

THE TRUTH WE TELL

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THE TRUTH WE TELL

BOOK TWO

This book is dedicated to all the incredible women who have walked beside me over the years. Those we have lost along the way, those who live incredible lives in faraway places, and those who I am lucky enough to see every day. None of you are relatives, but all of you have been my sisters.

Foreword

This book contains limited material relating to suicide and self-harm. While there are no deaths relating to self-harm included in this book, should it raise issues for you please contact a mental health services provider in your local area.

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**.

Chapter One

HARLOW



There is no heaven. When you die there's no tunnel of bright white light or angels floating around a golden gate. There is nothing. You simply stop existing. End of story.

A lot of people have argued with me about this, mostly because they're scared and sometimes because they think I'm just a dumb seventeen-year-old. Like what do I know, right? But in the end, I always win the debate. And why shouldn't I? I'm the only one who's ever been dead.

I was eleven when it happened. A car accident. Well, a kidnapping and attempted murder if we're being honest, but the medical report called it a car accident. I was officially dead for three minutes before they managed to restart my heart. Apparently, that's the longest your heart can stop pumping blood and oxygen before you begin to suffer irreparable brain damage.

Everyone expected me to be traumatized by what happened, maybe suffer post-traumatic stress disorder having *died* so young and all. But for me, the experience was nothing short of cathartic. When my injuries healed, I left the hospital knowing exactly what I wanted. To be free of my fame-seeking mother, the infamous Madelyn-May Marozzi, parental blogging queen of North America. I wanted, no, I *needed*, to be free of her. I felt as though my second chance at life depended on it.

Not long after I was released from hospital, my parents and brother Harry moved to Australia to start over. Much to my mother's disgust, I stayed here in Philly with my best friend Kempsey and her parents Steve and Rhonda who were more than willing to become my official guardians until I come of age.

For so long, I thought of the day I moved in with them as my rebirth. The day I got to *choose* my family. Since then, I have lived a quiet, reserved life, away from the spotlight forced on me by my mother. For six years it's been a wonderful life in a lovely home surrounded by warm and caring people. If only things could have stayed that way.

Chapter Two

SOPHIE



Poppy was born at one minute past two at the University of Maryland Harford Memorial Hospital, and to everyone's surprise, she came out with an extra thumb. According to the doctors it wasn't that uncommon. But lying there in the birthing suite, my hair wet and my skin slick with sweat, I felt as though I failed my daughter before she even took her first breath. In terms of natural childbirth, at age thirty-five I was considered geriatric. I knew without a doubt that it was my aging body that let her down. I hated myself but the doctors were adamant. There were no signs of congenital defects or issues of concern, other than the thumb. To them, she was perfect.

Because Poppy arrived right on my due date, I took it as a sign she might be an easy baby. I hoped it meant she had some in-built understanding that the world of adults was ruled by dates and times. That she would work in with my plans. But she didn't.

As the weeks turned into months and months turned into years, Poppy became a tired and irritable child. I was sure she slept and cried more than any normal baby should. More than Josh had.

By the time she was three, we were regulars at the Westbrook Family Medical Clinic, but no matter how many times I pleaded for him to look harder, Dr Martin Havinack remained adamant that she was fine. She was just *'one of those children who needs a little extra love and attention'*, he would say. But deep in my heart, I knew something was wrong. I just didn't know what it was.

By the time she was four, five separate psychologists had assured me it was normal to be overcautious. To not just think the worst but to expect it. My son Josh died when he was six, not because I missed the signs of an underlying health condition, but because a drunk driver killed him and my husband in a car wreck. They told me again about survivor's guilt, post-traumatic stress disorder, and all the other conditions grief can create. They willed me to believe that it was fear not fact when I told them something was wrong with Poppy. They said my ongoing anxiety, coupled with the fact that I randomly uprooted my life and moved to Havre De Grace, was proof

enough that I was the one who needed medicating. I hoped they were right, but I also knew they were wrong. My move to Havre De Grace was not random. It had been very much on purpose.

“Now you be careful,” I tell Poppy, my face pressed gently against her tiny button nose. “Some of those kids are bigger than you.”

“Come on, Mom,” she whines. “I’m up next.”

I zip up her hot pink parka and say a silent prayer. She’s five. It’s March and still cold out. Our school has a team in the local social baseball competition for under-eights. The team is a mix of boys and girls and at the end of the season, the winning team gets to host an all-expenses-paid day at the Fun Factory, a popular kids’ game and pizza place just off Main Street. All the teams in the league attend, so no matter how good or bad the kids play, everyone gets a prize at the end of the season.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask again.

