

Chapter 1

Meet Pierce Edwards

Most people live life on a path that was set for them, too afraid to live on any other. But once in a while people will break down barriers and obstacles to fight to be the person they were destined to be.

—Anonymous

Met Pierce Edwards, founder and CEO of Blackbird Technologies, a large supplier of flight technology to the United States aerospace and defense industries. Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, where he continues to make his home with his wife, Sarah, and their two children, Lila and Max, Pierce successfully turned a boyhood obsession for planes and flying into a multimillion-dollar, privately held company that employs more than 600 people—all before he reached the ripe old age of 40.

Pierce's meteoric rise to success came as no surprise to those who knew him well. Always mature beyond his years, Pierce demonstrated a relentless, unwavering drive from an extremely young age. There was never a doubt in anybody's mind that this young man would end up at the top.

A successful company in a booming industry, capped off with a beautiful family, and a stately home with all of the bells, whistles, and toys that typically accompany wealth—it seemed that Pierce really did have it all.

Or so people thought.

Recently, however, deep cracks had begun to appear in the façade of Pierce's ostensibly perfect life. He could no longer access the cool, calm demeanor he had always possessed—that he had, in fact, taken for granted—as easily. Quite simply, Pierce was losing control. Lashing out at Sarah without provocation, drinking excessively, and working later and later each evening, he was disconnecting and disengaging from human contact. He was well aware of the changes occurring within, but for the first time in his life, Pierce had no idea what to do about it.

Was this a typical case of not stopping to smell the roses, or had Pierce literally derailed somewhere along his rapid journey to the top? He couldn't be sure.

While he was navigating his black Escalade through uptown Charlotte, heading home one evening, a light mist settled over the city. Flicking the wipers to the ON position, Pierce noticed that the green clock staring out from his mahogany dashboard read 8:40 PM. Bold LED numbers crudely taunted him as he wondered when he had last made it home in time for the 6:00 news. Had he ever? He honestly could not recall.

Switching lanes, he caught his image in the rearview mirror, and was surprised to notice tufts of gray hair sprouting at the temples. When did this happen? On closer inspection, he noted that his pasty skin could use a week in the

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Caribbean, or at the very least, a Sunday stroll in the park. “When did you stop caring about yourself?” Pierce asked his reflection.

Were these early physical signs of aging a fair and just ransom for his rapid rise in business and, well, *life*? Had he really matured too fast? When he was growing up, neighbors and friends had criticized his father’s efforts in raising him solo. It was a father-and-son team, with one leader and one hard and fast set of rules. Naysayers abounded when Pierce was a young schoolboy, barely whispering behind cupped hands, lamenting how terrible it was what had happened to this poor young boy. A boy needed his mother and deserved the chance to be a child; and that shameful, domineering father (providing the juiciest fodder for gossips) hadn’t allowed his young son the opportunity to grieve. ONWARDS AND UPWARDS was always his father’s motto; there was no time to stop and think too much about anything.

Retreating from his reverie, Pierce watched as the city faded behind him. Only the Bank of America building remained in view, proudly and powerfully thrusting itself toward the heavens—the Bank of America Corporation, currently number nine on the Fortune 500 list.

Shrugging off pesky, nagging concerns that had been haunting him for months, Pierce refocused his attention on future plans for Blackbird Tech. After all, he made sacrifices all the time. So what if he had been a little stressed out? It came with the terrain, and was the only way to reach the top. Singular focus was certainly a trait Pierce had inherited from his father. One goal and one path, no matter who or what stood in the way. Sacrifice. How else would he grow the

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company from the largest of its kind in the United States to the largest in the world? How else would he get *himself* on that Fortune 500 list?

As Pierced turned the car into his suburban home's long, winding driveway, the gravel protested beneath his wet tires with a loud crunch. Tall poplars lined the property, cloaking the massive 30,000-square-foot home in privacy. Turning off the engine, he sat for a moment, taking it all in. He had built this home for Sarah less than five years earlier. Sacrifice, he thought smugly to himself; it's all about sacrifice.

