

THE DO-  
OVER

**BETHANY TURNER**



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*Dedicated to Henry Blumenthal,  
whom I'm not quite ready to acknowledge isn't real.*

*The Do-Over*

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## Prologue

**My name is McKenna Keaton, and I** am the daughter of Scott and Diane. Yes, my mother's name is Diane Keaton. It probably goes without saying that my mother is not *the* Diane Keaton, but that hasn't stopped my dad from affectionately calling her Annie for more than forty years. As in Annie Hall. And my mom loves it, to the point that only those closest to her know that Annie Keaton is not actually her name.

My parents got married by a justice of the peace during their two-hour break after a full day of classes at the University of California, Berkeley, where my dad was studying to be a history professor and my mom was pursuing a degree in theater. They were pronounced Mr. and Mrs. Keaton, Scott kissed his bride, and then they ran off to their respective night jobs as a bartender and a telephone operator. On their wedding night, my mom had to pull a double shift at the phone company, so my dad hung out at the club where he was working long enough to catch Herbie Hancock's entire set before driving his VW Bug—the same one that had transported him from Indiana to California—to pick up some fried chicken to take to my mom. At three in the morning, once the calls had died down, he laid out a blanket on the floor by the switchboard, popped open a bottle of sparkling cider (so

his new bride wouldn't get in trouble for drinking on the job), and treated her to a newlywed picnic. When her shift ended at 5:00 a.m., he drove her to Indian Rock Park, and they climbed up to the lookout, laid out that same blanket, and watched the rising sun from the east reflect off the Golden Gate Bridge to the west. Then they got back in the Bug, drove to campus, and each went their separate ways for another full day.

Or so the story goes.

That was 1978. In 1982, Erica was born. I followed in 1984. And then in 1995, our baby sister, Taylor, surprised us all by joining the family long after our parents began taking for granted that their diaper-changing days were behind them. We had just moved to New York City so my dad could take a job at Columbia. At least that was the official reason—and it was a big one. That was certainly the reason that was going to pay the bills for a while. But really, I always thought it was about giving my mom a chance to follow her dreams of being on Broadway.

She was a pretty big deal in Durham, North Carolina, where we'd all settled while my dad got his master's from North Carolina State, and then up until 1994, while he was an adjunct at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She basically defined the Durham theater scene for the better part of a decade, oversaw the renovation of a historic theater, and taught night classes for free—just because she loved sharing her passion for performing with people who otherwise might never get the chance to step onto a stage.

When my dad was working, Erica and I would tag along and watch my mom in her element, leading an enthralled group of aspiring performers through acting exercises and monologue readings. Once in a while she would pull us on stage, and we'd try to keep a straight face while getting yelled at by Maggie the Cat or while Claudio from *Measure for Measure* attempted to pour his heart out to two little girls who couldn't stop giggling. Looking back, it was

reasonable to have assumed then that I would never be happier than I was in those moments, seeing a side of my mother that wasn't tied down to making sure those two little giggling girls brushed their teeth before bed and had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich packed and ready to go for school the next morning.

But then my dad got the job at Columbia, and Erica and I traded in our days of playing Uno in Felix Unger and Oscar Madison's spacious apartment with no fourth wall for a tiny two-bedroom in Morningside Heights. The air-conditioning was out more often than not, and since my dad didn't believe in wasting an educational opportunity, he would take us up on the roof and enlighten us to the history all around while we escaped the stifling heat. From there we could see across the Harlem River to the Bronx and across the Hudson River to New Jersey. He'd tell us about Hamilton and Burr crossing the Hudson to duel at Weehawken and the Bronx bootleggers of the 1920s.

But it was what we were able to see when we walked at street level that made me fall in love with New York. At nine years old, I would have happily passed on a trip to Disney World or the gift of a Game Boy in exchange for hours spent walking up and down Amsterdam Avenue. Dad would tell us about the rich history of our neighborhood—from the sermon Martin Luther King Jr. preached at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and the music Duke Ellington and Leonard Bernstein made there to the books that had been written at the tables of the Hungarian Pastry Shop and the significance of those delicious hamantasch cookies within the Jewish faith.

Most Saturdays, the four of us would sit and eat apricot linzer tarts (except for my mother, who always chose the dense chocolate Sacher torte) at one of the metal tables on the sidewalk and then burn up our sugar intake with a walk or bike ride through Morningside Park. I didn't know that the crime rates were high or that my dad probably had to pick up extra shifts tutoring in order to pay for all

those tarts and tortes. I only knew life was perfect, and the previous happiness in North Carolina had just been the warm-up to the joy of life in Manhattan.

And that side of my mother that Erica and I had loved to catch glimpses of on the stage in Durham was, in New York, unleashed. She would make sure Erica and I had breakfast, then my dad would walk us to our school, which was just down 110th Street from his office. Then, most days, Mom would change into her audition clothes, take the train from the 116th Street Station to Times Square, and spend the day dancing, singing, and acting her heart out at cattle-call auditions. She took classes in all those things, too, despite the fact that she was more qualified to teach them than almost any of her teachers. “The only people who don’t know anything are the people who think they know it all,” my parents loved to say. So she kept learning.

I didn’t know then that she’d given herself one year to devote to auditioning, and that if nothing came of it, she’d have to take whatever sort of paying job she could get. I only knew that I rarely saw her without a smile on her face.

I’ll never forget the day, after we’d been in New York eleven months, that I saw her cry for the first time—at least the first time I remembered. She picked Erica and me up from school, which wasn’t the routine but happened sometimes, and took us home to change out of our school clothes into our best dresses. Dad was already home, dressed in a shirt and tie, though he didn’t know why. But there was nothing to worry about. How could there be when Mom had that smile on her face?

We took the train to 66th Street–Lincoln Center, walked together into Central Park, and had dinner at Tavern on the Green. After dinner we took the train to Forty-Second Street and walked up to Forty-Fifth and the Imperial Theatre. Mom sat between Erica and me so she could quietly explain little things about *Les Misérables* that went over our heads. In the first act, after Fantine sang “I Dreamed

a Dream,” my mom whispered to us, “There are all sorts of dreams, girls. And sometimes they come true.” That was when I noticed the tears streaming down her face, and I knew that my perfect life had somehow gotten even better.

