

# To Hide in Holly Springs Book One

SANDY APPLEYARD

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## Chapter 1

Linda Dixon was perched on a chair with heavy eye lids as her and her fellow eleventh grade students listened to yet another lecture about internet predators. Sylvia, her friend next to her, elbowed her, nudging her awake. The woman pacing the stage held the microphone too close to her lips and had evidently reached a pivotal point in her speech.

“She’s talking about that internet site I was telling you about,” Sylvia whispered to Linda. “Remember?” Sylvia felt special because this high profile woman was discussing something the semi-reclusive teen could relate to.

With her eyes glazed over, Linda ignored her friend and began thinking about the book she couldn’t wait to continue reading, which also happened to be the reason she was falling asleep in school. Linda had become completely enthralled with *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and watched the sun rise before finally stuffing the book under the mattress in the early morning.

“Oh my God! I can’t believe it! I know this site!” Sylvia squeaked. “My aunt was showing me it just last week!”

Sylvia’s Aunt Cathy was divorced, and a weekend drunk, but Linda liked her. Cathy was the one who lent Linda the *Fifty Shades* trilogy.

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Linda was irritated. “Would you relax?” she hissed. “She’s not singing the praises of MidlifeMatchup.com, it’s one of the sites that was hacked recently, which is the reason these weirdos are gaining access to their victims.”

Sylvia pursed her lips, smirking under Linda’s scrutiny. “God, Linda, you’re such a prude. Besides, you’re one to talk.” She gave Linda an evaluating glance. “You talk to guys online all the time.”

Linda made a tscking sound, rebuffing her friend. “Yeah, but they’re intellectual sites. It’s completely different. The people,” she accentuated the word ‘people’, “I talk to are in pre-med chat rooms; both males and females. And we’re on there to discuss entering medical school.”

Sylvia raised her hand in a gesture that silenced Linda. “Whatever.”

The woman on stage changed tack, introducing a man who appeared as if from nowhere, suddenly taking the stage. He was in his early twenties, dressed in a dark, casual suit. His voice was gentle, enrapturing, and an audible shuffling was heard from around the lecture hall as all the females sat up straighter, taking notice.

“Wow, he’s cute!” Sylvia gushed. “Don’t you think?”

“He’s not bad,” Linda lied. He was very good-looking, but she didn’t want to admit it, opening herself up for further torture from her overzealous friend.

“Not bad?” she exclaimed under her breath. “Man, how cute are these pre-med guys you talk to online?”

Linda had to admit the bar had been raised recently. But she wasn’t about to share that with Sylvia.

“Do you have to be pre-med to go on that site?” Sylvia pressed. “I wanna check some of these hotties out.”

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Any academic student was welcome to join the site. It was specifically designed for those needing to share ideas and experiences with different colleges and universities, even some high school and college alumna. The site was set up by students for students, but Linda linked herself with strictly the medical chat board, although all registered students were accessible no matter what board you were participating in.

“No, future tree trimmers need not become involved,” Linda lied. Sylvia was getting on her nerves. And she didn’t want overly excitable Sylvia to have yet something else to talk to Linda about. She preferred to keep her private life just that—private.

Mention of the site reminded Linda that she needed to talk to her dad about something. He would be making rounds at the hospital, so Linda pulled out her cell phone and sent him a text message. As she hit send she noticed there were two unread messages. One was Layla, her younger sister, gushing over the man speaking on stage. She looked over to the other side of the auditorium and saw the sixteen-year-old waving at her.

Sylvia, still gaping at the attractive speaker, ignored Linda’s messaging. But just to be sure, Linda lifted one leg over the other, shielding her phone from her friend’s view before checking the other message.

It was him again.

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“Dad?”

Chris lifted his head briefly from the mountain of paperwork staring at him from his desk. His eighteen year old daughter Linda stood in the doorway, looking at him expectantly. The small den was used for him and his wife, Mary, also a doctor, to finish their patient charts at home so they could at least see their children for more than an hour a day. “Yep,” he answered tersely.

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“Erm...do you have a minute? I need to ask you something.”

“Can it wait? I’ve got tons of work to do here.”

She gave him the palms up. “I sent you a message.”

“Phone died.” He pointed to his iPhone sitting in the charging dock.  
“Can you talk to Mom about it?”

Linda and Mary had a falling out a few days prior when Linda missed her curfew, which was normally ignored because Mary and Chris were never home to enforce it. On the one night Mary was home, Linda was caught and was grounded. “Not really,” Linda answered under her breath, looking off to the side, still feeling wounded.

He sighed and lifted his arm, motioning her to come in. His eyes did not leave the open file in front of him.

Taking a step closer, Linda began. “I don’t know what to specialize in.”

Chris continued scrawling notes, his eyes moved over the paper as he wrote. “You’ve still got time.”

Mary was a paediatrician and Mark was a general practitioner. “I know, but I’d like to have my mind made up before I go to college.”

“You can change your mind later.”

“But I want to be sure.”

Chris was becoming agitated. “Why?” His head didn’t lift, but he stopped writing to emphasize the question. “I wanted to be an oncologist first off. Your mother wanted to be an OB-GYN. It’s not a big deal.”

Exasperated, she sighed heavily. “I don’t know.”

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Chris had just finished a thirty-six hour shift treating victims of a road accident, a guy who jumped the tracks at the subway stop on Bleecker Street, dozens of people with influenza, one case of hypothermia, and a multitude of other ailments. Plus he had to witness a crazy woman having a mental meltdown in Chris's subway car on the ride home. At least an hour's worth of patient charts was left to do, and he still hadn't even spoken to his wife or his other two daughters since arriving home. "Listen, Linda. Why don't you tell me what's really bothering you?" His tone was clipped, knowing this was Linda's game. Chris's eyes met Linda's for a brief moment.

When she stood there, her jaw muscles worked in deep thought. Chris took notice of his daughter's expression and his eyes softened. "Whatever you decide, your mother and I will support you."

Linda paused, digesting his statement, feeling like she'd been dismissed. "Okay, Dad."

She turned on her heel and headed for the kitchen, but she couldn't stop thinking that he could have finished the sentence differently and it would have made her feel that much better. Linda hoped he would add, "Whether it's becoming a doctor or not". But she noted that he didn't.

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Having five hours of blessed sleep, Chris was awakened in the night by the house phone ringing. He'd been called in to the hospital as the emergency room was flooding, typical of the end of the week. Reluctantly he dressed himself, feeling remotely resentful of his wife still sleeping soundly, and boarded the subway.

Six hours later he found himself in the break room talking with one of his mentors, Dr. John. Chris's foot was propped up on the corner of the metal table. His arms were crossed over his chest while Dr. John stood against the counter by the fridge, picking his teeth with a wooden toothpick.

"How's that daughter of yours doing?" Dr. John asked.

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Chris guffawed. “Which one?”

Dr. John chuckled. “That’s right, you have a house full of women, I forgot.”

“Linda’s doing well. Still on the fence with what specialty she’d like to pursue.”

“My Paul went through the same. It’s pretty standard to change your mind. Flip-flop here and there. That’s why we do residency. Exposure is good.” Dr. Paul was matter-of-fact. “He’s expecting a baby, you know?”

Chris’s eyebrows lifted. They’d gone to his wedding two years ago. “Oh, yeah? And how many grandchildren will this be for you and Gwenyth?”

“Sixth,” Dr. John said as though he didn’t believe it himself. “Gwenyth’s a little upset that her baby’s having a baby so far away.”

Dr. John’s youngest son, Paul, met his wife while vacationing with friends in North Carolina. They carried a long distance relationship until marriage. “No thoughts of moving back to New York?”

The senior doctor shook his head emphatically. “No, that was the agreement. They got married in Manhattan and they would settle in North Carolina.”

Chris nodded understanding.

“Matter of fact his practice is thriving over there. He’s looking for two or three doctors to join him in the office.” He tossed the toothpick in the garbage. “I’d take the job myself, but he doesn’t want to work with his dear old dad anymore. That’s half the reason he didn’t mind taking up in North Carolina.”

Chris laughed gently. “I can understand that, you old coot.”

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Dr. John chuckled him playfully on the shoulder. “What about you? Would you leave all this mayhem for a job in Holly Springs, North Carolina?”

Chuckling him back, Chris joked, “And leave you here, old man?”

“I best get back to work,” Dr. John advised, looking at his watch. Then he glanced at Chris. “You look like hell. Why don’t you go home?”

It seemed Dr. John had been saying that to Chris a lot. “Thanks,” he answered with only a trace of humor. “You don’t look so hot yourself.”

Winking, the senior doctor left the break room, leaving Chris to himself. Drawing in a deep breath, he let Dr. John’s words linger in his mind. Still deep in thought, Chris pulled out his cell phone and saw the message Linda had left him the previous day. He looked at the door where Dr. John had just parted, and stood there blinking numbly until he was startled by another overworked doctor coming in for a moment’s respite.

## Chapter 2

Mary Dixon entered the bedroom. She had bags under her eyes, but the huge grin on her face was telltale. “Did she say something particularly cute again?” Chris inquired, looking over his laptop screen as he sat against the fluffy pillows on the headboard.

“It wasn’t what she said but how she said it,” Mary answered, pulling her fuzzy slippers off her feet. The three bedroom apartment was quiet, and it was a rare occasion for both Dixon parents to be going to bed together. “She squeezed me so tight when she said ‘I love you, Mommy’.”

“She’s a doll,” Chris said.

Mary slid her feet into bed and pulled the covers up to her neck. Chris looked over at his wife, noticing the slightly pained expression on her face. “What is it?”

Shaking her head, as if she’d worried for nothing, Mary explained. “She’s just not the same in the last little while. Clingy and more juvenile than recently...I just think she’s regressed.” Mary was a paediatrician and it was difficult to keep her doctor’s hat off when she was around her own children.

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Waving his hand in a cavalier gesture, Chris interjected. “Tasha’s still adjusting to the new school and to Martha, dear. Really, it’s only been a couple of weeks. Give it time.”

“But she’s doing well in the new school,” Mary argued. “Better than she was in the other one.”

Six year old Tasha was enrolled in a wonderful school at the recommendation of one of Chris’s colleagues. Sadly, four months later the school unexpectedly closed down, forcing them to abruptly change her current daytime schedule and surroundings. Also, with Tasha being in school full-time, and the hospital placing both parents on call nearly the whole week at times, they could no longer rely on their own schedules or that of their two teenage daughters anymore, so they had to hire a part-time nanny.

“And don’t forget about Martha. Tasha’s never had a nanny before. She’s been spoiled with Layla and Linda being around all the time.”

He caught his wife’s disapproving stare and lifted his arms in defeat. “I’m not arguing the point. We needed someone, what with the other girls and us in and out all hours of the day and night,” Chris said as if by rote.

Hiring a nanny had been a bone of contention between Mary and Chris. Chris thought it was unnecessary, that between the five of them they could make things work, but Mary disagreed. Having been raised in a large family of seven, Chris was accustomed to never requiring outside help, but Mary was child one of two, and the youngest. Her family was wealthy and had both a nanny and a housekeeper in their large rural estate in Ohio.

So it came down to insulting her upbringing when Chris fought the issue. Caving after the first unwelcome quarrel, Chris placed an online ad and the following week came Martha. “I’m sure she’ll come around.” He patted his wife’s leg.

Still appearing unsettled, Mary bit her lip. Chris prattled on about his day when Mary suddenly interrupted him. “Do you think Martha

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is treating her well? I don't see them bonding much," she said, as if she'd been deaf to his conversation.

"You're never around to see whether or not they're bonding," Chris said in a non-malicious tone. It was simply reality for them. "Have you asked Tasha if she likes Martha?"

"She says so, but I don't know."

"Give it time. Ask her again in a couple of days and see if her attitude changes," Chris ventured, typing away on his computer.

"I have a better idea," Mary said, picking at her nails.

He closed the lid on his computer, giving Mary his full attention. "Oh, yeah? What's that?"

"You ever heard of a 'Nanny-Cam'?" she looked directly at her husband; that same 'you're-not-going-to-win-this' look arose in her eyes. Chris ran a hand through his hair. He didn't have the energy to argue with her.

"Fine. Do it. I'm sure everything's fine though." He opened his laptop again and she slid further under the covers. A small, contented glimmer was in her eyes as she glanced at Chris's screen.

He had their shared personal email account open. A message from Dr. John was there; it was an ultrasound picture of their sixth grandchild.

"Oh, isn't that nice," Mary beamed. "Gwyneth must be beside herself with joy."

"Yeah, I talked to him today," Chris assented. "She's a little upset that Paul's having a baby so far away."

Mary nodded. "I can understand that." She sighed, turning over onto her side, away from him. "It's better that way, though. Given the

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choice, I'd rather have raised our kids out in the country. That's how I was brought up."

Chris and Mary met through a mutual friend when Mary had moved to New York to attend NYU School of Medicine after University in Ohio. Then, she fell in love with the city, having never seen it. She'd travelled all across Europe with her family throughout her life, but she found city living intriguing, and so when she and Chris met up in New York, they made a life there.

Turning his head towards his wife's back, a thought suddenly struck him. "You ever think about going back?"

Mary shuffled over so she was facing Chris. "Going back where? To Ohio?"

"No. Just to living in the country."

She paused a moment for thought. "I don't know. We've established ourselves here. It would be hard to leave, and for what? Our jobs are here in New York."

He chewed his lip, rewinding some of the conversation he had with Dr. John earlier. "What if there was a job for both of us somewhere else?"

Her eyes opened and a crease formed between her brows. "What do you mean, like opening a practice or something? That costs way too much money out here, Chris. We've discussed that. Heck, we can't even afford to buy a house or a condominium here."

Chris looked at his wife and, sensing his segue into an oddly timed conversation, she propped herself up onto the pillow so she was face to face with him.

"Paul's looking for two or three doctors for his practice. Dr. John mentioned it to me in jest, but...I don't know, Mary..." He recalled the words he shared with Linda the previous night, and it pained him to realize how much he'd brushed her off, and how much they'd

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both been somewhat neglecting their family responsibilities. “We never have time for the kids anymore, and we’re both constantly exhausted. Maybe a career move wouldn’t be the worst thing.”

Mary averted her glance, as if in shock. “But he lives in North Carolina, doesn’t he?”

Chris nodded. “Holly Springs, about a half an hour outside of Raleigh. John’s showed me pictures. It’s a beautiful area, Mary.”

She gaped at her husband. “Are you serious?” She whispered a hiss that expressed half surprise, half excitement. “It sounds like you’ve already made up your mind.”

Boldly, Chris asked, “Would you consider it?”

Mary shook her head slowly. “I don’t know, Chris. What about the kids? We just put Tasha into another school, and Linda might want to go to NYU, and Layla would die if we told her we’re moving out of the city. She can’t stand ‘hicks’.” Mary air-quoted the word ‘hicks’.

“Why don’t we discuss it with them tomorrow?”

She had a sparkle in her eyes when she faced Chris. “Are you serious?”

Chris placed his hand on hers. “Yeah,” he said in a warm tone. “I’m serious.”

Bending over, she kissed him tenderly on the mouth. “You know I’ve always dreamed of this.”

“When opportunity knocks, it’s simple, you answer.”

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Chris had butterflies in his stomach. Mary had gone to round up the kids to talk about the possibility of moving to North Carolina, and he

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was very nervous about it. The last thing he wanted was to cause a problem in his family. Lord knew they had enough of that already, and he hoped that they would see this as being a solution to that. His wife reappeared with slight irritation in her face. “Layla’s in a snit; can’t get her hair just right.”

Waving, Chris put his other arm around Mary. “She’s always in a snit about that. I’ll buy her one of those flat irons and she’ll be our best friend again.” Sometimes teenagers were so tough to deal with, but other times they were so simple. Chris was thankful this was the latter.

Tasha came skipping into the living room. “Mommy, can I have a cookie?”

“Sure, honey, go grab a plate of them and we’ll all share.”

Linda appeared a second later. For once she didn’t have her cell phone glued to her palm. Chris smiled. “How are you, Linda?”

She was nonplussed. She shrugged. “I’m fine.

When sixteen-year-old Layla trudged out of her bedroom, she had one side of her long brown hair pinned up just above her ear and the other side laying flat down her chest.

“You figure out your hair, sweetie?” Mary asked.

Layla gave her an ‘okay, what’s the catch’ look. “Yeah, so?”

Linda and Layla slumped down on the couch in their ‘oh God, it’s another teenage lecture’ position, eyes averted, picking at a loose thread or at a fingernail, sour looks on their faces.

Tasha walked to the living room carrying a large white tray with a plate full of chocolate chip cookies. “Just set them down there.” Chris assisted, and wasted no time proudly announcing what Mary and he had in mind. “Your mother and I have been working a lot lately and we understand this family needs a little change.”

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He looked at his daughters, checking for attention span. Linda was pouting as she peered out of the window to her left, which overlooked Manhattan. Layla was chewing a cookie, showing more interest in counting the chocolate chips than in what her dad had to say. Tasha was still inspecting each cookie for chip count before finally selecting one and taking a large bite.

“I was talking with a colleague of mine, err, Dr. John, yesterday, and his son Paul is looking for a couple of doctors to help him run his practice.” Chris paused. No response. They were all miles away in their own worlds. He gave Mary a wink and continued. “In North Carolina.”

All eyes were on him suddenly. Audible gasps came from all three daughters. Tasha immediately began wailing. “Mommy, I don’t want to move! I love my new school!”

Layla darted up, sitting straight. Her face was pained as she barked, “Are you crazy? Move to North Carolina? No way! I’m not moving to some hickville neighbourhood! I love it here in New York!” Her hands were flailing, exhibiting her fiery upset.

Linda sat silent, shaking her head slowly. She was biting her lip and Chris could clearly see her chest heaving. She waited for Layla to finish her tirade and then she started. “Great, Dad. I haven’t even decided which University I’m going to. What happens if I decide to go to NYU? Why couldn’t you decide this at a better time...like after I’m done with school?” She rose quickly from her seat and lifted her arm to emphasize her point. “I’m not moving, Dad! Forget it! I’ll stay with Sylvia until September and then I’ll live in residence.” Her voice was vile, full of hatred for her father.

He looked at his hands in defeat, as though he expected Linda’s heated response. Instead of fighting back he let her storm off to her room and slam the door. Layla left the room abruptly as well and shouted to her parents, “I’ll stay with Sylvia too!”

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Little Tasha sat on the couch, sobbing and holding her hands to her ears to shield them from the shouting. Her face was red and wet with tears. Mary knelt down in front of her, fingering a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Honey, it was just a thought. We don’t have to move. Me and Daddy thought you girls would be happy about it, but if you’re not, that’s okay. We can stay here in New York.”

She looked up at Chris, as if for permission. He was still standing there staring at his fingers. Sensing his wife’s glance, he looked at her and nodded assent. Walking away, his gait changed, like he suddenly weighed much more than he did before the conversation.

## Chapter 3

Mary lay in bed alone, catching up on work emails, when Tasha appeared at her bedroom door. She rubbed her eyes until they were pink; her hair was messed from sleep.

“Did you have a bad dream?” Mary asked, patting the empty side of the bed.

Tasha jumped onto the bed and nestled herself beside Mary.  
“Where’s Daddy?”

“He’s at work, honey. I’ve got to go in in about three hours too. Martha will be here by six to get you ready for school.” She ran her hand through her daughter’s knotted hair. “What was your dream about?”

“I didn’t have a bad dream.” She yawned. “I just woke up and couldn’t fall back to sleep.”

The background image on Mary’s laptop screen was her old childhood house where her parents still lived. It was a beautiful two-storey mansion with large white pillars flanking the front door, and a roundabout driveway that snaked its way to the cobblestone walkway that led to the side garden. An American flag leaned proudly on the side of the house.

