

# THE SECRETS WE KEEP

NIKKI LEE TAYLOR



Magpie Creative Media

Published by Magpie Creative Media

ISBN: 978-0-6484406-1-1

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2021 Nikki Lee Taylor

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication can be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior permission in writing from the publisher with the exception of except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

**[nikkileetaylor.com.au](http://nikkileetaylor.com.au)**

# What Readers Are Saying

"If you want to add this to your To Be Read List, you certainly can because this nail-biting thriller gets you and at the same time makes you emotional. There is a beautiful pain this book leaves behind, and I certainly couldn't figure out the cover till the end and that is also something that I was not expecting... NOT AT ALL."



"This is one intense, twisted, addictive, complex, jaw-dropping novel! Not only is this a very well-written book with wonderfully interesting characters, but the suspense builds at just the right pace as the story unfolds."



"This novel had quite a few twists and turns and the twists are so juicy that I couldn't stop reading."



"The book touches on so many sources of pain addressing each with intelligence, empathy, and humanity. It is a true thriller in women's fiction."



"The Secrets We Keep was by far the best book I have read this year. Many twists and turns throughout kept me looking forward to my reading time each day. The ending was fantastic."



"The suspense never ends and parts of this book rip your heart right out of your chest. It is so hard to read through the tears but you have to because this book grabs you and pulls you in!! That quality is rare in a book!"



"I loved this book so much!! The depths of the twists in here will leave you speechless. It's a huge work of great storytelling."



**THE SECRETS WE KEEP**

BOOK ONE

*For my mother Glennis Craig, who has spent every day teaching me what a mother's love should  
feel like...*

# Foreword

According to research, in Australia 18 per cent of women and 4.7 per cent of men report having suffered sexual abuse before the age of 15. International analysis suggests the rates are even higher, reaching 19.7 per cent for girls and 7.9 per cent for boys. Even more alarming is a survey carried out in 2016 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics which reported only 10 – 15 per cent of Australian cases included a stranger as the perpetrator. These are horrific statistics.

While this kind of abuse is not a major theme of *The Secrets We Keep*, it does play a role in highlighting the importance of shining a light on child abuse.

All characters and events are fictional in *The Secrets We Keep*, and as the author I have paid careful mind to tackle this subject with the most delicate of care and consideration. There are no graphic abuse scenes in this book, however I do hope the references make you, as the reader, uncomfortable enough to realise this is an ongoing problem and one that should not remain behind closed doors.

While ever we shy away from things that make us uncomfortable, evil will continue to find its way through the cracks. We must be brave, and we must

be vigilant, and most of all, we must always stand up for those in need of a plain-clothed hero.

If this book raises issues for you, please contact your nearest mental health provider. **In Australia call Beyond Blue on 1300 223 636 or Lifeline on 13 11 14.**

# Preface

When something breaks, when it shatters, sharp edges are always left behind. That's how it was with me. I saw myself as a broken window, fraught with shards sharp enough to make the hardest of hearts bleed. I cut people, not because I meant to but because I was broken.

It had been that way for as long as I could remember. Only pieces existed. Pieces that whispered and pieces that shouted. Pieces that sought solace and pieces that screamed bloody murder. Pieces that ached, pieces that longed, and pieces that drifted on the breeze, quiet and gentle like ghosts in the dark.

People had tried to repair me. They wanted to round out my razor-sharp edges, but it never really worked. I was angry. I was hurt. I was a person without hope. I lived in the dark, surrounded by invisible walls too high to climb.

As a mother, I always saw myself as wanting. I never could figure out how things went so wrong. All I could do was live with the outcome, the fallout of my failures.

On the day it happened I hadn't seen it coming. I had no idea that what started out as a simple conversation would end the way it did, with a secret so dangerous it threatened to destroy us all.

## Chapter One

# SOPHIE



The blinds are drawn because I need them to be. There are days the light is welcome, but not today. Today, I need the darkness. It's the best way I know to pull them in close, here in the dark in the empty spaces where they no longer exist and yet still take up every particle of air.

My life. My love. My family. James and Josh. My husband and son, stolen while I was sleeping, peacefully unaware at that very moment the entire world was shattering around me.

It's the small things that hurt the most. An unexpected letter with his name on it. A television commercial for Linvilla Orchards – where we picked peaches every July, just the two of us at first and then with Josh. His familiar scent trailing behind a stranger, its ghostly arms wrapping around my lungs and squeezing. And worst of all, the sudden ring of a child's laughter breaking the silence and tearing my heart into a thousand tiny pieces.

