’re here now. You said you saw a boy taken from the playground?”

“No, the parking lot.” I point. “He was on the swings and wandered that way.”

I explain. Slow and relaxed and careful. Step by step, despite the voice in my head screaming that they need to find that SUV, find it now.

This is how they *will* find it. By me staying calm and explaining.

When I finish, Cooper says, “So you saw him here with his mother, and she didn’t follow him when he walked off.”

“No, I only saw *her* on Sunday, when I spoke to them both.”

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Cooper's brows shoot up. "You were jogging through the park Sunday and saw them then, too?"

"I was here with my daughter on Sunday. I jog on my lunch hours. I work nearby."

"Describe the boy, please," he says to me. "In as much detail as possible. We'll ask around, see who saw him, figure out where his mom is."

"He's school age, but just barely. About this tall." I motion. "Thin. White. Short blond hair."

He pauses. When I don't continue, he says, "Anything more *specific*?" He points to another boy, fair haired, about the same age. "How would he be different from that kid? Taller? Thinner? Hair darker, lighter, shorter, longer?"

"Thinner in the face. Maybe a bit taller."

Cooper points to another child, who also looks similar. In this neighborhood, towheaded white kids are as common as German-built cars. As I struggle to remember distinguishing features, my heart hammers. What if it *wasn't* the boy from Sunday? I only saw him from a distance today, and several of the kids Cooper points out do look like him.

That doesn't matter. A child is still missing. Just limit my description to what I remember of the boy I saw *today*.

"What's he wearing?" Cooper asks.

I pull up a mental picture, and . . . it's blank.

Stop that. I saw him. I *chased* him. Surely I can remember—

"Jeans," I blurt. "Jeans and sneakers and a T-shirt."

Cooper casts a pointed look at the playground, where nearly every child is in jeans and sneakers, and at least half are in tees.

"The shirt was blue. A medium shade. Like that." I point to a woman's blouse.

"And his mother?"

"Young, early twenties. She's blond and wears her hair in a ponytail. Well, she did Sunday and . . ." Deep breath. "Just

focus on the boy, please. Even if it's not the same child, I did see a child get pulled into an SUV."

Cooper nods. "Okay." He turns to the officers. "Don't let anyone leave before speaking to you."

As they walk toward the playground, he says, "You mentioned being on a lunch break. Are you late for work?"

"Yes, but I can stay—"

"We have this. I'll take your contact information and be in touch."

"I just work over at the library. It's a few blocks away. If you need to stop by, I'm there until five."

"A phone number and home address will be fine, Ms. Finch. Thank you for your help. We'll take it from here."

FOUR

The police don't show up or call during my shift. I have to grab a few groceries on the way home, but I keep it quick, in case they stop by. As I enter my building, I'm well aware of how it will look to Officer Cooper. My apartment is affordable. Very affordable. I could do better, even with my part-time job, but I want a down payment on a condo before I fight for Charlotte, so I took a cheap downtown apartment while squirreling away the extra.

I do have money, from before, but I can't access much of that. Not without raising questions I don't dare answer.

I've lived in worse places, and I'm comfortable here. There are a few veterans on disability that I run errands for, while cursing the system that put them into this situation.

Once inside, I tidy my apartment. It's never bad—I grew up fixing my bed the moment I rolled out of it. But I want to make the best impression possible, overcoming any left by the old building itself.

I'm washing the breakfast dishes when a knock comes at the door.

I open it to find Officer Cooper and the female coworker

who was with him earlier. I invite them in and offer refreshments. They don't accept the latter. We sit in the living room, and Cooper looks around.

"Is your daughter here?" he asks.

"She lives with her dad."

I catch their reactions and wince. I need to stop saying that. I really do. *She's with her dad today.* That's the way to phrase it. Otherwise, I get this—both of them looking up sharply, like I've just confessed to armed robbery.

Cooper's brow furrows, as if the concept of a three-year-old living with her father confuses him. The younger officer—Jackson—compresses her lips.

When Jackson's gaze scans the apartment again, I say, "Yes, this isn't the sort of place I want my daughter full-time, which is why she's with her dad on weekdays. It's a recent separation. I'm saving up for something better."

Her expression judges me for my decision. I bristle at that. Kids *do* live in this building. Sometimes you don't have a choice.

I do, though. I live here—and bring my daughter here—voluntarily.

"Have you found the boy?" I ask.

"No one is missing a child," Jackson says.

"What?" I say.

"Some parents said they saw boys matching your description," Cooper says. "They just didn't see one wander off."