Retrieving his sports coat and a bag of files from the back seat, Pierce made his way, as he did most nights, toward the back of the house, where he would dutifully remove his shoes before entering via the kitchen. It had become part of Pierce's routine to pass through the large, open kitchen, drop a few rocks in a glass and top it off with liquid gold, his favorite smoky, single malt, Glen, before retreating to his office—usually reemerging around 11 PM to pick at leftovers from the fridge before retiring to bed.

Tonight, however, was different.

Rounding the corner near the hothouse where Sarah tended her beloved orchids, the gentle humming of the swimming pool filter across the yard failed to conceal voices coming from inside the house. One was Sarah's and the other, which he didn't recognize immediately, was definitely male. Pierce did not recall any cars parked out front when he drove onto the property. Who was in there with Sarah? Through the window he spotted her, leaning on the granite island, her honey-blonde hair loosely cascading down her shoulders, standing in such a way that made it impossible to tell whether

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or not she was crying. A tall, dark-haired figure moved across the room, placing his hand on her back. He appeared to be consoling her. Pierce's mouth suddenly went dry. Josh Andrews. He tried to swallow as he picked up his pace. What the heck was Josh doing here? Had something happened to one of the kids? Why had Sarah called Josh and not Pierce? A fire burned in the pit of his gut as he burst through the kitchen door ready to confront his wife and his best friend.

Immediately hit with the thick, heavy atmosphere lingering in the kitchen, a wave of nausea washed over him. Once again, he tried to swallow, but his swollen tongue and dry mouth would not allow such freedom. He turned to Sarah, "Everything okay? Where are the kids?"

"Daddy!" Max charged across the living room, literally flying into his father's arms. Pierce scooped him up. Little Max. Thank God he was okay. Glancing across the cream-carpeted living room, he spotted Lila neatly stacking the books she'd been reading with Max on a table next to the sofa. Lila. Sweet, shy Lila. Pierce reminded himself he had less than eight years to go before his heart would be broken when she commenced dating some pimply-faced, junior-high schmuck. Max clung harder to his father—or was it Pierce doing the clinging? It was impossible to tell. Pierce desperately wanted to freeze this moment in time; his daughter young and innocent, his son loving and sweet . . . and his wife and best friend not about to tell him whatever it was they were planning. Perhaps it wasn't eight years before his heart was to break after all. Perhaps it was merely eight minutes, or seconds, away.

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“Daddy, I missed you!” Max mumbled into Pierce’s neck, digging his little hands further into Pierce’s shoulders, an action filled as much with love as it was with longing.

“I missed you too, buddy.” Holding Max close, the sweet scent of Johnson & Johnson baby shampoo wafted up from his freshly washed hair. Was it really Johnson’s? His heart sank when he realized he did not know the answer to this. Pierce had not been a part of the kids’ bath time ritual for several years now. Sarah could be using engine oil on their hair and he’d be none the wiser.

“Daddy, you’re home! We waited up to say goodnight!” Lila exclaimed as she joined her brother, curling her limbs around Pierce’s legs and torso. An old, wise tree at the mercy of a rampant, youthful vine, Pierce waited patiently while the kids, wiggling in his arms, excitedly relayed the events of their day.

Kissing the tops of the children’s heads, he bid them good night, waited as they kissed Sarah and “Uncle Josh” good night, and watched them run upstairs, hand in hand, their matching Paul Frank pajamas swaying in unison. Lila was a good kid, responsible, a really good big sister to Max. Six years old, wow, he had to remember that. Time was slipping by. And how old was Max now? Four? Jeez.

Dreading the challenging conversation that was sure to follow, Pierce stalled, “Shouldn’t one of us be reading them a bedtime story?”

Sarah sighed. “Honey, Lila read to Max already. They’re good for tonight. I promise.” Maintaining eye contact, she smiled, one of her warm, disarming smiles.