“I want to play,” she says, her tiny hands clenched into determined fists at her sides. “Please, Mommy, I want to play.”

“Alright, okay.” I tuck her long ponytail into the back of her parka so none of the other kids accidentally pull on her hair. “Come straight back if you feel puffed out or tired. I’ll be right here.”

She runs off and I pull myself up, my stomach twisting. Since the day she was born, I feel like I’ve been waiting, side-stepping the inevitable.

Beside me, my golden retriever Miss Molly doesn’t bother to get up. She was a rescue so it’s hard to know her exact age but if I had to guess I’d say she’s around ten years old. Her bones creak and her gait is slow, but she never leaves my side. It’s been that way since the day I brought her home. I give her a smile and a scratch behind the ear then glance out over the field.

Poppy is up on the plate, bat in hand. She swings and the bat connects. She is off, running toward first base, her ponytail already untucked and flapping around like a happy dog’s tail. When she trips and falls, I take a nervous step forward, hand on my chest, silently willing her to get up. One. Two. Three...

As I am about to run forward, her giggle carries on the breeze and she gets to her feet.

See, you’re being ridiculous. She’s fine.

Feeling silly, I sneak a glance at the other parents. Did anyone see me lurch forward, eyes wide with panic? Do they think I’m a helicopter parent? Or worse, do they think I know something is wrong and am letting her play anyway? I’m so concerned with deciding if other people are staring at me that I don’t see her fall the second time.

“Sophie,” one of the other parents says, an edge of concern pitching her voice higher. “Is Poppy okay?”

I snap my head back and peer out over the field. A tiny shape wrapped in hot pink is lying motionless on the ground. From the edges of the field parents slowly start to move in, their steps hesitant, not wanting to believe that something is wrong. The referee blows his whistle and hurries toward her. I can’t feel my legs but I’m already running, the freezing wind slicing my cheeks.

“Poppy! Poppy!” My cries echo and I can’t tell if it’s me screaming or one of the other parents. “Poppy!” When I reach her, I throw myself down and push the hair back from her face. Two ribbons of bright red blood trickle from her nose and her eyes are closed. “Poppy, wake up! Wake up!” The crowd is closing in on me. The weight of their fear is palpable. “Poppy!”

“I’ve called 911,” A male voice says. “They’re coming but - ”

“But what?”

“They have to come from another call. They’re fifteen minutes out.”

I rest my hand on Poppy’s forehead because I don’t know what else to do. Her skin is slick and too hot for such a cold afternoon. When I finally look up at the sea of faces staring back at me, some are familiar and others I’ve never seen before but the one thing they share is the look in their eyes— fear.

I scoop her tiny body up into my arms and cradle her against my chest. The bottom half of her face is stained red from the blood running out of her nose. As I wipe at it with my sleeve and hate myself for every minute I’ve wasted doing anything other than learning how to save my child’s life.

If she dies this will be my fault.

“I’ll take you to the hospital.” A burly man wearing a Havre de Grace Warriors windbreaker is suddenly standing in front of me, keys in hand. “Do you need to call her father?”

“There’s... there’s no father,” I mutter. “It’s just me.”

“Right. Let’s go then.”

People jump out of our way as we run single file toward the carpark. Their faces are a blur, and no one speaks as we pass. A woman in jeans and a windbreaker clutches at her chest as we race by. Next to them a man and woman pull their small son between them, closing ranks. I know they’re worried, but I also know a tiny part of them is relieved it’s me racing against time and not them.

The dusty carpark is only meters away, but Poppy’s lips are blue. She’s gone still in my arms.

“I think she’s stopped breathing!” I scream. “What do I do?”

The man stops abruptly and turns back, his brow pulled into a tight frown. "Put her down."
"What? No, I don't know CPR... I can't -"

"We need to find someone who knows how to do it while we wait for the ambulance."

"We can't," I shout back, my voice breaking. "We have to go. They won't get here in time!"

An icy wind whips across the back of my neck as I readjust my grip on her tiny body.

He steps in close. "What's your name?"

"Sophie," I sob. "My name is Sophie."

"Sophie, once we get into my truck there's no one to help us. She won't make it without CPR.

If we can keep her breathing the ambulance might get here in time. There's still hope."

I stare at him, willing his words back down his throat. She's heavy in my arms, gravity pulling her down and away from me. "Goddamn it!" I scream as loud as I can. "Help me! Anyone! Help me, please!"

Screams scrape against the tightness of my throat. As each second passes, I feel her slipping away as though a light is slowly dimming inside me. If she dies, every spark of joy will be extinguished from my life. If she dies, I will die with her. Maybe not my body, but my soul, my love, my will.

