



Before I Wake



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Prologue

The movers had gutted the house of her furniture and belongings. Rae Gabriella doubted she could find even a throw pillow remaining. She sank down on the living-room carpet to use the fireplace hearth as a backrest.

Stones dug into her back. The house had felt sunny and welcoming when she had moved in; now it felt ready to expel her too. Too much violence had happened here.

“You want the last piece of pizza?” Bruce Chapel asked, stretching out where her sofa had been.

“I can’t eat another bite. Go ahead.” Sweat had dried on Bruce’s blue sweat-shirt and his jeans had picked up cat hair. Rae wished the movers had taken the cat too, but the Siamese she was watching for a friend was still prowling around here somewhere.

Bruce tugged over the open cardboard box and picked up the last slice of pepperoni pizza. “What time did you say your friend was coming by?”

“Late.”

He waited, but she didn’t offer more. “When we were dating, you weren’t this quiet with details.”

She smiled at him. “I’ve acquired a few bad habits in the last eleven years.” She finished her soda and then slid out one of the ice cubes to crunch. “I already miss being a cop.”

“I bet the FBI would ignore the resignation if you want to change your mind. And I know the Chicago PD would welcome you back.”

She trusted Bruce implicitly, but she wasn't ready to talk about the last undercover assignment yet. “No, I'm done. I just want to equivocate now that the decision is made. I'm joining my uncle's crime-scene-cleanup business at least part-time and I'll see where I want to go from there.”

She'd seen her first dead body before she was seventeen and helped clean up her first murder scene when she was twenty. At least the work saved relatives of the dead from having to deal with the mess—and maybe for her it would be a bit of redemption through service. She studied the bottom of her glass and didn't want to think about her motivations that deeply.

The cat came into the room hugging the baseboards. Bruce held out a corner of the pizza crust and the cat swished his tail and stalked over to check it out. Bruce deftly got his hand around the cat and pulled him over to pet. “I was thinking on the drive out here that I might do something more than just help you pack.”

“Oh? What?”

“Offer you a job.”

Rae crunched another ice cube and shoved it to the side of her mouth. “What did you have in mind?”

Bruce smiled.

It was the way he smiled. She blinked and dropped the ice cube into her hand. “You're dangerous to my health, you know that? I about swallowed it.”

“You said you'd be my partner one day.”

“We were talking about getting engaged, not being business partners. Besides, it was eleven years ago and I seem to remember we were sitting on my uncle's front porch at 2 a.m. when we had that discussion. A statute of limitations should apply.”

Her phone rang, the sound echoing through the hollow rooms. She got to her feet. “I'll think about it, okay? But no promises.”

“None expected. The idea's going to grow on you.”

She laughed at his confidence. “Maybe.” She went to answer the phone.

Spending more time with Bruce—it had an interesting appeal to it. The

phone rang a third time and she picked up her pace, afraid it was news she did not want to hear. Mark Rivers was dead and she just wanted to get out of town before the next chapter in that story was written.



Bruce listened to Rae take the stairs two at a time. She was coloring her hair to keep away the gray and her glasses were new, but for a former girlfriend, she was in a lot better shape for the years than he was. He'd added thirty pounds and another break in his nose since leaving the Chicago PD. He was glad friendship covered a lot of flaws, for it appeared their relationship was going to pick up where it left off as if the years in between hadn't happened.

But the secrecy was new. Bruce rolled onto his back. Rae hadn't patched over the two bullet holes in the living-room wall well enough; he could still see the outlines of the impact in the plaster. He studied the painted white spots and a grim resolve replaced the casual expression he'd kept around her.

Rae hadn't explained; he hadn't asked, but he knew how to read the remaining trace evidence. The grit between the ceramic tiles of the kitchen floor had been bleached, but there were still faint traces of pink in the corners, suggesting blood had pooled and soaked in before someone had been able to clean it. Two of the kitchen cabinet doors had been replaced, the wood stain used not quite matching the older wood.

A weapon—a knife, a bat, something not small or fragile—had been swung to injure or kill. From the area involved, it looked like the bullet holes had come toward the end of the fight.

Someone had tried to kill her in her own home.

What had happened here?

He let the cat have the last of the pizza crust and got to his feet. He'd supported Rae's move from the Chicago PD to the FBI, thinking it would keep her away from the trouble he saw on the streets and let her do more white-collar work. It had been that or else present her with the ring he had carried in his pocket and convince her to stay.

