Chapter 1

Times Square. New Year’s Eve. Jake Alexander was one amid the swarming multitude waiting for the ball to drop. Another year had passed. So many balls had been dropped during his life. Sometimes they had dropped right into his lap, and he fumbled the play.

Lights glared at him and around him. Faces laughed on the big screens surrounding the square. All about him stood people with friends and family, people having fun, while he was alone. It hadn’t always been that way. One time he had had a family too. One time he had had it all: home, wife, kids, and money—lots of it. But Jake had fumbled the play and lost the game.

### Yet another New Year’s Eve alone. Diane Price sat in front of the TV waiting for the Times Square ball to drop. Why didn’t she just go to bed, she asked herself? But she knew why. She knew she wouldn’t sleep. She’d lie awake waiting for her son to get home, worrying about him. Too many sleepless nights she had spent worrying about this boy-child soon to be a man, and worrying about his sister before him, and his dad before that, before he left them all.

So here she was, waiting for the ball to drop. It seemed she’d been waiting all her life. What was she waiting for? First, she had waited for her husband. Then she waited for and waited on her children. Now her life was half over, and it felt like it hadn’t even begun. She had botched the first half. Will the next be any different, she wondered?

New Year’s Eve in Times Square. Jake remembered when it had been different, all those years on Wall Street as an investment banker. He had completed his liberal arts degree to satisfy his interests, then went on to get an MBA from Kendall School of Business at Northwestern University to satisfy his need for income. He had married Laura while they were both undergrads. She had supported him while he went to Kendall, working full time so he could attend school full time. Then there were those crazy years as an associate, working long hours, establishing himself and climbing until he reached the coveted position of manager. Laura had been busy with their children and pursuing a degree as a tax accountant. Once their youngest started school full time, Laura was poised to land a good position in an accounting firm, as she too worked herself up the corporate ladder.

It had been fun at first, networking, making connections, manipulating numbers, making deals. Then there was 9/11. While no one close to him had died, people Jake had known, people he had worked with, were left behind in the rubble. He had listed their names on a piece of paper and left it on his desk as a reminder, his own tribute to those he had known.

He also remembered those individuals he had escorted out of the building when they were let go, the look of shock on their faces as they were notified, their offices cleaned out, and they were ushered out the door within an hour. Then as he rose up the ranks, he was the one making the decisions, leaving someone under him the messy task of giving them the bad news so he didn’t have his sleep disturbed. This didn’t work. Their faces came back to haunt him, disrupting his sleep.

He began to ask questions: What was he doing? Why? He found it harder and harder to look the other way when questionable deals came across his desk.

He didn’t know exactly when it had happened. Seeds of discontent were sown that slowly took root and grew until he realized that not only could he not continue doing what he had been doing, he felt he needed to make restitution in some way.

He remembered that morning, the look his wife had given him.

“Why aren’t you dressed for work?” Laura asked him while looking him up and down, reproach in her voice.

“I’m not going,” Jake answered as he reached into the refrigerator for cream.

“Are you sick?”

“No, I’m just not going. I’m taking the day off. Let’s play hooky, Laura, just you and me, like when we were kids. Remember?”

“Are you crazy, Jake?” Laura shook her head and walked to the kitchen sink to rinse coffee cups before placing them in the dishwasher.

“Wouldn’t it be great to just blow off the day, like we used to? We could go to the beach, rent a dune buggy. Just for today. Wouldn’t it be great?”

“If this is some sort of midlife crisis, Jake, then go out and buy yourself a Porsche, but don’t drag me into this. I have way too much to do.” Laura didn’t even look at him in her haste to get past him and to the garage door. “If you aren’t going to work, at least make yourself useful. Pick up the laundry at the dry cleaners, will you? I have to get the kids to school.”

Jake watched his wife rush by, her hair pulled up at the nape of her neck into some kind of twist; she was elegant in her suit and high heels. He remembered a beautiful young girl, long blond hair blowing in the breeze off the lakeshore. She was still beautiful, but that seemed to be all she had in common with the young girl he remembered.

He sat at the kitchen counter in his jeans and a sweatshirt, coffee in hand, as his son and daughter walked around him. They fought over the last Pop-tart®, grabbed juice boxes for the road and their backpacks, and rushed out without a word to acknowledge Jake’s existence.

“Guess I might as well go to work,” he said to no one in particular.

“Don’t forget the dry cleaning,” his wife shouted back at him on her way out the door.

He went to work, told his secretary to cancel his morning appointments, closed the door to his office, and sat behind his desk. He picked up the list of names. The paper was well worn where he had fingered it over the years. That was when Jake knew he couldn’t go on. He had already dropped out of Laura’s life; he didn’t know when, just knew it had happened, and all that was left was a shell. He was a stranger to his children; the oldest was in college, the others soon to follow. All he had to do was make it final by leaving. It took him six months to take the leap, quit his job, and move out, but he did it. And now here he was.

How the mighty have fallen, the phrase resounded in his head. He wasn’t sure where the saying had come from, but it seemed appropriate as he looked at where he was, how far he had fallen. And now here he was on another New Year’s Eve, waiting for the ball to drop.