"I'll find someone," he calls, already running back toward the field. "Stay there, Sophie. I'll find someone! I'll find someone!"

I fall to my knees and fold my daughter's lifeless body across my lap. Her skin is translucent, clouds of gray gathering at her temples. A storm about to break.

"Don't you leave me, Poppy," I whisper. "Don't you leave me."

Seconds feel like hours as I gently rock her back and forth in my arms. I knew this. I knew something was wrong and I didn't prepare myself. All I had to do was take a CPR class. One stupid class. That's all I had to do.

"Lay her down on the ground," someone shouts at me from across the carpark. It's a woman's voice, strong but breathless. She's been running. "Quickly dear, there's no time."

When I look up, I register that the woman is older than me, maybe in her sixties. She has a short bob of gray hair and deep lines etched around her eyes. The rest is a blur.

"Roll her onto her back," she tells me, as I slide Poppy gently onto the ground. "What happened?"

"I... I don't know. She was running. I looked away for just a second." I glance desperately at the man who was going to drive us to the hospital. "Did you see what happened? Was there a collision?"

He is down on one knee. His cheeks are scarlet. His chest is heaving. “Beats me. Best I can tell she was just running and then...” he draws another deep breath, “...down she went. I didn’t see any other kids near her.”

“Does she have a health condition?” the woman asks.

I note she has the efficiency and tone of someone who knows what they’re doing. “Are you a doctor?”

“No, but I was a nurse for thirty-two years. She’s very pale. Is she anemic?”

“Anemic? No... I... I’ve taken her to doctors before. They never found anything like that.”

The woman crosses her hands over my daughter’s tiny chest and begins compression. “But you thought otherwise?”

I nod quickly not wanting to believe I might have been right. “Please,” I whisper to the sky as I watch her tiny chest rise and fall, “not again.”

“Where’s the damned ambulance?” the man curses, getting back to his feet and looking out toward the road.

“We can’t wait,” the woman says. “We need to go.”

“Are you sure?” I have no control over my daughter’s life. I don’t know how to help her and will have to rely on this woman, this stranger, to make a choice that will decide whether she lives or dies.

“I’ve got a faint rhythm,” she says. “I’ll continue chest compressions in the car. But we’ve got to move. Now!”

I gather Poppy up off the ground and together we run toward the man’s truck. With every step and every breath, I beg. I beg the power of the universe. I beg God, even though I have always been one of the faithless. I beg anyone and anything to take my life and give it to Poppy instead. I silently apologize for what I did, for having her without telling Bastian. I apologize for having slept with another woman’s husband. I apologize for thinking I deserved a second chance, and for daring to try and be a mother again. I apologize for everything I can think of. But most of all I apologize for once again failing a child whose only flaw was to depend on me.

“Please, you have to get us there in time,” I say, as I slide Poppy onto the dirty back seat of the truck. “She’s so little... she’s...”

He nods and starts the engine. Beside me, the woman immediately starts compression on Poppy’s tiny bird-like chest. But as we reverse, the man catches my eye in the rear-view mirror and it’s hard to miss his look of panic. As we race toward the hospital the car is silent. No one dares to speak but if we did, we would all say the same thing - *If we make it, it will be a miracle.*

Chapter Three

HARLOW



It's the pain that wakes me. A dull, throbbing ache that immediately settles into my bones. Spiderwebs of lingering sleep cling to me and I wonder if I'm back in the hospital. If perhaps the past six years have been nothing more than a dream.

But as I open my eyes, I'm greeted by soft light falling in through cream curtains and the delicate chirp of birds in the tree outside. I'm safe beneath my lemon and white comforter and up on the wall hangs a familiar abstract painting, its warm pastel hues reminding me of a sunrise.

This time I have not been kidnapped or almost killed in a car crash, but as I reach up and touch my lip, there is no doubt in my mind that I'm injured. I can feel it. Split and swollen.

What the hell happened?

My head throbs, and when I push back the comforter, I see deep scratches running from my shoulder to my elbow. I try to pull myself up, but the room swims in and out of focus. A choking rush of bile burns the back of my throat and I battle to swallow so I don't throw up all over the bed.

"You're awake," Rhonda says, striding in without knocking, the usual warmth missing from her voice.

"If you could call it that," I manage.

"Well, you have to get up, Harlow. We need to talk." Charlie

I squint as Rhonda tears back the curtains and bright sunlight assaults my eyes. "What time is it?"

"It's just after one o'clock in the afternoon." She doesn't look at me and instead picks my clothes up off the floor and folds them over her arm. There's dried blood on the sleeve of my shirt.

