

CHAPTER ONE

Northland, Washington

BRI MARSHALL CURLED UP ON the moldy mattress and panted. She'd known pain before, but this was something new.

"AJ." She gnawed on a lump of fear and nudged the sleeping man beside her. "Wake up. Something's wrong."

He moaned and rolled over, crumpled food wrappers and dirty needles disappearing under the hood of his ratty sweatshirt. Bri bit her lip hard. AJ should've slept it off by now. How much had he taken? She couldn't remember. Couldn't keep the edges of her world from blurring. Couldn't move.

Sweat formed on her forehead as she clutched her swollen stomach.

"Wake up." This time she kicked him.

Another bolt of pain tore through her body as AJ opened bloodshot eyes. He looked around the camper with a vacant expression, and she braced herself.

"What the—?" His eyes were cold and hard when they finally focused on her. "Did you kick me?"

She glared back, what little confidence she had buoyed by a sudden wave of clarity. "The baby's coming."

He sat up, wincing as he pressed a hand to his temple. "No, it's not time. Go back to sleep."

Bri clenched her fists. “You want our baby born here? You gotta get me to the hospital.”

Her heart only pounded this hard when she was high. Maybe that’s what this was. Maybe the drug demons were attacking her.

No. She’d only smoked a little pot this time. And the pressure deep inside was violent, unrelenting, and unmistakable. Her head swam, but she forced herself to concentrate.

For the baby. Do it for the baby.

She stood.

“What’re you doing?” AJ’s words slurred together.

“I gotta get to the hospital.”

He flicked on the lamp and eyed the wet spot on the mattress where she’d been. A couple months ago, she’d tried to read a book about babies, but it hadn’t made much sense. All those big words she’d never seen. Now she couldn’t remember what was supposed to happen next.

Her hair hung limp and grimy around her face as she struggled to slip into some shoes. What was she wearing? All of it was wet.

She leaned against the wall and screamed.

AJ jumped off the mattress. “Cut that out.”

The pain passed, but the darkness around the edges of her vision remained.

He rubbed a hand over his face. “Okay, let me find my phone.”

“We gotta go.”

He threw his hands up. “I get it, okay? But someone’s gotta take us. The car don’t run, remember?”

No, she didn’t remember. Everything was hazy. She wasn’t even sure what day it was.

He dug through piles of trash until he found his phone. She stared at his thumbs, transfixed, as they moved across the screen in slow motion. Why couldn’t he move faster? Maybe it was her brain moving slow.

He slid the phone into the back pocket of his saggy jeans. “Carson’s coming.”

She pulled open the door. “Fine. Help me down.”

The beat-up camper sat on the back of an old truck, some three feet

off the ground. Might as well be three hundred. She peered down as if the earth was falling away. If she could sprout wings and fly . . .

AJ pushed her aside and jumped out. "Can you sit on the edge?"

Her breaths came in gasps. Her stomach hung like a stone, heavy and unyielding. She snarled in pain as she braced against the door-frame and slid into a sitting position, cursing a mile's worth for every inch gained.

By the time she reached the ground with AJ's help and vomited into a scraggly bush, Carson had pulled up in his white Ford Tempo. He scowled at her filthy, damp clothes but said nothing as she climbed in the back and laid down.

"Hurry." She scowled at the empty beer cans rolling around on the floor. "Something's wrong."

That was all she knew. She had a baby inside her, he was clawing to get out, and something was wrong.

The woman in purple scrubs repeated the question for the third time as she helped Bri into a stiff blue gown. "Who is your primary care physician?"

Bri called her a terrible name as pain wrestled her into the fetal position on the bed.

"She don't got one," AJ said.

The nurse tied the gown and tucked a pillow under Bri's head. "I need to examine you to check your progress. Can you lay on your back?"

With a deep groan, Bri complied.

The nurse donned latex gloves. "How long have you been having contractions?"

Bri covered her eyes with her hand. "I don't know."

"When was your last checkup?"

"I don't know."

"What's your due date?"

Bri slammed her hand against the bed. "I don't know. Leave me alone."
AJ paced. "It's early."

The nurse continued her examination in silence. Bri didn't want to be touched like that. Didn't want to be in this stupid gown. Didn't want any more questions, any more pain.