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“What was it like growing up there?” Tasha asked sleepily. “Did you like it there?”

“I loved it there,” Mary said happily. “Me and Auntie Rebecca got to go fishing and hiking, and grampa taught us how to ride a bike. We even had our own pool in the backyard. It was wonderful.”

“I don’t know how to ride a bike,” Tasha observed with a small pout. “I have a goldfish though.”

“Well, honey, Mommy and Daddy could teach you how to ride a bike.”

Tasha looked at her mother sitting up in bed, as she lay on Chris’s pillow. “I don’t know how to swim, either.”

Mary’s face brightened after a beat. “If you want, we can get you into lessons?”

“But who would take me?”

“Any of us could,” Mary insisted.

“But I want you to take me,” Tasha whined in that mock baby voice that was bothersome to Mary.

“I can try,” Mary answered, searching her daughter’s face. “Now you should get to bed. You’ve got school in the morning.”

“Can I sleep with you?” Tasha begged.

“I suppose,” Mary said, reacting as though the child had twisted her arm. “But no snoring,” she joked.

Tasha giggled. A beat later Mary had minimized her screen again, giving [A] full view of her large childhood house. “How big would our house be?”

A crease formed between Mary’s eyes. “What do you mean?”

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“If we moved. Like what you and Daddy talked about. How big would our house be?”

Mary looked around the bedroom as though the walls were transparent and she had a clear view of the full rental apartment in front of her. “I don’t know. It would be much different than here.”

“Why?”

“Because where Paul’s practice is, it’s a very small town, like the one Mommy grew up in. The houses are cozy and you have lots more land, not like here where it’s mainly apartments. You have lots of grass and an unobstructed view of the sky and the stars. Plus, it’s a lot quieter.”

Tasha was silent, digesting the information. “Where would you and Daddy work? Would it be like the hospital?”

“No, sweetie. Paul has his own office, just a small one, in the town where he lives. There is a hospital there, but Mommy and Daddy would be working with Paul.”

“Would you have to work a lot?” Tasha’s expression was strained, like it was a painful question.

“Probably less than now. It’s a small town, so there are less people that get sick.” Then she corrected herself. “They are busy, because he’s looking for more doctors to help him, but it probably wouldn’t be as busy as Mommy and Daddy are now.”

Another pause. “Would Martha still cook me dinner and make my breakfast?”

Mary couldn’t help feeling like she’d set a trap for her sweet girl, but she had to answer honestly. “No, honey. Mommy and Daddy would probably be home for breakfast and dinner. There might be sometimes when we can’t be there, but we would be home often enough that we wouldn’t need Martha.”

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That hit a nerve. Tasha, who had been dozing slightly, was suddenly wide-eyed. “Really?” she asked, like Mary was Santa Claus, and she’d just been promised her very own life-sized Princess castle. “You mean you and Daddy would be home for dinner? And to tuck me in at night?”

Closing the lid on her computer, Mary nodded.

The child had an ear-to-ear smile. “Oh, Mommy, I want to move to North Carolina!” She beamed, as if to say ‘let me just go pack my bags, right now!’.

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Chris unlocked the door and threw down his keys on the console table by the door. He was exhausted after having worked a six hour shift with half the doctors on staff available. Another flu bug had ravaged the emergency department, but Chris was thankful it hadn’t affected him...yet. Checking his watch he saw that it was nearly four o’clock in the morning. He quickly stepped out of his shoes and placed his briefcase on the floor beside the console table. He was too tired to do paperwork—he wanted to go straight to bed.

Entering his bedroom he saw little Tasha sound asleep on his side of the bed, but Mary was nowhere to be found. The bedside lamp had been left on, so Chris carefully turned it off, heading for Tasha’s bedroom thinking he might find Mary there.

“Hey,” he whispered. Mary was fully dressed, ready for work. She had one of Tasha’s old teddy bears in her hand as she sat on the small bed. Beside her was a large, folded sheet of paper, instructions to something. “Whatcha got there?” he asked

“It’s the Nanny-Cam,” she answered, lifting her head just for a moment. “I wanted to get it installed so I can test it out before work. Tasha came to bed with me, so the timing is perfect.”

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The small camera was no bigger than a golf ball. Its tiny lens resembled the cameras the girls had in their cell phones. “Where do you put it?” Chris asked, joining his wife, being careful not to break her concentration as he sat on the bed.

“I dug a hole in the belly, see?” Mary showed Chris the spot of stuffing that had been removed, but was almost unnoticeable between the large, fluffy belly of the bear. “Now I just have to place it carefully and put this adhesive around it so the thing doesn’t fall out.”

Chris lent a hand and minutes later the camera was installed. The camera had a button that matched the color of the bear, so it was nicely camouflaged from view. She pressed it and they both heard the tiny beep. “It’s working.”

In Tasha’s room, on the large wall by the door, there was a bookcase with multiple shelves. It was the perfect home for the bear as it was at the right height to catch anything that would happen within the viewable area of the bedroom. Chris winced, not wanting to ask why she’d chosen the bedroom as the place to record.

“I’ll check it in a day or so, and if it works well, I’ll get another for the living room and kitchen,” she added, as though answering Chris’s silent thought.

“How was work?” Mary asked, changing the subject.

“Busy. If I don’t get called in I have tomorrow off.”

“Great.” Mary smiled. “I had an interesting conversation with Tasha last night.”

The days and nights were melded together, but Chris was too tired to ask for clarification. “Oh yeah? What did she have to say?”

“She wants to move to North Carolina.”

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His neck craned in disbelief. “Really? Why the sudden change of heart?”

Mary began folding up the instructions and stuffed them in the tiny box the camera had arrived in. “That little girl is smarter than all of us. We should give her more credit.”

Pushing his lips together, Chris gave his wife an ‘I told you so’ glance. “Too bad the other two aren’t as smart.”

Ignoring his comment, Mary rose. “I better head off.” She kissed him chastely on the lips. “Keep the bed warm for me.”

“I’ll sleep here. Test out the camera,” Chris offered, disregarding the fact that he was against having it. “Besides, Tasha’s in our bed.”

“She’d love to wake up next to Daddy.”

Chris had issues towards sleeping with the children. He quickly shook his head. “That’s okay, I’ll be fine here.”

Mary didn’t press. “I’ll see you later.”

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Layla sent a text message to her best friend Carla, asking her if she was home and if she could come over. Carla lived up the street in a building that could pass as Layla’s building’s older brother. It had all the same features but was about twenty years its senior. Carla and her mother lived in a two bedroom apartment, and both Layla and Carla attended the same high school and had known each other since Kindergarten.

Stomping over to her friend’s house, Layla couldn’t wait to express her outrage at her parents even thinking about moving out of Manhattan. She was fuming with anger, so much so that the neighbours came out to see what the commotion was all about as Layla banged needlessly hard on the door.

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“What’s going on, girl?” Carla laughed, knowing Layla was upset about something, but knowing it had to be really juicy for her to be this flustered.

Layla hesitated as Carla closed the door behind her. “Your mom home?”

Carla shook her head no and gave a slight eye roll, as if she was relieved.

Then Layla let it out. She began pacing, dropping her jacket, hat and scarf on the floor numbly. “My parents are thinking about moving! Do you believe it!”

“Moving where?” Carla crossed her arms over her chest.

“To freaking North Carolina!” Layla yelled, bending forward for emphasis.

Carla’s face scrunched. “What the hell is in North Carolina?”

Layla flailed her right arm in the air. “Some guy my dad works with has a son who runs a medical practice out there.”

Unimpressed, Carla stuck one foot out, leaning backward slightly. “So?”

“So, he’s looking for more doctors to help him run the place,” Layla huffed.

“And your parents wanna move there now?” Carla was confused.

Slumping down on the couch, bouncing so hard she forced a pillow off the back of it, Layla explained warily. “They said they wanted to know how we felt about it first,” she scoffed. “And boy, did we all tell them how we felt about it.”

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

Carla, still standing, stuck her hand out in the air, hesitating, trying to understand. “So...you guys aren’t moving?” She said it as more of a statement.

“No,” Layla said. Her foot tapped on the floor anxiously.

Carla sat on the arm chair beside the couch. “So why are you so mad then?” She practically laughed. Layla could be such a drama queen sometimes.

Heaving a quick breath of air as though frustrated, Layla glared at her. “Just the thought of it,” she squeaked. “You shoulda seen Tasha. She threw a fit. I can’t believe they would stress us out like that.”

“They were asking for your opinion,” Carla reasoned. “Think about how mad you would be if they thought about moving to Hawaii and didn’t mention it.”

Layla rolled her eyes at Carla, as if to say ‘don’t be so ridiculous’.

Carla caught the look. “I’m serious! Be thankful your folks asked how you felt about it and then respected your wishes,” she argued, not caring how sarcastic she sounded. “When my parents decided to divorce, do you think they asked me first? Do you think my mother asked how I felt about moving to this dump when your apartment is just up the street and is so much nicer?”

Layla’s face finally softened. She pointed at Carla. “Okay, you win. But you’re only allowed to use that once.”

“Fine. You want something to drink?” Carla rose, walking to the kitchen, which took only two steps.

“You got Coke?”

Carla dipped her head out of the kitchen, lifting her brows. “Liquid or powder?”

“Haha. My parents are doctors, loser. Liquid.”

Carla’s head disappeared for a beat and then her index finger appeared. “Okay, but you’re only allowed to use that once.”

When Carla came out of the kitchen carrying two glasses of Coke with ice, Layla waited until she set the glasses down on the coffee table and then shot a couch cushion directly at her. “That’s for being a smartass!” She laughed as the pillow whipped Carla in the head, sending her hair up in a heap with static cling.

Unscathed, Carla smoothed her hair down, taking a sip of her drink. “How did Linda take it?”

“Much like me. Only she’s twice as pissed off that they would consider moving her out of state when she might go to NYU.”

Carla waved and scrunched her nose. “She doesn’t even know where she wants to go yet.” It amazed her how much the sisters were alike. “Besides, if she’s smart she’ll go to Harvard.”

Layla got snarky. “That’s only four hours from here and like eleven from North Carolina.”

“So?” Carla was aghast. “I don’t get you Dixon girls. What is so damn special about New York anyway?” she argued. “I’ve lived here all my life, just like you, and given the chance, I’d leave.” Carla put her hand out defensively. “Don’t get me wrong, I mean, I don’t want you moving eight hours away from me, but God, I just don’t get it.”

Interested, Layla put her drink down and sat up straight. “What don’t you get?”

Head cocked to the side in thought, Carla sucked her teeth. “Layla, you have two sisters and both your parents are still together.” She looked at Layla in an expression that asked ‘are you still with me?’. Layla nodded. “Okay, so you never get to see your folks and your sister Linda is so quiet that when she speaks the whole room shuts

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

up. Tasha, well, she's six, she wouldn't remember moving anyway. And your parents work their asses off, each at different hospitals, making peanuts for the hours they spend outside of the home. Why wouldn't you want to move to a small town where you might actually be happier?"

"But why would we be happier, Carla? I mean, where they want to move, it's like friggin' hickville. I love the city. That's all I know."

Carla waited for her to finish and then continued. "Layla, have you ever been to your grandparents' place out in Ohio?"

"Not for a while, but yeah. Why?"

"You've barely been out of the city your entire life. How do you know you'd hate it?"

Now Layla was confused. "Why do you want me to move so badly? I told you my parents were just thinking about it."

Carla then brought her point home. "So then why were you so upset, Layla?"

She couldn't stand it when Layla was so dramatic. Carla was more grounded in personality and she disliked that being around her friend was becoming more and more like watching an episode of *Pretty Little Liars*.

Layla lowered her head in defeat. "I don't know. You know what? You're right, it's no big deal."

"Be thankful your parents care enough about you to do what's right, or at least try to," Carla added. "My mother's out at a bar scouting for younger men." Sometimes Carla wondered who was the grown up in her house. She clucked her teeth, trying to make light of it. "At least she gave me the number of the bar. Get this, it's called Cougartown. Apt, eh?"

SANDY APPLEYARD

Layla's sullen face stretched up into a smile that became infectious, which was exactly what Carla was looking for.

## Chapter 4

Linda slammed her door hard enough to rattle the pictures on her bedroom wall. The wooden desk in the corner actually shook with the force. Ignoring the fallen papers tacked to the corkboard above her desk, Linda flopped down on her bed. She was so angry she wanted to scream. Did her parents even care about her anymore? Lately it didn't seem so and now this.

There were so many questions in her mind that Linda was literally suffering from insomnia. Unresolved issues about her grades; pending decisions about medical school and which Universities to apply to—a whole laundry list of undetermined details lay there. Plus, being the oldest, Linda had other responsibilities like being a good big sister both to Layla and Tasha. She felt spread too thin, and having Martha around didn't seem to appease her at all. Linda still didn't trust her.

A bookcase, the mate to Tasha's only taller, hugged her main wall. It was crammed with every New York Times bestselling romance novel imaginable. Linda wasn't much of a social butterfly; she mostly went to the library to study, pick up new books, and meet the occasional friend. And although chatty Miss Sylvia thought she was Linda's best friend, Linda did not regard her as such. Linda didn't have a best friend.

She'd recently become very connected with a few students on the website her and Sylvia had discussed the other day at the assembly.

## SANDY APPLEYARD

If she was ever accepted to the same schools as said acquaintances, her circle of friends was bound to grow in numbers. Linda felt mixed emotions about that. She liked her privacy for her own reasons, but lately she had an overwhelming sense of loneliness.

Chris and Linda had always shared a special bond until recently. Linda couldn't place what set a wedge between them, but she was at least thankful that the gap in closeness with her dad wasn't nearly as big as the one she and her mom had. Since puberty, Mary and Linda didn't see eye to eye, and Linda often felt compelled to discuss personal matters with her dad rather than her mom.

Come to think of it, Linda couldn't remember ever having a unique bond with her mother. She'd always been a daddy's girl through and through. Tasha was very close with Mary, and Layla was somewhere in between. Layla was probably the closest thing Linda had to a best friend, but even her middle sister wasn't privy to all of Linda's personal life.

She heard her laptop ping with a new email and it broke her of her brooding. Entering her password, Linda's email account was already open, and so she clicked on the highlighted message. It was a friend from the college site, Wayne. He had once attended another local high school and they had another friend in common, someone who had moved away, but Linda still kept in touch casually. Wayne was asking if Linda would like to meet up with him and his group the following day after school. They had previously discussed having a meeting with senior students from both schools to discuss future academics at medical school. Wayne would be the chairman of the group, seeing as he was attending NYU.

After she replied back, Wayne gave her his cell number for convenience, and named off some of the others that would be attending the session. He gave her the Facebook page link to join the group, which she immediately did, and was suddenly over her previous melancholy over the move.

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## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

The bus dropped her off in front of the fence leading into Wayne's former high school. The chain-link fence had a layer of frost. An opening between two metal posts allowed entry onto the soccer field, just like Wayne had described. Linda had been to the high school only a few times before, but had always entered through the back, where the school bus was unloaded.

Entering the large glass double doors, the inside of the school was still bustling about as if it was still day time, when in fact it was after six. The library was at the end of the left-hand side hallway, just as Wayne had instructed. She'd told him she would be wearing her long blue woolen jacket and he reported he would be wearing his school jacket. When she saw him wave to her at the end of the hall, she smiled.

Wayne was a tall, gangly-looking man with long, curly red hair tied back in a ponytail, and blue eyes. His too-straight teeth were telling that he'd recently had braces removed and the pants that trailed up a few inches too high over his ankles showed that his parents were not as well off as Linda's. He was just short of handsome.

"Hey, did you find everything okay?" he asked, his voice the same as when they'd spoken on the phone earlier.

"Yeah, it's as easy as you said." She blushed, mirroring his bashful expression. Clearly he was as quiet and reclusive as she, which was a factor that drew her to him.

Wayne led her into the study hall where he introduced Linda to the rest of the group. There were about ten kids; a split between male and female, including Wayne. One of the girls was his younger sister Kelly, who had a striking resemblance to him, save for her mangled teeth. She would probably get her braces next, Linda surmised.

They sat for an hour discussing university, switching from current events and steering back to the topic at hand periodically. The group began to thin after seven-thirty, and at around eight o'clock it was just Linda and Wayne remaining.

## SANDY APPLEYARD

“Your sister looks a lot like you,” Linda observed.

He lifted a brow. “I’ll take that as a compliment, I think,” he said chuckling.

“She seems really nice. Are you two close?”

Wayne sighed. “When she’s not driving me crazy, yes. She misses me a lot since I’m at NYU now.”

Linda snorted. “I know the feeling. I have two sisters.”

“Oh yeah? No brothers, huh?”

“No. My little sister Tasha is six, and Layla is sixteen.”

Wayne was impressed. “That’s quite an age gap there. Your parents have a mid-life oopsy?”

She felt her face flush. “Kinda. We never really thought about it that way, but I guess you could say that.”

Wayne waved. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to disrespect.”

Linda shook her head, frowning. “No disrespect. So do you have any other siblings?”

“Nope. Just me and the Kell-ster.”

“How much of an age gap is there between you two?” Linda asked.

“She’s eighteen and I’ll be twenty-two soon.” Wayne decided to change the subject. “Hey, do you like to zip line?”

Linda’s eyes widened. “Zip lining? I’ve never gone but always wanted to try it. Why?”

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

Relief seemed to wash over Wayne's face. "Good. My girlfriend is terrified to go, but there's this place uptown that I've been dying to try." He looked at her pointedly. "Do you wanna go this weekend?"

Taken slightly aback at the mention of a girlfriend, Linda nodded. Not that Linda had any interest in Wayne, it was just that he'd never mentioned he was in a relationship. As if on cue, her cell phone vibrated in her pocket. She picked it up while an article in a magazine grabbed Wayne's attention. When she looked at the screen, she smiled.

It was him.

"Your Mom looking for you?" Wayne asked without lifting his head from the sports article.

She gushed. "No."

He lifted his head. "Boyfriend?"

Linda blushed but didn't answer. Wayne didn't press, either.

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Walking out of the high school, Wayne said goodbye to Linda and walked up the street to catch the subway back to NYU. He felt guilty for leaving Linda by herself, but she insisted. Standing by the back parking lot, which was dark and empty, her heart was beating fast. Hoping she wouldn't wait too long, she pulled out her cell phone and held it in her hand. Each time it went into sleep mode she'd wake it back up again, growing more and more anxious as the minutes passed.

Finally, a shadow appeared from the street where Wayne had disappeared only twenty minutes prior, but to Linda it seemed like hours. The smile on her face as she recognized him made him grin.

"Hi, baby," he said, kissing her on the lips. "Been waiting long?"

## SANDY APPLEYARD

She shook her head, burying it into his chest. "I missed you."

"Mmm. Me too." He kissed the top of her head. "How did your meeting go?"

"Really well. I think NYU is definitely going to suit me just fine."

"You didn't go on a tour yet?" her male friend asked, wrapping his arms tighter around her.

Linda pulled up so they were nose to nose. "You know those tours don't show you much more than geography. I met a guy who goes there and I've spoken to a few others who gave me more of a feel for it."

"I checked the place out," he commented. "Still not sure."

"Maybe you should've come to the meeting." Linda kissed him on the lips.

"Next time," he said. "You hungry?"

"Starved."

They walked down the street to a mom and pop submarine shop and sat, eating contentedly together. "So, have you given any thought to what I asked earlier?"

Linda squirmed uncomfortably in her chair. "I don't know, Brian. My dad's been real distant with me lately." She left out the part where they'd dropped the 'moving' bomb on the kids.