For a moment Pierce thought he misread the entire scenario and the knot in his gut released a little as his tongue

peeled itself away from the roof of his mouth. That was before Sarah added, “We need to talk.”

Eyeing Josh and Sarah suspiciously, Pierce reached for a rocks glass sitting on a shelf in the cabinet above the sink. “Wait,” Sarah stopped him, “I opened a nice bottle of cabernet, it’s decanting in the dining room. I thought we might enjoy it together, the three of us.”

“Well la-de-dah, Lady Sarah,” Pierce wanted to say, “Look at you, going out in style! Probably spent a king’s ransom on a posh cabernet—decanting as we speak, no less—to ceremoniously enjoy with your *boyfriend* while your plans to divorce are announced.” Instead, Pierce coolly placed the glass back on the middle shelf and quietly made his way to the dining room while he raged internally. How did he let this happen? For weeks, months even, he had felt his life slowly unraveling; but *this*, he did not foresee.

Taking a seat at the head of the dining table, Sarah watched as Josh poured the heavy, red wine into the three glasses she had laid out earlier. Pierce, intent on holding on to some dignity, thanked Josh for his wine as he took residence in the seat perpendicular to Sarah’s, immediately regretting his choice when Josh sat directly opposite him. “Don’t crack,” he told himself. “Save face, buddy.”

Swirling the deep burgundy liquid in the glass, Pierce joked, “I’d raise a toast. But, I’ve no idea what we should be drinking to.”

Sarah reached across the table, gently placing her hand over his. He resisted the urge to pull away from her.

“Honey, relax. We didn’t mean to ambush you, it’s just . . . it’s just kind of difficult to get you to commit to anything

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other than work lately. Short of making an appointment with your secretary, I saw no other way for us to all get together.”

“Okay. Well, here I am.” Pierce loathed the fact he could not control the emotion in his voice.

“Buddy, Sarah and I ran to each other last week at the grocery store. We’re concerned about you. That’s all.”

Pierce could not stop the laughter bubbling up in him. “Concerned? What’s to be concerned about?”

“Pierce, did you see my car out front when you came in?” Josh held up his hand, stopping Pierce from answering, “No, you didn’t, because I *walked* here. I live four blocks away. Four. And I haven’t seen you in over five months.”

Sighing, Pierce slouched back in his seat, relieved and slightly amused by his gross misinterpretation of the scene. “What are you talking about? We had breakfast a few weeks ago.”

“Actually, I had breakfast with a stranger who barely ate, barely talked, and typed on his BlackBerry the entire time . . . in *May*. We’re in *October*, bud.”

Pierce flushed as a bubble of resentment rose within him; he did not enjoy being put on the spot.

“When I ran into Sarah,” Josh continued, “she burst into tears when I asked about you.” Stung, Pierce looked to Sarah, who quietly stared at her wine glass.

“Honey?”

Sarah continued staring as if the words she needed would magically appear in the glass at any given moment.

The three friends sat in silence. Only the faint ticking of a clock could be heard off in the distance. Pierce struggled to recall even owning an analog clock. He certainly had no idea

in which room it was housed. Each tick felt like an eternity and he longed to find the source of the noise and smash it into a million pieces. But he was glued to his seat, unable to move, as he waited for his wife to speak.

Sarah nervously curled her lower lip inward and gently bit down on it. “Please, please don’t cry,” Pierce willed her. She looked down at her hands, nervously fidgeting with her wedding band. Spinning the diamond pavé ring around her long and slender ring finger with the thumb and index finger of her right hand, she looked up at Pierce and found the courage to speak. “Honey, something has to change. You’re no longer the man I married.” She paused, struggling to control her emotions. “Believe me—I am *beyond* appreciative for the lifestyle you have provided for our family. Building your company required incredible commitment and a lot of hard work and I certainly understand the priority it takes in your life . . . *our* lives. But I need you present. So do the kids. Without you, this house, the cars, the lifestyle . . . well, it really doesn’t mean anything at all.”