I stroke the fur on Miss Molly's golden head and close my eyes. "I'm sorry," I whisper, even though dogs don't understand apologies. "It's this day, it's..."

I let the words trail off, unable to say out loud that five years ago my husband and son took their last breath trapped in a car wreck and I hadn't been there. Unable to say that while they were dying, I lay peacefully in bed, useless and selfish, taking an afternoon nap. It hadn't even woken me. I hadn't sat up, my instincts kicking into overdrive. I hadn't experienced so much as a bad dream.

At the time friends told me I should try to forgive myself, that it wasn't my fault. They brought soup and sent messages. They held me and promised things would get better. They stood on my stoop and reminded me, "*There's nothing you could have done.*"

Therapists call my depression and anxiety a form of post-traumatic stress disorder. Survivor's guilt they say, although that's not the official term. Apparently, it's natural for parents who outlive their children to experience a sense of guilt, but I have struggled to believe there

is anything natural about it. Could there be anything more unnatural than for a mother to bury her six-year-old son?

Then there were the people who told me to have faith. I've never been a religious person, but I have stood alone on a rainy afternoon and heard the hollow thump of dirt shoveled onto a tiny white casket. I've heard the mournful cry of a loon as people, not knowing what else to say, turned and made the sad walk back to their cars. I have stood as day turned to night staring at two holes in the ground hoping my husband and son wouldn't be cold on the first night away from their beds. Away from me.

Having faith would mean believing James and Josh were taken for a reason, that there was some divinity to their absence. But there is not. There is only pain and empty spaces.

I get up from the couch and pull the curtains further across but no matter how dark I make the room there are always slivers of light that keep me in the place I don't want to be. Slivers that never let me bury the one question I still have no answer for.

How do I ever find the strength to step into the light when they are forever lost in the dark?

## Chapter Two

# MADELYN-MAY



Thirty floors below, people are scattered across Washington Square Park like colorful confetti. They're gathered around the fountain, its splashing water hypnotizing them away to some place they'd rather be. How many of them know the leafy space was once a Potter's Field? That right under their noses lie thousands of discarded bodies, the remains of soldiers from the American Revolution, victims of yellow fever, slaves and criminals, all scattered across the park, their secrets buried along with them.

"Madelyn May?"

"What is it, Sarah?" I ask without turning around, my mind still buried in the past.

"I have a candidate for the video producer role. You'll like her."

I roll my eyes. "I'll *like* her?"

"Yes," Sarah nods. "She's a mom herself and -"

"No. No mothers." I turn in time to catch Sarah swallowing hard. Her forehead is creased and confusion rests heavy on her brow. She's been my assistant for three months and I can already tell she isn't going to work out. She's emotional, soft, and tries too hard. "You signed a confidentiality clause when you started here," I remind her, slipping my feet back into new-season Guccis, "so I will explain this to you once and once only. I do not hire mothers. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Madelyn-May. I understand."

"But do you?"

Sarah is stuck. From the strained look on her face, it's clear she has no idea what I'm trying to tell her or what the correct response might be. She is a people pleaser. I knew that when I hired her, but I'm still not sure if she is smart enough to please me.

"Our key messaging, my brand, is based around the notion that here at *Love, Mommy* we love mommies more than anything else in the world. And we do, Sarah, we love mommies. Do you know why we love mommies so much?"

"Sure," she nods, "they're just like you."

I grin at her attempt to placate me. “No, Sarah, we love mommies because they are our core customer. They are who make this business, my business, a success.”

“Of course,” she nods, her eyes dropping. “My mistake.”

“There are two kinds of mothers out there, Sarah. The ones who are thoughtful and loving and will do anything for their families and the mothers who are weak, confused, and in desperate need of direction. Our content caters to both types of women, but neither can work here because either their priorities are elsewhere or they won’t handle the pressure. Do you see?”

“I do, Madelyn-May.”

“I personally create the core content base for our subscribers, our evangelists. Outside of that, I need smart, hard-working, loyal staff, who want this company to succeed as much as I do. I saw that in you, Sarah, so don’t let me down. I don’t have time to replace you right now. Not with everything that’s going on.”

As she turns and scurries out of my office, I glance back to the email message filling my screen.

### *How long can you hide the truth?*

I found it in my inbox this morning amid a scrolling list of messages about blog content, speaking tours, and social media. The sender’s name was unfamiliar, and the subject line was empty.

Over the years there have been hundreds of nasty emails and letters from women who either didn’t agree with something I wrote, were jealous of my success, or were just plain crazy. But this one is different. There’s something sinister about its simplicity, something that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

I press the intercom on my desk. “Sarah, get IT on the line for me please.”

