

# UNTIL I FIND YOU by Rae Frey

## EXCERPT

### 1 BEC

Someone's coming.

I push the stroller. My feet expertly navigate the familiar path toward the park without my cane. Footsteps advance behind me. The swish of fabric between hurried thighs. The clomp of a shoe on pavement. Measured, but gaining with every step. Blood whooshes through my ears, a distraction.

One more block until the park's entrance. My world blots behind my sunglasses, smeared and dreamy. A few errant hairs whip across my face. My toe catches a crack, and my ankle painfully twists.

No time to stop.

My thighs burn. A few more steps. Finally, I make a sharp left into the park's entrance. Jackson's anklet jingles from the blistering pace.

"Hang on, sweet boy. Almost there. Almost." The relentless August sun sizzles in the sky, and I adjust my ball cap with a trembling hand. Uncertain, I stop and wait for either the rush of footsteps to pass, or to approach and attack. Instead, nothing.

I lick my dry lips and half turn, one hand still securely fastened on my son's stroller. "Hello?" The wind stalls. The hairs bristle on the back of my neck. My world goes unnaturally still, until I choke on my own warped breath.

I waver on the sidewalk and then lunge toward the entrance to Wilder. The stroller is my guide as I half walk, half jog, knowing precisely how many steps I must take to reach the other side of the gate.

Twenty.

My heart thumps, a manic metronome. Jackson squeals and kicks his foot. The bells again.

Ten.

The footsteps echo in my ears. The stroller rams an obstacle in the way and flattens it. I swerve and cry out in surprise.

Five.

I reach the gate, hurtle through to a din of voices. Somewhere in the distance, a lawn mower stutters then chugs to life.

Safe.

I slide toward the ground and drop my head between my knees. My ears prick for the stranger behind me, but all is lost. A plane roars overhead, probably heading for Chicago. Birds aggressively chirp as the sun continues to crisp my already pink shoulders. A car horn honks on the parallel street. Someone blows a whistle. My body shudders from the surge of adrenaline. I sit until I regain my composure and then push to shaky legs.

I check Jackson, dragging my hands over the length of his body— his strong little fingers, his plump thighs, and perpetually kicking feet—and blot my face with his spit-up blanket. Just when I think I'm safe, a hand encircles my wrist.

"Miss?"

I jerk back and suck a surprised breath.

The hand drops. "I'm sorry," a woman's voice says. "I didn't mean to scare you. You dropped this." Something jingles and lands in my upturned palm: Jackson's anklet.

I smooth my fingers over the bells. "Thanks." I bend over the stroller, grip his ankle, and reattach them. I tickle the bottom of his foot, and he murmurs.

"Are the bells so you can hear him?" the woman asks. "Are you . . . ?"

"Blind? Yes." I straighten. "I am."

"That's cool. I've never seen that before."

I assume she means the bells. I almost make a joke—neither have I!—but instead, I smile. "It's a little early for him to wear them," I explain.

"They're more for when he becomes mobile, but I want him to get used to them."

"That's smart."

I'm not sure if she's waiting for me to say something else. "Thanks again," I offer.

"No problem. Have a good day."

She leaves. My hands clamp around the stroller's handle. Was she the one behind me? I stall at the gate and wonder if I should just go back home. I remind myself where I am—in one of the safest suburbs outside of Chicago—not in some sketchy place. I'm not being followed.

It's fine.

To prove it, I remove my cane, unfold it, and brace it on the path. I maneuver Jackson's stroller behind and sweep my cane in front, searching for more obstacles or unsuspecting feet.

I weave toward Cottage Hill and pass the wedding garden, the Wilder Mansion, and the art museum. Finally, I wind around the arboretum. I leave the conservatory for last, pulling Jackson through colorful flower breeds, active butterflies, and rows of green. My heart still betrays my calm exterior, but whoever was there is gone.

I whisk my T-shirt from my body. Jackson babbles and then lets out a sharp cry. I adjust the brim of his stroller so his eyes aren't directly hit by the sun. I lower my baseball cap and head toward the play-ground. The rubber flooring shifts beneath my cane.

Wilder Park is packed with last-minute late-summer activity. I do a lap around the playground and then angle my cane toward a bench to check for occupants. Once I confirm it's empty, I settle and park the stroller beside me. I keep my ears alert for Jess or Beth. I think about calling Crystal to join us, but then remember she has an interior design job today.

I place my hand on Jackson's leg, the small jingle of his anklet a comfort. Suddenly, I am overcome with hunger. I rummage in the diaper bag for a banana, peel it, and reach again for Jackson, who is playing with his pacifier. He furiously sucks then knocks it out of his mouth. He giggles every time I hand it back to him.