"Is that..." I peer in closer.

"Now, Harlow. I'll meet you downstairs."

She's gone before I have a chance to respond or ask about the stain on my clothes. It also occurs to me she didn't bother to ask if I was okay. Confused, I cast my mind back to last night and feel a sudden jolt of fear when I realize that I can't remember how we got home.

In my ensuite bathroom, I'm horrified at the disheveled girl looking back at me in the mirror. My hair is matted with lumps of dried blood. The right side of my lip is swollen, an angry split running from top to bottom. On my forehead, is a lump the size of a potato.

"Jesus..." I breathe, forcing myself to lean in and evaluate the damage. "What the hell happened last night?"

Carefully I pull my nightgown up and over my head, mindful not to bump my lip or the lump on my forehead. When the hot water hits my scalp, I close my eyes and let it wash over me. At my feet, the water turns a bloody mix of red and brown as it circles the drain.

When I eventually make my way downstairs, Rhonda is sitting stiff and stern at the formal dining table. Beside her is Kempsey, both their faces are blank and cold, and I shiver despite the warmth of the fire crackling in the hearth.

"Harlow, come and take a seat." Rhonda gestures to a leather chair directly across from her and it strikes me that we've never sat in this room the entire time I've lived here. Beside her Kempsey's head is down and she's pulling at one of her fingernails, something I know she does when she's nervous.

"I'm so confused about last night," I begin. "How did I end up with all these cuts and bruises?"

Finally, Kempsey looks up and when she does, I cannot hide my shock. Her right eye is swollen shut, an angry purple bruise stretching from the rise of her cheekbone up to her eyebrow.

"Kempsey, oh my God, are you alright?" I reach across the table, but she pulls away before my fingers reach her.

"Harlow, what you did last night is beyond words," Rhonda begins. "I don't even know where to start."

"What I *did*?" I repeat. "I can't remember anything about last night."

Kempsey huffs and looks away. "As if."

"No really," I try. "I can't remember anything. What happened to us?"

"To *us*?" Kempsey snaps. "You. You are what happened to us. You freaked out at the club and started acting like a crazy person."

"The club?" I close my eyes and brush through the spiderwebs trying to remember.

"Yes," Rhonda says. Her tone is sharp. Her lips are tight. "You are both seventeen years old. Too young to be out in a nightclub with boys."

"It wasn't a nightclub, Mom," Kempsey says with a sigh. "It was just a beer garden."

“At night with boys.”

“I remember sitting with Darcy,” I mumble. “He and I were talking and then we came back to the table. I felt dizzy and then - ”

“- you climbed up onto a table and flashed your boobs at everyone. You were yelling and shouting like a maniac,” Kempsey finishes.

“No,” I quickly shake my head. “I would never - ”

“Ah, yeah... you would,” she assures me. “Then you started making out with some old dudes letting them feel you up and shit. It was, like, so gross.”

“Kempsey, no. I wouldn’t... I didn’t...” I trail off and feel like I’m going to be sick.

I would never do that... would I?

“Then, after you saw Darcy and me together you went ballistic.” She points to her black eye. “Security tried to throw you out, but you made such a scene you ended up falling and smashing your head on the gutter outside.”

I push back against the chair desperate to get some distance from the things coming out of Kempsey’s mouth. It can’t be true. I would never dream of acting like that. But my physical pain is real, and it’s clear from Kempsey’s bruises and the look in her eye, that hers is too. I glance at Rhonda hoping for some explanation, a solution, anything, but she just stares back stony-faced.

“So, what do you have to say for yourself, Harlow?”

“I... I don’t know. I don’t remember any of this.”

“Did you take something?”

“Did I take something?” I glance at Kempsey, but she quickly swallows and drops her eyes. Through the fog, I begin to remember that she was the person who brought over my final drink. “Kempsey did you - ”

“Don’t try and blame this on me!” she snaps before I can finish. “You’re the one who got wasted and freaked out.”

“I only had two drinks. After the second, I... everything is a blur.”

Rhonda rests her palms out on the table and glares at me. “Neither of you should have been drinking at a club. But Harlow, you hurt my daughter. I can’t have that.”

My heart pounds against my ribs and I begin to panic. I’m being accused of things I can’t remember. “If I did then I didn’t mean it,” I begin, my words rambling. “I would never intentionally hurt Kempsey. Please, you must know that.”

Rhonda closes her eyes and slowly shakes her head. “I need to think this through.”

“Someone must have drugged me.” I glance at Kempsey, but she refuses to meet my eye. “They must have. Rhonda, you know me. I would never act like that.”