After a brief conversation with a techie named Brad, it’s clear the best they can do is provide a location the email was sent from. It’s not what I wanted but it might be enough to determine whether the email was sent from a crazy person - or worse.

I close my eyes and rub slow circles across my temples. Anything to calm my mind. Today is becoming one of the rare occasions I imagine leaving early, sneaking up the drive of our Chestnut Hill home, kicking off my shoes, and falling onto the cool crisp sheets of our California King. It’s unusual for me to leave the office before six pm, but right now the stillness of an empty house with no rambling footsteps on the stairs feels pretty inviting.

“Madelyn-May...”

Sarah’s voice cuts through the intercom and I leap in my seat. “Jesus Christ... Sarah, what is it?”

“It’s Brad from IT again. Should I put him through?”

The phone buzzes and I scoop up the receiver. “Do you have more information?”

“The ISP of the computer shows the email was sent from a terminal at DigiMads but that’s about all I can tell you.”

“DigiMads?”

“Oh, my bad, Ma’am. It’s a communal workspace down by Samson Street. Digital nomads and online influencers use the space for publishing online content to social media management platforms and travel blogs, stuff like that. It’s like a community office full of hot desks if that makes more sense. My mate Jethro runs an online-”

“Did you say Samson Street? As in, here in Philly?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

I clear my throat. “You’re telling me the email was sent from someone right here in Center City?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And you’re certain?”

“As far as I can tell.”

I fall back into my seat and tug at the stray ends of my hair; a nervous gesture I thought I trained myself out of fifteen years ago. “And there’s no way it could have been re-routed or something?”

“I couldn’t say for sure, but it doesn’t look that way.”

My eyes fall over the angry scar on my wrist. “There’s absolutely no way in your opinion the email could have come from somewhere in say, California?”

I think back to the place I grew up and wonder if my own history can remain buried, silent and still like the bodies in the park below. Or if someone is about to go digging up the past.

“Not that I can see, Ma’am, no.”

“Alright thank you. Oh, and Brad?”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“This conversation didn’t happen. Is that clear?”

“Course, Ma’am. I understand.”

“Good. And for God’s sake stop calling me Ma’am.”

## Chapter Three

# SOPHIE



When the knocking fails to wake me, Miss Molly takes it upon herself to rouse me from a dream state I would like to have stayed in, preferably forever. Before I can even open my eyes, her wet nose is up against my cheek.

“Okay, I’m awake...”

More knocking, and another excited bark from Miss Molly.

“It bothers me how excited you get to see him,” I scold her gently. “You know that, right?”

Unperturbed, Miss Molly runs in circles, her tail wagging so hard that her entire body becomes an obscure U-shape.

“You’re going to hurt yourself,” I grin. “Settle down.”

With no time to find a brush, I pull my messy chestnut hair into a ponytail and consider leaving him out on the stoop while I clean my teeth. But he’s seen me at my worst and sometimes it gets a lot uglier than this, so instead, I turn and follow Miss Molly downstairs. “I’m coming, hold on...”

By the time I get to the final step, Miss Molly is pawing at the door. “Now that’s just embarrassing,” I tell her with a smile. “Didn’t anyone ever teach you about playing hard-to-get?”

I unbolt the latch and the rich aroma of coffee brings a smile to my face. “Almond milk mocha?”

He nods and as usual, I cave. “Alright, come inside.”

Today his suit is royal blue accompanied by the same lavender tie he wore on my last day in the office. A day that feels like a million years ago. Bastian. My light in an otherwise darkened world.

Miss Molly throws herself at him. Her front feet reach his thighs and strands of her golden hair immediately attach to his perfect pant legs.

“Molly, get down,” I tell her. “We’ve talked about this. Sorry...”

“Aww, it’s alright, isn’t it Miss Molly?” he smiles, playfully rubbing her head. “At least someone is happy to see me.” He hands me the cup and strolls easily toward the kitchen window. “Your back lawn need doing yet?”

“Bastian...”

“What?” he shrugs. “I’m just asking. It’s summer. Grass grows fast.”

“I know, but I can do it myself.”

“I can’t remember the last time I even saw you go out there.”

And there it is. That tone. That judgmental, sympathetic, degrading tone that screams *you’re an unstable, incapable, good-for-nothing waste of space who can’t mow her own grass.*

“Don’t do that,” I tell him. “I can mow my own lawn, and I sat out there yesterday if you must know.”

He nods, knowing better than to challenge me. “Okay, I’ll believe you. Come here...”

“Bastian...”

“Sophie, come here and stop being such a pain in the ass.”