Diane had fallen asleep in the chair when she was awakened at two-thirty-five by the phone.

“Mrs. Price?” a voice asked.

“Yes, this is Diane Price.”

“I’m Officer Johnson. Do you have a son named Michael?”

“Yes, I do. Is he all right?” Diane sat up and began to search for a pen and piece of paper in case she needed to take notes.

“I’m afraid there’s been an accident,” the police officer said. “No one was hurt, but both the driver and your son have been drinking. He’s here at the station.”

“I’ll be right there.” Diane dressed and drove to the police station. You knew this would happen someday, a voice inside told her. It was only a matter of time. Just like his father.

“No, he’s not,” she shouted to no one in particular. “He’s a good kid, he is. Teenage boys always test the limits. It’s just part of growing up,” she reassured herself.

At the station the arresting officer pulled her aside to talk to her before releasing Michael.

“Your son is very lucky,” he said. “He could easily have been hurt, but he got away with just a few bruises. But what’s worse is that we have word that there were harder drugs at the party. Fortunately for your son and his buddy, nothing was found in their car. They may not be so lucky next time. I thought you should know.”

“Are you saying my son is into drugs?” Diane could not believe what she was hearing.

“I’m saying the crowd he is hanging with is suspected of drug use.”

“I see. Thank you, officer. I’ll talk to Michael.”

On the drive home, Diane and Michael spoke no more than a few sentences, at her insistence.

“Mom, I can explain,” Michael told her, his face turned toward the passenger window.

“I don’t want to discuss it, Michael. For your own good I suggest you keep your mouth shut before I say something we both will regret. I’m way too angry to be rational right now.”

They rode in silence, her head a flurry of words, none making any sense. The phrase, “What did I do wrong?” kept repeating endlessly in her head and even in her sleep when she finally managed to get some that night. Happy New Year. What a way to start the year.

“Sorry to hear about Michael,” one of her salespeople greeted Diane after the holidays when Diane entered the boutique dress shop that she owned. News sure travels fast, she thought.

“Yeah. It’s time to mark down some of those holiday dresses.” Diane put her employee to work while she escaped to the office to take care of paperwork. She knew the other employees were probably discussing her son too, but at least she didn’t have to hear it.

Diane had achieved some small success as a retailer. After the divorce she had started working at a local dress shop while attending school at night. She had learned all aspects of the business and managed to get a loan to buy the shop when the owner retired. She enjoyed the independence of being her own boss and had managed to make a good living, but now the offer to be bought out by a large chain seemed even more appealing.

“You could stay on as store manager. In fact, you might even be put in charge of a larger store in another city. There’s room for growth in our company,” one of the chain’s corporate vice presidents told her while discussing a buyout offer.

Diane didn’t know what she wanted to do. She was too young to retire, too old to begin all over again, wasn’t she? She stared off into space, no longer even pretending to be working. It sounded good, this opportunity. A new job, new city, new life. What did she have to keep her here?

Diane rolled over the next morning and hit the snooze on her alarm clock. She did not want to get up. Why was it so hard to get up every morning? Certainly if she had been going to sink into a depression the time to do it would have been when her husband had left her with two small kids to take care of eleven years ago. But then she had had to keep going for their sakes. She couldn’t afford the luxury of a breakdown. She couldn’t afford to lie in bed day after day, hour after hour in a state of depression. Someone had to cook the meals, wash the clothes, clean the house, help with homework. Someone had to be gainfully employed to pay the bills. That someone was her. She couldn’t afford a depression then. Could she now?

One child, Adrian, was grown up and on her own; the other, Michael, was close to being there. Soon Diane would be free to do all the things she had always wanted. Why didn’t she feel free? She felt trapped in a nowhere job in a nowhere community in the upper Midwest where the only single men were either twice her age, or half her age, or spent their free time in their trucks, hunting and drinking and talking about hunting and drinking with their buddies. Not a very appealing prospect. She had stayed for the sake of the kids, but now it was no longer a good situation for her son. Perhaps now she was free to leave.

After the third time hitting the snooze, she dragged herself out of bed and into the bathroom. Coffee, she needed coffee. She followed the smell of freshly brewed coffee coming from her kitchen. That programmable coffeemaker had been worth every penny, would have been worth twice what she had paid. That first cup tasted so delicious she craved another. She poured her second cup then went back to her seat at the kitchen table where she could look out the window and watch over her yard. There were fresh tracks on the snow from visiting deer and rabbits. There were matching tracks in her brain, etchings that were the marks of her life, haphazard as her life journey had been so far.

The dark tendrils of depression were creeping nearer and nearer, waiting to sink into her brain like an inoperable tumor. She had to do something to keep it from getting a stranglehold on her.

She picked up the phone and called her friend Marge and arranged to meet her for lunch then quieted her mind enough to go to work.

Marge greeted her with a hug. “So sorry to hear about Michael’s run-in with the law.” News does travel fast, Diane thought again.