After a long, uncomfortable minute of prodding, the nurse stood, her lips pressed into a grim line. "I'll be right back."

She left the room in a hurry. Bri's heart constricted. What was going on? Why did it hurt so much? Why did the room refuse to hold still?

The white-hot pain struck again, and she cried out. "Help me. Somebody help me."

Then it all happened so fast. People came in and out of the room, asking questions and shouting. She struck out at them when they touched her, but her arms were like a sparrow's wings, barely moving the air. She called them every horrible thing she could think of, but they wouldn't go away. Wouldn't stop touching and poking.

"The baby's breech."

Words and phrases drifted around her like feathers.

"Emergency C-section."

"Order a TDS."

"I need blood results ASAP."

"Take her to surgery."

Someone held her hand. Someone moved her bed. Someone rolled her over and stuck something in her back. Where was AJ?

A curtain hung in front of her face. Voices swirled. What were they doing? Why couldn't she see? What was happening to her baby? There was no sense of time. No sense of place. She soared through the air, a vast expanse of sky all around her.

A cry pierced the fog, bringing the world into abrupt focus.

Bri's breath caught. Her baby. That was her baby.

She knew his cry, his voice, because he was part of her. The nurse brought him around the curtain, and the light shone around him like angels from heaven. Bri reached for him, and her fear and desperation faded away. Just for a moment.

“Hello.” She held the baby close, rubbing her nose over his soft, warm head. “Aren’t you handsome.”

He stopped crying and peered up at her, right at her, his tiny arms flailing in the air. His gaze unwavering. She’d only felt like this once before that she could remember. Before Dad left when they lived in that little white house on Providence Street and life was sunny and warm. Happy.

She nuzzled him. “I’m going to take care of you. I got you now.”

The nurse leaned in and smiled apologetically. “I need to take him, so I can clean him up and get his measurements.”

Bri tensed, the hard lump of fear a mountain now. “No.”

“It’s all right. Look at him, he needs a diaper and some clothes.”

“I said no. Get away from me.”

AJ appeared on the other side of the bed, staring down the nurse. Where had he been?

The doctor stepped up, his voice soothing but firm. “You don’t want him to get cold, do you? We’ll find him a little hat. What color would you like?”

Still Bri hesitated. The baby belonged to her. She was supposed to take care of him, but she couldn’t get out of the bed. Couldn’t even move her legs. And she was so . . . tired.

She relaxed her grip. “I want a blue hat.”

The nurse pulled the baby gently from Bri’s arms and nodded. “Of course. And what will you name him?”

Bri’s eyes never left his face. He was perfect. Beautiful. Her heart expanded in her chest until there was no room left for her lungs to take in air and she struggled to breathe.

“Providence.” Tears streamed down her face. “His name is Providence.”

CHAPTER TWO

LAURA GAMBLER SMOOTHED THE FRONT of her shirt and patted her hair. She should've worn the gray blouse instead of purple. She looked like a walking eggplant.

The brightly lit hallway smelled of tennis shoes and old books. Ms. Calloway's office was across from the library. Laura poked her head through the open doorway, eager to get the meeting over with.

"Come in, come in." Ms. Calloway waved an arm. "Thanks for coming."

She had given no hint of the specifics when she called Laura to set up a meeting for this Monday to "discuss some concerns." Laura only knew it had to do with Peter. But what could a first grader possibly have done to warrant such a serious meeting with the school counselor? If it had been the middle school counselor calling about Katelyn or Alexa, she wouldn't have been surprised. They'd done nothing but spread angst and spew drama lately, especially Katelyn.

But Peter's biggest problem in life was tying his shoes.

Ms. Calloway pulled out a chair. "Please, have a seat."

Laura obeyed, eyeing Ms. Calloway's crisp, white blouse. She certainly didn't look like an eggplant.

"Again, thank you for coming." Ms. Calloway sat down beside Laura and crossed her petite legs. "As you know, I'd like to talk to you about Peter."

Laura kept her back straight, her hands gripping her knees. She didn't like the way the counselor said her son's name. Peter was a good kid.

"Has he gotten into trouble?"