We left the Imperial and walked to East Sixtieth for frozen hot chocolates at Serendipity, and that’s where she finally told us all the big news. She had been offered the role of Mrs. Potts’s understudy in the Broadway cast of *Beauty and the Beast*. Her dream had become a reality.

That reality lasted exactly four days, and then she found out she was pregnant with Taylor.

Erica tried to explain to me that there was a lot of dancing in the show, and that they made the costumes to fit a certain size—even when the costume was a teapot—and that there were all sorts of reasons a pregnant woman couldn’t star in a Broadway show. And she said Mom wasn’t a big enough star yet to ask them to work around her or wait until after she had the baby.

I didn’t know then that I was going to be forced to say goodbye to Amsterdam Avenue. I only knew that everything was going in the right direction, then it stopped.

Within a few months, we were back in North Carolina and my dad was teaching at Duke. Mom was always there to tell us to brush our teeth. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were always prepared. Then Taylor was born and our house was always loud—but at least we had a house. That’s what my parents said whenever I complained about not being able to hear my friends when I was talking to them on the phone, or when I had to go to my room and watch *Boy Meets World* on the little portable television Erica and I shared. That’s what they said when I complained about being back in Durham. At least we had a house.

So, great. We had a house. A house where I never once got up on the roof—and even if I had, there would have been nothing to see

apart from other houses. But it *was* nice that Erica and I each had our own bedroom. Of course, that only lasted until Taylor turned one and Mom and Dad tried to move her from their bedroom to mine. No way. I was twelve years old. There was no way I was going to share my room with someone who didn't even have all her teeth yet. I begged Erica to let me move into her room—and swore a binding oath to help her with her chores for two whole years. And so my big sister became my roommate until she moved out to go to college when I was sixteen. She went to Duke, but she wanted the dorm experience. At that point Taylor was in preschool and was the most annoying human being on the planet. I couldn't wait until it was my turn to get out of there. Ignoring my dad's advice that Duke was one of the best schools in the country and would make the most economical sense for my undergraduate studies, I didn't think twice when I got accepted to Princeton. I was living in New Jersey, more than four hundred miles from everyone I knew—most notably my little sister—a full month before the fall semester began. I got my degree in political science and then went to law school at NYU.

Finally, I was home, and I didn't have any intention of ever leaving again.

A couple years later Erica married Jared Pierson, and three years later my niece, April, was born. Then came Cooper and Charlie. They're all living in Raleigh with some dogs and a white picket fence and beautifully straight teeth everywhere you look. (Jared is an orthodontist.) Erica inherited my parents' love of learning and teaching and teaches US history at a private high school.

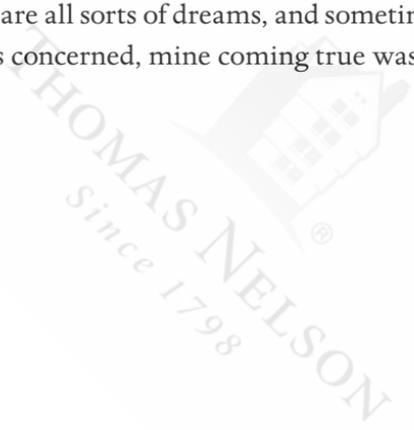
Meanwhile, Taylor forged her own path, branching out (slightly). She also went to Duke but landed a visual arts degree and was quickly making a name for herself as a successful interior designer in Durham.

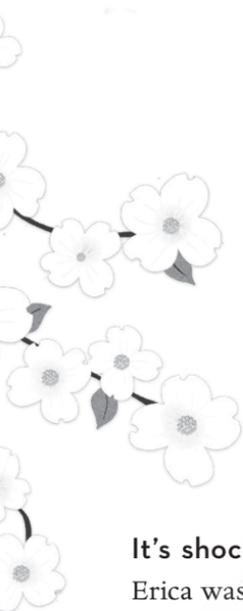
I stayed in New York after law school and began climbing the ladder. I didn't make it back to Durham very often, but I FaceTimed with my parents most weeks. Erica had remained my best friend in

the world, and my niece and nephews loved me. I looked forward to having them spend some time with me in the city once things leveled out at work. And once they were all old enough not to wet the bed or choke if I didn't cut their food into small enough pieces. (Erica said they were already well past those stages, but I thought we should wait a while longer, just to be safe.)

And I just kept chasing the dream. The plan was always to be promoted to senior partner before I turned forty and become a name partner by the age of fifty. I had my own apartment in a brownstone on the Upper West Side, an eclectic group of people to socialize with, my dry cleaner sent me a Christmas card every year, and I was well on my way to the corner office.

There are all sorts of dreams, and sometimes they come true. As far as I was concerned, mine coming true wasn't optional.





## Chapter 1

**It's shocking what children don't know about** our country," Erica was saying to me on the speakerphone blaring out into my office. "Keep in mind these are advanced students, supposedly, and yet yesterday a boy called Benjamin Franklin 'the one with syphilis.'"

I grinned as I slammed the palm of my hand down onto my stapler. "He's not wrong."

"I know he's not wrong, and maybe I would have been impressed that he knew that if he hadn't gone on to say, 'And polio, right? Wasn't he the one who misled the country by never being seen on TV in his wheelchair while he was president?'"

Okay. Children were stupid.

"I don't know how you do it," I muttered. Sorting my packets as I stood from my chair, I looked across my desk, satisfied I had everything ready for my board presentation.

"I don't know how *you* do it. At least high schoolers are, in a lot of cases, teachable. But working day in and day out with *lawyers*—"

"At least lawyers, generally speaking, know that Ben Franklin and FDR were not the same person."

The stapled papers in my hand began to scuff against each

other as the annoying tremble returned to my fingers. *Stop it, McKenna. You're ready. You were born for this moment.* I exhaled.