Pierce remained silent. He recognized the importance of what Sarah was trying to say; yet he had no idea how to respond, or how he could fix it.

“When Josh asked about you, my heart broke. Josh has been your best friend since grade school . . . and he’d not seen or heard from you in months. I could not wrap my head, or my heart, around understanding what changed in you. When did you stop caring about the people who should matter most? It’s not who you used to be.”

Josh spoke next. “Financial and business success is just a small slice on the pie-chart, buddy. You told me that, years

ago, just after graduation. Family, health, friends, *a life*, are of equal importance. Attaining—and maintaining—balance; that’s the mark of a truly successful individual.”

Pierce cringed, embarrassed by the recollection of his pompous, immature, college-boy lectures. As if reading his thoughts, Josh said, “Yeah, you were young and inexperienced and probably didn’t have a clue what you were talking about back then. But there was a lot of truth to that piece of unsolicited wisdom you so generously handed out.” Josh smiled at his friend. “You nailed it—the mark of a successful individual.”

“It’s also the mark of a healthy one,” Sarah added. “Pierce, we miss you. We miss your laugh, your smile, and your presence. Our biggest fear is not losing you to your work; it’s losing you to a heart attack or something. All you *do* is work. You come home late, holing yourself up in your office. You rarely eat, but you do *drink*. When was the last time you saw the inside of a gym . . . or even your sneakers?”

“Sarah’s right . . . and I do miss my jogging partner.”

Pierce rested his head in his hands. What a chump he’d been. Here he was thinking Sarah was running off with Josh—which she probably *should!*—and there she was, giving him the chance to make things right. Josh too. He thought back to his last meeting with Josh. Had it really been five months ago? He’d treated his time with his best friend as obligatory at best, a mandatory stop on his way to more important things. Josh was right; he really had spent most his time that morning on his BlackBerry. What a jerk.

Deeply sighing, Pierce reached for his wine, raising it in the air as he spoke, “Here’s to interventions. No longer

reserved for alcoholics and drug abusers, but class-A jerks!" Laughter filled the room as their glasses clinked, shattering a heavy tension the air had been nursing from the moment Pierce walked in the door.

"I promise to be more attentive. Work's really hectic right now, but I promise you . . . *both* of you. I'll figure out a way to find more time." He looked toward Josh. "To run and hang out, catch a game or two. Like old times." And then to Sarah, "To spend more time with you and the kids."

Josh and Sarah exchanged looks as Pierce pressed on. "Honey, in a few months, during holiday season, we'll take the kids on vacation. A cruise, Disneyland, anywhere you want to go."

"Pierce," Sarah said firmly, "you're missing the point." Swallowing hard, turning to Josh for reassurance, she added, "We don't need a vacation. You do."

Pierce was stunned. What did she mean by *that*?

"Pierce, this is not a quick-fix problem. You've worked yourself into the ground and a very big part of you got lost on the way. It's been manifesting for months . . . years even. You've changed and I don't like who you are right now. Take some time, do some soul searching. Please, for the sake of our family, get back in touch with who you are and what you really want." She paused for effect. "Pierce, you need to do this if our marriage is to survive."

The ticking clock got louder. Or was it Pierce's own heart thumping, that deafening sound rising up in his ears? "Are you asking me to move out?"

"Heavens, no! But you do need to get away for a bit, a retreat of sorts." Sarah reached for a file and opened it before

sliding it across the table in front of Pierce. Looking down, he saw an e-ticket for an American Airlines flight to Colorado and a copy of an e-mail confirmation for accommodations. “I—I took the liberty of booking a cabin in the Colorado mountains. I know how much you enjoyed being there all those years ago. This is the best gift you could give yourself. Stop, take stock in your life—and find your passion and your truth again.” She walked over to where Pierce sat, draped her arms around his neck, and kissed him tenderly on top of his head. “You need to do this now, Pierce, before it’s too late.”

That gnawing, nagging feeling of emptiness Pierce had been fighting for months arose. Though he loathed to admit it, Sarah was right. He now realized that this attitude wasn’t just affecting him; it was taking a toll on his family and friends as well. He knew he had to agree.

