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AUTHOR OF THE KAELY QUINN PROFILER SERIES

FREE FALL





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Free Fall • Nancy Mehl

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When you have a child, you discover a part of your heart you never knew existed. Then you have grandchildren and realize there's more room there than you ever imagined.

I dedicate this book to my incredible grandsons,
Aidan and Bennett.

I love you to the moon and back.

You're both so special, and I'm so proud of you.

I can't wait to see the incredible plans God has for your lives.

Thank you for letting me be your nana.

Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do. I'm half crazy . . .

Prologue

The screams of people buckled into rides designed to either terrify or thrill them rang out in the darkness. Walking through the park had always energized him. And tonight, as the rides spun, colorful lights flashed, and tinny music swirled, he once again breathed in the aromas of buttered popcorn, steaming hot dogs, and sweet cotton candy.

He'd grown up in this environment. His father had been a carnie, and they'd traveled together all over the country working carnivals, state and county fairs, and small amusement parks like this one. He loved it. When his father died of a heart attack a little over three years ago, the carnie bosses said he could stay on. At fourteen, it was the only life he'd known.

Besides, the carnies were a family. His family. He had grandparents somewhere here in Virginia, apparently not too far from this park. His father said they'd visited them once when his mother was still with them. But he couldn't remember that. They never really spoke about her. That was okay. If she didn't want him, he didn't want her either. His memories of her were few and easily forgotten.

His father had mentioned once that his grandparents had

money, but even now, at seventeen, he didn't care. He had everything he needed. Of course, as he got older, he began to really want a girlfriend. He was attracted to one dark-haired girl in particular.

He first saw her at this park three years ago, not long after his father died. She had shiny, long dark hair and a smile that made his heart beat wildly. When she walked, she sashayed back and forth, making him feel warm and funny inside. Sometimes she'd throw her head back and swing her hair as though she had no idea she was being observed. But she had to know how attractive she was and that every boy in the park watched her as she strolled past them.

He wasn't brave enough to talk to her, though. And besides, she was always with other girls. That made it even harder for him to approach her. The group all laughed and joked with one another as if they'd been friends forever. He couldn't help but be envious.

Eight other teenage boys traveled with their group of carnies, but he couldn't relate to most of them. They were coarse and stupid, and the way they talked about women turned his stomach. His father never referred to women like that even though his wife had run off with another man.

Eventually, though, he formed a friendship with Andy, who was just two years older. Andy understood him, liked books the way he did, and he never said bad things about girls. Handsome with blond hair and blue eyes, he always had a girlfriend. Girls stared at him all the time.

But when *he* smiled at girls, most of them acted like he didn't even exist. He tried to quell the anger and frustration growing inside him, but it wasn't easy.

Then tonight he'd decided to take a big step. He was run-

ning the Ghost Shack when he spotted the dark-haired girl and three of her friends waiting in line. She looked his way, and he got up the nerve to smile at her. His heart soared when she smiled back.

“Keep the tickets,” he said when she arrived at the front of the line. “That way you can ride again if you want.”

She wore a pretty white dress with yellow daisies printed all over it, and she smelled like . . . summer. It was intoxicating.

She smiled again. “That’s so nice.”

“You’re welcome.” Encouraged, he took a deep breath, then spoke to her in almost a whisper. “I have a break in an hour. Would you like to get something to eat? My treat.”

Her eyes widened. They were an incredible bluish gray.

“That sounds great,” she said. “Why don’t I meet you at the beer garden? Lots of tables there.”

His words seemed to stick in his throat, but he was able to spit out, “Yeah. Okay.”

She and her friends settled into the ride’s car, and he could hear them giggling as the large wooden doors swung shut behind them. Then their laughter turned into screams, a cacophony of terror that echoed throughout the old structure. The Ghost Shack always seemed to frighten anyone brave enough to venture inside.

When the car came out through the double exit doors, he unlatched the metal bar that had kept the girls safely inside. She stepped out, then looked back at him and called, “Don’t forget!” She blew a kiss in his direction before walking away, her hips swinging.

He turned his attention to the people next in line, feeling happier than he had in his entire life.