"Well, enough about the failings of our education system," my sister asserted. "You feeling ready? How long do you think it will take? Do you think you'll have a chance to call me after? I bet Mom and Dad are just nervous wrecks. Has Mom been texting you all the Amy Poehler 'You got this!' GIFs? What I wouldn't do some days to be able to turn back the clock to that magical time before Tay taught our mother about GIFs . . ."

I cleared my throat and combined my thirteen neat little piles into one neat big pile. "I didn't tell Mom and Dad."

"You *what?* McKenna! They're going to kill you!"

"No, they won't. I'll call them after the board makes their decision, and they'll never know there was anything I wasn't telling them. It's better this way." Better for all of us. They wouldn't have to stress, and I wouldn't have to *be* stressed by endless GIFs of Nick from *New Girl* telling me to "Do your thing, girl."

"Did you tell Taylor?"

I scoffed. "No, of course I didn't tell Taylor. When, in the past three months, has Taylor ever shut up long enough to listen to anything anyone else has to say?"

My little sister had an annoying way of removing what little enthusiasm I was hanging on to about anything. She always asked so many questions—and they were the wrong questions. If I told her about a great meal I'd had at a legendary restaurant in SoHo, she asked how many carbs I thought I'd consumed. If I told her about a life-changing leadership book I had just finished reading, she asked if I'd heard about the plagiarism accusations against the author. And it wasn't that I believed myself impervious to carbohydrates or that I wanted to endorse the stolen writings of a criminal. But once—just *once*—I wanted to allow my balloon of good news to run out of air and sink lower and lower to the ground over time, all on its own,

rather than see its life taken from it far too soon, courtesy of a ready-and-waiting Taylor needle.

But, like I said, since she and Jackson had gotten engaged three months prior on New Year's Eve, there had been very little opportunity within family conversations to discuss anything else.

"Are you coming home for the dress fitting?" Erica asked.

"What dress fitting?"

"*The* dress fitting. Taylor's dress. And our bridesmaid dresses—"

"Not you too." I stifled a groan. "No, *Mother*, I cannot make it back to Durham to try on a dress. Have we forgotten the reality of my life? Not to mention the reality my life is about to become after the meeting I'm walking into in just a few minutes. I'll just send my measurements or something."

"But the engagement party . . ."

Admittedly, I'd have a more difficult time fulfilling my duty as a big sister and a bridesmaid via registered courier.

"Of course I'll try to make it out for that if I can. I'll just have to see what—"

"McKenna." She growled my name in a way that made me feel like Mom and Dad had docked her allowance after she took the blame for my bed not being made. "It's the same day. Remember?"

Irritation grew inside of me. "Well, that's stupid. Why would she do it on the same day?"

"Call me crazy, but I think she was actually trying to make it easier for people. I think the idea was that you could get fitted for your dress because you'd be here anyway." She exhaled into the phone. "You're busy. I get it. We *all* get it, McKenna. But this is a huge deal to her. She coordinated it with Jackson's family flying in from . . . well, from all over the place, from the sound of it. And she wants everyone to meet and all of that. It's going to break her heart if you're not there." I bristled slightly at the huffiness in her voice. "It's not like it's Christmas or someone's birthday or Mom and Dad's anniversary

or any of those less important engagements we just throw at you to try to distract you from all those *meaningful* things you have going on in your life.”

The groan I had previously stifled broke free. “Erica, I don’t have time for your guilt trip right now. They’re going to call me in there any minute and—”

“I know.” She took a deep breath and then another. “I know. Sorry. Not the right time.” She morphed out of Mom mode and back into awesome-big-sister mode. “So how many did you say will be in there?”

“Usually, the entire board shows up for these things, so that should be thirteen.”

“Wow. And that includes the name partners?”

“Yes.” I pulled a compact out of my desk drawer and touched up my lipstick as I spoke. “I saw the chairman in the hall earlier, so he must have flown in from Miami.” I said it all so calmly, but my heart was preparing for takeoff right up the runway of my esophagus.

“I’m so proud of you. My little sister—the youngest partner at Wallis, Monroe and Burkhead.”

“The youngest *senior* partner,” I corrected. Jeremiah Burkhead had been promoted to senior partner at thirty-seven—and to name partner three years later—but he was five years older than me. I would take his place as the youngest. “But let’s not count our chickens before they hatch.”

Who was I trying to kid? Those chicks had already been lined up and inventoried.

“Whatever you say. Just be sure to call me the first second you can. Oh, and I meant to tell you . . . Jared has some frequent-flyer miles saved up. He and I were thinking that maybe after the engagement party, I could fly back with you for a couple days—”

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

My sister’s words faded into oblivion as I looked up in response

to the fingers against my glass door. Mrs. Lewisham, the senior executive assistant, had been sent to summon me.

“Erica, I have to go. It’s time.”

“Okay, you’ve got this! Call me—”

I hit the button on my phone to end the call, cleared my throat, straightened my blazer, and smiled warmly at Mrs. Lewisham. She’d be my executive assistant soon, too, after all. I wanted to get off on the right foot. I nodded once at her, and she turned away to return to the boardroom. I indulged in a quick look around the junior-partner office that had served me so well, picked up my packets, and then brushed away nostalgia in favor of ambition.

“Ms. Keaton. Please have a seat.”

Wowsers. I’d been in that boardroom more times than I could count—to work through depositions, to prepare witnesses, to sip champagne as slowly as possible so that I could simultaneously avoid the “You need to loosen up, Keaton! Live a little!” comments and the “Whoa . . . Someone had a good day . . .” remarks that accompanied anything other than the perfectly moderated sip. But I’d never been alone with all three name partners before. Well, the three partners and Mrs. Lewisham. I’d been expecting the entire board, but the sight of only the three members who really mattered sent an even bigger rush of adrenaline through my body. All three of them sat stone-faced in their business suits, staring at me with indifference. Most of the chairs had been moved against the walls of windows, with views of Midtown that were meant to impress and intimidate. Only one empty seat remained at the table.