“Okay, honey, I think you’re onto something here. I’ll look into this retreat idea and we’ll figure out some time for me to go, probably between the holidays and the New Year when things quiet down a bit.”

Tears welled up in Sarah’s eyes. “Pierce, you don’t understand. I’ve already booked the trip. You leave tomorrow.”

Pierce pushed his seat back from the table, almost knocking Sarah to the ground, wildly pacing the room, arms flailing. “The Colorado mountains? *Tomorrow*? Are you insane? I can’t just go off meditating on a snow-filled mountaintop in the middle of *October*—the beginning of the fourth, and final, quarter! Why not send me to Tibet, or the bloody moon? One way!”

“Pier—”

“No!” He cut her off. “No.” Pausing, reining in his emotions, a long moment passed before he turned back to Sarah. “I appreciate what you are saying. Every word. More than you know. Yes, changes have been occurring; I’ve noticed them too . . . the way I feel . . . talk . . . think . . . do business. But honey, I can’t just up and leave. The timing needs to be right.”

“Sometimes the right time never comes; you just have to jump in,” Josh piped up.

“Don’t tell me—Pierce Edwards, circa 1993.”

Josh grinned. “Yup.”

“Schmuck,” Pierce murmured, more to himself than Josh.

Placing his hands on Sarah’s shoulders, he looked her directly in the eyes. “I promise to go over my schedule this week and find the right time to get away . . . but please, call the retreat in the morning and cancel the reservation.” Kissing her tenderly on the forehead, he added, “I’ll see you in bed.”

“Josh, it’s really good to see you. I’m glad you came around tonight.” He hugged Josh before heading out the door.

“Anderson was all set to take over Blackbird for a short time.” It was Sarah who spoke, stopping Pierce in his tracks.

“Anderson?”

“Yes. Phillips. Your company VP.”

Pierce’s head spun wildly. He did not trust anyone else at the helm of Blackbird. Not even his VP—*not anyone*. The very thought of it gave him a splitting headache. “Well, then you should probably call him in the morning too.” Turning on his heel, he made his way upstairs, leaving a disheartened Josh and Sarah in his wake.

Pierce sneaked along the broad hallway upstairs to check on the kids before retiring to his office. Max's room was nearest. His tiny body sprawled across the shiny, red sports car bed, and toys were strewn all over the room. Pierce took them all in—robots, planes, balls, cars, trains, trucks, and bikes. When does a kid have time to play with all of those things, he wondered. A sliver of light shone through the curtains. Pierce padded lightly across the floor, dodging toys along the way, to close them. Looking out across the yard from the window in Max's room, the sight of the swimming pool sparkling in the moonlight gave him pause. A damn swimming pool! Did he really believe the toys, the pool, the private school tuition, buying every damn thing the kids wanted made up for his absence? Did any of this really substitute for a present and engaged parent? Pulling the covers over Max's tiny body, all the way to his dimpled chin, Pierce leaned down to kiss him, very gently, taking great care not to wake him.

Moments later, just down the hall, he peered into Lila's room, an explosion of every possible shade of pink. Six! He still could not believe it. Leaning against the solid doorframe, he fingered the pink satin ballet slippers hanging from its handle. Shame washed over him.

"You broke her heart, you know." Sarah's voice, a cold hushed whisper, startled him. Pierce bristled with anger as the guilt he harbored deep within put him on the defensive.

"I was in meetings, Sarah. You know that." The edge to his voice sounded colder when lowered to a whisper.

"A meeting you could have easily delegated to one of your engineers, Pierce." She glared fiercely at her husband,

delicate nostrils flaring with rage. “*Firsts* are just that, Pierce. They only ever happen once. No repeats, no undoing, or redoing. I only hope you understand all you are missing before it is too late.” Turning, she made her way downstairs, a whirlwind of pent-up frustration and disappointment whipping the air around her.