Knowing he’ll win me over eventually, I shuffle toward him. My gray sweatpants hang loose and there is still sleep in my eyes. “Why do you come here and do this?”

“You know why.” He gently tucks a wayward strand of hair behind my ear. “Tell me you know why.”

I want to look away, to tear my eyes from his, but as usual, they pull me in. “Fine, I know why.”

“Then let me help you.”

I sigh, and gently trace the olive skin of his cheek. “Fine, you can mow my grass.”

“I thought of you last night,” he says. “Anniversaries must be hard on you.”

I pull away, the moment between us instantly broken. Yesterday marked five years since the accident and another man mentioning anything to do with my husband and son still feels like a betrayal.

“Did you get through the night okay?” he tries again. “I’m just asking, Soph. It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

“I know, but it’s hard for me. I still feel like...”

“...you’re betraying him?”

I flop onto the couch and pull my knees to my chest. “It’s like when I’m with you there’s a part of me that’s still in relationship mode. It helps to keep me in the emotional place I was with him. But at the same time, I feel so guilty letting anyone else in. It feels I’m like

betraying him, but then I wonder, if I close that part of me off completely will it be like he was never here at all?”

“Sophie—”

“I know how it sounds, Bastian, and I don’t expect you to listen to all my problems. I don’t even know why you keep coming over to be honest.”

“I hope that’s not how you think I feel?”

I throw up my hands. “But surely it can’t be worth it? I mean, look at me. I’m a mess. You can’t be attracted to me. I’m ten pounds overweight because I only eat what can be delivered to my door. I haven’t put on lipstick since, God, I don’t know when, and most of the time my hair isn’t even brushed. I cry half the time, I’m angry the rest, and in between—”

“And in between, you’re still incredibly smart and beautiful, Soph,” he says, “and you’re doing your best. I’m not trying to be him – I need you to know that. For so many reasons, I would never do that.”

Just outside the window, a tiny sparrow hops between the green leaves of a dogwood tree.

“And besides,” he grins, sitting down beside me, “who said anything about coming to see you? The only reason I come over is to see Miss Molly. I thought you knew that?”

I manage something that almost sounds like a laugh. “Well, she likes seeing you that’s for sure. But I feel like you’re wasting your time with me, Bastian. I’m just... broken, or something.”

“You’re not. And besides, who am I to judge? We all have our issues, Sophie, Jesus.” He runs a hand through his thick brown hair. “I’m hardly a great catch, but we found each other. That’s what matters. Not every relationship has to have a label on it.”

I take him in. Broad shoulders from his days playing full-back for the Tigers at Princeton. Slender, artistic fingers. Straight, determined nose. When we first met, he reminded me of a compass perpetually facing north. Unwavering and resilient. Then I came along. A magnetic field, misfiring and bound to pull him off course.

“Why are your eyes so blue, anyway?” I ask, changing the subject. “I thought all Italians had dark eyes?”

“Because, signora, my family is from Veneto in Northern Italy,” he exclaims, mimicking an Italian accent and dramatically waving his hand. “My family comes from a small village outside Verona, home of the famed star-crossed lovers Romeo and Juliet.”

“Oh God... why did I ask?”

He grins and pulls me into the dip beneath his shoulder. “But seriously, Soph, we should go there, just the two of us.”

“That wouldn’t go well.”

“I mean it, Soph. There’s Venice but there’s also beautiful mountain ranges and medieval villages. It would do you good to get away.”

“Bastian, I think it’s time you went to work. You’ll be late.”

“It’s not like the boss is going to fire me.”

“Ever heard of leading by example?” I laugh. “Seriously, you should get going.”

“Will you at least think about the trip?”

“No, that’s ridiculous. First, I can barely make it to the market without having a full-blown panic attack. Second, I have Miss Molly. And third – well, let’s not get started on third.”

“Let me worry about third. I can make it work.”

“No you can’t, and if you did, you’d hate yourself. Now, thank you for the coffee and for checking in on me but you better get going.”

He gets to his feet, his tall frame forcing me to stand on tippy toes to kiss him goodbye.

“I do appreciate the thought, though,” I tell him. “Maybe in another life we could have wandered the streets of fair Verona holding hands and I would have loved that.”

He nods and kisses me softly on the forehead. “Call if you need anything, alright?”

“I will.”

“Promise?”

“Promise. Thanks again for the coffee.”

He kisses me one last time on the cheek, and I know what’s coming.

“I don’t want to hassle you, Soph, but the Jackson manuscript is due today,” he reminds me. “Think you’ll get through editing it?”

“Yes, boss,” I say with a grin.

“Don’t call me that. You know I hate that.”