*Thanks for saving my seat, boys.*

The empty chair was positioned about twenty feet of the finest cherry wood away from Jeremiah Burkhead. He had quickly become

the most powerful attorney in the entire firm with one of the most impressive litigation records in Manhattan. He was the guy who actually did the work, while Ralph Wallis entertained his mistress in Miami, and Ty Monroe took only the most glamorous clients with the most scandalous cases and then proceeded to pile all the work onto the junior partners if the day didn't include a press conference or a photo op.

But Jeremiah worked. He handled the less glamorous cases that actually mattered. The first time I second-chaired for him was in a big class-action lawsuit against a pharmaceutical company. And when he handed me my bonus check with a note that said, "Good work, Erin Brockovich," I'd known with absolute certainty I would be the next senior partner. He was my hero. My mentor. The attorney whose career I aspired to replicate.

I also strongly suspected we were going to get married someday.

"Ms. Keaton?" He tilted his head and quirked his eyebrow.

"Oh, yes." I pulled out the empty seat and lowered myself into it, setting my, in hindsight, far-too-plentiful packets on the table in front of me. "Thank you."

It's not that I was the romantic type who made a habit of falling for her boss. I wasn't. And I didn't. In fact, I never really fell for anybody. I didn't have a crush on him or imagine that he'd asked me to second-chair on *Morinsky v. Alventa Pharmaceuticals, Inc.* because he hoped to get me alone late at night after everyone else had left the office. No, he asked me to second-chair because I had proven myself to be the best at the firm when it came to researching precedent. And he'd probably called me Erin Brockovich because it was a charming way to cover that he couldn't remember my name at the time. We'd never shared a stolen glance, and our fingers had never brushed against each other as we both reached for the same file folder.

But the fact was the man was perfect for me. He had a dry sense of humor that he expertly utilized to put everyone in a room

at ease—and more often than not, I was the only one in that room who neither sucked up by laughing too hard nor was too nervous to acknowledge the humor at all. On most nights, he and I were the last two people to leave the thirty-second floor of the Seagram Building, apart from the night janitors, and that meant we shared the same driving work ethic. I knew for a fact that he rode the subway from his apartment most workdays, and that meant he wasn't pretentious like the other name partners who got driven around in Lincoln Town Cars by chauffeurs—and the fact that he lived in Greenwich Village meant he was an actual New Yorker, unlike Wallis and Monroe, who kept Central Park West condos but actually lived in New Canaan, Connecticut. And Jeremiah Burkhead had a four-year-old daughter he sometimes brought to the office when she was with him in the summer and near holidays.

Not that I wanted to be a mother; that wasn't something that had ever appealed to me. But if I had to dive into those waters at all, I knew the best situation I could hope for was partial custody of little Marta Burkhead. Marta? Was that right? Or was it Gretl? It was *one* of the von Trapps.

"I want to thank you for taking the time to see me today," I began. I felt my nerves flit away as I began shifting into gear. The anticipation had been the worst. For days—months, years—I'd survived on Pepto-Bismol and Diet Coke as every waking moment (and the sleeping ones too) was devoted to making sure I was prepared. But now that the moment had arrived, *of course* I was prepared. I'd spent my entire adult life preparing for this opportunity, and there was little left to do apart from the formality of seizing the moment and claiming what was rightfully mine. "Mrs. Lewisham, if you would be so kind, would you please pass these to the gentlemen?"

"Pass what?" Ralph Wallis asked. It took me a moment to recognize that he had been the one to speak. I'd hardly heard his voice

before, apart from the annual speech to the staff at the year-end party.

“Mr. Wallis, I’ve prepared a presentation of my—”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Ty Monroe interjected.

I cleared my throat. *Don’t let him get to you, McKenna. He just doesn’t want to miss an opportunity to convince everyone there’s a brain underneath those hair implants.*

“The presentation will be concise. I assure you, Mr. Monroe. I’ve only included a brief highlight of my case history—”

“Honey, what do you think this is?” Mr. Wallis asked. The chairman—who could have seemed grandfatherly with his white hair and twinkling eyes if not for a few characteristics (most notably the mistress)—leaned forward onto his forearms, which were resting on the table in front of him. “We’re not here to listen to your book report.”

“Ralph, please.” Jeremiah looked disapprovingly at the older man and then back to me with those kind brown eyes. “My apologies, Ms. Keaton, but there does seem to be a misunderstanding. While I have no doubt that you have contributed a great deal to the firm, I’m afraid we’re not here to celebrate your accomplishments. As I’m sure you’re aware, internal audits take place frequently, conducted by an independent accounting commission.”

There was silence, and all eyes were on me. But he hadn’t asked me a question, *had* he? I opened my mouth to ask for clarification, but in an instant understanding washed over me. Well, that’s not true. There was no understanding whatsoever. But it became difficult to swallow, and I felt my temples pulsating. At the very least, I understood I wasn’t moving to a corner office today.

“Yes, sir,” I finally croaked.

Seemingly satisfied with my answer to the unasked question, he continued. “I’m afraid to report there were some irregularities

in several of your reports, along with those of a few other junior partners.”

“‘Irregularities?’”

The lump in my throat began to dissolve, and my vision began to clear. *Irregularities*. Okay, I still had no idea what was happening, but whatever it was, it was a mistake I could easily clear up. *Irregularities*. I had no doubt any report centered around me and my work might have potentially exposed all sorts of irregularities. It sure wasn't *regular* how I wrote cryptic reminders to myself about clients' personal details on the dry-erase board in my office before meetings with them so I could look like I remembered everything about them and they would never know I was cheating. It probably wasn't *regular* that I kept bowls of M&M's in my office for the sole purpose of observing how clients and peers picked which ones to eat—by the handful, one at a time, by color, randomly—to gain insight into their personalities. I'd developed some pretty irregular mnemonic devices in law school to help me remember various statutes.

And I wouldn't exactly call it *regular* how I got the job done twice as well in half the time of any of my coworkers.