I replay what just happened. If someone had attacked me, I wouldn't have been able to defend myself or identify the perpetrator. A shiver courses the length of my spine. Though Jackson is technically easy—healthy, no colic, a decent sleeper—this stage of life is not. Chris died a year ago, and though it's been twelve months since the accident, sometimes it feels like it's been twelve days.

Jackson's life flashes before me. Not the happy baby playing in his stroller, but the other parts. The first time he gets really sick. The first time he has to go to the emergency room, and I'm all alone. The first time I don't know what to do when something is wrong. The first time he runs away from me in public and isn't wearing bells to alert me to his location.

Will I be able to keep him safe, to protect him?

I will the dark cloud away, but uneasiness pierces my skin like a warning. I fan my shirt, swallow, close my eyes behind my sunglasses, and adjust my ball cap.

The world shrinks. I try to swallow, but my throat constricts. I claw air.

I can't breathe. I'm drowning. My heart is going to explode. I'm going to die.

I lurch off the bench and walk a few paces, churning my arms toward my chest to produce air. I gasp, tell myself to breathe, tell myself to do something.

When I think I'm going to faint, I exhale completely, then sip in a shallow breath. I veer toward a tree, fingers grasping, and reach its chalky bark. In, out. In, out. Breathe, Rebecca. Breathe.

Concerned whispers crescendo around me while I remember how to breathe. I mentally force my limbs to relax, soften my jaw, and count to ten. After a few toxic moments, I retrace my steps back to the bench.

I just left my baby alone.

Jackson's right foot twitches and jingles from the stroller; he's blissfully unaware that his mother just had a panic attack. I calm myself, but my heart continues to knock around my chest like a pinball. I open a bottle of water and lift it to my lips with trembling hands. I exhale and massage my chest. The footsteps. The panic attack. These recurring fears . . .

"Hey, lady. Fancy meeting you here." Jess leans down and delivers a kiss to my cheek. Her scent—sweet, like honey crisp apples—does little to dissuade my terrified mood.

"Hi. Sit, sit." I rearrange my voice to neutral and move the diaper bag to make room.

Jess positions her stroller beside mine. Beth sits next to her, her three-month-old baby, Trevor, always in a ring sling or strapped to her chest.

"How's the morning?" Beth asks.

I tell them both about the footsteps and the woman who returned the bells, but conveniently leave out the part about the panic attack.

Beth leans closer. "Scary. Who do you think was following you?"

"I'm not sure," I say.

"You should have called," Jess says. "I'm always happy to walk with you."

"That's not exactly on your way."

"Oh, please. I could use the extra exercise."

I roll my eyes at her disparaging comment, because Beth and I both know she loves her curves.

"Anyway, it's sleep deprivation," Jess continues. "Makes you hallucinate. I remember when Baxter was Jackson's age and waking up every two hours, I literally thought I was going to lose my mind. I would put things in odd places. I was even convinced Rob was cheating."

I laugh. "Rob would never cheat on you."

"Exactly my point." She turns to me. "Have you thought about hiring a nanny?"

"Yeah," Beth adds. "Especially with everything you've been through."

My stomach clenches at those words: everything you've been through.

After Chris died, I moved in with my mother so she could essentially become Jackson's nanny. And then, just two months ago, she died too. Though her death wasn't a surprise due to her lifelong heart condition, no one is ever prepared to lose a parent. "I can't afford it."

“Like I’ve said before, Rob and I are happy to pitch in—”

I lift my hand to stop her. “And I appreciate it. I really do. But I’m not ready to have someone in my space when I’m just getting used to it being empty. I need to get comfortable taking care of Jackson on my own.”

“That makes sense,” Beth assures me.

“It does.” Jess pats my thigh. “But you’re not a martyr, okay? Everyone needs help.”

“I know.” I adjust my sunglasses and rearrange my face in hopes of hiding the real emotions I feel. “What’s new with both of you?”

“Can I vent for a second?” Beth asks. She situates closer to us on the bench. Thanks to the visual Jess supplied, I know Beth is blond, petite, and impossibly fit—and is perpetually in a state of crisis. She’s practicing attachment parenting, which, in her mind, keeps her glued to her son twenty-four hours a day. I’ve never even held him.

“Vent away,” I say.

“Okay.” She drops her voice. “Like, I love this little guy, truly. But sometimes, when it’s just the two of us in the house all day, I fantasize about just running away somewhere. Or going out to take a walk. I’d never do it, of course,” she rushes to add. “But I just have this feeling like . . . I’m never going to be alone again.”

“Nanny,” Jess trills. “I’m telling you. Quit this attachment parenting crap and get yourself a nanny. And if she’s hot, she can even occupy your husband so you don’t have to.”

I slap Jess’s arm. “Don’t say that. You’d be totally devastated if Rob ever did cheat.”