Brian rested his sandwich on the waxed paper, folded into four. "Linda, we've been going out over nine months. You've met my parents," he pressed. "When do I get to meet yours?"

She glared at him. "That's not fair, I already knew your parents." Brian's dad coached Tasha's little league team when she played the

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

previous summer. Linda often took Tasha when her parents were working. Brian's mom was always there to help with the kids too.

"So?" he argued. "You've seen them since we've been going out."

Linda pursed her lips. She didn't approve of him telling his parents they were going out. His mom still spoke with Mary sometimes, since they had other friends in common.

"Are you embarrassed or something?" Brian asked.

"No," she answered back, too suddenly, he noted. "I just don't like my parents knowing my business."

"They're your parents, Linda," he muttered, irritated. "It's their job to know your business."

Somehow, Linda begged to differ. Their jobs were at the hospital, and frankly, Linda liked it better that way. The only thing she really needed to talk about with her father was her education. Everything else she could handle on her own. "Whatever," she sighed, exasperated. "If you want to meet them, come meet them. Lord knows when they're home."

"I think it's about time, Linda," Brian stated firmly. "If they ever find out by accident our relationship will be soured. I've seen it happen before. It's not pretty."

"Fine." She set the other half of her twelve inch submarine sandwich aside, wrapping it up. Her appetite was gone.

## Chapter 5

Past her curfew, Linda slid inside the door, spotting Layla on the couch watching television. “The coast clear?” Linda whispered.

“Yeah. They’re not home. Martha just left a half an hour ago.”

“Tasha in bed?”

Layla looked at her watch. It was past ten o’clock. She rolled her eyes. “Duh.”

Smirking, Linda quickly hung her coat up as she heard the lock turn in the door. Racing to the couch, she tried to look settled, as though she’d been home a while. Mary’s head popped inside and she had a pained expression. Linda’s heart began to beat faster.

“Quick!” Mary whispered, squeezing through the door with bags of stuff from the party store six blocks away. “Take this stuff and put it in one of your rooms before your father gets home.”

She handed one bag to each of the girls as they trotted quickly towards their mother. “What is all this?” Layla asked.

Mary wasn’t sure if she should be angry at her kids or just herself for forgetting. “It’s your father’s birthday tomorrow. We need to make some fast calls and put something together or he’ll be devastated.”

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

“I’ll call Uncle Jack,” Layla offered.

Nodding, Mary ran a few things off, as if she had an imaginary list. “Call Uncle Jack, Gramma and Grampa, and...um...” She snapped her fingers, as if trying to remember something. “Err...do you think any of your friends would like to come over?” She looked at Layla. “Maybe Carla?”

“Sure,” Layla nodded.

“What about you, Linda? Do you want to bring Sylvia? You guys can ask two or three friends if you want. Fill the house. You know your dad likes that.”

Linda stared at her feet. Would Chris’s birthday party be the time to introduce her boyfriend?

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Layla was lounging on the couch, flipping through the channels on the television. She couldn’t sleep, having indulged in too much chocolate after supper, and was searching for the most boring program to bring her slumber. Mary walked into the living room dressed in her bathrobe and fluffy slippers.

“What are you doing still up?” Mary asked.

“Can’t sleep.”

“Where did Linda go tonight?” Mary peered up at the digital clock on top of the television. “How long was she home before I arrived?”

Layla sucked her teeth, as if the non-verbal communication would tell the tale.

Mary lifted a brow. “How late was she this time?”

## SANDY APPELEYARD

Layla shrugged, noticing Tasha's bear was tucked under Mary's arm. "What's that? Tasha's bear? She get something on it?"

"Not exactly."

Mary sat down beside her daughter's feet and pushed the back of the bear while she kept one hand in front, forcing a small, eyeball-shaped contraption out. Layla caught sight of it and lifted upward. "What are you doing?" she half-laughed, thinking maybe her mother had found some buried treasure hidden inside a child's toy.

"It's a Nanny-Cam," Mary answered simply. Then she checked herself, lifting a hand in defence. "It's just a precaution."

Layla lifted both her hands. "I'm not judging. But, mom, I'm home most of the time that Martha is here and she seems fine."

Toggling down on a small, wafer-shaped piece of plastic, Mary removed the micro SD card. "You got your laptop handy?"

Getting up, Layla went into her room and came back a minute later carrying her laptop. She lifted the lid and placed the small card into the port. "You really think Martha's trouble?"

Focusing on the picture coming up in front, Mary was only half paying attention. "No, Layla, I just want to prove myself wrong is all."

A crease formed between Layla's brows. She wasn't sure if her mom was being sarcastic or serious. "You'll be here all night watching it," Layla scoffed. "Here, hit the arrow key to move faster. I hope it's worth it."

Mary did as instructed and fast forwarded, to Layla's surprise, rather slowly. "Ah, this is what I need," Layla chuckled. "Supremely boring footage of my sister's room." She watched her mom carefully. "Kinda like watching paint dry."

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

Elbowing her middle daughter, Mary half laughed. “I didn’t invite you to watch, smarty pants.”

The only interesting footage shown was Tasha coming into her room to get a change of clothes, and then Martha putting her to bed. Mary sighed, almost apologetically. “Well, at least we know the thing works.”

“I have more SD cards in my room if you need them,” Layla offered.

“I think I can re-use this one. Keep a couple handy for me though, just in case.” Mary patted her on the knee. “I’m putting another one in the kitchen and one in the living room, too, just so you know.”

Layla’s neck craned as her face twisted. “Geez, Mom. Why are you so paranoid?”

“I’m not paranoid, Layla. Believe me, you’ll understand when you have kids too,” Mary urged. “Lots of people use these things now. You’d be surprised.”

Shrugging, Layla rose as she yawned. “Well thanks, Mom. That did the trick.”

Mary smiled behind a feigned glare. “Bored you to sleep, did I? At least I’m good for something.” Her face softened. “Lately I feel like you don’t need me for anything anymore.”

Layla tried for casual. “You can give me fifty bucks.”

“Nice try.”

Before trudging away, Layla snapped her fingers. “Oh yeah, Uncle Jack’s coming tomorrow.” Jack was the only sibling of Chris’s that lived in New York. All the others were scattered across the continental US.

“Good. Gramma and Grampa will be here too. One or two from his work might be able to make it. Should be a good turnout.”

## SANDY APPLEYARD

Layla nodded and was about to walk away but hesitated. “Hey, Mom?”

Mary had begun putting the card back into the camera and peered up at her daughter. “Um hm?”

“Don’t worry about Tasha. She’s fine. But if it makes you feel better, put the cameras up. Let me know where you put them so I can keep track in case you can’t.”

Tilting her head to the side, Mary grinned. “Thanks, honey. I appreciate that.”

Layla stuck her hand out. “Now can I have fifty bucks?”

“Bed.” Mary was still grinning, but her head motioned abruptly towards Layla’s room.

“Worth a shot.”

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Linda entered the combination into her locker and pulled it open. She felt his warm hands snake around her, causing her to jump. “Brian, would you stop that!”

He kissed her on the cheek. “What? What’s the matter with you? You’ve been so distant lately.”

Removing her chemistry book from the metal shelf up top, Linda answered. “I don’t know. I’ve got a lot on my mind I guess.” Her excuse was only half true. She did have a lot on her mind, but she was also feeling like Brian always wanted to paw at her. Granted, they had been going out nearly a year and started sleeping together more than six months ago, but his touch seemed to make her feel less attractive in recent weeks. “Besides, you know you’re not supposed to touch me at school. What if Layla walks by?” She placed the book in her backpack and zipped it up.

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

“You see, that’s the part I really don’t understand. Layla knows me. Why wouldn’t you tell her about us?”

Feeling cornered, Linda shook her head. “Fine. You want me to tell Layla, I’ll tell her.”

The flooded and noisy halls were beginning to thin and the noise was dissipating to a level where they no longer needed to raise their voices. Placing his hands on her shoulders gently, Brian forced her to look at him. “Hey, only if you want to, okay?” His eyes were soft. “My parents are at work. Do you want to come over so we can talk?” Brian and Linda both had a spare until last period. She mostly went to the library to study and do homework, but sometimes, if Brian’s house was empty, she went there with him.

One thing Linda loved about Brian was that he said what he meant. Yeah, he’d been seizing a few extra opportunities for sex recently, but when he said ‘to talk’ she knew there wouldn’t be any pressure. “Sure, we can do that,” Linda answered, visibly relaxing. Her eyes went to his lips and he smiled his smile that made Linda melt. Knowing he wouldn’t lean in, she did. They kissed briefly, but long enough to cause a pull in Linda’s belly.

And long enough for someone who was walking around the corner towards them, to see. “Hey, hey, hey...what’s this?” Layla said. Her arms immediately crossed over her chest. “Hey, Brian.” She looked at him and he looked away, pressing his lips together. She then looked at Linda. “Hey, Linda.” Linda’s face was beet red and she looked at her feet.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in class?” Linda asked weakly, as if the possibility of Layla skipping class would be a worse offence than Linda being caught kissing a guy in the hallway.

“Yeah, I came up to see if I could borrow your gym shoes,” Layla chuckled. “But I can see you’re busy.”

## SANDY APPLEYARD

Brian's serious face broke into a half-smile. "Look, don't narc on her, okay? It was my fault."

"Looked pretty mutual to me," Layla teased.

Linda rolled her eyes. "Look, just shut up, okay?"

Layla raised her arms in mock defeat. "I'm not saying a word. I just came to get some sneakers." She snorted a laugh, despite her failure to hold it in, as she reached into Linda's open locker and fished out her gym shoes on the bottom shelf. "Carry on."

Linda and Brian watched Layla saunter away. She turned back with a smirk. "Nice to see you again, Brian."

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Linda swore under her breath as she watched Layla turn the corner and disappear.

Brian said, "Don't sweat it. She's not a teller, is she?"

Slamming her locker door in anger, Linda pursed her lips. "No, but now she's got something on me."

"So get something on her."

Rolling her eyes, Linda draped her backpack on her shoulder and began walking. "Brian, she's home every night before nine, has no boyfriend, and she gets straight As. What dirt could she possibly have?"

"Everybody has dirt," Brian answered. "But this all goes away if you just tell your folks. Not that I'm pressuring you or anything."

"She'll still know we were already together."

"What's the difference? She can't prove for how long," Brian argued. "Seriously, you worry too much, babe. You need to relax."

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

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“So, I guess there wasn’t much to talk about apparently.” Brian smiled, basking in sexual afterglow. He lay on his back, chest naked and arms sprawled outward, spent from their lovemaking. Linda couldn’t help but giggle. Brian was great at two things: making her laugh, and making love to her.

She rolled over on her side, bringing the damp sheets with her. “So, I was thinking about something.”

“About doing it again? We have time and a lot to make up for.” Brian was only half-joking. His sexual appetite was insatiable.

Elbowing him in his side, she chastised him playfully. “I don’t mean that.”

Turning over to face Linda, Brian kissed her chastely on the lips. “What were you thinking about?”

“We’re throwing a birthday party for my dad tonight. Mom has asked us to bring a few friends.” She looked at him, pausing for a dramatic touch. “Did you want to come?”

Linda detected a trace of promise in his eyes, but it fizzled as his face went blank. “As your friend, or as your boyfriend?” His tone was calm, like it was an innocent clarification, not contemptuous.

“As my boyfriend.”

His brows lifted. “Really? Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. You were right about what you said before,” she admitted. “This problem all goes away if I tell my parents. In fact, if they’d known already we wouldn’t have been embarrassed today.”

Brian waved. “I wasn’t embarrassed.”

## SANDY APPLEYARD

Linda punched him in the shoulder, smiling. “Yes, you were. We were both wishing we could fit inside my locker.”

Laughing out loud, Brian lifted Linda so she lay on his chest. “You’re wonderful, babe.”

“You’re wonderful, too.”

## Chapter 6

Layla could not wipe the smirk off her face for the rest of the day. She couldn't wait to tell Carla about finding Linda sucking the face off of Brian Kilarney, geek extraordinaire, world chess master, and hopeless flirt to anyone in a skirt at the library. Linda and Brian fit together perfectly, except she knew for a fact that her older sister was a total prude, having only experienced sex through a paperback novel.

Snorting out loud as she walked back towards the gym, she interrupted a class in session, receiving a glare from the teacher as he abruptly closed the door. Giddy, she didn't care. She thought this was the best bit of gossip since her parents talked about moving to North Carolina. Only this was way better and didn't involve a major life change, for her anyway. For Linda that was a different story.

Carla spotted Layla trotting into the gym as a basketball game was in action. "Hey, I waited for you. What's with the stupid grin?" Carla's chin tipped upward.

"Oh, it's almost too good to share just yet," Layla teased.

"What? What?" Carla hissed, being careful not to attract the attention of Coach Harris. "Tell me before he calls us over."

Layla couldn't hold it in any longer. "I caught Layla frenching Brian Kilarney."

## SANDY APPLEYARD

Carla's eyes widened. "When? Where?"

"Just now. At her locker."

"Oh, he's so gross," Carla whined. "He has the hots for Shirley Weaver, doesn't he? I see him ogling her chest all the time."

"Doesn't every guy ogle her chest? I mean, they're like freaking watermelons."

"True." Carla tipped her head sideways, as if in thought. "So they're like...going out?"

Shrugging, Layla pulled her ballet flats off and stuffed her feet inside Linda's running shoes, which were one size too big. "Who knows. I'll ask her when I get home."

"She's going to be home? Shouldn't she be off in the library?" Carla taunted.

"It's my dad's party tonight, stupid. You haven't forgotten, have you? You're supposed to come." Layla was mildly irritated.

"I'm just joking." Carla saw Coach Harris motion them over. "I'll be there. Let's go before the coach busts a vein."

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Layla had butterflies in her stomach as she sat, keeping vigil for when Linda arrived home from school. When the door finally opened and she saw Linda's head pop in, she was ready.

Linda was nonchalant. "Where is everybody?" she asked, placing her backpack on the floor beside the door, noting the fact that she could hear a pin drop it was so quiet in the apartment.

"Mom and Dad are sleeping and Tasha's watching a movie." Layla smiled too sweetly. She waited for Linda to enter the kitchen,

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

seemingly avoiding the judgmental stare of her younger sister, and Layla casually asked, “Why’s your lipstick smudged?”

Linda’s head popped out of the kitchen. “Don’t start,” she warned. “I’m telling Mom and Dad tonight when Brian comes over for Dad’s birthday.”

Layla leapt out of the chair. “You’re what?” she gasped, enjoying this way too much. “You’re telling our parents about your grunt-and-grind-at-the-locker relationship with Brian ‘The Geek’ Kilarney tonight? In front of everybody? At Dad’s party?” Layla was in total disbelief. “Man, Linda, I thought you were the smart one in the family.” She shook her head slowly, but couldn’t hide the ear-to-ear one hundred watt grin.

“He’s coming over earlier. I’ll introduce him and tell them before everyone arrives.”

“Oh, ‘cause that makes it much better.” Layla’s tone was facetious. “You know mom hates Doug Kilarney, right?”

Doug Kilarney, Brian’s father, was a pompous, self-righteous, penny-pinching idiot—Mary’s words. Because of him, Chris and Mary had to foot almost the entire bill for Tasha’s little league team, all because of a silly disagreement between him and another of the coaches, who happened to also be the son of their major sponsor.

“What? I didn’t know that,” Linda was shocked. “What do I do?”

Layla’s lips thinned. “Well, you better tell them.” She was matter-of-fact. “Better to tell them now than to keep it a secret and have them find out the way I did.”

Linda’s face went white as a sheet.

...

“Mommy, can I wear my pink princess shirt with the black tights for Daddy’s party?”

## SANDY APPLEYARD

Mary quickly and quietly closed the door, placing her index finger on her lips. “Shhh, sweetie. Remember, this is supposed to be a surprise party for Daddy,” she whispered.

“Isn’t Daddy sleeping?”

“Yes, but just in case, let’s keep our voices down,” Mary warned. “And I thought you would wear the dress gramma bought you last time they were here. They’re coming, you know.”

Tasha lifted her shoulders, as if indifferent. “I really wanted to wear the princess shirt. It’s new.”

“Whatever you like then, honey. Just get a move on. We need to be out of the apartment before gramma and grampa get here.”

“But why are they coming when we aren’t home?”

“Because they’re going to decorate and greet all the guests while we take Daddy to dinner. That way when we get back every one will be here and it’ll all be set up.”

Tasha’s mouth formed an ‘O’ as she turned around and began dressing.

“I’ll go wake Daddy up. I made reservations for six and it’s almost five o’clock,” Mary said as she headed out of Tasha’s room to go wake Chris.

...

Linda sat in her room, brooding. She promised Brian that they would introduce him and announce their relationship tonight, but since Mary had changed plans, now making it a surprise party, that wasn’t going to happen. Linda toyed with the idea of telling her mother now, gauging her reaction to the news, before her dad woke up. Unsure, she got up and walked to Layla’s room. The door was

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

closed and she heard the music on low in the background. Knocking first, Linda opened the door.

Layla was dressed, as was Linda, and she was simply touching her hair up. “Hey, what’s going on?”

Linda slumped on the bed, sighing. “I don’t know what to do about Brian now.”

“What? Now that you won’t get the chance to tell them before we have a house full of people?”

Linda glared at her sister. “Yeah, and thanks for that, you suck up.”

It had been Layla’s idea to go out for dinner and have everything set up for a surprise when they arrived home. “Hey, it’s not all about you, Layla.” Her tone was unsympathetic.

“You’re just jealous because you don’t have a boyfriend,” Linda shot back.

Layla scoffed, as if it was the most ridiculous thing she’d heard. “Please. Why would I be jealous of the Pimple Prince, King Nerd of New York, anyway? Besides, I’ve already had my first boyfriend, your time was due.”

Linda smiled, averting her glance. Layla couldn’t tell if Linda found her pet names for Brian amusing, or if she was holding something back, but Linda didn’t seem in the mood to be pressed. “So what are you going to do?” Layla asked with genuine interest.

“I don’t know. I guess I have to tell them. I promised Brian I would.”

“So tell him you changed your mind,” Layla said, as though Brian’s feelings weren’t important.

Just as Linda was about to refute, they heard a soft knock at the door and Mary entered. “Girls. Oh, good, you’re already dressed.” Relief

## SANDY APPLEYARD

swept over Mary's face. "I was just about to go wake your dad. Are you just about ready?"

Linda was first to speak. "Mom, can I talk to you about something?"

Mary glanced impatiently at her watch. "Is it important?" Her face was pained. "Can it wait?"

Despite knowing it was her own fault, Linda got her back up. "Not really," she answered, her tone was condescending. Linda's recent grounding still stung.

"Fine. Come. Talk to me in the bedroom," Mary relented.

Feeling slightly braver, Linda followed her mother.

Chris was still a lump in the bed. The blankets were piled up high, covering his head. Mary nudged him gently. "Chris, Chris we're going to be late for dinner." She spoke softly to avoid startling him.

A soft moan came from the bed as Linda sat on the chaise chair beside the small, wooden entertainment stand. "I'm not hungry."

Mary chuckled, shaking him harder. His body moved slightly. "It's your birthday, you goon. Now get up; the kids and I are nearly ready. I've made reservations."

The blankets were suddenly tossed to the other side of the bed, and Chris appeared. His face was pink from sleep, and he was fully clothed in navy sweat pants and a white t-shirt. Licking his lips he countered, "If it's my birthday, why am I not allowed to just sleep?" His voice was still gravelly from sleep. He let out a yawn and rose, letting his feet touch the floor. "Whose idea was it anyway? Why can't we just eat at home?" Chris whined, but the playful tone in his voice told Mary he was joking.