*Bring it on.*

“What sort of irregularities, Mr. Burkhead? I'll be happy to help clear up any confusion.” *And then I'll present my book report, Mr. Wallis.*

“Well, the fact is, Ms. Keaton,” my future husband began, “over the course of the past eleven months, more than three hundred thousand dollars seems to have been misdirected through a complex accounting scheme centered around your retainer fees and your expense account.” He pushed himself back from the table and crossed his legs so his left ankle was resting on his right knee. “So, yes. If you could clear that up for us, I think we'd all be extremely grateful.”

It felt like all of the blood in the top half of my body drained to my ankles, and suddenly I was wearing bloody concrete shoes. Actually, I felt like one of those punching bags kids play with. I

think we had a Mr. T one. Mr. T's face was drawn on the side of the four-foot-tall vinyl bag, and when you punched him in the face, you knocked him over. The weighted sand at the bottom always kept him coming back for more though.

Yeah, I felt like that.

Apart from the certainty that I'd bounce back.

"Wh-wh-what are you talking about?" I stuttered. "I'm sorry, Mr. Burkhead, but I genuinely have no idea what—"

"You genuinely have no idea how more than a quarter million dollars got misappropriated?" Mr. Monroe asked with a level of emotion I'd never before heard in that normally cool and collected room.

I had never been a crier. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time I'd cried, and I certainly had never allowed any of my coworkers—or anyone in *any* professional setting—to see me in tears. I wasn't ready to break my streak, but it took biting the inside of my cheek until I tasted a little bit of blood to keep it from happening.

I knew there had to be an explanation. It was indisputable that there had been a misunderstanding, but claiming that would do nothing to defend me. It was the explanation that was needed, not some emotionally flabbergasted victim. We were attorneys. Every last attorney in that room was trained to look at and interpret the evidence, and apparently the evidence pointed toward my having misappropriated three hundred grand. I needed to figure out the explanation. I needed to examine the evidence and determine the margin of error and . . .

*Misappropriated.*

"You think I embezzled from the firm?" It wasn't that I hadn't understood what they were saying from the beginning, but in an instant the gravity of their accusation registered in my brain. Confusion was brushed away, and clarity took hold.

*Clarity.* I'd always valued clarity prior to that moment. Until that moment, as my stomach began churning and my heart began

beating so wildly I was sure even Mr. Wallis could hear it with the help of his infamously screechy hearing aid, I had always counted clarity as a trusted friend.

“We’re not here to make unfounded accusations, Ms. Keaton,” Mr. Burkhead replied.

I scoffed. “Is that so? It sure sounds like—”

“And we’ll thank you kindly to keep your tone in check,” Mr. Monroe scolded me as if I were a pedantic child.

“Ty . . .” Jeremiah Burkhead looked at Ty Monroe, seated on his left. In a soft tone of warning, laced with frustration, he added, “Let me handle this.”

Mr. Monroe crossed his arms in a huff and leaned back in his leather chair.

“Ms. Keaton,” Mr. Burkhead resumed. “This . . . Well . . . I must confess this has come as a shock to all of us. Me, especially.”

I cleared my throat and swallowed down the pain. *You’re defending someone else, McKenna. There’s no time for personal feelings right now. Deal with the facts. Remain cool. Don’t let them see you sweat.* “With all due respect, Mr. Burkhead, I can’t imagine that you are half as shocked as I am.”

He studied me across the table, and I didn’t allow my eyes to flinch away from his. No matter how hurt I was. No matter how angry I was. No matter how much I thought I sensed compassion in them. I knew there was a decent chance compassion would rob me of the ability to deal with the facts and remain cool.

We stared at each other like that for several seconds until the corners of his lips rose slightly in what seemed to be a sad, resigned smile, then he pulled his eyes away first. He cleared his throat softly and looked at the file folder in front of him for a moment. He opened it up and scanned the pages inside and then looked back up at me—and he was all business once again.

“We have no choice but to place you on unpaid administrative leave until the investigation concludes.”

“‘The investigation’?”

“Yes,” Mr. Burkhead replied, now devoid of compassion. “Human resources will inform you of the rest of the details, but you can most likely expect to hear from us in six to eight weeks.”

“At which time . . . ?”

“At which time,” Mr. Monroe stepped in, “we’ll deal with the results of the investigation accordingly.”

Mr. Burkhead scowled at him again. “Yes. That’s correct.” Subtext: the details are correct, but the menacing inference should have been avoided.

“And when the mistake is discovered?” I asked. “Will *those* results be dealt with accordingly?”

Another flicker of humanity overtook Mr. Burkhead’s eyes. “Yes. Obviously, that’s the outcome we all hope for, and if mistakes have been made in the auditing process to this point, that will be wholly and completely acknowledged and made right.” He softly added, “I do truly hope that’s the case.”

*Stay cool. Deep breaths. No emotion. Let due process run its course, and the truth will be revealed.*

“Is there something I need to sign?” I asked, maybe a little too coolly in my attempt to avoid feeling emotion.

Mr. Wallis responded. “Mrs. Lewisham, would you please escort Ms. Keaton to human resources? Thank you for your time, Ms. Keaton. That will be all.”

Mrs. Lewisham was standing by my chair again, impatiently waiting for me to stand up. There was no glimmer of compassion in her eyes. No indication of motherly concern. I stood and picked up my undistributed packets—packets that demonstrated why I deserved to be sitting on the other side of the table with the three

men who had just accused me of a white-collar crime—and heeded her gesture to go first. When I reached the door, I turned and glanced around the room one more time, inexplicably needing to cement in my mind the setting of my lowest moment. If there was ever a time for a powerful, passionate Erin Brockovich speech about justice and integrity, this was it. But there was too much pain blocking the path and keeping determination from rising to the surface. And it was in those most painful of seconds—when my life seemed to be flashing before my eyes and I saw a lifetime of hard work and dedication grow blurrier and less defined . . . irrelevant—that my eyes locked with Jeremiah Burkhead’s once again.

“We’ll be in touch,” he said. “Hang in there, McKenna.”

Well, what do you know? He *did* know my name.