It wouldn't have been the best thing for her; he'd been a bit too career

intense back then and the chances he took on the job hadn't meshed well with the idea of a wife expecting him to come safely home.

Rae had graduated from the FBI Academy, gone to Dallas, and then moved to Washington, D.C., where she had become involved with another agent. He'd let her go and wished her the best. But seeing this, it was obvious he had made the wrong choice.

A case gone bad? A relationship? He could speculate and contemplate, but he wouldn't ask. Rae would tell him when she was ready. He had his own memories from the last eleven years that would not easily find words even with Rae. She hadn't been that religious years ago; neither had he for that matter, but getting shot at might have changed things. It had for him. So much needed to be understood to know how he could best help.

"The Realtor will be over in the morning."

Bruce turned as Rae came back into the room. She joined him by the window to look out at the night. She didn't bear the visible signs of a fight, but her sweatshirt and jeans covered a lot. He settled his hand on her shoulder. He felt her weight shift to lean into his hand. "It's a good clear night for driving."

She smiled at him and he could feel the emotional hole that was her absence in his life fill a bit. The doubts he'd had about coming east, minor and merely whispers of regret, faded. He rubbed his thumb on her shoulder blade and then lifted his hand away. There was time and that was the best news he had. Time could fix about anything. "Traffic's light. I should make good progress once I'm out of the city."

Rae walked him to the door. "I should be ready to follow by noon tomorrow, once the Realtor has what she needs."

"Call me occasionally as you travel."

"I will."

Bruce unlocked the door of the van packed with Rae's more breakable pieces. Snow hadn't stayed this far south yet, but the January night had a cold bite to it. At least Rae had called him, out of the blue and late at night, but when she needed a friend she'd still had his number. He could build on that. Whatever had happened here, it would best be dealt with by getting her onto his own turf.

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Rae fingered the edge of the worn business card as she drove, her handwritten directions on the back faded after lying on the car dash in the sun. She turned the card over and read the raised black type.

*Bruce Chapel
Chapel Detective Agency II
Justice, Illinois*

Bruce's cousin, Sam Chapel, had formed the first Chapel Detective Agency over in Brentwood years before. Bruce had decided a few years ago to follow in his footsteps. If working for Bruce was anything like dating him, she was heading into unpredictable terrain.

She didn't have to do this. She looked at herself in the rearview mirror, into calm blue eyes that masked the accumulated turmoil of the past few years, and accepted that she had to do something.

She needed somewhere quiet to let the stress of the last years drain away, and it didn't get more anonymous than working for Bruce in a small town she'd struggled to find on the map.

The town of Justice was south of Chicago and east of the Mississippi River; it had a population of twelve thousand six hundred four, and had the distinction of also being the county seat for Justice County: it sounded like a good place to disappear.

She reached around to the boxes in the backseat for another CD. Years of FBI service had been reduced to a few private files, paperwork on her future pension, phone numbers of friends and colleagues, and a pile of past daily calendar books noting appointments she could no longer remember. At least the music CDs were still useful. Rae pushed aside the regrets. If she had to start life over again at least it would be with a friend.

Justice, Illinois.

At least it had the sound of being an interesting town.



Justice was a quiet town; all his friends said so. Sheriff Nathan Justice drove down Main Street watching a group form on the east side of the street in front of city hall. He slowed.

Teenagers congregating on corners were his normal problem on a Saturday morning, but today it was the adults. He scanned the backs of jackets for union logos and sought out faces. Several were long-term union members and in the center of the closing circle was the union treasurer.

Nathan pulled over to the curb and let the squad car idle. He watched his patrol commander Chet Peterson leave the coffee shop and walk over to join the group, his bulk and uniform parting the crowd.

Chet had been a union member before joining the police force, and his presence had the desired influence. The group spread out even as the discussion grew louder. The strike at the tile plant had entered its fifteenth day and stress was growing in proportion to the days without a paycheck. The union contract had expired, a new one to replace the rolling extensions wasn't in place, and emotions were rising.

Chet glanced his direction and quietly motioned that he had it covered. Nathan put the car back in gear. *May the day just end without violence. . . .*

Nathan parked in the nearly empty parking lot behind the Justice Police Department and unbuckled his seat belt, but he did not open the door. He sat and looked at the chipped paint on the hand railing leading to the back entrance and he waited, hoping for any sense of optimism to return.