“Well, technically...”

“Yeah, I know, but it’s weird.”

“Come back for dinner? Miss Molly said she’ll order your favorite pizza. Quattro Stagioni from Napoli around the corner.”

“I’d love to, Soph,” he sighs, “but I can’t tonight. Madelyn-May has some Women in Business event she’s speaking at so I’m home with the kids.”

“Of course,” I nod, hating myself for having asked. “No problem.”

“Sorry...”

“No need to be sorry. You’re a great dad. You shouldn’t have to apologize.”

"I'm not apologizing for them, but for the Madelyn-May part." He drops his eyes and kicks at an invisible stone on the stoop. "She's just..."

"...your wife, Bastian. There's no need to apologize."

"I know, but still..."

"Miss Molly and I will be fine," I tell him. "And I'll email the manuscript through by two pm."

I close the door and when the sound of his footsteps disappear down the path, I turn and press my back against the wood. The situation is far from ideal, but somehow knowing we can never be together, that he can never fill the space James left behind, makes the guilt of needing him a little easier to bear.

After making toast and pulling on a clean sweater, I grab the manila folder that's been gathering dust on my desk and brace myself for what's to come. Even if I dedicate the entire day to working on the Jackson manuscript, I'll never get it done in time. At my feet, Miss Molly licks her lips and I slip her the last corner of toast. "You happy now? You've eaten my breakfast."

Content with her corner of jam-covered toast, Miss Molly pads over to the checkered dog bed beside my desk and flops down. A full day of editing someone else's work can get tiresome but at the same time, if it's good enough and the writer talented enough, it might transport me away from my own tear-jerking tale.

When the computer comes to life, I open the file marked 'Jackson Manuscript.' I'll make my notes and changes on this electronic version for the author to see, but I like to read the old-fashioned way - holding paper in my hands. Bastian makes fun of it, calling me prehistoric and analog, but the texture of the paper provides an authenticity that helps me lose myself in the story. It's a practice I try to implement throughout every aspect of my daily life. Ever since the accident, I have shunned the internet and any form of social media. As an editor, all my communications are provided via email, but that's my cut-off. The boundary of my safety zone. I know there are undeniable benefits and efficiencies that technology provides, like the way it allows people to reach out and see in, but it's just not for me.

"Alright, Miss Molly, we'll break for lunch at twelve-thirty. Sound good?"

I take her disinterest as a resounding yes and flip open the manila folder. According to Bastian, the author Geraldine Jackson is going to be the next Jodi Picoult and he's thrilled her agent chose his company Marozzi Publishing to represent her debut novel.

"What's it about?" I asked when he initially handed me the manuscript over some mediocre Chinese take-out.

“I actually think you’ll enjoy this, Soph. It’s about a mother’s search for her missing son,” he’d told me.

My fork clattered onto my plate, and I stared at him in disbelief. “You’ve got to be kidding? You know I can’t deal with something like that.”

But he’d been adamant. “It’s not what you think. It might be hard for you in some ways, sure, but that’s why you’re the perfect person to edit it, Soph. No one has more perspective on this subject than you. It’s going to hit the *Times Best Seller* list. I can feel it, and we need a Picoult in our stable. You can do this. I know you can.”

The manuscript has been gathering dust ever since, mostly because I’ve been too afraid to open it.

“Okay, here we go, Miss Molly,” I breathe. “Let’s hope this little exercise doesn’t end badly.”

## Chapter Four

# SOPHIE

2003



*I*t was the first time I ever paid any attention to my mother's hands. Between trying to write my first novel, which of course was a spectacular failure, texting, dating, and cocktails at Rittenhouse Square, looking at the skin on my mother's hands had never been on the radar. But as we sat in the doctor's waiting room with its mint-colored walls and hushed tones, I noticed how her skin had taken on a translucent quality. Her veins were cobalt-blue, swimming beneath the skin like stinging tentacles of a Pacific man-o'-war.

"Did they give you any idea on the phone?" I asked. "Did he say anything about what they think it might be?"

But she shook her head. "They just said my tests were back, and I had to come in. Who knows what it is, but I hope they fix it fast. I'm sick of being sick."

I nodded gently and squeezed her hand, careful not to press too hard.

After the doctor asked us to take a seat in his consult room, he steeped his fingers and then folded them together into one bulbous strangle he used as a chin rest. "I'm afraid the news isn't good," he began. "The combined results of your pelvic exam, the transvaginal ultrasound we sent you for, and the CA125 blood test all indicate the presence of abnormalities within your ovarian region, Mrs Miller."