"His teacher and I are concerned about some of his behaviors. We want to do everything we can to make sure all our Bridgetown students succeed. I was hoping you could help us—um—*understand* him better."

"Okay." Laura chewed the inside of her upper lip.

"Peter has a strong resistance to working on things he doesn't enjoy, even when Mrs. Fletcher asks him repeatedly. He seems to view his days in class as a waste of his time."

Laura struggled to maintain a neutral expression. Peter refused to do his work? Why hadn't the teacher said something? School had only been in session for three weeks. How could he be bored with it already? The little rascal.

"What exactly is he doing?"

"Mrs. Fletcher reports that Peter doesn't participate in coloring time, won't practice his letters, and apparently objects to her lessons about Christopher Columbus. On philosophical grounds."

Laura choked back a gasp. She never should've read him that article about the terms Christopher Columbus negotiated with King Ferdinand and the decimation of the Taino people of North America. But he had wanted to know. He loved history.

She proceeded with caution. "He's known all his letters since he was four."

"He has yet to write a single one down. We believe he needs extra help."

Laura's eyebrows furrowed. She'd seen him write the alphabet a hundred times. "And he doesn't like to color?"

Ms. Calloway sighed. "I'm afraid not. But that's not our only concern. Peter struggles to follow simple instructions. When Mrs. Fletcher asks the class to line up for lunch, he leaves the classroom to go to the lunchroom instead of waiting at the door. Mrs. Fletcher can't leave her class

unsupervised to track him down. It's a huge security problem. Then when she tells him to read a book silently, he puts his head on the desk."

"If she wants the kids to line up at the door, why doesn't she say 'line up at the door'?"

"Then there was the incident with Carl."

Laura gulped. "Carl?"

"Yes." Ms. Calloway gave Laura a pointed look. "Carl used a pencil that belonged to another student, and Peter made him give it back."

Laura sat back in her chair. Peter hadn't mentioned anything about an incident or a boy named Carl, but it was no surprise that he had stood up for a classmate.

"Isn't that a good thing?"

Ms. Calloway sighed again. "According to Carl's mother, Peter was being a bully."

Something ugly and unnerving began to simmer in Laura's chest. "I don't understand."

"Look, Mrs. Gambler, our teachers have a big job to do. They have at least twenty-five students to supervise and instruct, all by themselves. When a child is continually disruptive, it makes the teacher's job more difficult and takes attention away from . . ."

Laura tuned out Ms. Calloway's voice. Peter had mentioned nothing to her about any of these issues. He had proudly shown her math worksheets he had completed and had asked her to order new books for him from the Scholastic catalog. All the books he'd asked for had been far above his grade level.

". . . that the Alternative Achievement class might be a better fit for Peter."

Wait a minute. Earth to Laura. What had Ms. Calloway said? Laura tugged at the collar of her shirt as the room became suddenly and unpleasantly warm.

"You think Peter should be in special ed?"

Ms. Calloway cleared her throat. "Alternative Achievement."

"My son is the smartest kid in that class." Laura's blood pressure began to rise. "He knew how to read before he even started kindergarten."

“He’s uncooperative and—”

“I need to talk to my husband about this. And Peter. I’m sure we can get everything straightened out.”

Ms. Calloway uncrossed her legs and leaned forward. “If not, Peter will have to switch classrooms. It’s not fair to the other students.”

Laura stiffened. How could this be happening? What was Mrs. Fletcher— No, she wouldn’t blame the teacher. Teaching elementary school had to be one of the most difficult jobs in the world. She just needed to talk with Peter and help him figure out a better way to participate in class.

“If he’s so disruptive, I’ll keep Peter home from school tomorrow, and my husband and I will get back to you.”

“I strongly believe a change of setting would be best for him, Mrs. Gambler. Sometimes kids need a little extra attention.”

“But I’ll talk to Peter, and—”

“The Alternative Achievement class is my recommendation.”

Laura blinked. She had failed as a parent. She was the worst mother in the history of mothers. They wanted to move her son to special ed because she hadn’t fully prepared him for classroom life. Because she hadn’t spent enough time with him, or given him enough attention, or taught him enough social skills, or . . . something.

“How long were you thinking of keeping him in special, uh, Alternative Achievement?”