The town bore his family name and he was the one on duty watching it crumble.

If only he were wealthy and wise, he'd buy the tile plant and keep it open, keep employees paid, and keep this community together. If the plant closed, the stress of losing fifty-two direct jobs, as well as the work that flowed to local businesses, would decimate the town economy and trigger a cascade of business failures.

Those failures would ripple through the downtown area, forcing people to move to find work, collapsing housing prices, and weakening the tax base. The mayor was his mother; Nathan knew in excruciating detail how the plant's closing down would impact the town budget.

If there was optimism to be found, he couldn't find it. He pushed open the car door. Someone had to keep the peace and he had sworn the oath to do so. He just hoped this didn't end with his having to arrest his friends.

Nathan entered the police department and took the stairs two at a time up to the second floor where officer desks dominated the open space. His small office tucked into the corner had a door for privacy, but it was open, a box fan in the doorway turned on high. Winter outside meant the building's old furnace created a sauna inside. He stepped around the fan. His deputy chief was waiting for him.

"I heard it was a bad wreck," Will Rickker said, offering the transfer sheet Nathan had come back to sign.

"The SUV went down the embankment on the east side of the river and slammed into the railroad bridge. The gas tank punctured, and the fireball scorched the wood to the second level of crossbeams. It could have been a disaster. I've got railroad engineers out there now assessing the damage."

Nathan shed his gloves but not his coat and searched for a pen. "If we don't get warning lights ahead of that curve, it's only a matter of time before there's another fatal accident out there. The state highway department is promising action before the end of next week, but I've heard that before. I want us to step up patrols and start issuing speeding tickets a mile ahead of that curve until the problem is resolved."

"I'll talk to patrol."

Nathan scrawled his signature approving Noland Reed's application to the county narcotics task force. Every department in the area was vying for the precious slots on the task force, for once there, an officer had access to better resources and his salary was paid for by a federal grant. He hoped Reed got accepted.

Drugs flowing from the south up to Chicago were coming through the county in ever increasing volume and it was creating a cottage industry of safe houses and homegrown labs. Nathan had been diverting ever larger portions of his department's budget to keeping the problem out of his community. He handed the papers back to Will.

"The posting for the opening is going up at ten and I'll be there to hand over the paperwork," Will promised.

"You could send Carol."

"I could, but we need the radio upgrades and shifting Noland's salary is how we pay for it. If there are problems with the paperwork that I can't solve on the spot I'm tracking you down."

"I'll stay reachable."

Nathan moved around to the credenza to pour himself a cup of coffee. He'd fixed the pot at 1 a.m. and it was almost gone. "What's the latest here?"

"The contract talks broke down about twenty minutes ago. The union team walked out first. Adam looked mad as a hornet and he pushed through the gathered men without stopping to comment."

"He'll go steam somewhere in private rather than spread that anger to his men. What about management?"

"Zachary paused to make a short statement to the newspaper. The bottom line is still the health-care cost increases. There was some pushing and shoving between the picket-line guys and the company guys when word spread there were no new talks scheduled."

Nathan drank his coffee and let himself worry. "There's going to be trouble."

Will nodded. "The union is riding close rein on their guys, but if no new talks get scheduled soon, we're going to start losing control. We've already had some minor vandalism of plant trucks: graffiti and slashed tires. We need to avoid either side having a press conference and digging in their positions."

“I’m more worried about management trying to bring in strike breakers next week. Can we get through Monday with the officer rotations we have now?”

“We’ve got three officers at the plant, another two monitoring the picket lines, and we’ve stepped up patrols around the homes of the negotiators and plant managers. Short of having to start making arrests, we can handle it.”

“How’s morale?”

“Officers are wondering when this will end, but for the most part keeping their opinion of the strike to themselves and doing their jobs.”

Nathan studied the duty board. The names ran out before the assignments did. He had four ladies with protection orders against ex-husbands and boyfriends, two unsolved rapes, five open burglaries, and the county task force suspicion that there was at least one clandestine meth lab operating somewhere in his area.

He had more problems than he did men to solve them. The department only had twenty-six officers and some of those were part-time. “I don’t want to ask for more overtime unless it’s a crisis; we’re already pushing the men hard. What else happened in town overnight?”