My mother leaned forward, and my body automatically moved with her. "What does that mean, abnormalities?" she asked.

"Mrs Miller, there's no easy way to say this so I'll just come out with it. The tests conclude you have ovarian cancer. We won't be able to confirm the severity until we can remove tissue samples from your pelvis and abdomen. We determine the stage of the condition using what's called the American Joint Committee on Cancer TNM staging system, which is a fancy way of describing a series of further tests. Through those tests we will be able to determine the size of the tumor and whether it has spread outside the ovaries or further through your body, such as to the lymph nodes or distant sites."

"Distant sites?"

*“Areas such as the lungs or organs like the liver.”*

*My mother’s hands gripped the edge of his desk. “Is that likely?”*

*“We can’t know for sure until we go through the staging process, and there’s no use panicking in the meantime. The good thing is that we found it. Once we know more, we can determine the best course of treatment.”*

*“Treatment,” she repeated. “So, there’s something we can do, it’s not...”*

*“I think it’s best if we wait until the results tell us what we’re dealing with. Now...”*

*He continued talking about where my mother would need to go to have samples taken, and what would be involved but I didn’t hear a word. My mother had cancer. Her hands were so pale...*

*“Miss Miller?”*

*“Hub?” I snapped back and looked at the doctor. In any other situation, I might have noticed he was no older than thirty-five with thick blonde hair and a delicate freckle by the side of his nose. But I didn’t want to see. I didn’t want to look at his face or remember his name. I wanted him to disappear, to stop existing. Then this might all go away.*

*“Ovarian cancer is known to be hereditary,” he was saying. “So, it might be worth getting a check-up yourself, and even considering the option of freezing some eggs if children are a part of your plans for the future.”*

*“Children?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“I’m twenty.”*

*“Well, you’re never too young to consider these things,” he said with a gentle smile. “With any luck, we’ll have your mom here fighting fit and it would serve you well to be aware of the risks and take any precautions you can. Just my advice.”*

*I nodded and reached for my mother’s hand. Children were the last thing on my mind. I was still her child.*

*My mother asked me to spend the night since my brother was away and my father was experiencing what she liked to call, ‘the blues.’ In truth, he had been experiencing ‘the blues’ for the past eight years, the result of being dishonorably discharged from the United States Marine Corps after a lifetime of service. When morning came and he sobered up, she would need me for moral support. She knew he wouldn’t take the news well. He didn’t take anything very well, not since ‘the incident.’*

*When I opened the door to my old bedroom, I expected to feel larger than life with its single bed, heart-shaped vanity, and lavender comforter. But down on the floor, with my back curled*

*against the mattress, I felt small enough to crawl into the dark space under the bed like I did when I was five. In the dark, you could create your own world without the bright lights illuminating every missing piece, every imperfection, every crack. In the dark, flaws stayed hidden. No one had to know the truth. Under the bed, I could pretend whatever I liked. But out in the light, I was a twenty-year-old girl with the aching feeling her mother was going to die*

## Chapter Five

### MADELYN-MAY



Her slender legs kick back and forth as summer air spirals in, catching her hair in invisible ribbons. Beside her, he shovels pasta from his plate into his mouth – fuel for a body that never stops growing.

My twins, Harry and Harlow, born right on my due date and in perfect health. Even my labor was easy compared to the horror stories of other women. The first contractions began at two pm, and by six-thirty pm, they were in our arms. Harlow came first, a soft bundle of pink skin wrapped in white swaddling. She had the brightest eyes and the loudest wail I'd ever heard. Her face was round and punctuated by the same cheeky dimple that had charmed me on my first date with Bastian. She was warm, sweet, and drenched in the scent of possibility - the kind that exists only on the skin of a newborn baby. To anyone else, she would have been a miracle but not to me. The nurses gushed and hovered over her, the baby they called the prettiest on the ward. It took some time, but I kissed her eventually, more of an apology than anything else because I knew they were wrong. She was not perfect. She was a living flaw. A personification of the pain and mistrust woven into my DNA. She had to be. A womb as fractured as mine could not have created anything else.

I watch her now, with filly legs she is yet to grow into and hair that reflects the light like glass. She's eleven years old and has Bastian's homemade spaghetti sauce splattered across her face and neck. Before my eyes, she digs a spoon into the sauce and flicks it at her brother, squealing in delight as his face freckles with red.

"Harlow!" Bastian cuts in from the other side of the kitchen. "Don't throw sauce at Harry. We've talked about this." The ladle balances in his hand and a tea towel is folded over his shoulder, the corners as neat as an origami swan.

"Daddy, but he wanted me to," she sings in a voice made of sugar and candy. "He likes it."