Minutes felt like hours until it was time for his break.

When Buzz finally arrived five minutes late, he was ready to throttle him. But he just handed over the ride and nearly ran to one of the carnie games.

He'd remembered that one of the prizes was a little stuffed dog holding a daisy. When you pressed its paw, it sang *Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do. I'm half crazy all for the love of you*. He asked the carnie, a guy named Mike who'd been a friend of his father's, if he could have one and pay for it later.

"Is it for that girl you been likin' all this time? I seen her go by here earlier."

"Yeah. She's gonna meet me over at the beer garden."

Mike handed him the stuffed toy and told him to forget about paying for it. He smiled and thanked him. This really was the best day of his life.

Before entering the beer garden, he stopped to smooth his hair and brush off his clothes. He was wearing one of his best shirts because he'd hoped she'd show up while they were here. Then he squared his shoulders and walked to the garden, quickly spotting her sitting at a picnic table. His face grew warm with anticipation.

He sat down beside her, smiled, and handed her the dog. "I got this for you. When you press his paw, he sings. It made me think of you . . . of your dress, I mean."

She pressed the dog's paw, and as they listened to the song, she laughed.

"I forgot to ask your name," he said when the song ended.

But instead of answering him, she looked into his eyes. "Would you like to kiss me?"

He nodded, unable to speak around the lump in his throat. Hadn't she noticed his scar? Would she change her mind if she did?

Then something in her expression startled him, but by the time he realized what it was, it was too late. Someone behind him poured soda over his head, and then both she and the girl who'd doused him started giggling. Several of her friends came out from behind the food stand, and they all began laughing hysterically.

“What a freak,” the girl said. “How could you think someone like me would be interested in you?” Then she stood and rejoined her friends, tossing the dog in a nearby trash can. As their laughter grew and others around him joined in, a seed of hatred was planted deeply in his heart.



Fifteen years later

The abandoned amusement park reminded Logan of an aging bride waiting for a bridegroom who never came.

From this vantage point, he and Jeff could see Alex get out of her car and walk toward the entrance of a building that looked like it was ready to collapse at any moment. Why had the FBI given its permission for this to happen? It was too dangerous. With the sun slowly slipping out of sight, the park was beginning to disappear into the dusk.

He glanced at Jeff. If his jaw were set any tighter, his teeth would crack. Jefferson Cole, unit chief of BAU4 at Quantico, wasn't afraid of much. But he and Logan were more than afraid. They were terrified. What if this went wrong? What if Alex didn't make it out?

They watched as she hesitated at the entrance to the dilapidated Ghost Shack, then reached into her jacket pocket and removed a small flashlight. She appeared to look up to

where they'd parked. She couldn't have known he and Jeff were there, though. This wasn't protocol. But Logan's feelings for Alex had forced him to be here, at this place, with her. If he'd had his way, it would be him walking into the forsaken building that had once caused its riders to shriek in fear. He could almost hear the frightened cries from years ago reverberate around them.

When he first met Alex, he could see her imperfections. A wide mouth. A long nose. High forehead. She wasn't beauty-queen perfect. But as he got to know her, interest in other women faded away. He could see only her. In his mind, she was the most gorgeous woman he'd ever met. Was that love? He wasn't sure. He only knew he'd never felt like this before, and a voice inside his heart whispered that he never would again.

"This is a really bad idea," Jeff said. He sighed. "But Alex insisted she had to try to save the women if they're still alive. So far this UNSUB's been one step ahead of us. I just wish Alex hadn't refused when the SWAT captain tried to get her to wear a wire. I know she was afraid the guy would find it, but . . ."

Jeff was talking about an unknown subject who had kidnapped several young women. They suspected there were more spread out across the state, although they hadn't been able to tie him directly to their disappearances. Typically, a serial killer had a narrower comfort zone. A place where he felt safe to hunt. Of course, they couldn't actually prove he was a killer. There weren't any bodies . . . yet anyway.

"We should have checked this place out first. Placed agents inside."

"I told you. There wasn't time." Jeff shook his head. "As

much as I hate to say it, this is our first and maybe our only chance to catch him. Alex is smart and well trained. We have to believe she can handle him.”