Watching Sarah storm back downstairs, he knew she was right. He could attend every ballet recital, every dress rehearsal, even each and every class Lila took, but his first-born and only daughter would have but one first ballet recital, and he had missed it. Looking in on his sleeping daughter, he choked down the lump rising in his throat. He had broken her heart.

Listening to her soft, rhythmic breathing, he wondered what she dreamt about. Trying to conjure dreams of a six-year-old only triggered memories of the nightmare that was his sixth birthday. The candles, the big, colorful cake . . . the two empty seats at the dining table where his brother and mother usually sat. Pierce closed his eyes as the familiar, painful sting of this memory ripped through him. It had been way too soon. Not quite a month. It was his father who had insisted upon the party, but his supreme effort to create a sense of normality only served to highlight their absence. The two empty seats, staring back at him in the flickering candlelight, had winded young Pierce.

“Make a wish, make a wish,” his father and aunt sang out cheerfully. Even as a young, heartbroken six-year-old, Pierce was wise enough to know the one thing he longed for could never happen, no matter how hard he wished: his mother and brother to take a different route that sunny Saturday afternoon after the soccer game. There would be no detour for an ice

cream cone, rewarding Billy for his goal. No crossing the old railroad tracks at 1:34 PM. No faulty signal. No oncoming train. Gasping, Pierce had struggled to blow the candles out. Fighting back tears, trying to force the air out, when all it wanted to do was rush back in, in heaving gulps. Aunt Joanna leaned in beside him, blowing out the six candles on his behalf. “Good boy,” she whispered, gently rubbing his back.

Aunt Joanna. Pierce smiled at her memory. What a gift she had been, stepping in to pick up the pieces his father dropped along the way. She was wise enough to know that she could never fill the void in his young heart. And she was wise enough to allow Pierce’s father to believe he was doing it all on his own, and doing a grand job. Pierce knew his father did the very best he could, and that he was consumed by his own grief the entire time. Pierce never had the heart to dissect or criticize any aspect of his upbringing, but still he was grateful for Joanna. Sweet Joanna, who allowed him to cry and pretended not to see, who picked him up from school early to have the too-big uniforms altered and then realtered when a growth spurt hit—all without his father knowing.

He had not seen Aunt Joanna in years. Granted, she now lived in San Francisco—which Pierce knew was a petty, lame excuse for allowing another important person to drift out of his life. Or was Pierce the one doing the drifting?

Turning away from Lila’s room, he noticed the light fanning out from beneath the master bedroom door, long, golden tentacles stretching down the hallway. Sarah must already be in there, he figured. Uncertain of how long he had been daydreaming in the kids’ rooms, Pierce made a beeline for the office.

Sitting at his desk, he quickly typed an e-mail to Anderson Phillips. Snapping his laptop closed, he joined Sarah in the bedroom. She looked beautiful, sitting up in bed, reading a paperback. Smiling sheepishly, he strode across the room toward the his-and-hers walk-in closets. His was on the left, Sarah's to the right. The standard joke around the house was that women—and Sarah especially—were always right. Tonight had been no exception.

As he placed the carry-on on the chair, Sarah slowly lowered the book onto her lap. "You're going?" She whispered, her voice a raspy blend of disbelief and joy.

"I'm going." Pierce smiled. "What time's the Denver flight?"

"7:30 AM."

"AM? Wow. You really *do* want to get rid of me. When's the return booked?"

Sarah made her way over to where Pierce stood and began to help him pack. "Honey, I didn't book a return, it's up to you. You'll know when you're ready to come home."

"Shouldn't be more than a few days," he promised.

Zipping up the black carry-on, Sarah stopped him by placing her hand over his. "Take all the time you need. We'll all be here when you're ready to come home." Smiling, she added, "If you do it right the first time, you'll only have to do it once."

"Is that another Pierce-ism?"

"I think so."

"You married a pretty corny guy, didn't you?" Laughing, they climbed into bed together for the last time before Pierce embarked on his journey.

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