

CHAPTER ONE

The sun had set on the Meadowlands State Fair. Megan Forrester scanned the dazzling array of lights on the midway's rides, corn dog stands, and shooting galleries. The place was buzzing. Above her, excited screams came from the roller coasters rumbling along their tracks, and pop music blared from multiple speakers, filling the warm September air.

Her phone vibrated in the hip pocket of her jeans.

She resisted the temptation to answer. Constant calls and texts were part of her life as operations director at the Hunts Point Distribution Center, but they could all wait a little while longer. Tonight was all about the two most important people in her life.

To her right, her husband, Mike, and eight-year-old son, Ethan, sat side by side at a picnic table. They looked a lot alike with their side parts and unbuttoned polo shirts. Even the way they enthusiastically attacked their greasy, sugary churros had a similar rhythm.

Megan smiled to herself. She had kept her promise of giving them an unforgettable night out. Despite her rapidly advancing career at one of the most complex logistical operations in the world, a good work-life balance remained an ironclad priority, to keep her family strong.

This was Forrester family time. No compromises.

Ethan gulped down the last bite and pointed at the swing-chair ride. "Mom, can we go on, please?"

Twenty sets of double chairs whirled around a center pole from chains mounted to the large pink canopy. Multicolored lights flashed on the spinning tower.

The sight of riders flying in circles with their arms in the air gave Megan butterflies. Using her problem-solving skills to untangle countrywide logistical nightmares? No problem. This nausea-inducing ride, on the other hand, was out of the question. She checked her watch. It was already close to her son's bedtime, and it was an hours' drive to their house in Ludlow.

"Please," Ethan pressed. "One last ride."

"We need to get you home, mister."

"Aw, Mom, just one more. Dad?"

Mike glanced up, giving her a resigned smile. "I'll take one for the team," he said. "Besides, there's hardly anyone waiting."

“Okay, okay,” she replied with mock sternness. “But this is definitely you two’s last ride.”

Ethan sprang up from the picnic table, thrilled. Grabbing Mike by the hand, he led him over to the end of the short line. When they got to the ticket booth, her son rocked up on his tiptoes to meet the required height. He just made the cut. The operator grinned and waved him through. He thrust up his thumb as a roustabout directed them to the last two empty seats.

Megan grabbed a stuffed Minion toy off the table. She’d forgotten to capture the elation on her son’s face after winning him the yellow toy earlier. Who knew that landing a Ping-Pong ball in a fishbowl could bring such joy?

Most of the available prizes had looked seriously dated—probably older than Ethan. She wouldn’t have been surprised to see a Cabbage Patch bear on display. That was the nature of state fairs, though. Nobody came expecting to win a Tiffany bracelet or a pink Cadillac. It was pure, unpretentious fun, a far cry from the stiff and stuffy boardroom at work.

She headed over to the metal barrier for a better view.

This time, she wouldn’t forget to record the look on Ethan’s face, to capture a video clip that would join the hundreds already on her MacBook’s hard drive. Sure, *Ethan Forrester: The Early Years* wasn’t bound for box office glory, though it would get plenty of viewings in the Forrester household for years to come.

Megan dug her phone out of her pocket. She focused the screen on the ride and hit the record button.

Mike pulled down the safety bar. Both he and Ethan glanced across to her with beaming smiles, her son’s filled with eager anticipation, her husband’s with unabashed pride. These were the moments she lived for. They made everything worthwhile, everything complete.

A carnival worker quickly swept around the riders, giving each bar a quick rattle to see that it was properly secured. He then jogged back to the booth.

Moments later the chairs gradually rose to a height of three stories. The canopy rotated in a counterclockwise direction, picking up speed. Soon, twenty pairs of seats whizzed around to the strains of Belinda Carlisle’s “Heaven Is a Place on Earth.”

Ethan waved down. Megan shook the stuffed Minion in response.

Such a perfect way to cap off the . . .

Suddenly, a metallic groan rose over the sound of the music. Loud and discordant. Unnatural. Close . . .

The crowd surrounding the ride let out a collective gasp as the world around Megan seemed to stop. She froze. Something unplanned was happening. But what?

A heartbeat later, the answer came. The ride’s steel center pole groaned and bent in the middle, lurching several feet to the left. Riders instantly went from being spun horizontally to a diagonal revolution. The chairs whipped dangerously close to the ground on the descent.

In an eyeblink, the shrieks of enjoyment transformed into terrified screams.

The Minion and the cell phone dropped from Megan’s hands. The ride’s center pole let out a grating screech as it sank farther to the left. The vibration resonated through her trembling body.

No. This couldn’t be happening.

Mike and Ethan’s chair rocketed past, only a yard from the ground. Her husband had his arm protectively wrapped around their crying son. Their look of wide-eyed terror filled her with dread.