"It was Layla's idea," Linda was quick to point out. "You can thank her," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

Mary was ignoring the exchange, poking an earring into her left ear. “Go and shower, Chris. For heaven’s sakes we have to leave soon.”

He padded to the ensuite bathroom, sticking his tongue out at his wife. Linda’s serious face crinkled on one side as Chris mussed her hair up in passing. As soon as they heard the shower running, Mary closed the bathroom door and sat on the edge of the bed, directly in front of Linda.

“Alright, I’m assuming you don’t want Daddy to know about whatever is going on, so go ahead and tell me.”

Linda drew in a deep breath. “I invited Brian Kilarney as one of my guests tonight.”

Mary looked confused yet relieved. “Doug Kilarney’s son? What for?”

Linda appeared to relax as well. She hoped Layla had dramatized Mary’s feelings towards Doug Kilarney, and apparently Layla had since her mother was nonplussed at the mention of his name.

It took only a moment for Mary to figure it out. “Are you two...dating?”

Linda stared at the plush carpeting that surrounded her feet. “Yeah.”

Mary’s face brightened. “Really? Well that’s wonderful, Linda. Why were you so afraid to tell me?”

Shrugging, Linda ignored the question. “So you’re okay with that?”

“Of course, sweetie. My goodness, you’re eighteen and going to college next year. It’s about time you started dating.” Reaching up, Mary patted her daughter on the shoulder.

“Do you think Dad will be okay with it too?”

## SANDY APPLEYARD

Mary had walked back over to her dressing table; she turned to face Linda. "I think so," she said, as if to say 'why not?'.

"Okay, then," Linda added. "I'll make sure Layla and Tasha are ready."

Linda exited her parents' room thinking that wasn't so bad. She wondered if she should have taken advantage and told them the duration of the relationship and the fact that they were having sex. Then she dismissed the thought.

Those secrets, if she had it her way, would go to the grave with her.

## Chapter 7

Mary placed her key in the hole, feeling her heartbeat quicken. Chris was behind her, holding Tasha in his arms.

“Surprise!”

Chris looked straight at his wife and an ear-to-ear smile swept across his face. Tasha wrapped her arms around her daddy’s neck and squeezed. “Happy Birthday, Daddy!”

“Thanks, sweetie,” he gushed.

Walking into the apartment, he put Tasha down. “Aw, thanks everyone!”

He shook hands with his father and brother and gave his mom a quick hug. Dr. John was there too, along with another colleague, Dr. Crawford.

“Rick, Dale.” Chris nodded respectively to his co-workers. “Thanks for coming.”

Rick, the younger doctor, leaned in. “Hey, no problem, Chris. Listen, I can’t stay long, I’m covering for rounds.”

Chris patted him on the shoulder. “That’s okay.”

## SANDY APPLEYARD

Dr. John looked strange in jeans and a cotton button-down shirt. "I'm off tonight, so I hope Mary has lots of wine." He winked. There were a few giggles.

"Don't worry, Rick, we have plenty," Mary announced, basically to the rest of the room.

Chris finished greeting the adult guests and moved to the younger crowd. "Sylvia, hey, how's it going?"

"Great, Dr. Dixon. Happy Birthday."

He waved to Carla, who was standing by the couch helping Layla with something on the television. "Hey, Dr. Dixon!" she waved back.

Linda watched her father gaze to the two males in the room he wasn't familiar with. "Dad, this is Wayne," she introduced as the twenty-one-year-old held out his hand. He was a full head taller than Chris. "He's from NYU. His sister goes to Clarkson High. Wayne runs the NYU group I was telling you about. You know? The internet group?"

A flicker of recognition finally crossed Chris's eyes. "Ah, yes. How do you like NYU?"

Wayne nodded respectfully. "Very well, sir. It's a top-notch school."

"Pleased to meet you, Wayne."

"Likewise, sir."

Mary stepped in. "Nice to meet you, Wayne. I'm Mary, Linda's mother."

"Ma'am." He bowed slightly at the waist, taking her hand instead of shaking it. "It's a pleasure."

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

Linda caught Brian lifting a brow, knowing exactly what he was thinking. How was he supposed to compete with such a gallant introduction? And Chris didn't even know that Brian was her boyfriend yet.

"And this is Brian, Dad," Linda said, moving on. "He's Doug Kilarney's son."

"Oh?" Chris mumbled, semi-casually. "I don't believe we've met before, have we?"

Brian shook his head. A tight smile appeared on his face. "No, Dr. Dixon, but I've heard lots about you," he said before he could catch himself. Brian didn't intend for it to come out the way it did.

Linda watched her dad's head incline slightly. Oh my gosh, he's probably wondering what that was supposed to mean!

"Chris, love, why don't I get you a drink?" Mary offered, taking her husband's arm. "I've got your favourite beer in the kitchen waiting for you."

Linda felt a sigh of relief. She looked over at Layla, who was snorting, trying desperately not to laugh. Linda shot her an icy stare through narrowed eyes and became immediately angered. She saw Carla practically on the floor, meaning that Layla had told her about Brian.

...

Chris's forehead wrinkled up as he entered the quiet kitchen. He looked at his wife. "Two strange young men accompanied our daughter?"

She handed him a Bud Light and told him to take a drink while it was still icy cold. Mary waited until he drank nearly the whole can, letting him revel in the refreshing taste before she dropped the bomb on him. "Brian is her boyfriend."

## SANDY APPLEYARD

His eyes widened. “What? Is that...Doug’s kid?”

Mary took a can of beer out of the fridge, opened it, and took a long sip before answering, “Yup.”

...

Tasha was in her room playing with a few of her friends, away from the adult entertainment. Seated among the grown-ups were Chris’s brother, a lawyer; Chris’s mother and father, retirees; Mary and her sister Caroline, an executive at a merchandising firm.

Linda’s friend Sylvia brought over a DVD box set of Criminal Minds and they all hovered around the large screen television to watch while the adults played a round of cards.

“Oh, that agent Morgan gets me hot!” Layla squealed. “He’s so smart and sexy, but he’s also such a gentleman. Man, what I wouldn’t do to be Garcia, his sidekick.”

“Easy, hormones,” Chris said in a mock warning tone from the table. “He’s too old for you.”

She feigned a sneer at her father. “You’re lucky it’s your birthday, old man.”

“Besides, he’d never put the moves on Garcia, she’s too much like his sister,” Linda added. “That would be gross at this point. Incest.” She made a gesture like it was suddenly cold, shivering all over.

“This show is getting so phony,” Chris’s brother Jack commented. “Half of the stuff they do here wouldn’t hold up in court. The suspects would walk.”

Carla thumbed Jack’s way. “We shouldn’t be watching this in front of the lawyer.”

In the episode, a man had been recorded on video doing heinous things to his younger brother, including various forms of torture. “It

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

would never hold up in court,” Jack said with a mouth full of chips. His voice was raised over the TV volume. “You need DNA to prove it.”

Linda’s neck twisted so she could face him. “But he’s on tape,” she shot back. “Isn’t that enough evidence?”

“Any good lawyer with a capital case like that would have back up evidence. There is too much chance for tampering with tapes and still photos, things like that, plus the guy could’ve been under duress. The defense and jury could argue it too easily. You can’t mess with DNA, it’s your best bet,” he answered pointedly.

Smirking, unimpressed by her uncle’s slamming of her favourite drama, she turned back to the television.

“It’s okay, Linda.” Sylvia patted her back. “Morgan’s too smart to let the guy walk. It’s too early in the show; he’ll have something up his sleeve.”

Tasha appeared from her room carrying a large teddy bear. She approached her mother, clutching her bear tightly. “What’s the matter, honey?” Mary asked.

“The show’s too scary,” she pouted. It was a strange thing to say seeing as she was in a separate room, away from the television.

“Now, you’re fine, love. Why don’t you go back and play with Lillian? She waited such a long time to have a play date with you.”

The little girl hugged her mother and then skipped away with her bear in tow.

Jack looked at his sister-in-law. “She getting any better?”

Mary looked sullen. “Not yet. I hate putting her in this situation.”

Chris, overhearing, interjected. “I still say it’s the adjustment. She’s only been at this school since the start of the year. Tasha got spoiled

## SANDY APPLEYARD

being in that other school. Had we known it was shutting down I would never have recommended that she go there.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Chris,” Mary interrupted. “It’s not only the adjustment to the school, it’s also to Martha. And you obviously know how I feel about that.”

“Don’t start,” Chris warned. “You’ve already taken care of that, haven’t you?”

Jack was interested. He looked expectantly at his sister-in-law. “What did you do?”

Mary was about to speak, but Chris interrupted. “Nanny-Cam.”

Impressed, Jack’s forehead lifted. “Wow.”

Ignoring her husband’s half-drunken rudeness, she took advantage of Jack’s attention. “So based on what you just said, even if we did find out Martha was not behaving appropriately with Tasha, we wouldn’t be able to do much about it, would we?”

Jack blushed. He leaned in and lifted his hand up to his mouth, lowering his voice. “I was just messing with the kids. Yeah, the tape is fine.”

Both Mary and Chris smirked, eying the teens sprawled on the floor. “You’re such a tease,” Mary chided, chucking her brother-in-law on the shoulder.

...

“So do you think your dad is having a cow?” Brian asked, sitting as far away from the adults as possible.

“No, he’s not feeling much of anything. He’s quite a light weight,” Linda answered, watching her father from the corner of her eye. Chris was trying and failing to hold a hand of cards.

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“How did your mother take it?”

“Surprisingly well,” Linda said, her voice raising an octave.

“Well, that’s good at least.”

Layla overheard. “Dad’s fine, it’s mom who doesn’t like your dad.”

“Shut up, Layla,” Linda retorted. “She was totally fine when I mentioned Doug.”

“Yeah, right,” Layla croaked.

Wayne, putting two and two together, intervened. “So what, Linda’s father didn’t meet you until tonight, and you’re the boyfriend?” He glanced at Brian.

Brian had sipped his pop to buy time. “Yep.”

“You’re serious?” Wayne chuckled in disbelief. He looked at Linda. “Man, Linda, I had you all wrong. You’ll fit right in at University. Thick-skinned and audacious, that’s what you’ve got to be.” He looked at Brian, who still looked stung. “And dude, count yourself lucky, man. When I met my girlfriend’s father, at a dinner party which I was invited to by her parents, he nearly swatted at me.”

“How old is your girlfriend?” Brian asked, desperately wanting to change the subject.

“Twenty-two, why?”

Brian frowned. “Just wondered.”

What Brian was actually wondering was why this guy was even there. If he was twenty-one and had a girlfriend, so therefore would have no interest in Linda, what business did he have being at her father’s birthday party? Getting the desired speculative look out of Wayne, Brian decided not to press.

## SANDY APPLEYARD

When the show ended, the kids decided to watch a PG movie at Mary's request, so Tasha and Lillian could come out and watch it with them. As the previews for upcoming movies in the same genre were being shown, the two Kindergarteners brought their pillow-sized stuffed animals out to the living room and lay down on their stomachs in front of the television.

"Hey, I used to have a stuffed animal just like that," Wayne commented, eying Tasha's panda bear. "Does its feet and head tuck inside?" he asked, kneeling down beside her.

Tasha rolled off the bear. "No, but he has a zipper on the bottom so you can put your pajamas inside."

"Very cool. Mine used to have little pockets for the head and legs so it would look like a ball. I took it everywhere with me."

Tasha smiled. "I have a Pooh bear that does that. He's my second favourite."

"Do you sleep with the panda bear?" Wayne nodded to the black and white plush animal she had rested her elbows on.

"No, but I have a pink furry pillow for my bed."

Wayne was impressed. He nodded. "Very nice."

"I didn't know you liked kids so much, Wayne," Linda commented. "Are you going into paediatrics? My mom's also a paediatrician."

Wayne sat down on the armchair and lifted his head from side to side. "Possibly. Either that or paediatric oncology. It's sad how many kids are getting cancer."

"I know. My mom sees so much of that," Linda agreed. "Do you have any little ones in your life?" she asked, knowing his sister Kelly was his only sibling.

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“I babysit my neighbour’s kids sometimes when I’m home. And one of my mom’s older friends has grandchildren she often has over, so I see a lot of them.”

“I bet you can’t wait to have kids of your own, huh?” Layla intervened.

Wayne tilted his head sideways. “Someday. But I like the idea of having kids temporarily. I know they can be challenging.”

Tasha lifted her head, her face looking stern. “But not you,” Wayne corrected, lifting a defensive hand. He winked at Tasha and she appeared satisfied, turning away to face the television.

Brian felt his cheeks burn. He suddenly felt like he didn’t belong there. “I should get going.”

Linda looked at him, concerned. “But the movie just started.”

“Yeah, but I forgot I have to do something at home.” He rose and saluted everyone in the living room. “It was nice meeting you all.” He looked at Layla. “I’ll see you at school.”

Layla lifted a hand without looking at him, and gave him a weak wave. Carla elbowed her in the ribs, but Layla ignored her.

“It was a pleasure to finally meet you,” Brian said, addressing both Chris and Mary.

“Thanks for coming, Brian.” Mary smiled. “I hope we’ll see you again soon.”

Linda followed Brian to the door and closed it behind them for privacy. “What’s going on? Why are you leaving so suddenly?”

“Something about that Wayne guy; he turns my stomach.”

Placing her hands on her hips, Linda cocked her head to the side with a worried look. “What do you mean?”

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“I don’t know, maybe I’m jealous,” he said, turning his head away from her.

Layla lifted her hands up to his cheeks. “That’s what I love about you, Brian.” She kissed him on the lips. “How many other guys on the planet would willingly admit to being jealous?”

He ran his hands through his hair. “Well, it’s true. He’s a college man, he’s twenty-one, and he’s got a girlfriend. Let’s face it, girls like guys who are unattainable.”

Smirking, Linda rested her index finger on his lips. “You’ve got nothing to worry about, Brian.” A sentiment hung on her lips but she feared saying it.

His arms wrapped around her as they were nose to nose. He kissed her deeply but tenderly. “I love you, Linda. I hope you know that.”

A lump formed in her throat. “I love you, too, Brian.” She closed her eyes, silently saying thank you to God for having Brian say those three sweet words to her first. “Why don’t you stay?”

Loosening his hold on her, Brian stepped back. “I can’t, Linda. I’ve already said goodbye to everyone, and besides, I think I make your parents uncomfortable.”

“You’re the first man I’ve ever brought home, Brian. It’s pretty normal to react a little standoffish in that situation,” Linda challenged. “I think overall it went pretty well.”

“You’re right. But I think that’s enough for tonight. Maybe next time we’ll have a chance to get to know each other when there aren’t so many people around,” Brian conceded. “I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” He kissed her once more, tenderly, and walked to the elevator.

She waved at him once as the elevator door closed. Something bothered her. Brian told her that he loved her. Linda knew for a

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

while now that he did, and that she loved him in return, but something wasn't right about it. In all the intimate moments she and Brian had had in the recent past, he had never taken the opportunity to tell her how he truly felt.

So why did he pick tonight?

## Chapter 8

Chris closed the patient file and slipped it into the plastic slot on the wall beside the door. He felt a pat on his shoulder. “Hey, Chris! Did you enjoy your party?”

It was Dr. John. “Wonderful, Mark. I had the best hangover the next day.”

Dr. John patted him again, twice for emphasis. “Then you know you did it right.” He looked at his watch. “You’re here early for a Sunday.”

“I hoped to do my rounds and meet the family for church. Been missing it a lot lately and the kids won’t go unless at least one of us is there with them.”

“You’re a good dad, Chris, and husband. Despite Gwyneth’s begging, you won’t catch me in a church...unless someone’s dead.” He was matter-of-fact.

“But Paul got married in a church,” Chris countered.

Dr. John waved, as if staving off an argument, and frowned. “Unless it’s Catholic, it isn’t a real church.”

Chris's eyes widened but he didn’t pursue. This was a priceless nugget of information that he would behold and remember to never

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

have Mary and Mark discuss religion. If Mark felt that way about it, Chris could foretell a huge argument between the two.

“Mary saw the ultrasound pictures you emailed,” Chris said, grasping at straws for another subject to discuss. “She was delighted for you.”

“Ah, wonderful! Gwyneth’s planning a trip to North Carolina to visit Paul and Debbie in a couple of weeks. I’ll tell him you were asking about him.”

“Sure, thanks.” Chris bit his lip to try to prevent words from coming out, but he couldn’t help himself. “He find any new doctors to fill the positions yet?”

Dr. John shook his head no. “There aren’t too many out there. He’s put word out to the neighbouring cities, but so far nobody’s willing to relocate.” He paused and relaxed his tone. “Paul’ll figure it out. He always does.”

Chris glanced at his watch. “I better go. I’ve got one more patient to check on and then I’m off.”

“I’ll catch you after church,” Dr. John said.

Chris waved, envisioning Paul, Dr. John’s son, sitting in the office of his North Carolina practice, and his heart sank.

...

Chris heard himself praying in church for an answer. He knew his children had no interest in moving, but deep down he knew it was the right thing to do. Chris was no fool. He knew Mary and the children had forgotten about his birthday, heck, he almost forgot it himself. And then he was too darn tired to feel motivated enough to actually enjoy it fully. Still thankful he had a celebration, he smiled at the thought, but subconsciously he was aware of the possibilities had his life been simpler.

It bothered him that Linda chose his birthday to introduce her boyfriend for the first time to the family. Was he so busy that there were no other opportunities? Or was that her way of being passive-aggressive; getting back at her dear old dad for sloughing her off so many times recently? Also...Linda with a boyfriend? He knew she was eighteen, but his eldest daughter had never truly showed an interest in having a relationship before. How did his kids grow up so fast? And how much had he missed?

Peering over, he saw Mary's head bowed, with the same pained expression across her face as he imagined he had. It prompted him to pray harder. All three girls had their heads respectfully bowed as well, although he noticed Layla and Tasha exchanging funny faces away from the scrutinizing eyes of the pastor. And Linda, he couldn't guess what Linda was praying for. She looked sullen, lost, maybe even a bit confused. Chris prayed Linda knew what she was doing with this boy. And he prayed that Brian would treat her well and not impose the same pressures on his daughter as other teenage boys out there would place on girls.

He imagined all three girls were also asking God to not force them to move. And he wished the Lord would guide them, make them change their minds and help them see that their family would be so much better off away from New York, where they could actually be a family, instead of this mashed together group of five that they were.

...

Chris had to take a double shift at the hospital, leaving him at the emergency department until nearly three in the morning. When he arrived home, Mary was still up, reading in bed. "What are you doing? Did you just get home?"

"No. I've been home for about an hour. Can't sleep," she explained, turning the pages in one of Linda's romance novels.

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

“You better not damage that. Linda’ll feed you to the lions,” Chris warned, half-joking.

Mary ignored the comment. “You looked so...troubled, today at church.”

He loosened his tie, pausing briefly to look at his wife. “So did you.”

She sensed his hesitation. “What’s bothering you?”

“Lots of things. Nothing I can do about any of them, though, so there isn’t any point in telling you about it,” Chris answered, his words coming out more cutting than he meant them to be.

He placed his tie over the clothes hanger and began undressing. Mary put the book down, placing the bookmark carefully between the pages. “What can’t you do anything about? Are you still thinking about North Carolina?”

Chris felt his frustration rise. His face began to feel heated and his heart pumped quickly against his ribs. “Well, of course I am, Mary!” he nearly shouted.

Mary zipped out of bed and closed the bedroom door. “Keep your voice down, please. I don’t want the kids to hear.”

Feeling guilty for lashing out, Chris instinctively calmed. “Sorry,” he muttered. “It’s just that I wish we had the time to take them out to North Carolina to show them what it’s like, and then maybe we’d have a chance to have them at least agree to think about it.”

