

Chapter 1

Natalie – 2017

To-Do List

1. Sell everything.
2. Drive to San Francisco.
3. Introduce Dash to his father.
4. Leave Dash with his father.
5. Return to Chicago alone.
6. Go to jail.

“It’s Alcatraz!” eight-year-old Dash shouted from the back seat of the rental car. “Do you see it, Mom?”

Shuddering, I tightened my grip on the steering wheel and focused on driving across the Bay Bridge. Maybe bringing Dash to San Francisco was a mistake. Maybe this time a list wouldn’t solve my problems and I should just turn the car around and go back home to Chicago.

Except, after selling everything, I no longer had a home. No longer had anything but Dash, his dog, and a determination to face my past instead of run from it.

Through the rearview mirror, I watched Dash pull his labradoodle, Roxy, onto his lap and point out the window. “This is San Francisco, Roxy. Our new home. Do you see all the buildings? Do you, girl?”

In response, Roxy began barking and racing across the back seat from one window to the other. I pressed my fingertips to my temple. The dog’s constant yapping drove me crazy.

Still, I was grateful Dash had her. Everybody needed a faithful companion when on the verge of a major change in life.

“How long until we get to our new house?” Dash asked once Roxy stopped barking.

I turned on my blinker to exit I-80. “The rental is just a few minutes away, but we’re not scheduled to meet the landlord for another hour. I thought while we still had the car we’d drive down to Fisherman’s Wharf and find a place for Roxy to run around.”

“Do you mean use the bathroom?” asked Dash, never one to mince words.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean.”

“I thought so. I have to go, too. Hey, look. There’s the Ferry Building.”

Glancing to my right, I spotted the historic clock tower as Dash began spouting off everything he knew about the Embarcadero, which was a lot. Before leaving Chicago, we’d checked out several library books and had watched hundreds of YouTube videos about San Francisco. If things didn’t work out with Dash’s father, I joked to myself, Dash could always earn a living by becoming a tour guide.

Yet, as my son continued talking, I once again questioned the sanity of my decision. Would I actually be able to follow through with my plan? Would I actually be able to leave Dash with Gage?

The thought of being separated from my son was unfathomable. Dash was my whole world, and I'd do anything for him, which was why I had to turn myself in and go back to jail.

I couldn't live with this constant fear anymore. I couldn't continue having panic attacks every time I encountered a cop or saw the flashing lights of a patrol car.

"There's Coit Tower, Mom."

I looked to my left and swallowed hard. Years ago, Gage had kissed me on the top of that tower. He'd told me he loved me and that we'd be together forever. Unfortunately, *forever* turned out to be much shorter than either one of us had imagined.

As if reading my mind, Dash said, "Do you think my dad's ever been to San Francisco?"

The knot in my stomach tightened. Dash's questions regarding his father had increased lately. Hopefully, that was a good thing, given the fact that Gage would soon have full custody of the son he didn't even know existed.

What would Gage say when I told him about Dash? Would he despise me for keeping his son a secret? Would he refuse to acknowledge Dash as his own? Of course, none of that compared to what Gage would say when I told him why I needed to go back to Chicago.

Hands trembling, I reached for my water bottle, only to discover it was empty. Placing it back in the cup holder, I swallowed past my dry throat and continued driving.

In an ideal world, Gage would patiently listen as I explained everything. While he might disapprove of my actions, he would at least try to understand and be supportive.

Most importantly, he would embrace the son who grew more like him every day. He would welcome Dash into his life and promise to take care of him while I was gone.

"I think Roxy and I are going to like San Francisco," Dash said, his voice full of hope and enthusiasm. "I can't wait to get started on my new life."

Glancing back at Dash, I forced a smile. If only I could borrow some of his optimism as I started my new life without him.