Ms. Calloway patted Laura’s knee. “Don’t worry. If you work with him at home every day after school, I’m sure he’ll be ready for the regular classroom after Christmas break.”

Christmas break? That was three months away. How much learning would Peter miss in three months? All this because Peter didn’t like to color. Hmph. He wasn’t in school to color pictures.

Whatever that thing was that had begun to simmer in Laura’s chest now began to boil. Ms. Calloway’s words echoed in her mind. “*Work with him at home, work with him at home, work with him at home.*” An uncomfortable thought popped into her head. If they believed he should be in special ed until Christmas . . .

“I know this is difficult.” Ms. Calloway stood, signaling an end to their meeting. “But I’m thinking of Peter’s best interest. Think about what I said, and I hope you’ll reconsider and send him to school tomorrow.”

Laura stood as well, fighting to keep her hands from picking at her buttons. The counselor was right about one thing. Peter’s best interest was the most important thing here.

She slung her purse over her shoulder. “He won’t be here tomorrow. Or the next day.”

“Mrs. Gambler, you don’t want Peter to fall behind.”

“You’re right.” Laura walked to the door. “I don’t. Which is why I’ll be teaching him from home until after Christmas break.”

* * *

“And then I pulled him out of school.” Laura clutched her cell phone in one hand and steered the Suburban with the other. She hated to bother Dean at the office, but this was important.

Her long-suffering husband was silent on the other end of the line.

She glanced at the phone to make sure it still had a signal. “Honey? Are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here. So you want to send Peter somewhere else?” Dean’s voice betrayed his skepticism.

Laura pulled over and jumped out of the car to check the mailbox at the end of their block. “No, I’m going to homeschool him. I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you first.” She glanced at Peter’s window and lowered her voice. “But they want to put him in special ed for three months.”

Again, Dean was silent. Laura rubbed her forehead. It wasn’t like him to be so quiet.

She pulled a stack of mail from the box and hurried back to the car. “Honey?”

“It seems like a bit of an overreaction, don’t you think? I mean, you’ve been feeling a lot of stress lately, maybe—”

“They think he’s a poor student because he doesn’t like to color, Dean. As if we send him to Bridgetown to color pictures.”

Okay, there was more to it than that. The counselor had listed several other reasons, but that was beside the point.

“And I haven’t been stressed.”

Dean cleared his throat. “What I was going to say is maybe you should sleep on it. I had the urge to make all kinds of crazy changes, too, when I was . . . you know . . .”

She steered the car into their driveway and slammed it into park. “This has nothing to do with me turning forty.”

“Let’s talk about it when I get home, okay?”

“Okay.” She unlocked the front door and held it open for Peter. “But I’m not stressed.”

The house greeted her with the antiseptic smell of Windex, lingering evidence of the thorough cleaning she’d given it before the meeting at school. Not that the cleanliness of her house was directly related to the amount of nervous energy she possessed or anything.

Ahem.

Peter dropped his backpack on the floor and turned to her. “I don’t have to go to school tomorrow?”

She gave him a long look. He’d always been quick to obey, quick to learn. His black-and-white view of the world usually made it easy to guess what he was thinking. At least that’s what she’d always thought. Maybe she didn’t really know him at all.

“We’re going to have school here at the house. Just you and me.”

“Why?”

That was his favorite question. Why do dogs bark? Why does green mean go? Why are they called earwigs? Why? Why? Why?

Doubt crept into Laura’s chest. So many questions. So many answers she would be responsible for giving.

Had she made a big mistake?

She dropped her purse on the kitchen table and thumbed through the mail. “Why do you put your head on your desk when Mrs. Fletcher says it’s silent reading time?”

Peter shrugged. "I like to read the books I write in my head."

Laura slid a finger under the back flap of an envelope to open it. "Have you ever gotten into an argument with someone in your class?"

"No."

"Someone named Carl?"

Peter picked up his favorite NINJAGO LEGO mini-figure and began rearranging its body parts. "No."

She bit back her frustration. Something was going on here, but she didn't know what. Ms. Calloway had implied Peter was a bully. Maybe she should let it go until she could talk to Dean.