My husband rests his hands on his hips in a bid to look intimidating. "Harlow, that's not true. What did we say about telling lies?"

“But it’s not a lie. He likes it. Look...”

Beside her Harry is poking out his tongue, twisting it at an almost inhuman angle trying to reach the sauce and making it difficult to argue.

“Harlow,” Bastian sighs, looking to me for support, “I know this might be hard for you to understand, but we can’t just act however we like. There are rules and one is that we don’t throw food at each other, even if he does like it. Got it?”

She rolls her eyes and stabs her fork into the spaghetti with the violence of a Joe Pesci film.

“Harlow,” I try, “there are other ways to make Harry laugh that isn’t breaking the rules. You could make faces at him or do that thing you learned at school, you know when you pretend to walk down invisible stairs behind the bench?”

“Mom,” she sighs, without looking up, “I haven’t done that since I was like, eight. Why do you even bother?”

This time the stab reaches my heart. Have three years passed since the last time I saw her do that? Shaking it off, I gather myself and push out from the bench. “I have some work to do upstairs. Are you right to watch them?”

“How about we take the bikes down to the park?” Bastian counters. “It is the weekend, after all. You could come.”

At the mention of bikes, Harry’s head snaps up and his fork drops noisily onto the bench. “Can we, Mom?” He leaps off the stool, his weight shifting from one foot to the other, like a dog ready for its afternoon walk. “Can we?”

“Harry...”

“Come on, Mom, please. You never come with us.”

“I’m sorry, buddy. I have a lot to get done for my meeting in the morning.”

“Maybe you could write a story about riding bikes at the park?” he tries.

His pleading eyes immediately convince me that I’m broken. But instead of feeling compelled by his desperation, it annoys me that saying no will lead to that familiar itch of guilt. “I can’t,” I tell him flatly. “I have work to do. But Dad will take you, and Bastian, don’t forget it’s Sunday.”

“Right, Madelyn-May,” he replies. “Like I could.”

My gaze lingers on his face, and I contemplate forcing a smile, but instead nod and look away. From Bastian’s tone and the lusterless way he mutters my name, it’s clear that once again I’ve let them down. Not that he’d ever say it. There’s always so much left unsaid between us. These days every conversation is fraught with silent curses and unspoken accusations that hang in the air like storm clouds.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I wonder how something as simple as tone can convey so much. There were times when Bastian said my name in tones so hushed the inflection alone caused my heart to race. There have been times he's choked it out in pieces so fraught with laughter I thought we might both stop breathing. He has spoken it with such tenderness, such outrage, such passion, purity, and persuasion, that I would have followed any instruction that came after. But now my name is said in a tone so empty the letters echo off each other, repelling and colliding in the air.

Right now, he will be down there cleaning and cooing and making sure they have everything they need. Their backpacks will have water bottles. He'll take a small medical kit complete with Band-Aids, disinfectant, a bandage, and tweezers. He'll take three pieces of fruit - a banana, an apple, and a pear. Harry will want the banana, its disregarded skin to be packed away in a zip lock bag if no bin is nearby, and Harlow will devour the apple, tossing the core when no one is watching. To anyone else, it would appear almost scripted, but Bastian is just like that. He's organized, thoughtful, and prepared. I can only imagine it's the result of growing up in a loving, well-managed home where everyone got their favorite snack and no one ever went without.

In a few short hours, my community will be logging on to read the regular Sunday blog post on *Love, Mommy*. It's my weekend update, a recap of how I spent time with my family, what activities we enjoyed, and tips for when they bundle up their own children to carry out the same activity next week. There are the odd occasions I go out with Bastian and the twins and take pictures of them, but most weekends my photographer takes care of that. I take credit for the images to make it look like I was there, and when my subscribers ask why I'm not in the photos I always tell them the same thing - *I was just too focused on capturing the joy of my family*. Isn't that the trait of any devoted mother, after all - to stay in the background while her husband and children shine?

When Bastian and the children eventually tumble back into the house, I head downstairs completely unaware that we are about to get caught up in our first out loud argument of the year. And all because of a string of ducklings on the pond.

He's at the sink, busy rinsing their water bottles away and despite the awkwardness hanging between us when he left, I smile and touch him gently on the shoulder. "How was the park?"

"Interesting to say the least," he says. "Can I talk to you outside?"

I follow him out and he sits down on a cane seater by the pool. “There was a mother duck and a string of ducklings on the pond,” he begins. “Cute as all hell, but it got Harry thinking. Eventually, he asked where babies come from.”