“I can’t have drugs here, Harlow.”

“But I’m not on drugs!” I get to my feet, my eyes brimming with tears. “I would never take drugs. I don’t... I don’t want drama in my life... not after everything, you know that. That’s why I stayed here. I don’t - ”

“Then I wouldn’t go back to school on Monday,” Kempsey tells me with a dramatic roll of her eyes. “Because there’s definitely going to be drama.”

“Why? Did everyone see what I did?”

“Everyone? Yes, Harlow, *everyone* saw what you did.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means your little show went viral. You’re all over socials.”

I clutch at my chest as the air disappears from the room. “You filmed it?”

“Not me, but pretty much everyone else. I’m surprised you haven’t seen it.”

I rub my forehead as the room swims around me. “But I... I don’t even have socials. You know I hate that stuff.”

Kempsey exchanges a look with Rhonda then slides her phone toward me. “Here, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

My skin goes cold as I watch the disaster play out on a video posted to Kempsey’s social media account. My soft pale breasts are exposed. The fly on my jeans is unzipped. I’m up on a table holding a glass of beer over my head like a trophy. The light is dim but two men I’ve never seen before, both much older than me, are clearly groping and clutching handfuls of my bare skin. One has a dirty-looking beard and red-rimmed eyes. He squeezes my nipple between his fingers and slurs something to the camera that I can’t understand. The other looks just as drunk. He has my left breast cupped in one hand and is taking a selfie with the other. But the most humiliating part of it is that I’m laughing. I look so joyful, so carefree. I swallow hard and close my eyes.

Did I like it? Why didn’t I try and stop them?

When I look back at the screen, the camera phone is following me. I climb down from the table and stumble toward two people kissing in a darkened corner of the beer garden. Through vacant eyes, I glance back at whoever is filming. Dried spittle hangs from my lip and my hair is a mess.

“Whoa... you are wa-sted,” a male voice sings from behind the camera. “This is going to be a-ma-zing.”

When the two people on screen break apart, to my surprise it’s Kempsey and Darcy who were kissing. I glance up from the phone and stare at her in shock. “You kissed him?”

She shrugs and pushes the phone a little closer. “Keep watching.”

Suddenly onscreen, I raise a chair up over my head and hurl it at my best friend's face. She screams and Darcy shouts out. The video falls out of focus and disembodied voices yell to call an ambulance. I hear myself sobbing and it's hard to tell whether the sound is coming from the past or present.

"Kempsey, I... I don't know what to say," I tell her, pushing the phone away from me. "Someone put something in my drink. They must have. You know I would never act like that on my own... even though you were kissing Darcy."

But again, Kempsey just shrugs and then pushes the phone back into her pocket. "I don't know why you even care that we were kissing. It's not like you guys were dating. You liked him. No one ever said it was mutual."

"I never said I liked him. "

"Oh, please..."

"Girls," Rhonda says, her arms stretched out toward us. "Forget about the boy. This is serious. We have to meet with the school on Monday. Let's see what they have to say and we'll take it from there."

"I don't use drugs. You both know that," I plead. "You gave me a home when I wanted to stay, and I'll always be grateful for that. I would never try to hurt you Kempsey, not on purpose. I don't know what I would do without you guys."

"Well, you could consider going to live with your *actual* family," Kempsey suggests, her tone making it clear she's still furious.

"Is that really what you want me to do?"

"Just... do whatever you want, Harlow. But I really like Darcy so since you messed that up for yourself, don't go messing it up for me too."

"Sure." I force a smile. "Of course not."

She nods and pushes back from the table. "I'm going over to Laura's. Darcy's coming to meet us. Obviously, you're not invited, Harlow. Sorry not sorry, you know?"

I glance at Rhonda, but she doesn't meet my eye. Instead, she gets to her feet and disappears toward the kitchen leaving me to sit alone at the table.

When they're gone, I rest my head in my hands and try to think. One of the last things I remember is Kempsey bringing two beers over to Darcy and me. But what happened after that?

I think hard, trying to remember every detail but my head is throbbing and the best I can conjure are blurry visions of people moving in slow motion. Did she drug me? The thought seems impossible. She took pity on me after the accident and when the truth about my mother came out, she convinced her parents to be my guardians so I wouldn't have to move overseas.

She always liked Darcy and I know deep down it bothered her to think he might be interested in me – her weird little introverted sidekick, but to drug me? I don't want to believe she would be capable of doing something like that, of putting me in danger, especially over a boy. But I also learned a long time ago that the people who love you are usually the ones who end up hurting you the most.