Megan drew in a trembling breath and looked frantically toward the ticket booth. A few people in the crowd screamed at the man inside to stop the ride, but he was already frantically hitting buttons and pulling a lever at his console.

Nothing he tried had any effect.

The chairs continued to rocket past, now dangerously close to the ground and soaring back up, almost vertically, into the clear night sky.

Please, God, no.

The crowd surged away from the barrier, as if sensing what might happen. Parents picked up their kids and sprinted for safety, cutting between the nearby food stands. Shouts and screams drowned out Belinda Carlisle's soprano. The buckled center pole continued its slow tilting, bringing each chair ever closer to a high-speed collision with solid concrete.

A double chair smacked into a mother and child who hadn't moved away from the barrier, striking them with tremendous force. Their bloodied bodies flew and then skidded through the crowd, crashing against the side of the high striker game. A man dropped the oversized mallet and knelt beside them, trying desperately to help them, but it was clear they were gone.

Megan staggered back a few paces, unable to take her eyes off her husband and son. She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

The next double chair obliterated the ticket booth and sent the operator's arm cartwheeling lazily through the air. Two teenagers in the chair slumped lifelessly over the safety bar as they swung upward for the ride's next deadly revolution.

The operator lay facedown on the floor, spattering the height-restriction sign with rhythmic spurts of blood from the stump of his severed arm.

Mike and Ethan flew past Megan again. Both had their legs raised to avoid the ground. The bottom of their chair scraped the concrete, sending sparks through the gaps in the barrier. The previous chair had cleared a path for them, and they sailed through the remains of the booth and continued upward.

The pole tilted lower.

"NO!" Megan shouted. "PLEASE, GOD, STOP!"

The noise of the scattering, screaming crowd drowned out her useless plea.

The next set of chairs, containing a mother and daughter, zipped down and hammered head-on into the concrete with a crunching thud. Their knees and faces took the full brunt.

Ethan and Mike rose again to the zenith of the near-vertical revolution. She couldn't process events at the speed they were happening. Couldn't move. Nothing had prepared her to watch the two most precious things—her whole life—seconds from a brutal end.

Another chair slammed down, giving the riders no chance.

Then another.

And another.

Six more people flung against the concrete like bugs against a windshield. At that speed and direct angle of impact, none stood a chance.

Each chair continued at a low angle, flattening small booths that sold caps or cotton candy and mowing down small trees to the right of the ride. Branches caught a corpse and tore him free from the ride, and there he hung, arms loosely at his side, face gone from the earlier impact.

A shriek beside her broke Megan out of her paralysis. She pushed the terror down and searched her mind for a solution. Anything to save her husband and son before their devastating impact with the concrete.

Only three chairs remained on the ride. Six surviving people of the forty who had boarded. They arced through the zenith and plunged downward, with Mike and Ethan's chair at the back of the trio. Behind them, mutilated bodies and parts lay in mangled pieces of wreckage. One woman hung from her seat by a twisted leg, the ragged end of her shinbone gleaming white where it protruded from her yoga pants.

The first of the undamaged chairs battered the ground, slinging blood over the horrified crowd.

A man with a blood-spattered face looked at Megan in terrified bewilderment. She had seen him send his two kids on the ride before Mike and Ethan.

Megan vomited nothing but bile. Tears filled her eyes as she stood alone in front of the ride, taking rapid, shallow breaths. Helpless.

This had to be a nightmare. It couldn't end like this.

She heard a low groan of rending metal.

One of the chains supporting the next pair of seats snapped free from the extreme centrifugal force. A teenage couple gripped the safety bar, yelling as their chair swung wildly to the side. The second chain broke, separating them from the ride entirely.

The freed chair catapulted high over the crowd's heads, through the darkness, and arced down toward the pirate-ship ride. The people disembarking had stopped to watch the disaster playing out from a distance. Now they dived for cover. Some tried to run but got bottlenecked in an exit big enough for only two at a time.

The teenagers' chair smashed into the crowd, knocking people aside like bowling pins before slamming into the hull of the pirate ship.

Megan spun back to face the swing-chair ride as sirens wailed in the distance.

She swallowed hard, and tried to make eye contact with her husband and son. They simply hugged each other, eyes shut tight, as if resigned to their gruesome fate.

A second before Ethan and Mike collided with the ground, the support chains snapped free. Their undamaged chair hurtled outward at a much lower angle, cartwheeling inches over the people's heads. The dangling chains scythed through the scattering people as they fled toward the food stands.

Fairgoers ducked left and right as the chair plummeted toward a burger shack.

The back of Mike and Ethan's seat crashed through the serving window and came to a violent stop on the asphalt.