“So, what did you tell him?” I ask as a tiny brown bird flits and hops from branch to branch in the tree beside us.

“Well, I considered going with egg because they were ducks and it’s still the truth, even for human babies,” he smiles. “But instead, I told him about the Guf.”

“The Guf? What’s that?”

“The Tree of Souls.”

“Like in *Avatar*?”

“Not like in *Avatar*,” he grins. “I mean the Jewish version.”

“The Jewish version? I thought your family were Lutherans?”

“Well, that’s a long and slippery slope. But according to Jewish scripture, the Chamber of Guf is like the Tree of Souls in the Garden of Eden.”

“Okay... and this helps Harry how?”

“The Tree of Souls is supposed to be where all souls reside before descending to Earth. Each soul has its own purpose, its own role to fulfill. When a set of circumstances presents itself that will allow the soul to fulfill its destiny, like a bird it descends from the tree ready to be born in human form.”

“Like a bird?” I think about how babies are really made and realize never once have I considered conception to be anything like the graceful flight of a bird. “Are you joking?”

“In fact,” he continues, “sparrows are said to be the only living creatures able to see the soul as it descends from the Guf and onto the earthly plain.”

“Sparrows?” I cast my eye back to where only moments ago the tiny bird was hopping from branch to branch, but it’s gone. “And you actually believe that?”

Bastian is thoughtful for a moment. “I’d like to. It makes a lot of sense.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well, it’s like fate I suppose. The theory that everything happens for a reason.” He stands up and nods to no one in particular. “When bad things happen, it allows us to fall back on the theory that it’s all part of the journey we were meant to have, the one God chose for us. It’s a lot better than thinking we experience things that are painful just by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. How could we ever make peace with an ideology that random? It would scare people.”

“I hope you didn’t tell him that?”

“I told him we are his parents by design. That his soul saw us and knew it was meant to be.”

I rub at the scar on my wrist the way I always do when I’m nervous. “And he bought it?”  
“Bought it? Why would I have to sell it?”

Memories of my own parents find their way in and I know without a doubt I would never have chosen them for myself – or anyone else. “Because there are some parents that no one would choose, Bastian. Not for any reason and not ever.”

“You mean because yours died when you were young? That wasn’t their fault, Madelyn-May, and maybe—”

“And maybe what?” I snap. “I wanted the experience of having no one love me for most of my life?”

He bites down on his lip, his way of not saying something he might regret later. “Madelyn-May,” he begins calmly, “you never talk about your family, so I can’t really comment can I? You never say anything about your childhood, so how would I know how you think or feel? It’s like...”

“...like what?”

“It’s like you were a ghost before I met you. You never talk about anything that happened in your life. I don’t know a thing about you.”

“My parents are dead.” I fold my arms across my chest and stare back at him, my eyes daring him to argue. “There’s nothing else to say.”

“Fine, Madelyn-May, whatever...” he sighs. “But it’s pretty hard to understand something if you won’t tell me what it is.”

If he screamed. If he shouted. If his family had been through even one scandal, there might be a chance he’d understand. If his shirts weren’t pristine, and he didn’t always have the right answer. If he cut corners, or dare I say it told a lie, then maybe I would consider letting my heels crack the eggshells we walk upon. But how could a man like Bastian ever understand a woman like me? I’m stained from the inside out.

“Bastian, I’m so tired of this,” I sigh. “It’s exhausting. Leave it be.”

“Don’t we always?” he huffs. “I don’t have much choice.”

There are times that I want to shout and cry and let him see the ugly version of who I am. The unloved, hideous girl who on a hot Californian night ran from her parents’ trailer covered in sweat and shame and never looked back. There are times I feel exhausted from the repetition of asking myself over and over if he would still love me if I ever let the veil drop. But the things Bastian longs to know, the secrets that threaten to shout their way out of my

heart, are things I can never tell him. He might think of me as a ghost, but he's wrong. I'm not some phantom floating out in the ether. My soul did not choose its parents and descend to Earth amid the sparrow's song. I fought my way here. I scratched and dug and clawed my way out of the ashes. I made myself into the wife he wanted me to be, and not a moment too soon because he is unequivocally the love of my life.

"I wish you would let me in," he tries one last time. "Tell me what it is that's haunting you."

"There's nothing to tell," I shrug, my secrets drifting back down into the dark. "I wish you would just accept that and leave the past where it belongs."

"Fine, Madelyn-May, have it your way. I'm sick of going around in circles."

I search his eyes for any glimmer of the love we once shared. But seeing none, I drop my head and turn away. As usual, he will go his way and I will go mine, both of us lost in a house so big it's all but impossible to find our way back to each other.