She stood with her arms folded over her chest, listening intently. Her face was relaxed, and when he finished speaking, she gave him a warm, yet muted smile. “Well, that’s reasonable,” Mary agreed. “To be honest, I’m kind of glad our kids had the sense to refute a spontaneous decision like moving. At least if we propose a trip there, they might actually like it.”

## SANDY APPELEYARD

Chris's face fell. He was suddenly deflated. "Yeah, well, when do we have the time? We both took time off in the summer. I'm not due for vacation for another three months and neither are you, plus the girls have school."

Mary pursed her lips in thought. "I could take a leave of absence."

"The girls would never agree to skipping school." He paused for emphasis. "We taught them that. And what about Linda? This is her last year of high school, and she has too much on her mind to think about going away until summer, or at least until March Break." Chris paused for a few moments, then he added, "And now that she has a boyfriend," Chris pronounced the word 'boyfriend' like it was venereal disease, "she won't want to part with him."

She looked up at the ceiling and sighed. "Please don't start."

Slumping down on the bed, Chris ran his hand through his hair. "Face it, Mary. It's hopeless."

Joining her husband, Mary sat beside Chris and placed her hand on his back. "Why don't you take some time off?" she whispered kindly. "You're so stressed out, honey. A break would do you some good."

He looked at his feet and shook his head. "What did I promise you, Mary?" Looking at his wife of twenty-one years, he lifted his hand and tipped her chin so they were nose to nose. "I promised we would always do things together." He kissed her full on the lips. "I've never broken that promise and I have no intention to do so."

Mary's eyes softened, looking fondly at her beloved. "Oh, Chris," she whispered. "I hope there are more like you out there for our babies."

Pushing his lips together, he averted his glance from Mary. "I hope so too. But something tells me Brian isn't one of them."

...

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

Linda sat in the library waiting for Wayne, Kelly and the rest of the group. Now that Brian and Wayne were acquainted, she had to lie and tell Brian that she was going to hang out with Sylvia, instead of meeting up with Wayne. Despite the fact that there were other males in the group, Brian had his back up over her friend, so the mere fact that he would be present, even with other guys there, was still a problem.

She didn't like lying to the one and only man who had declared his love for her, but who was he to dictate who she spent her time with? Her future was at stake here, and if he loved her and wanted to be a part of her future, he should want only what's best for her. Somehow, Linda thought that since Wayne was already attending NYU, that would put a point beside Brian's reasons not to apply there, as much as she felt that was petty. However, the last thing she wanted was for Brian to apply to NYU just for the purposes of babysitting her.

Linda would worry about how to make up for the lie later, but for now, front and center was choosing which schools to apply to. And this group had so far been very helpful. One of the group members had a cousin who attended the University of Connecticut, and he'd kindly offered to drive over for the meeting, so Linda did not want to miss out.

Strangely, everyone had arrived for the meeting except for Wayne and Kelly. Dylan, from Connecticut, was incredibly handsome. He was in his last year before doing residency so he was older, and despite her love for Brian, Linda could not take her eyes off him. Connecticut was beginning to look promising.

When Wayne and Kelly walked in she noticed Wayne's long red hair was not in its usual ponytail. Red curls pooled over his shoulders, making him resemble Merida from the kid's movie Brave. The look definitely did not suit him. "Hey, guys. Sorry we're late," he commented, acting as if he didn't notice the puzzled glances toward him.

“What did we miss?” Kelly asked, taking a seat beside another of the girls alongside Linda.

Dylan stuck his hand out to Wayne and shook it. “Good to see ya, man.”

“Same to you.”

Dylan and Wayne attended high school together, only Wayne was a freshman when Dylan was in his senior year. “So, what have you guys been talking about?”

Wayne took a seat opposite Dylan, making the seating around the circular table full. As he pushed his chair in, his red hair fell on his face and he jerked his head back, almost aggressively, to clear the tendrils. “Yo, don’t go acting all normal with your dreads free like that, man,” Dylan chided playfully. “First, tell us what happened to the mop, Red.”

Wayne’s face turned crimson as Dylan’s comment received muted giggles.

“My...err...ponytail...thing...broke.”

“Your only ponytail thing?” Dylan taunted.

Shooting him a pointed glare, Wayne answered. “Yeah, and I wasn’t about to wear Kelly’s pink one either.”

“So this is the lesser of two evils.” Dylan was matter-of-fact.

Linda squirmed in her seat, sensing Wayne’s growing irritation. “Look, could we just get back to the subject? I can’t stay here all night,” she scolded, fishing into her purse and handing Wayne a black hair tie.

He nodded thank you and pulled his hair back into a neat bunch and tied it with the black elastic. Looking expectantly at Dylan, Wayne cued him to continue the conversation.

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“I’ve completely lost my train of thought,” Dylan said with a trace of sarcasm.

Rising, Wayne uttered an expletive under his breath and walked out of the room. Linda followed him. “What’s going on? Why are you letting that jerk get to you?”

“He’s always picked on me, the son-of-a-bitch. I can’t stand him,” Wayne seethed once they were out of earshot. “I hadn’t logged into the site in a couple of days and Kelly told me it was down today. Now I know why she lied to me, because she knew that that asshole was going to be chairing the meeting.”

Suddenly Linda felt like a mother hen. “Well, in his defense he had a lot of helpful things to say about the University of Connecticut, despite the fact that he has some personality issues.”

Wayne’s eyes narrowed in the direction where they had walked from. “Pretty boy Dylan has always been a helpful little beaver. But he’s an egomaniac and I’ve always hated him.”

Placing her hand on his shoulder, Linda tried to soothe him. “Now don’t let him get the best of you, Wayne. You’re a nice guy and you didn’t deserve that.”

She’d never seen that look in his eyes before. He wasn’t lucid or calm like normal. Wayne appeared extremely agitated, more so than he should be for the situation. “Is something else bothering you?”

Pulling in a deep breath of air, Wayne looked off to the side and shook his head. Sensing his need to have a chat, Linda directed him to an empty table nearby, and urged him to sit. She sat and waited calmly for him to speak. “Tracy broke up with me,” he finally said. “That’s why I hadn’t checked into the group for the last couple of days.”

Linda’s face was morose. “I’m so sorry, Wayne. How long were you two together?”

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“Not long; just a month or so. But she was so sweet and I have no idea why she dumped me.”

“She didn’t say why?”

“Not really. She was really vague. Just some excuse about us not being compatible.”

Linda tilted her head to the side as if to say ‘so-so’. “Well, that’s not too vague. I mean, at least she didn’t just say it’s over and give you no reason.” Linda tried for helpful. “Maybe she didn’t want to hurt your feelings by saying something shallow, you know?”

Wayne drew in a deep breath. “That’s true, I suppose. But there was no warning that she wasn’t happy. We were getting along fine.” His fist hit the table softly.

Linda placed her hand above his fist. “You’ll be fine, Wayne. You’re such a nice guy, and hey, at least you’ll be single again.” She smiled brightly, searching his eyes. When there wasn’t a glimmer of hope in them, Linda turned up the aggression a notch. “Hey, Wayne, most guys would love to be single and in college. Suck it up. Live it up.”

Abruptly, he stood up. “I gotta go.” And he stormed out, leaving Linda sitting there, alone and clueless.

What was his problem?

## Chapter 9

Chris lay in the darkness of his bedroom. Mary wasn't home from her shift at the hospital yet, but he expected her soon. It was late, past two in the morning, and he couldn't get to sleep despite his physical exhaustion. Hearing someone in the kitchen, he decided to give up and remove himself from the bed.

Linda was up getting a cup of tea when Chris approached on soft feet so he wouldn't startle her. "Hey, you must have inherited insomnia from your old man."

The eighteen-year-old had a teacup in hand and was waiting for the kettle to boil. "Yeah," she agreed good-naturedly. "I met someone who goes to the University of Connecticut today. It seems like a really good school."

Brian's interest was piqued. "Better than NYU?"

The kettle began boiling and Linda poured steaming water into the cup. "Maybe. Maybe it doesn't even matter where I go, Dad. I think right now what matters is deciding what I want to do."

Pulling a mug out of the overhead cupboard, Brian poured himself a cup of tea. "Have you given it any thought?"

"No. Not really. I've been so busy worrying about the 'where' part that I'd forgotten about the 'what' part."

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Chris and Linda sat at opposite ends of the small circular table inside the kitchen. "I think you're on the right track, Linda. All the schools out there have merit and in the end, you're correct that it doesn't ultimately matter which one you attend. What's more important is what you do afterward."

"What did you do after medical school, Dad?"

With that statement, it all came clear to the forty-something doctor. "I'm doing it," he said simply, with a trace of unmitigated shame in his tone. "I graduated from NYU and did my residency. Then I met your mother, we got married, and this is where we've been ever since."

A shot of reluctance hit Linda in the face as she stammered to phrase her question correctly. "Are you happy doing what you do?"

Taking a sip of tea, Chris worded his answer carefully. "I think there are a lot of opportunities, but none of them that fit right now."

Linda was no fool. "You still think about moving, don't you?"

Chris could never tell a decent lie. "I do," he admitted. "But it doesn't matter unless it will make us all happy." A thought struck him suddenly. "Why don't you come into work with me tomorrow? I'm going to be there past six, so that leaves you at least a couple of hours with me."

"You mean like...do rounds with you? Is that allowed?" Linda hesitated.

"Sure, I'll get you a security tag and a lab coat, and I'll only take you in with me to see the patients who aren't going to make a fuss about having you tag along." Chris patted her on the shoulder. "It'll be fun. It's about time I did this." He was pleased with himself.

"Okay." Linda smiled. "Maybe someday we can work together or something," she commented.

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Chris's heart leapt. He put his hand to his heart. "Oh, my cup runneth over, sweetie."

...

Linda was just securing the lock on her locker when she felt his arms wrap around her. "Hey, baby. Where have you been today?" Brian said, kissing her behind the ear.

"Oh, sorry. I left my phone in my locker during classes this morning."

Turning her around to face him, Brian kissed her tenderly on the lips. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too."

Checking the hallway on both sides, Brian made sure the coast was clear before passionately kissing Linda. "Do you want to come over this afternoon? My parents are working. It's been a while." He mouthed suggestively between kisses.

"I can't," Linda answered. A trace of frustration was in her voice. "I'm meeting my dad at the hospital in half an hour."

"Oh yeah?" Brian was suddenly interested. "Is he taking you on a tour?"

"Something like that. He's just trying to help."

"Maybe he might take me on rounds sometime, too."

Linda tilted her head. "You could ask him. I'm sure he'd be happy to."

She felt her phone vibrate, indicating there was a message waiting for her. "Shoot, that could be my dad," Linda said, opening her

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backpack and rifling through it. When she finally found her phone, a crease formed in between her brows.

“Everything okay?”

“There’s like twenty text messages here.”

“Three are from me,” Brian interjected, peering over her shoulder at the screen.

“One is from my dad, but...” she hesitated as the phone shut down. “Dammit! I knew I should have charged it this morning. It dies and then comes to life when it wants to lately.”

“You want to use my phone to contact your dad?” Brian offered.

“No, it’s okay. He said he would let me know where to meet him, but I know which floor he’s on. I’ll find him.”

“You should get a new battery for your phone, Linda. It should still be under warranty.”

“I know,” she huffed. “Listen, I gotta go. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” She kissed him quickly.

“Remember, I’m taking you out tomorrow night,” he advised. “Dress nicely.”

She blew him a kiss, walking off. “I will.”

It was their one year anniversary and Brian was such a romantic it made Linda gush. Reaching the bus stop, Linda gave her cell phone another crack, thinking she might be able to answer some of the text messages while waiting. Pushing the power button, the screen came to life. The first message she saw was from Wayne, asking if she was available to chat tonight, if he could come by.

Linda managed to respond, saying that she was with her dad at least until seven or eight o’clock, but that she could meet up after. There

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

were still numerous unread messages waiting for her, but she only managed to click on one more before her phone died.

It was another message from Wayne.

...

Her last period test finished early, so Layla came home to get caught up on homework. Carla had invited her for a sleepover since it was Friday, and she didn't want anything hanging over her head for the weekend. The house was quiet since Tasha's bus hadn't dropped her off yet, and Martha had called in sick. Mary was napping in the bedroom.

Layla was in her room doing some homework when she heard a knock at her bedroom door. Mary's head popped in. "Hey, I got called into the hospital. Can you watch Tasha when she gets home?"

"Sure. Where's Linda?"

"I think your dad mentioned something about her doing rounds with him tonight."

Layla gaped at her mother. "Rounds? You mean Linda is actually going to go see sick people?"

Mary gave her a disapproving glare. "Don't start. You know your sister wants to be a doctor, Layla. Don't make fun."

Linda was prim and proper, and could not stand the sight of blood. Layla always wondered how on earth she would survive as a doctor. Layla was the one to change Tasha's diapers and clean up the barf when she was sick. She pictured her sister more the lab rat type. Linda was very interested in how the human body worked, but more so under a microscope. She would be better doing research or something, not actually working on the front lines. "Whatever you say, mom," Layla chuckled.

...

## SANDY APPLEYARD

It was late afternoon. Dinner was simmering in the oven, emitting the delicious aroma of roasted beef and potatoes. Tasha and Layla sat on the couch together watching television when there was a knock at the door. “Don’t forget to ask who it is before answering it,” Tasha warned.

“I know, silly.”

Tasha had been learning about safety at school, and not talking to strangers, and frankly, she was becoming irritating and obsessive about it.

Peering through the peep hole, Layla saw a familiar face. She opened the door to a sullen-looking, red-haired man carrying a plastic bag with what appeared to be goodies in it. “Hey, Wayne, err, Linda’s not home.” She searched his morose face. “Can I help you with something?”

“Yeah, sorry.” He managed a smile, and then he lowered his gaze, as though embarrassed. “Linda’s phone died before I could ask, um...I know she’s doing rounds with your dad, and she said we could meet up afterward.” He poked his head into the empty apartment. “Do you mind if I just wait for her?” Wayne lifted the bag. “I brought all kinds of junk food.” His face brightened as if trying to lighten the moment.

“Sure, yeah, we’re just watching television,” Layla said, feeling slightly uncomfortable. “She won’t be home for a couple of hours, but since you’ve come all the way here, I suppose it’s okay.”

“Thanks, Layla,” Wayne said, entering the apartment. He removed his shoes and jacket, placing it on the arm of the couch.

“Hey, Tasha,” he greeted. Tasha didn’t acknowledge Wayne’s presence at first.

“Tasha, don’t be rude. Say hello,” Layla chided.

Tasha lifted her arm, not taking her eyes off the television.

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Wayne chuckled. "That's okay." He glanced down at the bag. "Do you mind if I put some of this in the fridge?"

Layla sat next to Tasha on the couch. Wayne called from the kitchen. "Hey, Tasha, do you like chocolate milk?"

Her eyes darted to the kitchen. She couldn't see Wayne behind the refrigerator door, but he dipped his head over, catching her reaction. Tasha's eyes bugged out like she'd just been offered a million dollars. "I'll take that as a yes," Wayne laughed. "What about you, Layla? Are you into the chocolate stuff?"

"Sure," she sighed, unable to control her undying need for chocolate.

Wayne returned to the living room with two glasses of chocolate milk and a can of Coke. "I know you probably think I'm completely off my rocker, but my girlfriend broke up with me and it seems she took all my friends with her," he explained to Layla matter-of-factly.

"That sucks," Layla answered, beginning to understand why he looked so upset when he first arrived.

His red hair was tied back in the usual pony tail and his spirits appeared to have lifted. "You have a boyfriend?" Wayne asked Layla.

"No," Layla answered a little too firmly.

Wayne leaned over so Tasha could see his face. "What about you, little lady? Do you have a boyfriend?"

Tasha had a brown moustache. She giggled. "No."

"Good," Wayne said triumphantly. "Men are nothing but trouble. You'd be best to stay clear of them." He winked at Layla, who was looking at him through the corner of her eye.

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“What? It’s true,” he laughed, chucking Layla on the shoulder like they were old pals. “Tell me how much you like Brian.” He said the name as he crossed his eyes.

Layla snorted, almost shooting chocolate milk out of her nose. “Okay, good point.”

Wayne was satisfied as he took a sip of Coke. For a while the room grew quiet, eerily quiet as the television show continued. As the program finished, the noise from the television seemed distant to Layla, like it was reverberating from a different room, not from right in front of them. There was a weight on Layla’s shoulder, and as she turned her head slightly, she realized it was Tasha. She’d fallen asleep.

“Aw, kids are so cute, aren’t they?” Wayne commented.

His voice sounded fuzzy. She looked up at him and his face scrunched. “Layla? You don’t look so good. Are you okay?”

“I...I feel strange.”

“Aw, geez. Where’s your mother?”

“She’s...she’s at...the h...hospital.”

“Okay, I’ll call an ambulance. Just hold on.” Wayne rose, pulling his cell phone out of his jacket pocket. As he dialed 9-1-1, he turned his back and then turned back around when he heard a thump. He shouted in horror...

“Layla!”

## Chapter 10

The anticipation was almost unbearable. Linda's stomach was in knots. She was so excited about what anniversary celebration Brian had up his sleeve. For their six month anniversary, he took her on a moonlit walk through Central Park where a couple of his friends had put together a candlelit picnic. It was the most romantic thing she'd ever experienced.

Looking through her closet, she couldn't find anything suitable to wear. She gave up and decided to raid Layla's closet. She'd called and said she was staying at Carla's an extra night, and since she finished all her homework, Mary said it was okay. So in Linda's view, Layla would be none the wiser. By the time her sister would arrive home, anything Linda borrowed would be cleaned and replaced.

Layla was only slightly shorter than Linda, which made the sexy skirt she chose even sexier. Brian was forced to call the house line to communicate with Linda because her phone had completely died and the battery wasn't even taking a charge. She'd called the cellular phone company and they said they would simply replace the whole unit; that the phone was defective and it was not worth replacing the battery.

Gathering her hair up into a sexy chignon, Linda admired her image in the mirror. She looked so grown up with her hair like that. Brian would be dazzled. He met her at the door at precisely six o'clock,

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dressed in a three piece suit and matching black tie. Linda's eyes bugged out when she saw him.

"Now, you two behave, okay?" Mary advised warmly. "And be sure not to miss curfew tonight, Linda." She glared.

"I'll be sure to have her home on time, Dr. Dixon," Brian assured gallantly.

"Okay. Be careful and have fun," Mary said, closing the door behind them.

Linda rolled her eyes, but the minute the door closed, Brian gently pushed her away from the door and pressed her against the wall, kissing her hungrily. "God, you look beautiful, Linda," he gasped.

Taken by surprise, Linda's chest was heaving. Her eyes were bulging, but her whole body was warm and tingly. "Wow, Brian. Are we even going to make it out the door?"

"I'll try to contain myself."

...

Mary couldn't help the giggle that came out of her mouth as she closed the door. Brian was such a sweetheart, much more gentlemanly than his father, Doug. Walking past the living room, she saw Tasha drawing a picture on the coffee table. She was using a scented marker set, not at all worried about smelling like the markers, since her hands were every colour of the rainbow.

"That's beautiful, honey. What are you making?"

"A picture for Daddy. When will he be home?"

"Not until way later on when you're asleep, honey," Mary answered apologetically. "But I'll be sure to show Daddy for you if you like."

"Kay."

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

Walking into Layla's room, Mary picked up her daughter's laptop. She opened the lid and turned the machine on. She then went into Tasha's room and pulled a chubby bear down off the shelving unit. Digging her fingers into the stuffy, she fished out the small camera she'd placed inside only days ago. Mary brought it into Layla's room, removed the tiny microchip out of the camera and inserted it into the laptop.