“That’s just a part of it, Marge. That’s not what I wanted to talk about,” Diane paused before continuing. “Marge, I’m thinking about selling out.”

“The store?”

“Yes, I’ve gotten a good offer. Not only that, the company that wants to buy the store has offered to place me in management in one of their other stores, maybe a larger store in a larger city.”

“But what about Michael?”

“I don’t think Michael’s in much of a place to bargain one way or another. He’s mixed up with a bad crowd. Maybe a move would be just what he needs, a new start, new friends.”

“Or worse friends and worse trouble in a bigger city.”

“I’ve thought about that, but this isn’t just about Michael. It’s about me too. Me. When is there going to be time for me? I’m over forty years old and what do I have to show for it? A divorce, a small-town store, and a son that I have to pick up at the police station.” Diane shook her head and sighed so loud that it surprised both her and Marge.

“Have you talked with anyone else about this?” Marge questioned.

“Not yet.”

“How about someone at church?”

“That won’t do any good. I’ve tried and tried. I’ve talked to the minister about Michael. I’ve tried to get him into some activities at church, tried to get him to join the youth group. And I’ve prayed. How I’ve prayed. I know Michael needs male guidance in his life, someone to help him know what it is to be a man. I’ve prayed that God would send someone, some man, a big brother or a teacher or a coach. Someone who would take an interest in Michael. Someone that Michael could relate to. I’ve prayed and I’ve tried. I’ve looked for men in the community willing to take Michael under their wing, and none have come forward. I’m tired of praying. I’m tired of my life. I want a life too.” Diane shook her head, fighting the tears that threatened to fall from her eyes. She grabbed a Kleenex from her purse and blew her nose.

“I’m worried about you, Diane. You don’t seem like yourself.”

Diane picked at the lettuce on her plate before answering. “Sometimes I’m still so angry, angry at Tom for leaving, even though I know my life got better once he left. I get angry at myself for having married him in the first place, and angry at the kids and all of their demands, even though I know they were my saving grace back when Tom left. They were my reason for living. And I’m angry at God for bringing me to this place and abandoning me.”

Diane paused to take a breath before continuing. “All my life I tried to be the good daughter and good wife. I stayed with Tom even when others advised me to leave because I thought that was what God wanted me to do. I stayed in this town because I thought that was what God wanted me to do. It’s different now. My kids don’t need me like they used to. Now I feel so alone. I have to have something else in my life.”

Marge reached out for Diane’s hand. “Diane, I had no idea. I’m so sorry. I haven’t been the best friend.”

“No, Marge, you’ve been a good friend. Now I’ve hurt you when I never meant to. It’s me. I hate to say it, but it truly is all about me, not you. You’ve been great. I’m sorry.”

“What about Adrian?”

“She’s off at college, off in her own world, starting a new life of her own. What would she care? She hardly comes home for the holidays. And depending on where I move, I may be closer to her. Maybe we could grow closer.”

“Sounds like you’ve already made up your mind.”

Diane paused and stirred the bowl of soup that was growing cold in front of her, pushed it aside, and took a bite of salad. “Maybe I have. I just have to take the steps to make it happen.”

“Well, if anyone deserves a second chance, it’s you, Diane,” Marge said. “I’ve seen how you’ve worked the past eleven years since Tom left. Raising the kids on your own, struggling to make ends meet, to better yourself and provide a life for your children. You’ve always put the kids first. Maybe that was a mistake. Maybe if you would have allowed yourself more of a social life you could have found someone. . .”

“Marge, I don’t need to hear this again.”

“But maybe, Diane, maybe then there would have been a man in Michael’s life and your own, to help you.”

“Look, I’m not going to lie and say I’m not interested, but . . . you know what my life has been like. I guess I just figured if it was meant to be, it would happen, and if not, it wouldn’t happen. But that’s another reason for a move. I’m not getting any younger. I don’t want to live my life alone, but my chances of meeting someone here does not appear to be that good.”

“There’s Doug, the church organist.”

“Marge, I’ve told you before. I’m not looking to be fixed up with anyone.”

“But he’s cute.”

“And he knows it. Besides, he’s not interested in me.”

“How do you know if you don’t ask?”

Diane laughed. “Haven’t we done this before?”

“It’s good to see you laugh, Diane. You need more laughter in your life.”

“And good friends. I’m going to miss you.”

“You’re not getting rid of me. I expect you to go some place exotic so I’ll have an excuse to travel. Who knows, maybe I’ll meet someone exciting and leave my John behind.”

They laughed at this, another joke shared between them. Despite her complaints at times, Diane knew Marge and John were definitely a “couple” in the truest sense. In fact, that made it easier for Diane to joke, for the likelihood of Marge ever leaving John was nonexistent. The two women finished their lunches, chatted about common acquaintances, then hugged again as they left.

“I’ll miss you if you leave,” Marge said.

“When I leave,” Diane corrected her.

“Okay, when. Just make sure it’s not too soon. You’ve got to give me some time to get used to the idea.”

Diane felt both better afterward and more fearful. It seemed the die had been cast.