## Chapter 2



**I couldn't remember the exact time** I was last in North Carolina, and I wasn't thrilled to be there now. But my sister was a sneaky one.

I'd been escorted by Mrs. Lewisham straight to HR, where I was asked to sign papers saying I understood how everything was going to play out. As if I understood anything. But according to the paperwork, if the investigation cleared me, my job would be waiting for me and I would be paid retroactively for the forced administrative leave. If, however, the investigation concluded—as at least Wallis and Monroe seemed certain it would, even if Burkhead wasn't entirely convinced—that I was indeed a master thief, suspension would morph immediately into termination. And by the end of spring, I'd probably be sent to the same prison where Martha Stewart had crocheted her jail poncho. (The paperwork made no mention of any specific punishment, but if I were to survive the next six to eight weeks, I would have to picture myself in a minimum-security place with air-conditioning and a tennis court rather than behind the slamming metal doors of a cell in which my toilet doubled as my breakfast nook.)

Documents signed, I'd been escorted to my office to gather my personal effects while my coworkers looked on with the sort of rapt attention usually reserved for moments that began with

the words “We, the jury, find the defendant . . .” My keys and entry badge were stripped from me, then I was followed by security guards until I stood alone on Park Avenue with a small box containing a framed photo of all of us at Erica and Jared’s wedding, my long-dead Kindle that I had taken with me to work at the beginning of the year as part of a resolution to read during breaks (which, as it turned out, I never took), and a few boxes of Junior Mints I’d kept stashed away in case the break room ever ran out of ways to fuel the midafternoon energy lags. I’d chosen comfort over economy and taken a cab back to my apartment on West Fifty-Seventh—then spent the entire ride in supreme discomfort, watching the meter tick on and imagining my checking account draining at the same pace.

No matter how I tried to comfort myself with visions of a penitentiary stint that would finally allow me time for a pedicure, the reasonable side of me knew the mistake in the audit would be found during the investigation. I knew my name would be cleared. I’d receive my owed back pay and my path to senior partner (and to becoming little Liesl Burkhead’s stepmother) would be fast tracked. Her father did know my first name, after all. It would be good. We would bond over this. It would become the hilarious story we told at parties for years to come.

But it wasn’t funny yet, and I was about to not get paid for several weeks.

I was going to need to walk a lot more.

It was about the time my extravagant car ride came to an end that my cell phone rang. *Erica*. How in the world could I take that call?

Obviously, I couldn’t right then. I had that tiny box of personal items to carry up the six steps of my building’s landing. And then I had doors to unlock. A box to set down. Dozens of Junior Mints to eat. An unfair accusation to grapple with. A career to mourn.

But as the day went on, and there were no Junior Mints left, and I acknowledged that the grappling wasn’t going to be wrapped up in

time for dinner, and the mourning settled into my heart in spite of how optimistic my brain knew it should be, I accepted that I couldn't avoid my big sister forever. Besides, her calls every thirty minutes had transitioned into calls every twenty minutes, and I knew she wouldn't stop until I answered.

"How did it go?" she asked as soon as I answered the phone. "Have all the chickens hatched? How many are there?"



Four days later I was standing at the red front door of my parents' white colonial home in Durham. There was still a trace of snow on the ground, but the noonday sun overhead and the 78-percent humidity combined to welcome me back in spectacularly sweaty fashion under my down bubble coat that had been warranted in Manhattan that morning. Erica had convinced me to sublet my apartment a month at a time, and she had used Jared's frequent flyer miles to get me home. I'd only agreed under the condition that she was to tell no one the real reason I was there. Except for Jared. The two of them had annoyingly adopted our parents' number one rule of marriage: keep no secrets from each other unless necessary to pull off a pleasant surprise.

I hadn't quite been able to come up with a way to repackage my situation according to those terms.

I texted Erica from the front stoop. She had promised she would be there to help me establish motive.

I'm here. Are you going to come smuggle me in or what?

Just ring the doorbell. Yay! So excited to see you!

"*Just ring the doorbell.*" I took a deep breath and did as I was instructed, after first making sure there was a smile on my face that

would come across as genuine and might even give the impression I was happy to be there.

I heard my dad's voice call out, "No, I've got it," then footsteps approached. Then they stopped. I knew he was looking through the peephole. I contemplated ducking and sneaking behind the bushes—or maybe if I ran fast enough I could catch up with my Uber driver. Instead, I bared my teeth and smiled at my undoubtedly shocked dad, who I knew was on the other side of the wood trying to make sense of the strangely magnified view of his middle daughter's face. There was a sudden flurry of sound and movement, then the door was open wide. Nearly as wide as my dad's arms.

I'd never felt homesick. At least not for people. After we moved back to North Carolina, I spent years feeling homesick for New York. But when I missed people, I called them—and for nearly twenty years, I'd had Manhattan *and* gotten to talk to the people I loved whenever I wanted to. Homesickness never entered the picture. But in that moment, I wouldn't have traded the expression on my dad's face for anything. It was as if he'd been homesick for *me*.

"Oh, my goodness. McKenna." His voice was a whisper as he pulled me into his arms and wrapped them around me. "This is—How in the world— It is just so good . . ." He put his hands on my arms and pushed me back so he could look at me. "What are you doing here?"

The tears glistening in his eyes made me uncertain I could keep up my prebuilt defenses, so I embraced him once again. It did feel awfully good to be in his protective arms.

"Are you surprised, Dad?" I asked, though there was no need.

"*'Surprised'?*" He chuckled and rested his cheek on the top of my frizzy, untamed humidity curls. "One of the best surprises I've ever gotten."

"Good." I sighed and let everything that wasn't my dad slip away for a moment.

Until he pushed me away again and studied my face. “Who knew you were coming?” His voice was quiet as he confronted the exciting possibility that he was now a coconspirator. “Does your mother know?”

I shook my head. “Just Erica.”

He threw his head back and slapped himself on the forehead. “*That’s* why she said we should do Saturday family lunch instead of Sunday dinner this week. Don’t tell her this, but your mother and I suspected she was going to announce she was pregnant again.”