“We had three calls reporting a prowler out on Kerns Road that haven’t been resolved. Someone took Goodheart’s pickup again; officers found it out of gas down by the lake pavilion. Overall, it was a pretty quiet night.”

“We needed one. I need to have a frank talk with the union steward today. If a man can’t pay his bills, he gets angry. If a man can’t feed his kids, he gets desperate. The other side of desperate is dangerous. We need a better handle on how guys on the picket lines are doing.”

“I’ll see what I can arrange.”

Nathan spotted the chief dispatcher. He leaned out the office door. “Eileen, how’s your voice doing?”

“Raw, but there. Just don’t come near me and catch this.”

“The pharmacist has your prescription refill ready. Call over, and he’ll deliver it here.”

“What did you do, bribe him?”

“Anything to keep my favorite lady answering my radio calls.”

She laughed. “Thanks, Nathan.”

He looked at the clock. “Will, after you deliver that file, why don’t you head home and get some sleep. You can spell me around dinner.”

“I can take tomorrow morning for you.”

“I’ll take you up on it.” Nathan had yet to find a substitute to take his Sunday school class of junior high boys and the last day he had off—it had been before the strike started. “If you need me in the short term, I’ll be patrolling on the highway, keeping speeds down while they clear that wreck. After that, I’ll be over at the plant.”

Will nodded. Nathan pulled on his gloves and headed back out to patrol.



Death was such an interesting process. Nella’s eyes flickered open. She tried to focus on him. Her eyes began to water as they widened. Her hand pushed against the blanket to slide out but didn’t have the strength to push the heavy weight aside. Her breath began to come in gasps. He watched, interested in the way her nerves reacted as the seizure hit. Her neck stiffened and tilted back. Her blue eyes filmed over as membranes broke. She bit her tongue. As seizures went, it was small and lasted less than a minute.

Her breathing stopped.

He watched for death changes, in her eyes or in her muscles, and saw her go slack. A double dose of the new formula killed; there was no surprise there. The tougher question would be to find a dose that gave the euphoric high without killing as it wore off.

He turned away and swung his legs to the floor, sitting on the side of the bed and stretching. He picked up his shirt.

He tugged against her weight to free the sheet; her limp body settled into the bed and pillow. He tossed the blanket back up and made his presence in her bed less obvious. He buttoned his jeans and bent to pick up his shoes.

He had to force the window to get it to rise in the aged frame. The window screen had numerous tears in the wire mesh; he used his finger to widen a few of them. He let the window come down under its own weight and it jammed

off center, half an inch from closed. He rocked the frame with his hand and it just jammed tighter. Good. Let the bugs come in.

He turned on the ceiling fan and closed the bedroom door. In the hallway, he turned the thermostat to eighty-four. Nella liked to keep her rooms warm; she complained to everyone about the heating bills and how her poor circulation gave her cold feet. He'd attest to the fact that her feet were cold; it had annoyed him for the last four years.

In the kitchen he retrieved the last of the wine he'd brought and poured himself another glass. He walked to the window. The rising sun left the woods between the house and the town of Justice in dark relief.

He could go home or back to work or to meet the guys at the union hall. He considered that and the absolute senseless way this weekend was going. Had she just been able to keep her mouth shut, he could have had another couple hours of sleep. But she liked to talk to strangers.

He finished the wine, took the bottle with him, and closed the front door, letting it lock behind him.

BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE

Before I Wake

The word *Justice* is both the name of a town and the name of its sheriff. Does this seem like an appropriate name to you? Explain.

In the prologue, we meet Rae Gabriella. What are your first impressions of her? of Bruce?

What might make Rae think she can “disappear” in Justice? Do you think that Rae will succeed in escaping her past by moving there? Why or why not?

What is Bruce’s motivation for taking Rae on as a partner? In Chapter Four he tells Nathan that she was a good cop and that it will be useful for him to have a female on his team. Do you think his motivation goes deeper than that?

What are some things Rae does to get familiar with her new surroundings? How does her approach, as a trained undercover cop, differ from that of a typical newcomer?

Nathan and Bruce are both dedicated to uncovering the truth in Justice: one as a sheriff, the other as a private investigator. How did each of them land in their present positions? When do their responsibilities complement each other? When might they clash?