Chapter Four

SOPHIE



Flanked by the man and woman who helped get us here, I run as best I can toward the hospital's emergency department, Poppy's lifeless body hanging from my arms like a rag doll.

"Help me!" I scream, my voice almost incomprehensible. "My daughter! Help me!"

Instantly men and women in teal scrubs run at us from every angle. People who were slumped across seats in the waiting area are up on their feet, brows knotted, and a woman tucks her small daughter in closer.

A middle-aged woman with cropped red hair and a stethoscope around her neck takes Poppy from my arms and places her gently onto a gurney. Relinquishing her to a stranger is like taking my heart and willingly placing it in the cupped palms of someone I have never met.

"What happened?" she asks, her eyes trained on Poppy as she takes her vitals.

"I... she fell. I don't..."

She leans over Poppy but looks up and meets my eye. "I need you to take a breath and tell me exactly what happened."

"She was playing Little League Baseball," I manage between sobs. "She fell but it didn't seem like she was hurt. I think she fell because..."

"...because what?"

"Because something is wrong. I've felt it ever since she was born. Something isn't right."

She holds my gaze, clearly assessing my mental state versus the strength of a mother's intuition.

"Prep for an MRI and full bloods," she barks at two of the nurses watching on. "Now!"

As they turn and wheel Poppy toward a set of plastic double doors, I gather my bag and begin to follow but a young female nurse wearing so much mascara it has congealed on her lashes, steps in front of me. "We'll need you to stay here and fill out her insurance and medical details."

"But I -"

"She's in very capable hands."

The woman looks too young to even work at a hospital and I panic at the idea of Poppy being taken somewhere I can't see her. "Are you sure? I mean..."

Can I trust these strangers with my baby?

"Doctor Yates is incredible," she assures me. "Your daughter will get the best care possible."

I watch after them as Poppy's tiny shape is swallowed up by a pair of double doors.

"Can you follow me please?" she asks again.

I turn to the man and woman from the field. "I don't know how to thank you both," I say, as a bewildered fog falls over my brain. "I don't even know your names."

"I'm Martha," the woman smiles, "and there's no need for thanks. I'm just glad we made it."

"Agreed," the man says with a nod. "I'm Barry. Baz."

Around us, people slowly fold themselves back into their chairs and slump their chins against balled-up palms.

"I don't understand what happened," I mumble half to them and half to the air around me. "She just fell and -"

"I really need you to come with me," the mascara nurse tells me again. "We need your daughter's details."

"Alright, Christ!" I snap, stress breaking through the fog and catching me unaware. "Oh shit, I'm sorry," I apologize immediately. "I didn't mean that. It's just..."

She nods and opens one arm ready to guide me toward wherever it is I need to go.

"We'll wait over here," Martha offers, but there is a question mark in her tone. She probably has somewhere else to be.

"No, don't be silly," I tell her. "You've both done everything you can. Go on back. I'll be fine."

"You're sure?" Baz asks, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. "I'd stay, it's just my son is back at the field."

"No, I mean it. Please, you've both done everything you can."

Finally, much to Mascara's delight I take a seat in an uncomfortable orange chair and begin to fill out Poppy's details. When I'm done, they direct me to a small white waiting room with sparse furniture and a wooden coffee table adorned with biscuits in small plastic wrappers.

Unable to even think about eating, I pull out my phone and call to check that Miss Molly is safe. She won't understand being left behind and I hate that I couldn't bring her with me. I scan through the school phone tree and find Delilah's mother saved under her actual name, Julia.

"Julia," I sigh when she answers, "it's Sophie. I was hoping you took Miss Molly from the field?"

“She’s here at home with us,” Julia says, and my shoulders sag with relief. “She’s quite happy and snoozing by the fire with our dog Bosco.”

“Thank you so much. I’m sorry to burden you.”

She dismisses my apology and asks how Poppy is doing. I tell her all that I can, which is nothing, and then hang up and wait.

After a few minutes, a tired-looking man who looks like he hasn’t slept in days shuffles in and folds himself into the seat across from me. Our eyes meet, he nods in recognition and then looks down at the ground. He doesn’t speak and neither do I. Neither of us wants to give life to the only words there are to say. *I hope. If only. Please, no.*

Together we wait in silence, the wall clock ticking down the moments that will determine the rest of our lives. Eventually, the woman with the red hair who took Poppy away appears in the doorway and gestures for me to follow her.

“How is she? Do you know what happened? Is she alright?” I feel like I’m barking at her and purposely lower the volume of my voice. “Can I take her home?”

“She’s resting.”