Fast-forwarding through, she made it all the way to the end and frowned. She walked over to the camera she had strategically placed inside a small clock in the kitchen, and then to the one inside a small trinket she was given from a patient, and took all the microchips into Layla's room. She tried playing each one and sat there, stumped.

All three memory cards were empty.

...

Hailing a cab outside Linda's building, Brian would not give her any hints as to where they were going, despite her begging. "I want it to be a surprise, Linda. This is our first real anniversary and I don't want you to forget it."

"But I won't forget it, Brian. I promise."

A yellow cab finally approached, squealing its tires as it reached the curb. Brian instructed the driver which intersection to drive them to and the car sped off. Linda raised her eyebrow. "What have you got up your sleeve?"

Placing his hand delicately on her thigh he leaned in for a kiss. "I'll never tell."

Brian's touch was warm and gentle, making every inch of Linda's body long for more. But she was very aware of the audience they had, and equally uncomfortable about someone watching them. "We better take it easy," she said, pulling back.

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“I wish we could stay in a hotel or something, Linda,” Brian said, pulling her chin upward, looking deep into her eyes. The car came to a stop. “But this will have to do.”

She turned around, eager to see where they were, and her jaw dropped. They were at the Hilton Hotel. Before she could say anything, Brian raised his hand. “Don’t worry, we’re just having dinner in the restaurant. It’s one of the nicest in town.”

Smiling, she kissed him tenderly. “You’re wonderful.”

Leading her out of the car, Brian took her hand. The night air was chilly, but the warmth Linda was feeling resonated through her whole body. They were led by the hostess to a secluded table, reserved in advance, and Brian removed Linda’s jacket while he pulled the chair out for her.

“Gosh, Brian, how did you afford all this?” Linda asked, gazing at the trappings of an expensive, high class restaurant. On every table there was a small white tea light. The tables were round and dressed with white satin tablecloths, draped over the top and then bunched decoratively in a swirl around the underside. Antique crystal chandeliers hung above each table, adorning the dark hardwood floors shining below. A pianist played soft music from a baby grand piano by the large picture window off to the side.

“Don’t you worry about the cost,” Brian gently scolded.

Linda was truly surprised. Brian had a part-time job at the local movie theatre, but she knew that paid minimum wage and he was saving for a car. She figured it took him months to scrounge up enough money to pay for this meal.

The waiter delivered menus and bowed. Linda blushed. She wasn’t used to this treatment. “I feel so out of place here.”

Grinning, Brian placed his hand on hers. “Me, too, but I wanted to celebrate in style tonight.”

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He picked up his menu. "Order whatever you like."

Linda did the same and her eyes bulged again as she saw the prices. "Brian," she gasped. "Are you sure you can afford this?"

Brian nodded once for emphasis. "My dad owns me for the next six months, but yes, honey, I can afford this."

Snorting, Linda covered her mouth. "You borrowed the money from your dad?" She couldn't contain her giggling. "That's so cute."

Blushing, Brian pulled the menu down so he could observe her face. "Let's just say he's hired himself a personal slave." He aimed his thumb at his chest.

Cooling the comedy, Linda's face softened. "I love you, Brian," she whispered.

"I love you, too," he said. "Now let's order, because I'm starving."

...

Mary dozed on the couch watching a rerun of a sitcom. Looking at the clock she realized it was almost ten o'clock. Tasha had been asleep since eight and both the teenagers were out. Relenting, she flicked the remote to turn the television off and padded to the bedroom. Suddenly she heard the lock turn on the front door. Chris's head appeared.

"Hey, you're home early." Mary yawned. "I was just about to head to bed."

"Go on, I'll be there in a minute," Chris said, placing his briefcase and keys by the door.

Minutes later, Chris joined her in the bedroom. Undressing, he asked how the kids were.

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“Good. Tasha’s asleep. Layla’s at Carla’s house and Brian and Linda are out.” She stretched her arms over her head. “Linda and Brian were sure dressed up nice. Apparently he was taking her to a fancy restaurant.”

Stepping into his pajama bottoms, Chris scoffed. “Maybe it was their one month anniversary. You know how dramatic kids are.”

“True,” Mary agreed. “Hey, do you know anything about SD cards?”

Slipping into bed, Chris turned his bedside lamp on. “A little, why?”

Mary chewed on the end of her fingernail. “I checked the camera cards, you know, the ones from the nanny-cams?”

He nodded.

“All the cards were empty and the machines were turned off.”

“Did the batteries run out?”

“I don’t think so,” she said with little certainty.

Leaning in to kiss his wife, Chris said, “Maybe they’re faulty.”

She craned her neck. “All three of them? The one in Tasha’s room was fine the other day.”

Shrugging, Chris kissed her tenderly. “I know one thing that isn’t faulty.” He looked at her lips.

Mary smiled. “Close the door.” She motioned playfully with her head and winked. “We’ll need privacy to check.”

...

Dinner was exquisite. Linda and Brian took turns sneaking samples from each other’s plates, both reveling in the delectable delight of eating at a high class restaurant for the first time. “Maybe someday

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

I'll bring you back here, when we're old enough to order from the wine list," Brian suggested.

"That would be really cool," Linda agreed. "I'm glad you think about stuff like that."

"Like what?" he asked, popping the last piece of medium-rare steak in his mouth.

"The future," Linda answered, watching him chew.

He scrunched his face a little, as though it was a silly thing for her to say. "Of course I think about the future, Linda."

"It's more than that," she explained. "You think about the future, and you mentioned me as part of it."

Placing his fork and knife at ten and two o'clock on his plate, he leaned forward in his chair, closer to Linda. "How else would I picture it?"

Linda was lost for words. She seemed content to sit and gaze into his twinkling eyes all night.

"God, you're making this too easy for me," he said, breaking the reverie.

She chuckled softly. "What am I making too easy?"

Reaching into his jacket pocket, Brian pulled out a small black box and placed it on the table. Gazing into her eyes, which were now wide open, he asked her, "Linda, will you marry me?"

Swallowing in utter shock, Linda was speechless. He opened the box, revealing a small gold, diamond solitaire. "You don't have to answer me now, Linda. Just think about it."

Taking the ring out of the box, Brian placed it on her left ring finger. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Linda Dixon."

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The ring had small scratches on the band and filigree in the setting leading up to a small princess-cut stone. It was clearly an antique, possibly a family heirloom. Linda stared at it like it was the Hope diamond. "It's so beautiful, Brian."

"I'm glad you like it."

"But what about college and medical school?" she asked, as though in a trance.

"This has nothing to do with school, Linda. It doesn't even matter if we decide to go to different schools," Brian said with an assuring tone. "We can have a really long engagement. We can wait until we've both graduated."

Suddenly Linda wondered why he would ask her now if he didn't plan on tying the knot for several years. "But what if you meet someone else?"

Brian shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "There isn't anyone else, Linda. All I want is you."

She shook her head as if to clear her mind of something. "But I'll have to keep this a secret. As far as my family knows we've only been going out a month or so."

"That's okay, Linda," Brian comforted. "I'm fine with that." He checked himself by looking over his shoulder. "Besides, I like sneaking around now. It's fun."

Linda was confused. This was coming from a guy who just a week ago was begging her to tell her family about him. "I don't know about this, Brian. Don't you think we're a little young? I mean, we're not even finished high school yet."

"I know, I know." He shook his head, as if it was irrelevant. "I told you. You don't have to answer now. Think about it. Take as long as you want, okay?"

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Linda swallowed. “Okay.”

Brian was pleased. The waiter delivered the check in a small leather booklet and Brian placed a credit card, his father’s credit card, into the marked slot. “Now, how long do you have until curfew?” he asked, eying the door leading to a bank of rooms on the lobby floor.

She followed his glance, smirking. “Why?”

He lifted his eyebrows, giving her a sultry look. “Feel like making love on satin sheets?”

## Chapter 11

Carla's face was stone. "Oh my God, Layla. I think I'm going to be sick." She put her hand in front of her mouth as she sat on her bedroom floor in the corner with her knees up, hugging them against her chest. Layla sat beside her trembling, her face soaked with tears, her mouth and eyes were swollen and red. Layla could barely get a breath in as her body convulsed with anxiety, and she hiccupped as her lungs gasped for air.

Wiping her face with her damp shirt, Layla continued sobbing, her face buried in her hands.

Placing a hand on Layla's shoulders, Carla tried to comfort her. "It's okay, Layla. I'll help you. Do you want me to tell someone for you? Like a counsellor or the police or someone?"

Layla reacted as though Carla had slapped her. "No! No, you can't tell anyone, Carla! You have to promise."

Lifting a defensive hand, Carla retracted her words. "Okay, okay. I get it."

Breaking into another fit of tears, Layla covered her face with her hands. "Oh, God help me. What am I going to do?" she cried.

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“I don’t know, Layla,” Carla whispered, trying to comfort her best friend by patting her shoulder. “We’ll have to figure something out. Just try to calm down so we can think, okay?”

Sniffling, Layla wiped her nose and nodded. “Okay.”

Carla turned to face Layla, crossing her legs Indian-style. “Your mom’s expecting you to stay the weekend, right?” She placed her hands gently on Layla’s shoulders as her friend struggled to pull her head up. Her eyes seemed permanently transfixed, focusing at a spot on the floor.

“I’m supposed to be home for church on Sunday,” Layla answered, her voice still laden with anxiety. The words came out shaky, like she’d just recovered from a bout of laryngitis.

“Okay, so we have lots of time to figure it out,” Carla confirmed, pulling at her lip, looking out her bedroom window, black with evening darkness.

Changing tack, Carla placed her hand under Layla’s chin, gently forcing her to look upward. “So...are you...hurt?” she asked carefully, inspecting her friend’s face.

Swallowing, Layla shook her head. She wasn’t physically hurt, but the emotional scars would never leave her, she was certain of that. What happened would change her life forever. Everything she believed, thought, planned for and dreamed of was now stamped with fear, anger, guilt and the worst of all, shame.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to take you to the hospital?”

“No,” Layla managed. The word dragged out long, like a sentence, and in the same breath she answered with, she pushed out another sob, only this time the outburst was pained, like Layla had been stabbed.

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“Okay,” Carla whispered. “I know it’s hard, Layla, but you have to try to be strong. If you don’t want to tell anyone, then you have to fight this on your own.”

Layla looked up quickly and Carla checked herself. “With my help.” She nodded reassuringly. “Anything you need me to do, I’ll do it, Layla. I promise.”

Licking her lips, Layla began nervously chewing her index fingernail. Her tears finally began to calm. Carla sat silently in front of her and waited for her friend’s breathing to normalize. “What about your Uncle Jack? He’s a lawyer, right?”

“No, Carla, I can’t tell him.”

“Can you make it as though you’re doing research? Like a case study for school?”

Layla knew that what happened would never be printed in books, the least of all textbooks. No, what happened would be something nobody would ever want to remember, nor would ever want to study. This was worse than any psychological scenario, any thought-provoking film, or any censored video you would find on YouTube. The odds were, Layla thought, that you could ask any psychologist at any mental institute, and they would likely have never heard of anything so disturbing.

“Carla, he’ll figure it out,” Layla sighed, feeling completely hopeless. The sixteen-year-old was beginning to understand why some teens chose suicide over living through situations like this. It almost seemed like a pleasant thought. She had nobody to turn to, no support, whether it be literature, media, or one-on-one discussion. This was an insurmountable obstacle that nobody, teen or otherwise, should have to be challenged with, yet there it was, strapped to her back like a burden sent to her from some demonic plain.

Carla didn’t contest. Part of her figured that would be Layla’s reaction. She’d already made her point about not telling anyone, and despite Carla’s growing anxiety, she was partially relieved that her friend decided to tell her.

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Layla began wondering why this happened to her. Was she not a well-behaved girl? Did she do something to deserve it? Or was this a lesson that she needed to be taught? None of those scenarios made any sense to her. If anything, Linda was the Dixon child who should be punished, not her. Layla never lied intentionally, or at least without provocation, she was still a virgin who attended church as regularly as possible. She kept her grades up, did as her parents told her to do, and she was a good sister. What else could she do to be more of an above-average teen?

Staring at the small plastic bag Layla brought, Carla shook her head. “Layla, God, you’re so smart. How did you know to get all this stuff?”

Layla shrugged, as if dismissing the compliment. Her abandoned ego and self-pride would never again register praise directed at her. “So what do I do with it?”

Giving her instructions, Layla remained morose, sitting on the floor. When Carla left the room and returned a minute later, Layla looked at her with the tiniest twinge of hope in her eyes.

“What is it?” Carla asked, joining her back on the floor.

“There’s one other thing I need you to do.”

...

Linda stood at her locker, pulling out the books she would need for completing her homework. Her necklace, heavier since the weekend, fell out of her sweater like a reminder of the answer she needed to give Brian. She stared at the solitaire for a moment before tucking it back under the garment.

How could she say yes? They were so young. Yes, they were also in love, but Linda couldn’t help but feel like maybe his decision to propose might have been done in haste. Was he asking her for the right reasons? She knew he loved her, but enough to spend the rest

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of his life with her? Placing her hand over her chest she could feel the hard diamond against her skin. How long would he wait before wanting an answer?

Zippering her bag up, she wondered why Brian hadn't appeared yet. He was usually at her locker by this time. She had time before her bus would arrive, so Linda decided to go down and return some library books. The library was quiet, even for a library. There was practically nobody there save for two librarians behind the counter, scanning returned books into the system.

Linda gave a terse smile as she placed her two large non-fiction books into the return slot. A small table filled with back issues of magazines stood off to the side. Leaning on it with her knee, Linda zipped her bag back up. Something caught her eye in the corner of the room. It was two figures side by side in one of the aisles holding adult fiction novels, A through C. The girl had large breasts poking up through a white t-shirt that was clearly one size too small.

The male figure standing beside her, seemingly in search of a book, had his head bowed. When he looked up, Linda couldn't contain her gasp. It was Brian. His face was pink, as if embarrassed or nervous. She knew that look well. The back of Shirley's body was pressed up against the bookcases, her chest arched outward as if it needed to be further accentuated. Linda stood, observing the look on her boyfriend's face for a moment, as if trying to determine what the conversation was about.

His face gave away nothing, except that he was perhaps uncomfortable. Who initiated the conversation? Linda wondered. And who followed whom to the library? To be fair, Shirley, like most of the students at Mayfair High, was unaware of their relationship. Had Brian made a pass at Shirley? Had Shirley made a pass at Brian? Judging by the look on his face, he hadn't, but it wasn't impossible.

Linda wasn't sure if she felt jealous, heartbroken, or angry that the girl who flirted with every male on campus was now after her Brian, or if it bothered her more that Brian might have told Shirley about

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their impending engagement. It was almost a tie. Being engaged at age eighteen sounded foolish, at least in Linda's opinion. And she wasn't sure if she felt comfortable knowing that Brian was telling people about them.

Suddenly, Shirley's hand touched Brian's arm, and Linda fought the urge to run and slap her. Brian's eyes flitted to her chest quickly, but then back up to her face, as he turned away to put a book back on the shelf. When he took a step past Shirley, towards the end of the aisle, Linda swiftly walked out of the library. Her heart raced, thumping inside her chest. Placing her hand below her neck to still her breathing, she felt the ring under her shirt.

Did this encounter make her feel more or less inclined to accept or decline his proposal?

...

Chris was feeling unwell. He had a slight fever and his throat was on fire. Dr. John sent him home early, and as such, he made it home in time for Tasha to come off the bus. Moments later, Mary arrived home, surprised to see her husband.

"Hey, this is new," she commented, clearly happy to see him. Her expression changed abruptly when she saw his pasty pallor and red nose. "What's wrong? You look pale."

She raced over to him, still in her coat, and felt his forehead. "You're warm. Do you want me to make you some chicken soup?"

"Martha had the flu last week, Mommy," Tasha supplied.

"Yes, I know. She's still sick, sweetheart." That was the reason Mary arrived home early. Linda was meeting some friends after school and Layla had texted Mary, saying that she would be late.

"I don't feel bad at all, but I obviously couldn't treat patients," Chris said, trying to soothe his wife, who looked very worried.

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“You look awful,” she said honestly. “Why don’t you head into bed?”

“I’m fine, just a small fever, Mary,” he insisted. “Besides, how often do I get to be home this early?”

Mary looked at him like he was a petulant child. “Alright. But I’m making you chicken soup.”

“With lots of noodles,” Chris added.

Stowing her jacket and briefcase under the kitchen table, Mary pulled out a pot and opened up the package of chicken soup when the key in the door turned.

“Oh my God, what happened to you?” Chris cried from the couch.

Mary immediately darted out of the kitchen into the living room. Layla had arrived home from school. She was late, but that wasn’t as upsetting as the state she was in.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said, stifling a sob. “Just leave me alone.”

Her hair was dishevelled, like it hadn’t been brushed in a week. Over her left eye was a bruise, so swollen it forced her eye shut. Below, her lip was cut, bleeding, and three times its normal size. A large gash was oozing from the top of her forehead, above the injured eye. Layla limped further into the house, pushing her hand out, preventing her clearly worried parents from coming closer.

“Did somebody beat you up?” Tasha asked, her chin quivering.

Layla’s heart sank. “I’m fine, Tasha, honey. Really, I am,” she lied. The look on her face made Layla sob. “I’ll be fine.”

“Okay, enough,” Chris stated firmly. “Who did this to you?” Ignoring her defensive hand stretched outward, he approached closer. “Do we need to call the police?”

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“No, Dad. It happened at school,” Layla answered, relenting slightly. Mary’s hand covered her mouth as though in shock.

“Who?” Chris seethed. “Who did this to you?” he demanded.

“I...I don’t know, Dad.”

“You’re lying, Layla. Who did this?” he repeated. “You can’t let anyone get away with this, I mean, look at you. You’re a mess.”

Mary gently took Layla’s hand and directed her to the couch. “Are you okay, sweetie? Let me see you.” She studied her daughter’s cuts and bruises and her face relaxed a little. “It doesn’t look like anything needs stitches, but it’ll be a while before they heal.”

She placed her hand under Layla’s chin so she could get a better look at her eyes. “Layla, honey, you need to tell us who did this. We need to protect you.”

The word ‘protect’ resonated inside her. “Mom, I really don’t know who it was.”

Chris interjected. “Was it a girl?”

Layla nodded.

“Do you know why she did this? Did you provoke her?”

Layla shook her head. “No. She just ambushed me, Dad. I think she might have mistaken me for someone else.”

Mary and Chris exchanged a look. “Layla, honey, it’s important to tell the truth.”

She rose abruptly. “I am telling the truth,” Layla shouted. “Now just...leave me alone!” Stomping into her room, Layla slammed the door closed.

## SANDY APPLEYARD

Mary sighed, clearly frustrated. Tasha sat in a heap, crying. Chris was first to sit next to the six year old. "It's okay, sweetie. Layla's okay. She's just a little bit mad and embarrassed." He stroked her cheek. "You can go in and talk to her once she settles down. She's fine."

Tasha nodded, wiping her eyes. "Okay, Daddy."

"Do you want to come help mommy make Daddy some soup in the kitchen?" Mary offered.

Her little face brightened. "Sure, mommy."

...

Chris lay in bed reading the paper. His fever had disappeared and the colour had returned to his face. Mary entered the bedroom and began undressing for bed. "You look better," she said.

"Hmm, I feel better," Chris grinned, still glancing at the paper. "How's Layla?"

"She let me bring her in a plate for dinner, but she's still not talking," Mary murmured. "Her face isn't that bad, but I'd feel better if I knew how it happened."

"This is her first fight," Chris commented. "Remember when Linda got into a fight in middle school?"