She pulled two sheets of paper from the envelope and unfolded them. They were from the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families. The first sheet was a short letter telling her their foster care application had been approved. The second was a copy of their new foster license.

"Oh."

A strange sensation swept over her. It was official. They'd decided months ago to move forward with the fostering process after years of hearing stories from Laura's neighbor, who was a nurse, about how many kids were being removed from their parents at birth because of drugs. How desperate the state was for foster families. How horrible it was when a kid had nowhere safe to go. She felt inadequate for the task but couldn't talk herself out of getting involved.

All those poor babies.

She peeked at Peter sitting on the couch and set the license aside. She would deal with that later. Right now, the most important thing she needed to do was figure out what it would take to homeschool Peter until Christmas. She would need books. Lots of them. And were there requirements to meet? Forms to fill out?

She fired up her laptop. The internet would have answers. As she waited for the computer to install an update, she watched a robin hop from branch to branch on a tree outside the kitchen window. Was she crazy? Was all this because the big 4-0 loomed on her horizon?

She checked the time. Katelyn and Alexa would be home from school

in half an hour. They already thought she was nuts. Wait until they found out about Peter.

Her cell phone buzzed. The number was local, but unfamiliar.

“Hello?”

“This is Stacy from DCYF, calling for Laura Gambler.”

Laura’s eyebrows rose. She must be calling about the foster care license they’d just received. But how did she know it came today?

“Yes, this is Laura.”

“Hi. I’m calling about a possible placement.”

CHAPTER THREE

BRI TUCKED HER ARMS UNDER her breasts to ease the pressure. They'd never been so big or so firm. But mostly they hurt. Everything hurt. She needed out of this stupid place.

A woman's face popped into her mind. A woman with short gray hair, sharp eyes, and cheeks like crumpled leather. Grandma Deedee. Bri hadn't seen or spoken to her in two years. Boy, wouldn't she be surprised to hear she had a great-grandbaby.

Well, she wouldn't hear it from Bri.

A nurse in purple scrubs entered the room. Bri tugged a blanket over the wet spots on her gown where milk dripped from her aching nipples. They wouldn't even give her any good pain pills. Where was a tablet or two of oxy when a girl needed it?

AJ better hurry up and get back.

"Would you like me to wheel you over to the nursery so you can try a bottle again?" The nurse tried on a hopeful smile.

Bri grunted. "No, I want you to bring my baby here."

"That's not possible at this time."

A scowl twisted Bri's face. That's what she said every time. Dumb nurse.

The doctor had told Bri they ran a test on Providence's umbilical cord, and it came back positive for meth. But he had to be lying. She hadn't used in months, not since she realized she was pregnant. He said

Providence had to stay in the nursery until the state did an “investigation” and that she wasn’t allowed to nurse. What a load of bull. What business was it of theirs anyway? It’s not like she was going to do any drugs now that her baby was born. She wasn’t stupid.

The nurse left the room and AJ came in. Her heart pounded at the smell of cigarettes on his clothes. She needed a smoke, too. Bad.

She threw off her blanket and tried to sit up. “Help me into the wheelchair.”

“What’s all over your gown thing?”

“What do you think?”

AJ frowned at her. “Did you feed him yet?”

“I tried, but he wouldn’t. He just cried the whole time. I didn’t know what to do.”

Everyone stared at her when she went in there. Watched her like she was going to drop him on his head or something. It wasn’t her fault he wouldn’t take the bottle. The nurse said Providence might be having a hard time drinking because he was three weeks early, but Bri knew the truth. He was upset because he wanted real milk. Because the nurses were mean. And because he couldn’t be with her all the time.

The memory of holding him in her arms, smelling his hair, gave her a surge of energy, and she swung her legs off the side of the bed. She would smoke a cig. AJ would help her dress. Then she would demand they hand over her baby so she could leave.

A soft knock sounded at the door. Bri yanked the blanket back over her gown but remained sitting up. A woman in black pants and a gray turtleneck entered the room. She carried a notebook under her arm.

“Bri? AJ? My name is Stacy. I’m a social worker with the Department of Children, Youth, and Families. I’m here to talk with you about Providence.”