“Oh...” My palm comes up to my collar bone and I let out a long breath. “So, she’s alright?”

What I want is for her to smile and tell me that of course, she’s alright. It was nothing. She tripped and bumped her nose. Don’t be silly. You can take her home right now. But she doesn’t.

“Ms Miller -”

Oh, God.

“It’s Sophie, please.”

She nods and swallows, her neck muscles constricting for the most fleeting of seconds. It is a tiny gesture but one that sends a shock wave of panic from the top of my head down and into my toes. Pins and needles sting at my face and for the first time in years, my heart beats out of rhythm. The first sign of a panic attack.

“Sophie -”

“I... I think I’m going to have a panic attack,” I manage. “I used to have them, not in years, but I can feel -”

She stops where we are and eases me into one of the chairs along the wall of the corridor. “Just breathe. Slow and deep, Sophie. In through your nose, out through your mouth.”

The smell of antiseptic and fear flood my nose as I inhale deeply, searching for a stable breath. Beside me, the doctor pulls out a cell phone and asks someone to bring two milligrams of Valium.

“Keep breathing, Sophie. In and out.” She leans in and wraps her fingers around my wrist to check my pulse. “You’re doing great.”

“What’s wrong with my daughter?”

“Let’s just get you calm and breathing properly then we can discuss Poppy’s condition.”

“Condition? What condition?”

A male nurse who looks young enough to still be in school approaches us carrying a small cup of water and a plastic thimble containing a small white tablet.

Valium, Xanax, Prozac. None are strangers to me. After my husband and son were killed it was years before I could function without some form of medication. For years my anxiety and I lived a very small life, not leaving the house, each day spent chained to a pillar of guilt and remorse.

Get it together. This is not like that. Fear, not fact.

I take the tablet and scold myself. Indulging in fear and panic is selfish. Poppy needs me. I have no right to escape into a panic attack. Somewhere in this building, my daughter is scared and alone. I have no right.

“I want to see my daughter,” I say, finally finding an even tone for my voice. “I’ll be fine. Please, just take me to her and tell me what’s going on.”

The doctor nods and I pull myself up and follow her. We turn left, then right, take an elevator up one floor, and memories of Josh’s accident flood my mind. In a hospital just like this one, my family was identified and autopsied. He looked so tiny lying still and silent on the gurney, like his body had contracted around the empty space his soul once took up.

“We have her here in the pediatric wing,” the doctor says, interrupting my memory. “We’ll keep her here tonight. I’d like to monitor her and run some more tests.”

When the elevator doors open, sterile white walls are replaced with lashings of bright color and cartoon animals. Instead of looking cheerful, they strike me as garish.

“But you know what happened?”

“I think so, yes.”

I hold my breath and wait for her to elaborate.

“I can’t be one hundred percent certain until we do more tests, but your daughter is displaying signs that align with something called Fanconi Anemia.”

Oh, thank God.

“Anemia, yes,” I gush, instantly relieved. “The woman who helped me get her here, she was a nurse and mentioned something about anemia.”

The word anemia feels so benign compared to the atrocities I had been imagining. Lymphoma. Brain tumor. Leukemia.

“Poppy’s been to see our local doctor several times though,” I tell her. “He never said anything about anemia. But that’s good, right? Anemia? I mean, it’s treatable.”

“I noticed a small scar on her hand,” the doctor says, ignoring my questions. “Did she have a birth defect? An extra digit?”

“Yes, an extra thumb but the doctors said it was nothing to be concerned about.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You don’t agree?”

“Let me run a few more tests. For now, you can go and see your daughter. I’ll be back when I have more information.”

“But she’s going to be alright?”

“For now, she’s alright and she’s asking for you. I’ll update you as soon as I can. She’s down the end in bed seven.”

As I make my way through the ward, I try not to look at the other children or worried parents hovering over them. Instead, I try to make sense of what the doctor has told me. All I know about anemia is that it has something to do with red blood cells and feeling fatigued which makes sense because Poppy has always been a tired child. Perhaps she’ll need supplements, or we’ll have to look at her diet, maybe add more red meat. Something about needing iron also rings a bell.

There is a curtain around her bed, and I pause for a moment before pulling it back. I don’t want her to see that I’ve been crying, especially not when a hamburger and some vitamins might be all she needs to get back on her feet.

I force a smile onto my face and push my fears down as deep as they will go. “Hi sweetheart,” I chime, as I pull back the curtain and walk toward her tiny shape tucked up in the hospital bed. “How are you feeling?”

She shrugs and yawns, pulling a teddy I’ve never seen before tighter into her chest.

“Who’s your new friend?”