Mary tilted her head. "Over a boy."

He set the paper on his lap. "You think that's what this was about? Maybe Layla's too embarrassed to tell us she likes a boy?"

Waving, Mary dismissed his thought. "No, she's already dated that Peter...something. Last year, wasn't it?"

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Chris rolled his eyes. “That wasn’t dating, that was holding hands in the hallway at school. They didn’t even go to a movie alone together.”

“Still,” Mary challenged. “They were more than friends.”

She let that comment hang as she pulled her flannel nightgown over her head. As Mary slid her feet into bed, Chris looked at his wife blankly. “You think maybe I should try to go talk to her?”

Mary shrugged. “It’s up to you. Being a teenager isn’t an easy thing. Up until now Layla hasn’t had any real problems. She could probably use some advice, but maybe she doesn’t want it from us.”

“Maybe,” Chris conceded. “But at least we should let her know that we’re here if she wants to talk.”

Lifting her eyebrows, Mary smiled. “You wanna flip a coin?”

## Chapter 12

Linda had stood in the crowded hallway, at the opposite end of where hers and Brian's bank of lockers were located. She was there again. Shirley Weaver was stock still, leaning on Brian's locker when he arrived. From afar, Linda couldn't see his facial expression, but she moved quickly out of his way.

Choosing to wait until Shirley was gone, Linda watched her voluptuous body walk away from the lockers and open the double doors leading to the stairwell before approaching. As the crowds thinned, Brian looked Linda's way. "Hey, I was looking for you earlier."

"Yeah," she scoffed. "What do you need?"

Obviously oblivious to her snarky tone, Brian answered silkily. "You."

Crossing her arms over her chest, Linda leaned her shoulder against her locker. "We need to talk, Brian."

He nodded. "Sure. My parents aren't home. Do you wanna head to my place?"

Brian didn't have the sultry, 'because-we're-going-to-do-anything-but-talk' look on his face, so she agreed.

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

They began walking, and despite her reluctance, Linda let Brian hold her hand. “So, have you given any thought to our, um, situation?” he asked.

“Kind of.” She licked her lips as they stood at the bus stop. “But I just wanted to ask you something.”

“Shoot,” Brian invited.

“Why now?”

Without hesitating, Brian answered with his eyes pointing upward. “Because I love you. Because there isn’t anyone else for me.”

In a tone that told him she suspected otherwise, Linda tilted her head. “Really?”

“Yeah, really,” he insisted. “Why?”

Unable to hold her accusatory tone in check, Linda just let it out. “What about Shirley Weaver?”

Brian’s neck craned backward, as if Linda had just slapped him. “Shirley? What about her?”

“I saw you with her in the library this afternoon,” she said, her tone cutting.

The bus was approaching, but Brian gently touched Linda’s shoulder, guiding her from the stop. He sensed this wasn’t going to be a calm, private conversation if it took place on a bus. They began walking in the opposite direction. “So?” he answered, as if needing more information.

“I saw how she looked at you,” Linda continued. “And then I saw her at your locker again, just before I got there.”

## SANDY APPLEYARD

Brian stopped walking and looked at her, pursing his lips. "Alright. Not that I'm looking for a fight or anything, but what about you and that Wayne guy?"

She shook her head. "What about him? He's a friend who goes to NYU. He's also almost four years older than me." Linda chose to leave out the part about him having a girlfriend, seeing as they'd recently broken up.

"What was he doing at your father's birthday party? You barely know him."

"That's right, Brian. I barely know him," she argued. "So why are you giving me a hard time about him?"

"Because he obviously likes you." A crease had formed between Brian's eyebrows, and his face had reddened slightly.

"So what if he does? I don't like him, at least not in the way that you're thinking." She placed her hand on her chest for emphasis when she said 'I'. "At least he doesn't flirt with me, like Shirley 'Big Tits' Weaver does with you."

Brian's face went beet red, as though the mere mention of her plentiful chest was embarrassing, like he'd noticed how big it really was. "She doesn't flirt with me," he lied. "And so what if she does. I've asked you to marry me."

"And why did you do that, Brian? Because you feel insecure? Because you know someone else likes me? Or is it because you want sex more regularly? In case you haven't noticed, the frequency has been slipping lately."

He drew in a deep breath. She'd hit a nerve. "I can't believe you said that, Linda. That's hitting me below the belt. I proposed because I love you, isn't that enough?" His tone was cold. Brian was a calm, caring young man, and the words came out as if from another person. She'd hurt him and didn't really mean to.

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

Linda lowered her head. “You’re right. I take it back. I’m sorry.”

Still stung, Brian began walking, leaving it up to Linda whether or not she cared to follow him. His hands went inside his pockets, so unlike him, as he always held her hand when they walked anywhere together. She matched his pace as they strolled silently down the sidewalk, heading nowhere in particular.

“I’ll make you a deal,” he finally said. His tone was reasonable, like he wasn’t looking to argue further. “I’ll tell Shirley to back off, if you can stop talking with Wayne.”

Swallowing, Linda digested his suggestion. “Okay, I can do that.” Realistically, after spending an afternoon doing rounds with her father, she was on the fence as to what she really wanted to do after graduation. But that was a whole other conversation entirely. Nonetheless, aside from casual friendship, she really didn’t need Wayne any longer, so the point was moot.

“Good,” he said, finally taking her hand. “And what about the other thing?”

“What other—“

He interrupted her. “About marrying me?” Brian squeezed her hand and looked at her with a stupid grin.

She couldn’t resist. “Sure,” Linda nodded. “But we’ll wait until after we’re finished college, okay?”

Snaking his arms around her waist, he kissed her deeply, and then looked deep into her eyes. “Sure.”

...

Linda tried to ignore the email that Wayne sent her. Her phone was out of service, so he was worried that she hadn’t returned his messages, or at least that’s what his message had implied. She felt bad, not wanting him to stress himself about her, and felt it was time

for her to tell him what Brian's wish was. She had no reason to lie to Brian and continue seeing Wayne, she truly didn't feel anything for him, and frankly, she thought he had a distasteful temper, considering how he'd left things with her the last time he saw her.

Wayne also mentioned the day she went to the hospital to do rounds with her father, and he apologized for not being able to stick around long enough to wait for her return. He wanted to arrange another meeting, and he also wanted to go zip lining, like he'd suggested the first time they met in person.

When he emerged on Skype, she decided it was time to have a chat with him. She accepted the conversation request and sat at her desk with her laptop open.

"Hey," Wayne said. "So what's going on? You not talking to me anymore?" His tone was light even though his words were a little disarming.

"No, not at all. My phone's broken," she explained. "I haven't had a chance to get a new one."

He lifted his head, recognition setting on his face. "Oh, wow, that sucks. Hey, how did it go with your dad that day? Did you see anything really interesting? Did it help you make any decisions as to what school you're going to choose or what program?"

Linda smiled. "Unfortunately no. In fact, I'm even more on the fence about that now, among other things," she stated, placing her hand on her chest, subconsciously checking to make sure her engagement ring was still safely on the chain around her neck.

"Oh?"

"Being a doctor isn't really all it's cracked up to be," Linda sighed. "I kinda wish I'd done that with him sooner." She placed her hand out for emphasis. "But I'm not telling him that...yet."

Wayne chuckled. "Good idea."

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

“So, how are you doing? Things got kinda awkward at the library the other day, huh?” she ventured.

“Yeah, I’m fine, thanks.” He sniffed, rubbing his nose as if anxious. “I’m seeing someone else.”

Linda’s eyes bulged. “Really? Gosh, you work fast,” she laughed. “Good for you.”

“Actually, I knew her a long time ago. We were in the same Molecular Biology class and didn’t even realize it. We met when I worked at the nursery six years ago.”

“Oooohhh.” Linda let the word linger on as if it was a sentence. “Well, that’s cool.”

Wayne changed the subject. “So, how’s Brian?”

Linda wasn’t comfortable telling him about their engagement. However, she did have a duty to be honest about Brian’s feelings toward him. “He’s good. But he’s feeling a little upset at me because you and I talk.”

Wayne’s face scrunched. “Why?”

“He just doesn’t understand your interest in me. I understand, but I don’t know, he’s feeling...a little insecure?” She tried for nonchalant.

He was visibly agitated. “So, what, did he tell you not to speak to me anymore?”

“Kinda,” Linda confessed. “But he’s also promised not to talk to this other girl I don’t like him hanging around with, either. So it’s kind of fair, you know?”

“Well, I think it’s kind of stupid, personally,” Wayne barked. “I mean, well, I guess, yah, it’s high school crap.”

“I guess so,” she said, squirming.

He huffed. “Well, there you go.”

“I’m sorry, Wayne. I—”

Wayne lifted his hands defensively. “Hey, look, I don’t need any of this crap in my life. And I was just doing you a favour.” His voice raised an octave. “If your boyfriend doesn’t like you talking to me, then that’s fine by me.”

She was about to apologize again, feeling badly for offending him, when he interrupted again. “No loss to me.”

His comment was biting. “You know what?” Linda scoffed. “It’s no loss to me, either.”

Linda immediately logged out, crossing her arms over her chest. “Jerk.”

...

Layla was bruised, swollen and felt the way she looked—miserable. But that was nothing compared to what was going on inside. She had part of a plan initiated, but still had another concern: how could she tell Linda without actually telling her? It seemed an impossible task, but a necessary one if she was to protect what was most important to her.

Standing carefully, Layla felt every inch of her injured body, but she knew she had a job to do, and if she didn’t do it now it may be too late. Walking softly to her sister’s room, she stood by the door, as if to gain strength and summon the courage to do the right thing. She heard Linda talking to someone but couldn’t make out what they were saying.

Pulling herself closer to the door, she realized it wasn’t open, but the handle wasn’t secure. She pushed it gently and it opened a crack,

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

allowing her to eavesdrop. Linda at first sounded happy, but then her tone changed to apologetic, and then she became angry. As she heard the conversation end abruptly, Layla visibly relaxed. She looked up at the ceiling, as if she believed the Lord was standing over her, and Layla said a silent thank you.

That saved her a painful conversation.

...

Mary knocked softly on Layla's door, hoping the day's events had tired her, and that she had found rest, something that would help the teen immensely. She heard a sigh and then Layla invited her to enter.

"Hey," Mary opened with. "I thought we'd give your cuts a soak. It'll help them heal faster and prevent infection."

She lifted her feet and placed them on the floor. "Fine," Layla said; irritation laced in her words.

Beside her, on the console table outside Layla's bedroom door, Mary had a tray of ointments, antiseptics, band-aids and cotton balls. Lifting the tray, she stepped into the room in her bathrobe and slippers, her pink flannel pajamas poking out from underneath the robe. "Do you want some Tylenol or Advil?"

"Sure," Layla relented, nodding.

Her mother handed her two pills from a small plastic cup, just like the ones they use in the hospital, and a glass of water. When Layla placed the cup on her swollen lip, she winced.

"We'll put some ice there, honey, and on your eye," Mary explained. "But first, we'll put a dressing on them. She searched her daughter's eyes. "I guess you should stay home from school tomorrow."

"Or never go back," Layla said without a trace of mirth.

SANDY APPLEYARD

“Did the Principal see anything?”

“No. Nobody saw anything,” Layla admitted, staring at the floor.

“Then you’re lucky you weren’t hurt worse.”

Layla didn’t respond. Mary removed the cap from the brown bottle of peroxide and inverted the bottle onto a cotton ball. Dabbing her daughter’s eye, and then her lip, small pockets of white began forming in the places where she’d bled. “Does that hurt?”

“A little.”

“It’ll feel a lot worse before it gets better. You should start feeling relief in a couple of days,” Mary said; her tone comforting. “You feel like talking about it?”

“No,” Layla huffed. “There’s nothing to talk about. I told you everything already.”

Mary finished dabbing her wounds and unscrewed the cap off a tube of ointment. “This is going to sting a little,” she warned.

Layla gasped when the cream was placed on the abrasion above her eye, but then she seemed to calm as Mary worked her way around, gently rubbing the cream into all the gashes and scrapes on her face. “Do you need ice for your foot or ribs?”

“Just my ribs.”

“I’ll get some for your eye and lip as well.” Leaving the room with the tray, Mary exhaled quickly and shook her head. Layla caught the look but didn’t respond.

The less questions that were raised, the better.

## Chapter 13

Mary and Chris lay in bed asleep. The apartment was enveloped in silence as all five Dixon family members enjoyed rest. Chris snored intermittently as cold medicine and nasal congestion came into play, but Mary was so exhausted from the day that she hadn't noticed. Moonlight shone into the room, striking Mary's face unsubtly, as she slept undisturbed.

Darting up from a sound sleep, Mary heard a shriek coming from the hallway. Her heart pounded as she scooted out of bed, not bothering to grab her housecoat or slippers. Feet padding quickly down the hallway, she half-heartedly listened in her sleepy state and realized the screams, which were now mewls of hurt, came from Layla's bedroom.

The door creaked slightly as Mary entered the dark room. Layla was on her side, sobbing...from pain? A nightmare? The worried mother had no idea until she bent down and asked.

"What's going on, sweetie? Did you have a bad dream?"

Sniffling, Layla answered. "Yeah. And my head hurts really bad."

"I'll go get you some more Advil," Mary said, padding her way out the door, grateful Layla's outburst hadn't awakened anyone else.

## SANDY APPLEYARD

When she returned a minute later with the tray, Layla was sitting up in bed with her bedside lamp on.

“Here you go. Take a nice long drink, Layla. Water will help flush any impending infection out,” Mary advised kindly. She stroked her daughter’s cheek tenderly, pushing a tendril of hair behind her ear.

Layla did as she was told and emptied the glass. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Feel better?”

“A little.”

Mary nodded, getting up off the bed. “I’m taking a couple of days off work to take care of you and Daddy. Plus, with Martha still sick, somebody has to take care of Tasha.”

Yawning, Layla nodded understanding.

“Now, you lie back down and get some rest.” Mary turned the lamp off and returned to her bedroom.

“Everything okay?” Chris asked sleepily.

“Layla,” Mary sighed. “She woke up from a bad dream with a thumping headache from what I imagine.”

“She’ll be okay,” Chris said, spooning his wife. “It’s not easy being a teenager.”

Mary lay there unsettled. Something didn’t sit right. For a teenager to have such a bad dream, waking up out of a dead sleep through screaming and tears, it would have to take something much worse than a schoolyard fight. She wondered why Layla had been so guarded when asked to explain exactly what happened.

Mother’s intuition told her that there was much more to the story than Layla was letting on.

...

The Advil had taken effect, but Layla could not find sleep. Her mind was reeling and she couldn't shut it off. A mixture of guilt, fear, anxiety, and anticipation had her re-enacting the events of the past few days. Layla knew that her injuries could be easily hidden once the swelling disappeared, especially considering the weather was still chilly, so nobody would question her donning a hat and scarf in school.

But how could she face Linda?

Staying in her room all night bypassed her running into her older sister, but she couldn't hide from her forever. Layla noticed an outfit missing from her closet earlier, so she knew that eventually Linda would come to return it. Plus, the sisters were rather close-knit, so Linda would come to talk to her soon. Layla was surprised she hadn't already.

Realizing her bladder was full, Layla carefully slid out of bed. Her ribs were throbbing, but at least her head felt better. Limping to the bathroom, she quietly closed the door halfway, leaving the main light off, allowing the plug-in night light to shine a sufficient light source for her while she did her business.

As she sat on the toilet, in a daze, she didn't hear anyone approaching, but the bathroom light was suddenly switched on. The door closed as Layla squinted at the brightness and saw Linda entering, unaware that Layla was on the toilet. The eighteen-year-old jumped but didn't make a sound other than a small gasp. "Jesus, Layla." Linda grabbed her throat. "Sorry, I didn't see you there."

Adjusting her eyes to the light, Linda looked down at her sister. "Layla?"

Trying to hide her face and failing dreadfully, Linda bent down. "What the hell happened to you?" she said, searching her sister's face, not only for an inkling of eye contact, but also to study her injuries.

Averting her glance, Layla pulled from the toilet paper roll and wadded it up in her hand, buying time. "I'll be fine."

Staring at her through one open eye, shielding the light from her face, Layla rose and flushed the toilet. Linda stood there, still observing her sister in her beaten-up state. "You look awful."

"Thanks," Layla's voice was laced with sarcasm.

As Layla washed her hands, Linda stood behind her, glancing at her through the mirror. "Did you get into a fight?"

"Wow, you're sharp." Layla was being facetious.

"Do Mom and Dad know?"

Layla gave her a 'how-stupid-are-you?' look.

Intrigued, Linda hoisted herself up on the counter and sat, smirking. "What did they say?"

"I thought you had to go to the bathroom?"

"I do," Linda said, as if it didn't matter. She rested her hand under her chin, with her elbow planted on her thighs, and waited for Layla. "But this is way more interesting."

Slightly irritated, but relieved that her sister wasn't making a big deal out of it, aside from her acting all paparazzi on her, Layla decided to give her the sordid story her older sister was seeking. "I was sitting in biology class. We were having a discussion on DNA and dominant and recessive genetics, stuff like that." Layla checked to see if Linda was with her and she nodded. "So me and this girl got into a disagreement about how a child born to two blue-eyed parents could inherit brown eyes."

"Ooo, and I know you love biology," Linda interrupted, feeding Layla's temptation to continue.

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“Right, so we started charting it out, you know, how the dominant and recessive eye-colour genes would come into play.”

“Okay.”

“So I’m making headway with her, and suddenly this other girl in the back of the class comes out of left field and says the only reason I’m such a goody-goody in biology is because both of my parents are doctors.”

Linda closed her eyes and nodded. “I get that sometimes too.”  
Patting Layla on the forearm, Linda prompted her to finish the story.  
“So what did you do? Clock her in front of the whole class?”

Not only did that not sound like Layla, but judging by how severely beaten up she was, it should have proved to Linda that she didn’t win whatever fight she’d started. But Linda was buying the story, and that’s all that mattered to Layla. “No. I know this girl smokes, so I followed her to the back of the school after class, and then I let her have it.”

“Was she bigger than you?”

“Bigger, but stupid.”

“So how does she look? Did you bust her arm or anything?”

“No, but I think she needed stitches above her left eyelid,” Layla answered, holding up the ring on her right ring finger, supposedly used to tear open her opponent’s skin.

Linda smirked. “Your left eye doesn’t look much better, Layla.”

“Mom said it’ll heal well enough.”

“Did anyone see anything?”

Layla waved. “No, I don’t even know this girl’s name.”

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Linda was agape. “Are you serious? But she obviously knows your name, Layla. You should be careful,” she warned.

Ignoring the last comment, Layla cocked her head sideways. “But you can’t tell Mom and Dad, okay? I told them I was ambushed, that some girl mistook me for someone else.”

“Why did you lie?”

Giving her sister a judgemental look, Layla shook her head. “Do you forget that we have an Uncle who’s a lawyer? Dad would be the first to charge this girl with assault and battery.”

Recognition came to Linda’s face. “You’re right. Yeah, that was a good call. So, do you know this girl? Do you think she’ll come after you or send someone after you?”

“No, I don’t think so. She took the last punch. I think it ended amicably.”

“Well, what about if she tells her parents? I’m sure if she looks worse than you, something will be said. Especially if she knows who you are, she could find Mom and Dad and then you’re sunk for lying.”

“From what I know of her this wasn’t her first fight,” Layla added, growing tired of the interrogation. “I’m not worried. I’ll deal with it if it comes to that.”

Linda hopped down from the counter. “Okay, but you better lay low for a while, Layla.”

“I plan to.”