“There she goes,” Logan said as Alex stepped through the entrance and disappeared from sight. His whole body tensed, and he silently begged God to bring her back to him. Not that he and Alex were a couple. Not yet.

He’d never known anyone like Alex. She was strong, yet she could also be vulnerable. Sometimes her strength was her greatest weakness. She took too many chances. Could be incredibly stubborn when she thought she was right. That trait had landed her in trouble more than once. He knew where it came from, though. Her commitment to the people she swore to protect burned like an unquenchable fire in her soul.

That devotion was why she was walking into a situation that could easily end her life. The FBI had received a call summoning Alex to this spot, claiming that the location of the missing women would be revealed if his demands were met. The hope that it might be true had brought them all here. There were families who couldn’t give up, who were praying that their loved one would return to them. Logan understood why Alex felt she had no choice, but he still wanted to physically pull her out of there. He tried to ignore the fear that she wouldn’t come back from this attempt, but it clawed at his mind.

Logan reached into his pants pocket and took out the bottle of pills that went everywhere with him now. He opened the lid, shook two into his hand, and managed to swallow them dry. He was taking too many, but the headaches were blinding, the pain unbearable.

“Logan,” Jeff said gently, “you’ve got to take care of—”

“No!” Logan instantly felt guilty. He hadn’t meant to bark at Jeff, but he was determined to be available if Alex needed him. Although she would never admit it, in his heart he knew she depended on him. Yet sometimes all he could do was just be there for her, and he had no intention of letting her down now—even if she didn’t know he was close by.

“I’m sorry, Jeff. But if you hadn’t told me the truth, it would have been really hard for me to forgive you. This is my choice. I had to be here.”

“I know you wanted to stop this,” Jeff said. “But it was out of my hands. We both had to follow orders.”

Once he knew the truth, Logan had thought about calling Alex, begging her not to do it, but he knew she wouldn’t have listened. It would have only distracted her, making it harder for her to concentrate on her mission. And that could get her killed. So even though he hated what she was doing now, he could only watch . . . and pray.

The minutes ticked by like hours. Logan could barely breathe. What was taking so long? HRT and SWAT agents were parked as close to the building as they could get without being seen, waiting for Alex to emerge. They were hidden behind a large sign that promised Magic Land Park would provide “the most fun you’ve ever had.” So far it was failing miserably at living up to its hype.

If Alex received the promised information, she was to exit the structure and wave, letting the SWAT team know it was safe to breach the building. If she didn’t wave, they were to stay where they were until she could get back to them. Maybe the UNSUB hadn’t shown up. This could be a test to see if Alex would follow his instructions.

“It’s been too long. I have a bad feeling about this,” Jeff said.

“I do too.”

Then they saw the SWAT team get out of their vehicle. They were through waiting. Something was wrong. Alex should have been out by now.

“If she was wearing a wire or had her phone, we’d know if she was okay,” Jeff mumbled.

“But besides telling her she had to come alone, he said no gun, no wire, and no phone. Defying him could have gotten her killed. I hope he didn’t find the weapon she does have.”

Alex had a hard nylon knife tucked inside her sock and boot. It wouldn’t show up if the UNSUB had a metal detector. Neither would the specially built tracker they’d hidden in the lining of her jacket. Logan felt better knowing she had a way to defend herself if she needed to.

Jeff cursed. “This is insane. We should have set the parameters, not let this guy do it.”

“Hard to say no when the UNSUB threatens to start killing hostages if you don’t follow orders. He was smart giving Alex only thirty minutes to arrive. I’m just glad SWAT and HRT were also ready to roll.”

Logan got out of the car and walked a few feet away so he could see what was happening more clearly. Jeff joined him, and they stared down at the scene below. The agents were moving toward the structure, weapons drawn. Time seemed to have slowed to a crawl.

“I wish they’d hurry,” Logan said.

“You know they have to be careful. Not only for themselves but for Alex. If they move too fast—”

Suddenly, a loud explosion rocked the ground, and in only seconds fire engulfed the building. With Alex still inside.