I laughed softly. “Can you imagine? I think we’d have to lock Jared up in a padded room if he found out they were going to start over just when Charlie finally got over his fear of staying the night at friends’ houses.”

“Are you kidding? Jared’s been the one with baby fever. I figure if they’re not expecting soon, he might just walk into a maternity ward and help himself to one.”

“Scott?” My mom’s voice rang out from upstairs, then I heard her footsteps approaching, muffled by the chevron-patterned carpet runner in the center of the wood staircase. “Who was at the door?”

My dad giggled to himself and winked at me. “Annie, did you mean to have *all* the wedding flowers delivered? I thought you and Taylor just wanted some samples sent over from the florist.”

He could barely contain his laughter. Golly, he was proud of himself for that masterful deception.

“Oh no!” my mom cried out, and the pace of her footsteps increased. “Taylor! You’d better get down here!”

Taylor was here too? I could barely contain my grumble. *Thanks, Erica.* Although, I quickly reasoned, maybe that was for the best. That would leave very little chance that the focus would remain on me for any extended period of time throughout the day. *Thanks, Erica!*

“McKenna!” My mom rushed toward me as soon as she entered

the foyer. She wrapped her arms around me as my dad had, and it felt every bit as safe and secure.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Look at you! I feel like I haven’t seen you since you were a little girl.”

“We FaceTimed last week.”

She scoffed. “Oh, I know that. It’s just not the same. And yes, before you say it, I know that the last time I saw you in person you were already a fully grown woman, but . . . Well . . .” My dad reached out and rubbed her back. “I just missed you. That’s all.”

I grinned at her, finally glad that Erica had insisted I spend some time in Durham. The joy radiating from my parents’ faces was a pretty good indication that the visit was past due, and at that moment I couldn’t imagine any other place on earth where I could be made to feel like I mattered. Where I could pretend—for just a little while—that I wasn’t under investigation for a crime I hadn’t committed. A crime that, were I to be indicted for it—or, in fact, anything apart from exonerated of all wrongdoing and offered a reputation-restoring apology and compensation for it—would signal the end of my career and everything I had spent my entire life working toward. I wouldn’t just be fired and go to jail. I would be disbarred. I would be disgraced. I would have to leave New York and learn a new skill—like welding or calligraphy or something that didn’t involve the law or money or children or anything that required people to have any sort of personal stake in my integrity.

My shoulders and jaw tightened, and I felt my breath growing shallow as the possibilities swam through my brain. *You have nice penmanship. You could do a whole lot worse than that calligraphy gig.* I abruptly gasped for air, and all four of my parents’ eyes focused on me with concern.

“You okay, kid?” my dad asked, stepping closer.

“McKenna, honey? What is it?” My mom ran her hands up and

down my arms and used her gentle but commanding mom strength to guide me to the bench against the staircase. “Scott, grab a paper bag from the kitchen.”

I guess I was hyperventilating. That whole sequence—from Mom instructing my dad to grab a paper bag to me breathing into said paper bag and my head being forced down between my knees while my mother rubbed rhythmic circles on my back—seemed to progress in a blurry instant. Although I do have a faint memory of my dad calling out, “How about the full-sized ones from the butcher? Would that work?” and my mom replying, “No, the ones in the drawer next to the refrigerator! Good grief, Scott, we’re not covering up her head and filming a hostage video here.”

However long it actually took, my mom soon brought calm to the chaos, and I was able to breathe again. The soothing patterns on my back continued. Her deliberate and paced breathing influenced mine. She hummed a lovely but unrecognizable tune under her breath. It all took me back to every time she had tried to comfort me through the years—through childhood disappointments and teenage panic attacks, all of which seemed so utterly insignificant now. Not only because the heartbreaks of then were small compared to what I was currently dealing with, but also because I wished I could go back and warn that little girl that even then she was setting herself up with goals and dreams that were one day going to be squashed by three men who didn’t even know her. An entire lifetime of work, and it would all be taken away in a matter of seconds by a philandering octogenarian; a pretty face with fake teeth, a fake tan, and a grand total of sixteen brain cells; and the man I had thought represented my best chance at someday having what the world considered “it all.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’m okay now.”

She smiled at me even as concern mingled with examination and analysis in her eyes. “What’s going on, sweetie? Did something happen?” She tilted her head and examined me further, then seemed to

astutely land at the conclusion that the only thing that would cause this severe of a reaction in me had to be work related. “Something to do with a case you’re working on?”

I shook my head and tried to access an unprepared file of excuses in my mind. I hadn’t expected to need an excuse. Not for being upset anyway. My catalogue of excuses for why I was in Durham had been checked, double-checked, alphabetized, and backed up in the cloud. But what was my reason for being upset? I hadn’t intended to be upset and therefore hadn’t prepared an excuse.

My dad sat down on the bench on the other side of my mom, and they both gave me all of their attention. Loving concern was evident in my dad’s twitchy fingers and the way he bit his lip as he watched me. He was desperate to find out who or what had hurt his little girl so he could figure out how to make it all better. My mom exuded patience and understanding through her comforting grin and focused eyes, and I sensed that we would be in the kitchen soon, baking snickerdoodles together just as we had every time my adolescent heart had been troubled.

“You know you can tell us anything, kiddo,” my dad said, and I believed it. I *knew* it. Down deep to my very being, I knew it was true.

I filled my lungs with air and dug my fingernails into my knees, which were protected by a pair of jeans I’d bought more than a year ago and was wearing for the first time. Wallis, Monroe and Burkhead did not believe in casual Fridays. And even if they did, who was I kidding? McKenna Keaton did not believe in casual Fridays.

“Well, the truth is . . . ,” I began. But before I could squeak out another word, my attempt at a confession that would have humiliated me, regardless of my innocence, got caught up in the Taylor tornado. It was as familiar to me as an approaching nor’easter to a ragged old fisherman who had spent his life pursuing an elusive catch on the sea. She came bounding down the stairs with the same recognizable cadence she’d had practically since she began walking.