“He’s from here,” she tells me. “I don’t know his name.”

I smile and smooth an invisible crease from the sheet that’s covering her. “Well, you know what? I bet he’d love it if you gave him a name.”

She glances down at the teddy but again just shrugs and looks disinterested. I remind myself they think it’s anemia, something that is treatable. Poppy will be okay.

Fear, not fact.

“What’s wrong with me, Mommy?”

Her voice is fragile and tiny and yet the impact is powerful enough to tear apart even the hardest of hearts. I swallow and command myself to find a voice that will calm her.

“You, my sweet girl, haven’t been taking your vitamins.” I give her my best smile and hide my trembling hands where she cannot see them. “And, I think that when the doctor is finished checking on you the first thing we have to do is get you a big hamburger. How does that sound?”

“Can Miss Molly have one too?”

“She sure can,” I tell her. “She’ll be so happy to see you.”

Poppy finally smiles and I tell myself that as soon as they’re done I’ll take her home and we can fix this. That everything will be alright - because it has to be.

Chapter Five

HARLOW



It feels like everyone in the world has seen my insides. I tell myself they're just breasts and that every day women's breasts are posted all over the internet. I tell myself this video isn't a big deal. Except it is.

When my family packed up and moved to Australia, I promised myself that staying here in Philadelphia, more than ten thousand miles away from my mother, meant I could start over. I thought that when she was gone, with time her lies about my birth would go with her. I thought that all the online attention would be gone. I thought that after everything that happened, her *Love, Mommy* blog with its millions of followers would fracture and fall like a defeated empire. And it had. But now this video of me with its thousands of views is making me feel like instead, I have just taken her place.

For the past six years, I've avoided social media. I don't have any accounts. I don't read blogs and I only use Google when I absolutely have to. Kempsey calls me a recluse and an introvert. She makes fun of how much I love reading paperbacks, the way I cherish the feel of a book in my hand, the musty scent of time trapped within its pages. She could never understand what it feels like to be second best to a computer screen, to be a cog in the wheel of your mother's savage pursuit of success. I know my mother had her reasons. She grew up in a trailer park and when she met my father, a successful publisher, it must have felt like all her dreams had come true. To keep him she lied about not being able to fall pregnant and instead used an egg donor to try and hide her past. I was eleven when I found out another woman provided an egg so that I could be born. But by the time I knew the truth the woman had moved away with no forwarding address. I didn't hate my mother for using an egg donor. I hated her for lying and treating us like vessels to a better life, one where she could present herself to the world as the perfect mother adored by millions.

I sink down into the bed and close my eyes. This morning I went to school but left an hour after I arrived. Everywhere I looked kids were laughing and whispering, their eyes trained on me

like recording devices. I'm a joke and a laughing stock. I have never even kissed a guy and now there's footage out there of me laughing as two grown men grope and fondle my breasts.

I close my eyes as a single tear slips over my cheekbone. It's just a video and they're only my breasts, I remind myself again. But the gritty feeling of being exposed won't stop itching at my skin. It claws at me, creeping up my legs, scratching to be let in. They saw me. Watched me. Their eyes and their phones forever capturing the moment I was stripped bare.

I swallow hard and try to stay calm. Eventually, they will move on to the next thing. They will forget about me and move on; just like my family did. A fresh start will come and until it does, I will stay here in this room and never ever come out.

"Harlow, are you in there?" Rhonda knocks at the door. "You need to come out. We have to talk."

So much for that idea.

I gingerly open the door and peek out leaving a gap no wider than a couple of inches.

"Can you come downstairs, please? I need to talk to you."

I nod and reluctantly follow Rhonda into the kitchen. The setting is less formal than the last conversation we had and I hope it means I won't be getting kicked out.

"Harlow, I spoke with your guidance counselor and the principal this afternoon. They agree what happened at the club was out of character. You have a 4.0 GPA and an unblemished record."

I intend to say something like thank you but instead, just feel myself nodding.

"Based on your grades and record of good behavior we all believe that you are telling the truth about being drugged. That said, we'd like you to consent to a blood test so we can get to the bottom of all this."

"Of course, Rhonda, thank you." A long sigh of relief escapes my lips. "I would never -"

"You will still have to deal with Kempsey though. She's not happy."

"I know."

"Well..." Rhonda's eyes are softer, almost tender, "if you can work things out with my daughter, I don't see any reason for you to leave us. Things tend to happen when you're a teenager, but Harlow, they are things that can usually be avoided. You have to make better choices."

I nod and let my eyes fall to the table. "I know and I'm sorry. It won't happen again. Not ever. You have my word."