Nine days earlier

Tracy craved more sleep, but her mind fought the almost overpowering urge. Where was she? How long had she been here? She had no memory of coming here. For a moment she wondered if she were dead, but that couldn't be right. This wasn't heaven. God didn't drug people.

She pushed herself up from the bed and swung her legs over the side. Immediately, the room swirled around her, and she grabbed the edge of the mattress to keep herself from falling off. It took a while for the dizziness to subside. She felt sick. Nauseated. And damp. She looked down and realized she'd wet herself. She was so embarrassed. She hadn't wet the bed since she was a child. Then anger quickly overtook humiliation. This wasn't her fault. She wasn't supposed to be here.

She reached inside her pocket for her phone, but of course, it was gone. Not a surprise.

Then she looked around the room. It was small, and there were no windows. But at least it seemed clean and neat. Besides the bed, there was a dresser, a wooden chair against one wall, a bookshelf with a few books, and a small table with something on it. She stood, wobbling some, and made her way to a note on top of a pile of folded clothing.

You can change into these or any of the other clothes in the dresser. Clean sheets are in there too. There's a toilet

behind the curtain. A plastic receptacle for the bag is next to it and will be emptied every night. Other plastic bags are available for any trash or laundry. Just put it all next to the door at the end of the day. Also put your food trays at the bottom of the door after each meal.

Plastic bags? A receptacle? Food trays? What in the world?

She turned around and carefully made her way to a dark pink curtain that closed off one corner of the room. Pushing it aside, she found the kind of portable toilet her family had used when they'd gone camping years ago. She remembered how it worked. Once the bag attached under the seat was partially full, you disposed of it and put a fresh one in its place. As the note promised, a plastic pail sat next to the toilet.

She took in a small sink and some towels and washcloths hanging on a metal bar. A cabinet under the sink was filled with shampoo, soap, lotion, feminine products, a brush, and a bag with makeup. It seemed he'd thought of everything, but she certainly wouldn't be applying any makeup for this freak.

She stumbled back to the dresser, where she found sheets and pillowcases in one drawer and packages of new underwear and socks in the next one. Jeans and some folded T-shirts had been placed in the last one. She slammed it shut. She had no intention of staying here long enough to use all of this.

But even though she didn't want to agree to anything asked of her, she couldn't stand the way she felt—or smelled. It was obvious she'd been here at least a day, maybe two. She took the clothes from the table, lifted a package of underwear from the dresser, and started to strip off her sweat suit. But then, suspicious, she looked around again. Sure enough, a camera was positioned up in one corner with

only the curtained area blocked from its view. She had no intention of giving this pervert a show, so she stepped behind the curtain again.

She washed herself, then pulled on the jeans and T-shirt, which fit surprisingly well. They also looked clean and smelled fresh. She felt better.

She shoved her discarded clothing into a plastic bag, then dropped it on the floor next to the dresser, where she grabbed some socks. The floor was concrete. Cold. She carried the socks to the wooden chair next to the wall, then sat down and tugged the socks onto her bare feet. They were thick and warm, which felt good.

She carried the plastic bag to the door, but when she turned the knob, it was locked. The door was made of metal with a small knob about three-fourths of the way up attached to a small panel. There was a larger panel positioned near the floor.

The walls were made out of some kind of stone. She touched them, and they felt cool to the touch. Where was she?

She was about to try opening the top panel when another wave of dizziness hit her. She made it back to the bed, but it was still wet, so she returned to the chair and waited for the room to stop spinning. When it did, she quickly removed the wet sheets and shoved them into another plastic bag. The mattress had a plastic protector, and she used one half of a towel to wipe it down with soap and water. Then she dried it with the other half.

After that she wrangled clean sheets onto the mattress and slipped a new pillowcase onto the pillow. She checked a tiny closet in another corner and discovered a soft comforter.

There was also a hook with a flannel nightgown hanging from it.

She was so tired. Even though she wanted nothing more than to learn where she was and get out of there, she crawled into the bed and pulled the top sheet and comforter up to her shoulders. Then she allowed herself to start drifting off again, determined to fight back as soon as she could.