Taylor didn't walk so much as she bounced and glided in equal measure.

"Mom? Did I hear you call my name a few minutes ago? I was on the phone with—" Her face morphed before my eyes into a mushy mess of emotion. In an instant mascara was streaming down her face, and her cheeks had turned the color of cotton candy. The pink kind. Not the blue. "I *told* them you'd come!"

I don't know exactly how I got to my feet. My dad may have pushed me up. Or maybe Taylor's magnetic energy pulled me in like that Woolly Willy toy we'd played with as kids. The thing where you move the iron shavings around with a magnet to form Willy's hair and beard. *Here, kids. Some little pieces of metal to play with!* Is it any wonder I became an attorney? Even as a child I recognized the liability risks. Regardless, I was on my feet and being cried on before you could say "settle out of court."

"Hey, Tay." I hugged her back. She was annoying, but I loved the brat. I think I'd even missed her—not that I'd realized it before right then. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" she repeated. "How could anything be wrong?" She pulled away until her face was about six inches from mine and whispered, "This is the happiest day of my life."

She was a little too in my space. Even as representative of another one-third of the six X chromosomes Scott and Annie Keaton had put out into the world, she and I didn't know each other well enough for her to be standing so close.

"Well," I muttered as I attempted to pull away. "That can't possibly be true."

"No, it is true! Mom said you couldn't come, and I thought she was being ridiculous. But then Jackson started telling me I needed to prepare myself in case you actually couldn't come. And he was telling me I needed to be more understanding because you have an important job and everything. But I still knew you were coming.

Then when Erica said you really, *really* weren't coming, I figured it had to be true. If anyone would know if you were coming, it would be Erica. But even *she* didn't—" Her eyes widened, and a grin as broad as sunrise overtook her face. "That little punk! Erica!" She yelled toward the back door and took off running. "I can't believe you tricked me!"

I felt dizzy, and not just in a commotion-all-around-me way. I felt sort of like that cow that Helen Hunt and Bill Paxton watched fly through the air in *Twister*.

My dad's arms, suddenly wrapped back around me, provided stabilization. "You're a good kid, McKenna. I'm sure it wasn't easy for you to get away, with all you've got going on. But thanks for being here for her."

*Thanks for being here for her?* Surely not even the *Twister* cow was as confused as I was.

"Oh, sweetie," my mom chimed in with a sigh as she stood from the bench and placed her hand on my arm. "Why didn't you tell us the panic attacks had started again?"

"They haven't, Mom. Really."

"I'm sorry that taking time off work is creating so much stress for you." I stared blankly at her, and she continued. "I mean, that *is* what's causing the stress, right? Or is there something else—"

"Nope," I asserted. "There's nothing else." Whatever vulnerability I'd been feeling had to be halfway to Oz by now.

My dad kissed the top of my head before he pulled away. He grabbed my suitcases from the front stoop and brought them into the foyer. "If you need to talk, you know we're always—"

"Aunt McKenna!"

Just in time to distract from a conversation I didn't have the energy for, three voices and six feet came running at me with a herd-of-buffalo quality I knew would have resulted in a "No running in the house!" back in my day. Erica's too. Maybe the way our parents had spoiled Taylor prepared them for grandparenthood.

“Hey, guys!” I called out as I planted my feet and prepared to be tackled. Ten-year-old April and seven-year-old Cooper were nearly as tall as I was, and at four years old, Charlie looked on track to outgrow us all. I wrapped my arms around them as they reached me. “I’ve missed you!”

“We’ve missed you too,” April said, tilting her head up slightly to look at me. “Are you here for Aunt Taylor’s party?”

*Oh, of course.*

Well, that was fortuitous. Erica said no one would even question my being there. I hadn’t been too sure about that, so I’d crafted stories of use-it-or-lose-it paid time off and situations in which my bosses had said things to me like, “You work so hard! You need to get away for a while and recharge.” My little sister’s engagement party would work in a pinch, I supposed.

“I sure am,” I replied.

“Alright, that’s enough.” Erica’s voice presided over the chaos like the superteacher and supermom that she was as she entered from the back of the house. “Let’s at least let Aunt McKenna get her coat off.”

The kids scattered, my dad started carrying luggage upstairs, and my mom disappeared after mumbling something about her Instant Pot.

“Hi,” I whispered to Erica as she walked toward me. “I’m really happy to see you.” I grabbed her hand as soon as I could reach her and wrapped puffy coat-ensconced arms around her shoulders.

She clung to my waist. “It’s been too long, McKenna.”

“Not you too. It hasn’t been *that* long—”

“It’s been three years.”

Had it?

“Oh. Well, that *is* too long, I guess. But I don’t need you to make me feel guilty—”

“I’m not trying to make you feel guilty.” She leaned her head back

and looked at me. And it was okay that *she* was in my space. “I just missed you. That’s all.”

“I missed you too.” I sighed and pulled away and finally began stripping off my coat.

Erica took it from me. The moment it was in her hands she said, “You’re drenched.”

I shrugged and attempted to appear as nonchalant as I could. “It was a lot colder in New York—”

“McKenna . . .” She was surveying me with concern, but there was warning in her voice—as if I’d better not dare to be anything less than completely truthful with her.

*Being human is not a weakness, McKenna.* I exhaled as I remembered the words Dr. Krabbe, my first therapist, had said to me at the age of eleven.

“Everything got chaotic a few minutes ago and I’m tired. Plus, I was thinking about everything going on . . . and I had a minor panic attack. First one in years.” Erica studied me and refused to flinch until I raised my hands in front of me and added, “I promise.”

She pulled my sweaty body to her and embraced me firmly. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I know.” I rested my head on her shoulder for a moment and then pulled away after a quick squeeze. “So remind me . . . When’s this engagement party?”

She flung my coat over her shoulder. “Next weekend.”

I nodded and picked up my carry-on. *Okay. Next weekend.* With any luck, Wallis, Monroe and Burkhead’s investigation would unearth the egregious error well before then, and I’d be on a plane by the following Monday.