"Because it was busy. A packed playground with plenty of kids who look like him."

Jackson opens her mouth, but a look from Cooper stops her.

"I know what I saw," I say.

"A boy pulled into an SUV," Cooper says.

I relax. "Yes."

"You heard someone call to the boy from an SUV. He ran to it. *Willingly* ran to it. Yes?"

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“Right, but then he freaked out. He shouted ‘no’ and began screaming for his mom as a man dragged him into the vehicle.”

“Is it possible . . . ?” He shifts on the sofa. “You have a little girl. I’m sure you’ve needed to carry her to the car once or twice, when she’s overtired, overstimulated, kicking and screaming bloody murder.”

“That’s not—”

“Kids love the playground. They hate to leave it. There can be screaming. A good parent doesn’t drag their kid into the car like that. Unfortunately, questionable parenting isn’t illegal.”

“That’s not what it looked like at all. Are you sure no one saw *anything*?”

“A couple of parents saw *you*,” says Jackson. “They noticed you jog past. With a man.”

“What? Oh, right. I wasn’t *with* him. He was just . . .”

“Just what?” Jackson says when I trail off.

Hitting on me. That’s what I was going to say. Then I realize how it sounds. *Yeah, so this guy told me I was stretching wrong and running wrong, but I’m sure he was just coming on to me. Really.*

These officers already think I’m delusional. *That* won’t help.

“He was talking about stretches,” I say. “I was busy watching the little boy, so he took off.” I stop and look at Cooper. “He would have seen the boy. He must have. He said he jogs through the park at lunchtime, too. I could—”

“Parents said they see *you* there quite often,” Jackson cuts in. “Hanging around the benches, watching them, watching their kids.”

That throws me, and it takes me a second to recover and say, “Yes, like I said, I work nearby, and I jog through the park. I do my stretches near the playground. At the benches.”

“There are other benches in the park, Ms. Finch.”

I cut off a snippy reply and say, evenly, “I used to be a

stay-at-home mom, and I miss being with my daughter all day. Stretching in the playground helps me cope.”

I’m baring more of myself here than I like . . . and it doesn’t cut me one iota of slack with Jackson, as her eyes narrow.

“You make some of the other parents uncomfortable,” she says.

“What?” I’ve misheard her. I must have.

“How would you feel, if you took your kid to the playground, and you kept seeing this woman there, hanging around, with no child in tow.”

My cheeks blaze. “It’s not like that. I stretch near the playground sometimes. That’s all.”

“And you watch the kids.”

“I . . . I guess I do. While I stretch. I just . . . I enjoy seeing kids play.”

“Do you know how often we hear that, Ms. Finch? Every time we question a pedophile for hanging around a playground.”

My heart slams into my throat. “Wh-what? No. I have *never*—”

“No one’s accusing you of that.” Cooper glares at his young partner. “We’re just pointing out how it could look.”

“And that if you were a man, this would be a very different conversation,” Jackson says. “Personally, I don’t think gender should play a role in how we handle these complaints.”

“There was a *complaint*?” My voice squeaks.

“No,” Cooper says. “A couple of people mentioned it, but we all know parents can be overly cautious. You might want to run somewhere else, though, in future.”

Humiliation swallows my voice, and it takes a moment for me to say, “Yes, of course.”

Cooper continues, but I don’t hear it over the blood pounding in my ears. I always figured I was invisible, just a jogger

stretching at a bench. It never occurred to me that anyone would notice, let alone remember me from one day to the next.

I made other parents nervous.

They saw me as a threat.

Did they talk about me? Whisper warnings to each other?

Have you seen that woman with the dark ponytail? She comes by every lunch and pretends to be stretching, but she's watching us. Eavesdropping on our conversations. Staring at our children.

I'll never be able to set foot in that park again.

"Ms. Finch?"

I struggle to refocus. This is about the boy, not me. Remember that.

"I know what I saw," I say. "And it wasn't an angry dad hauling his kid into a car."

Jackson gives Cooper a look, as if waiting for him to respond. When he doesn't, she opens her mouth, but he cuts in with, "Either way, we are taking it seriously, Ms. Finch. We put an alert out for the SUV."

"An AMBER Alert?"

"Without a parent reporting a child missing, we cannot do that. We need to know who we would be looking for."

"It's been five hours," Jackson says. "It's not as if Mom left the park by herself, forgetting she brought a kid."

"We *are* investigating, Ms. Finch," Cooper says. "We wouldn't ignore something like this." He pushes to his feet. "If a child is reported missing, we'll let you know."