Megan screamed. She sprinted toward the stand, weaving through the dead and injured. Her new, white sneakers splashed through slicks of blood. She feared the worst as she closed in, praying that they were somehow still alive, the sole survivors of this mechanized slaughter.

Eighteen more seats still rotated around the canopy, most of them carrying disfigured corpses that repeatedly smashed into the concrete.

Chains continued to break free and whip through the air with chilling, decapitating force.

Megan ignored the danger. All she cared about was Mike and Ethan. She reached the burger stand and peered inside. An overhead strip light sparked. Debris littered the little square cook shack. Crumpled plywood. Hot griddles. Napkins. The owner must have fled because the only two people inside were Mike and Ethan. Both lay still, their arms and faces peppered with scratches and small cuts.

Her husband's eyes flickered open. He winced and turned to check on his son.

Ethan also came around, groggy and confused. He burst into tears and hugged his father.

A wave of relief washed over Megan, though she remained acutely aware that this wasn't over until a doctor could confirm the extent of their injuries. But they were alive—probably the only two from the whole ride.

"Thank God," she breathed. "Ethan, it's Mommy. You'll be okay, baby."

Megan ran to the side of the stand, ripped the door open, and stepped inside. A small fire had broken out where the edge of the chair bashed the stove. Only a few wood planks and a stack of frozen patties stood in her way. She stepped around them and raced through the thin smoke.

Ethan held both arms toward her for a tearful embrace.

"One second, baby," she said. "Let's get you both outta here first."

Her husband was in obvious pain. He grunted, clutching his ribs. Likely multiple fractures, making it hard to breathe. Blood trickled from a gash above his temple. She couldn't see any nasty cuts on Ethan, who stared at her with tears welling in his eyes.

She crouched to free the safety bar. It wouldn't budge. The impact had bent it downward, jamming Mike and Ethan into their seats. She scanned the chair at both ends for some kind of button or lever, without success.

Mike tried to help her by wrapping his hands around the bar and heaving upward.

Nothing. The bar would not move.

The crackle of flames in the background grew louder. Smoke billowed, making her eyes water.

Two men appeared at the front window.

“Help us!” Megan yelled. “It’s stuck.”

Both men recognized the situation and went for the door.

Ethan coughed in the fast-thickening smoke.

“I’m gonna get you out soon, baby,” she said, unconvinced by her own words.

Megan untied the sweater from her waist and gently placed it behind her son’s head. She wasn’t sure how much it would help, but she didn’t know what else to do in this moment.

A sudden whoosh of flames erupted to her left. She turned, and smoke burned her throat.

Flaming grease had run from an upended griddle and flowed across the floor, toward the chair. Megan and Mike glanced at each other. The look in her husband’s eyes told her that he, too, realized the consequences of not getting out in the next few seconds. Both grabbed the bar and lifted with their combined strength.

Again it didn’t move.

“Someone, help us!” Megan shouted. She couldn’t hide the looming reality from her son any longer.

Fire licked its way up the walls and across the ceiling. The cheap wooden structure was no match for the flames.

The burning grease reached Mike’s and Ethan’s feet. They screamed in agony as flames consumed their shoes.

Through the dense smoke, Megan spotted the locking pin, peeking out beside Ethan’s elbow. Fire blazed around them, but there was still time. She reached for it.

Flames from the grease fire immediately scorched her arm in 450-degree heat.

The overwhelming pain sent her staggering back. Skin shriveled and bubbled on her forearm. Regardless, she advanced toward her husband and son again, determined not to leave them to this terrible end.

A wall of fire exploded in front of her. Her body betrayed her and instinctively pulled away from the heat. Clutching her seared arm, she fell backward.

She scrambled to her feet but froze, terrified to move any closer to the swing chair.

Frozen by her fear.

Strong arms grabbed her and pulled her back through the kitchen. She fought them with all her strength.

“Get the hell off me!” she yelled.

“You can’t stay in here, lady!” a man replied. “It’s suicide!”

She struggled again, unable to break free.

Inside the stand, fire consumed the writhing bodies of her husband and son as their screams blended with the roar of the flames. Their hair flared up like lit matches. Then, as their faces blackened and their bodies contorted in the intense heat, the cries mercifully died away.

Now only the sounds of burning wood, the screams of the crowd, and the approaching emergency vehicles filled Megan’s ears.

The burly carnival worker who had pulled Megan from the flames finally let her go.

She collapsed to all fours and crawled toward the blazing food stand.

Heat drove her back. She could no longer see inside.

It was all over in less than a minute. Her son’s and her husband’s lives, her hopes and dreams, replaced by numbness and devastation.

She stared at the roaring fire for a few seconds, then doubled over and vomited.

Her family was gone.