Unbelievable. If Bri could stand, she’d rip that notebook out of what’s-her-name’s hands and spit on it. Instead she released a string of profanity longer than the tube that had connected her to a plastic pee bag up until a couple hours ago. Stacy didn’t flinch.

“Shut up, Bri,” AJ whispered. “You’re not helping.”

Stacy pushed an armchair over to the bed and settled into it. “Why don’t you lay back down, Bri.”

Bri’s jaw clenched. This woman had no right to tell her what to do. She didn’t want to lay down. She needed a cig, not a lecture. But she couldn’t walk out of the room without help, and AJ’s message was clear when he jerked his head at the bed. She growled and pulled her legs back up under the covers.

Stacy nodded at Bri. “I can see where Providence gets that hint of red in his hair. And his determination.”

Bri touched her head. The long auburn locks that used to be thick and fiery were dull and lifeless now. She sank back onto the pillow.

“Like I said, I’m with DCYF.” Stacy’s voice was calm and even. “I’m here because of a concern about meth use. Do you understand what that means?”

AJ nodded. Bri glared.

“The state has opened an investigation into your situation. We need to determine what will be best for Providence at this time, and I need to ask you some questions.”

Stacy pulled a pen from her bag. Bri stifled a scream. More questions. Everyone who came along had questions. This was ridiculous.

“I want my baby.”

Stacy opened her notebook. “I understand. I want to help you. But I can only do that if you’re honest with me and cooperate with the investigation.”

AJ leaned against the bed. “We will.”

Bri stared at him. He hadn’t even wanted her to keep the baby. He’d yelled at her for getting pregnant in the first place. Now he cared all of a sudden? Suspicion seeped into her mind like fog under the door. What was he up to? But he was right. To get her baby back, she would do anything.

Stacy gave a small smile. “Okay. Great. Let’s start with your address.”

A little white house with a blue door on Providence Street appeared in the corner of Bri’s mind. She shook her head.

Stacy tapped the paper with her pen. "Where were you living before you came here?"

"There's a camper on my buddy's property outside of town," AJ said. "We been staying there a couple months. Don't know the address."

"Could you contact your friend and get it? I'll need to see it."

AJ looked at the floor. Bri's fingernails dug into her palms. This woman would never let Providence go home with them if she saw that dump. The roof leaked and mice lived in the cupboards. Not to mention the filth. And the drug stuff everywhere.

She gave AJ a pointed look. "It was a temporary place. We're moving, soon as we get out of here."

"Okay, where will you be going?" Stacy's expression was passive, but Bri didn't like the tone of her voice. Too polite.

"Um . . ."

AJ spoke up. "I got another buddy who's got a house for rent in Northland. It needs some fixing up, but I can do that no problem. We're going there."

Bri held her breath. She didn't know if it was true, but if the story bought them some time . . .

Stacy wrote something on her paper. "I'll need an address."

* * *

Bri sat in a wheelchair and stared out the window, a frigid darkness enveloping her. Outside, the sky was bright blue, but it brought no cheer. She furiously bounced her left knee and flicked her hand against the wheel. *Clunk, clunk, clunk*. She needed a cig.

That social worker lady, she hadn't stayed long. She said Providence was going to a foster home for thirty days while she continued her investigation. She said the foster mom was coming tomorrow to pick him up. She said . . .

Bri didn't want to think about that. Her hands shook as she pushed her hair out of her face. She couldn't wait to leave this place. The sooner

she got out of here, the sooner she could prove to that Stacy person that it was all a big mistake and she could take care of Providence just fine. Sure, she was only eighteen, but she knew what to do.

She touched her stomach, the hollowness inside her like an egg knocked from its nest, cracked open and spilled out. When the doctor had operated on her, he'd emptied her out in every way possible. Nothing but her baby in her arms could fill her back up.

She eyed the cell phone in her lap. AJ's. Hers was broken. A phone number flashed in her mind like an Open sign. Grandma Deedee's number. She must be feeling really low if she would consider texting Grandma. But she needed help, big time, and there was no one else.

The screen lit up when she pushed a button. With sluggish thumbs she opened a new text message.

Hey. It's Bri.
In hospital.

Should she say something about Providence? Maybe she should wait until she got everything straightened out. Who knows what Grandma would think.

She hit Send. Then threw the phone on the floor.