Walking out of the bathroom, Layla felt the guilt wash over her again. She’d made like she was pleased with herself while talking to her sister, but Layla had never been a liar. Despite the fact that she’d told a magnificent and believable story, Layla was not proud of

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herself. Her newfound knack for storytelling was not something she'd ever wanted to acquire.

However, she knew she would need it now more than ever.

...

Freezing rain pelted down as Sylvia sat on her bed, studying the last of her calculus material. The test wasn't for another week, but her GPA had slipped slightly since her last biology assignment, which only scored a B+, and she needed an A to keep her impending scholarship within arm's reach. Hearing a soft knock at the door, Sylvia didn't lift her head. "Go away, turd, I'm studying."

"I just want to come and sit with you," Sylvia's little sister Jenny begged. "I promise I'll be quiet." Starving for her older sister's affection, the seven-year-old knocked again.

"You're relentless!" Sylvia chided. "Fine! Just be quiet, okay?"

A little smile erupted from Jenny's face as she opened the door. She was holding a cell phone in her hand and she clicked the camera the moment she entered the room. "Gotcha!"

Sylvia's face scrunched. "I hope you got Mom's permission to use her phone."

"She's sleeping."

"Good. Linda's coming over and I don't want her fawning all over us." Sylvia commented, bouncing on her bed. "Dad still out?"

Jenny nodded. Sylvia's grandfather was an Alzheimer's patient, leaving her father, Hector, to frequently visit him at the seniors' home. He went directly from the office each day and at least once throughout the weekend. Her grandfather's temper had become fiery since losing the memory of his grandchildren, and they were often shouted at, being called "little beggars" when they went to visit with Hector. Hence, the children only saw their grandfather on special

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occasions when there were other family members present that he could remember.

When Hector's father was admitted into the home for the aged, Sylvia and her family inherited his handsome two-storey dwelling, much to his sibling's chagrin. The move slid the eighteen-year-old up the social pole, despite her reclusive personality. With close friends she was extroverted, flamboyant and giddy, but in public her reticent personality was quite apparent.

The doorbell rang and both girls darted out of the room. "Get out of my way, turd!" Sylvia admonished. "And be quiet or you'll wake Mom." Grace, Sylvia's mom, worked nights as a 9-1-1 operator.

Jenny raced to the door ahead of Sylvia and opened it unceremoniously, without looking through the peephole first. "Hi, Linda!"

"Hey, Jenny," Linda chuckled, knowing full well how boisterous young children could be.

"Go watch television," Sylvia ordered.

"Why? Are you going to talk about...booooooyyyzzzzz?" Jenny teased.

Sylvia's eyes bulged. "Beat it, squirt," she said in a tone that Jenny knew better than to ignore.

"I'll sell her to ya real cheap," Sylvia offered jokingly, letting Linda into the house.

She hung her jacket on the pegboard beside a small deacon's bench and removed her shoes, setting them down on the grey plastic boot tray by the door. "Thanks, but I have one of those at home."

Sylvia rolled her eyes. "I'll trade you for your subdued sister any day."

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Linda smiled. “So, what’s new?”

Tipping her chin upward, Sylvia answered. “Come. Let’s go to my room and we’ll chat.”

Closing her bedroom door, Sylvia hopped on the bed, leaning her back against the wall. Her room was tidy and organized, more than a seventeen-year-old’s room should be. A bookcase crammed neatly with several volumes of novels and non-fiction books stood on the wall opposite the bed. A tall white dresser was on the adjacent wall, painted to match the wrought-iron bedpost.

Linda sat cross-legged at the head of the bed, only inches away from Sylvia. “How’s Brian?” Sylvia asked.

Blushing, Linda turned her head. She knew his name would come up as it was almost always the first question Sylvia asked in the past week. Having no boyfriend of her own, Sylvia was jealous of her friend, but not too jealous to dig for information. Linda hadn’t told Sylvia about her and Brian’s relationship until the week prior. Fighting the urge to blurt that they were engaged, which would knock Sylvia out of the ballpark for gossip, she simply smiled.

“What? Tell me.” Sylvia grinned, knowing that look on Linda’s face fairly well. “Did you guys do it?” she gasped, holding her hand in front of her mouth.

Uh oh...Sylvia didn’t know the half of it. “No, we didn’t do it,” Linda lied. “He’s just really sweet.”

Sylvia rolled her eyes. “Oh, spare me. So, you guys haven’t done it yet?”

Linda could not wipe the ear-to-ear grin off her face. “You did it, didn’t you?” Sylvia taunted, slapping her playfully on the shoulder. “Oh, admit it, I can tell when you’re hiding something from me.”

Relenting, Linda chuckled. “Fine. We did it.” She thought she’d let Sylvia bask in the glory of new information.

“What was it like? When did it happen? How did it start?” Sylvia couldn’t roll the questions out fast enough.

“Breathe,” Linda laughed, grasping her friend by the upper arms. “It’s no big deal.”

Her mouth forming an ‘O’, Sylvia checked herself. “Are you kidding me? No big deal?” Then she lowered her voice and narrowed her eyes. “Was it bad?”

A brief hesitation on Linda’s part sent Sylvia reeling. “Oh my God! It was that bad?”

Lolling her head from side to side, as if to say ‘so-so’, Linda answered honestly. “It’s okay, I guess.”

“Well, what part is okay, and what part isn’t okay?”

Before she could stop herself, she answered, “I don’t know, I guess it’s just that I get bored sometimes. Guys tend to want it more than girls.”

A confused look crossed over Sylvia’s face. “You’re...bored? But you’ve only been going out like...” When the deer in the headlights look passed, Sylvia had it figured out. “You’ve been going out longer than you told me, haven’t you?”

Caught, Linda bowed her head, fidgeting with an imaginary piece of lint on the duvet cover. “Kind of.”

Craning her neck backward, Sylvia’s jaw dropped. “How long?”

Feeling like she’d slowly dug herself into a hole she couldn’t escape from, Linda drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “About a year.”

Sylvia’s face dropped. “What?”

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“Look, Sylvia, I didn’t tell anyone,” Linda explained. “I didn’t even tell my own sister.”

Shaking her head, clearly angry and hurt, Sylvia averted her glance. “Why would you keep that a secret for so long? I mean, are you ashamed of him or something? Or are you just so untrusting that you couldn’t tell me?”

The words stung. Linda was at a loss. “I...I don’t know, Sylvia. I only told my parents a week ago. And they still don’t know we’ve been dating for so long.”

“What’s the matter with you, Linda? Why are you being so reserved? I thought we were best friends.”

Knowing full well she did not reciprocate her feelings, Linda suddenly felt like a heel. She knew she’d misled Sylvia for far too long, but she was very clingy, and it was difficult to tell her the truth most of the time. Harmless, Sylvia’s perceptibly big mouth rarely went beyond the two girls, so there was really no reason why Linda couldn’t have told her sooner. “I’m sorry, Sylvia. I should have told you.”

Linda debated whether or not to tell her about the engagement. She figured it was an even chance that Sylvia would either be ecstatic, being the first to know something so huge, or be terribly upset once again, because she’d been kept in the dark about yet another thing, which had snowballed into a proposal for marriage.

“You’re right, you should have told me.” Sylvia slid towards the edge of the bed and scooted off. “I don’t understand, Linda.” She walked towards the small wooden desk in front of the window that was directly beside the bed. “I mean, I’ve never told a soul any of your business, you know that.”

Thinking back, Linda realized that that was true. Sylvia had always respected her privacy. When Mary and Chris discovered they were expecting Tasha, Sylvia never spread the news, which was evidently a huge piece of scandalous information, because once Mary began

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blossoming with baby belly, the whole apartment, and school was talking about it.

Logging into her computer, Sylvia entered the student website that Linda frequently visited. Joining her friend by the desk, Linda rose and then bent down so their faces were very close. "I'm really sorry, Sylvia. I don't know what else to say."

Softening slightly, Sylvia looked at Linda. "You can let me live vicariously."

"What do you mean?" Linda picked up a tinge of playfulness from Sylvia as she grinned devilishly.

"You can tell me all about what sex is like."

"Ewww!"

"Worth a try." Sylvia shrugged, changing the subject. "Hey, so what's the story with this Wayne guy? He holds these regular meetings so NYU wannabe losers like us can ask him dorky questions?"

"Something like that. He had someone from University of Connecticut come to the meeting last week." It was a shame Sylvia wasn't comfortable attending the meetings. Linda thought it would be a great opportunity for her to learn about the different Universities, despite the fact that poor Sylvia still had no idea what she wanted to do after high school, which was a shame because her grades were so stellar.

"Oh yeah?" Sylvia was impressed. "I've been in the chatrooms and they seem to have lots of information. I wonder if it's better just to go to the University instead of getting biased info, you know?"

Linda lifted both hands up, as if in surrender. "Whatever you think. I found the meetings helpful."

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Sylvia changed tack. “This Wayne guy...is he cute?” She had a penchant for older men.

“He’s okay. He’s like twenty-one or twenty-two.”

That sent Sylvia reeling. She rubbed her hands together feverishly as if trying to start a fire. “Well, that sweetens the pot a little then, doesn’t it?”

“He has a girlfriend.” Linda chuckled her on the shoulder. “And you’ve never seen his profile picture before?”

“Those things don’t do justice,” Sylvia sneered. “Look at yours.” She was referring to Linda’s Facebook picture, which was a selfie that made her look like all she needed was a gust of wind behind her and she was a cover model. “You look nothing like that.”

“It’s just the lighting. And thanks.” Linda smirked. “Besides, Wayne’s a bit of a jerk.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Brian asked me to stop talking to him in exchange for him not talking to Shirley Weaver, and when I explained it to Wayne that my boyfriend wasn’t comfortable with us talking, he got really nasty with me.”

Sylvia’s face scrunched. “Well, does he have any feelings for you?”

“I don’t think so. He has a girlfriend.” Linda lifted her index finger. “Which, by the way, he seems to go through them a lot. He just broke up with someone.”

“Hmmm.” Sylvia paused. “He must be really cute, then. What does Layla think of him?”

Layla was usually Sylvia’s gauge for how cute or not-so-cute a guy was. She had a really high threshold for looks. Few passed her

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radar. She also had a great sense for personalities. “Well, Layla thinks Brian’s a total geek.”

“I knew that.”

“But Wayne, I don’t know, she’s only met him once and she didn’t give him googly eyes or anything.” Linda paused and shrugged. “You’d have to ask her.”

Then Linda remembered the other piece of news she’d better tell Sylvia, otherwise she would dig herself into deeper trouble than she was already in with her friend. “Speaking of Layla...”

All attention was back on Linda. “What? What?” Sylvia taunted.

“Layla got into a huge fight at school with this girl in her biology class. You should see her face.” Linda was practically bragging.

“Really? Layla in a fight?” Sylvia tested the words on her tongue. “That doesn’t sound like her at all. What happened there?”

Linda explained briefly and then Sylvia digested the information for a moment. She looked Linda straight in the eye. “Is there anything else you haven’t told me?”

As if she needed more information, Linda thought to herself. But she looked away too quickly.

Sylvia was no fool.

## Chapter 14

Layla had carefully planted a seed, but she needed to nurture it before it would grow into what it needed to be. Or what she needed it to be. The sixteen-year-old was never one for manipulation, but desperate times called for desperate measures. After spending three days at home, her face was healing nicely, thanks to both her parents being in the medical field. On the fourth day she returned to school, feigning reluctance.

Donning a baseball cap, sunglasses, and a thick pashmina scarf, Layla entered her first period classroom without much notice. She took her seat behind Carla and sunk low in the chair. Carla sucked air through her teeth. “Geez, how’s it feel?”

“It feels alright,” Layla lied. “Looks a lot better than a couple of days ago.”

Carla shuffled in closer. “And...how are...you doing?” She motioned with her hand.

Looking at the polished floor, Layla swallowed. “I’m doing okay, I guess.”

“Is everything working out as planned?”

“Not sure yet. Some of it is, but it’s too early to tell.”

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The teacher walked into the half-empty room and set his leather-bound suitcase on the desk. He noticed Layla right away and asked how she was feeling. Suddenly all eyes were on her and she felt her face heat up with embarrassment and anger for being solicited indiscreetly. "I'm fine, thanks," she answered so softly the teacher had to strain to hear.

When class began, Carla whispered, "What a jackass. I can't believe he did that. What did your parents tell the school was the reason you weren't coming?"

"It took some doing, but I managed to get my mom to tell the school I was in an accident while riding in a taxicab."

This reminded Layla that she must tell Linda about that or she was liable to spread the news and ruin Layla's reputation as a peaceful teenager.

"Good call." Carla gave her a thumbs-up.

The teacher glanced towards the girls, prompting Layla to swing back around and face the front of the classroom. She could feel eyes on her and it made her skin crawl. As if Layla couldn't feel any more intimidated, turning to avert her gaze to the front, where the teacher was writing something on the blackboard, suddenly she blinked.

When she opened her eyes again, red hair and blue eyes stared back at her.

...

"How was your first day back?" Mary asked Layla. Martha was putting Tasha's hair in corn rows while the six-year-old knelt on the living room floor. The nanny sat on the couch, switching her glance from the mop of brown hair in front of her to the conversation going on beside her in the dining room.

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“It was okay. A lot of kids stared at me.” That was an understatement. After Layla’s outburst following the hallucination, even Carla gasped from behind her. Layla swore Mr. Pinchot wet his pants when he heard the sixteen-year-old scream from her desk chair, seemingly unprovoked.

“They would stare at you if you wore the wrong coloured shirt, Layla. Don’t worry about it,” Mary said, unaware of the levity of the situation. Grateful that she was sent down to the guidance office following the episode, Layla was well aware that her mother would soon find out. Layla was counting on that.

“I suppose you’re right,” Layla conceded. Mrs. Harper, the guidance counsellor, asked the eleventh-grader a series of seemingly rehearsed questions, but Layla gave nothing away, playing the typical ‘I don’t want to talk about it’ card teenagers often used.

“Where’s Linda?”

“She’s out with Brian,” Mary answered, peeking at Tasha’s hair. The six-year-old seemed to sense her mother’s gaze and she turned, giving her a sour look. Mary tilted her head, giving the child a silent warning, and Tasha turned back to the television. Martha had spent the last hour doing her hair at the little girl’s request, and Mary wasn’t going to let her waste the nanny’s time.

“Did she get her phone fixed yet? I haven’t been able to talk to her all day,” Layla asked, anxious.

“I think she was going to get another one,” Mary answered nonchalantly as she rose to bring Tasha a drink of water. “But she didn’t want to cancel the service until she could access her messages somehow from her old phone.”

Layla’s face scrunched. “Why would she care about her messages?”

Mary’s hands lifted slightly as she passed her middle daughter. “I think she said there were a bunch of messages from Wayne she couldn’t access.”

Layla's heart began to pound. "I thought she wasn't talking to Wayne anymore," she said too fast, causing Mary to pause.

"Layla, you obviously know more than I do."

Yes, she did. Much, much more.

Mary's hands went to her waist as she took on a semi-concerned stance. "Why? What happened with her and Wayne?"

Shaking her head fast, Layla began denying. "I don't know. I thought I heard her say something about him being a jerk," she answered carefully.

Lifting her eyebrows in a dismissive gesture, Mary continued. "Well, you know Linda and her phone. She can't miss a thing. I'm surprised she hasn't had a coronary considering she hasn't been able to use it in days."

Little did they know, Linda had been slightly distracted by Brian. "She'll get it fixed soon enough...or get a new one. Whatever." Mary guffawed.

Why would Linda care so much about retrieving messages from Wayne? Was their heated conversation on Skype the other day forgotten? Were they friends again? Layla began to panic. Her throat suddenly felt like it was as thin as a sprig of hay. What was she going to do? She had to do something. And fast.

"I'm going to go lie down for a bit," Layla lied, getting up from the table.

"Daddy should be home for dinner tonight," Mary supplied. "Do you want me to wake you?"

"Sure." Layla shrugged, walking down the hallway. She peeked towards the kitchen, making sure Mary wouldn't see her entering Linda's bedroom. When the coast was clear, she closed the door to

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avoid being caught. Rifling through the pile of papers on her older sister's desk, she found the phone and charger.

The charger had been unplugged, but the phone still sat in the cradle. Praying it would have enough juice to access text messages, Layla plugged it in and watched the indicator light come on. Her heart was pounding hard against her chest. Leaving the phone connected to the charger, she pressed the power button, and the display came to life.

Layla quickly accessed recent text messages, scrolling down to the ones received from Wayne. There were at least ten from the day her phone died. As she skimmed through the messages her eyes widened. She looked up at the ceiling thanking God Linda never saw them. Pulling up the most recent one from Wayne, she opened it up just enough so she could send a response.

It would have to be a good one. She needed to get rid of him for good. Hurrying before the phone died again, Layla keyed in a fast message and hit send. The sixteen-year-old prayed for one more minute of power and opened each of the disturbing messages, forwarding them all to her own cell phone for posterity. She then opened up the tiny door on the side of the phone and removed the SIM card, placing it in her pocket.

Thankful the desk was already a mess, Layla unplugged the phone, removed it from the charger, and threw a pile of stuff on the floor along with the phone and charger, making sure to leave the door where she retrieved the SIM card from open.

Feeling slightly less agitated, Layla raced to her room and turned on her phone.

A relieved grin crossed over her face.

...

Layla heard a knock at her bedroom door and then Linda appeared. "Hey, how are you feeling?"

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Lifting up from her bed, she put down the paperback she'd been reading. "Fine. Were you at Brian's?"

Linda tipped her chin upward. "Sylvia's," she corrected. "Do you know what happened to my room? All the stuff from my desk was dumped on the floor."

Having rehearsed the lie ahead of time, it rolled off Layla's tongue. "I thought I heard something tip over in there earlier, but I thought it was my imagination. Anything get broken?"

"Nothing that wasn't already." Linda's mouthed curled upward on one side. "My SIM card is gone though. I was hoping to just pop it into my new phone. Save me having to enter all the numbers and stuff again."

Quickly, Layla changed the subject. "Did you get a new one?"

"Yeah. Sylvia and I went shopping." Linda turned her body to face the hallway, indicating she wasn't coming in. "Mom said to come get you. Supper's ready and Dad's home."

"Cool. Thanks." Then she remembered. "Oh yeah, Mom told the school that I got into an accident in a taxi, so let's use that story, okay?"

Linda's brow arched. "Okay."

Layla tilted her head. "You didn't tell anyone I got into a fight, did you?"

Blushing, Linda pursed her lips. "Just Sylvia."

Lifting both her hands in exasperation, Layla barked. "Oh, that's great. Tell the foghorn I'm a butch! Now the whole school is going to know!"

"Shhhh! Relax, Layla," Linda scolded. "She won't tell anyone. I made her promise."

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Layla wasn't convinced. "Yeah, right. Sylvia's got a big mouth."

"No, she doesn't," Linda argued.

Sucking her teeth, Layla pointed her index finger at her sister. "Fine. But if I hear any rumours flooding the school, I'll know where they came from," she warned.

Linda guffawed. "Well, what about Carla? Her mouth's bigger than Sylvia's any day."

"Don't worry. Carla's lips are sealed."

Mirroring Layla's unconvinced stance, Linda motioned her to come out for dinner. "I'm sure." She smirked.

It seemed both girls and their friends had plenty of secrets to keep these days.

## Chapter 15

Mary served a glorious meal that Martha had prepared earlier in the afternoon. It was Layla's favourite: macaroni casserole. Everyone was devouring it voraciously, except Layla.

"Sweetheart, you need to eat," Mary urged. "I haven't seen you eat a decent meal in days."

Pushing a noodle to the side of her plate, Layla moaned softly. "I'm not hungry."

Chris and Mary exchanged glances. "If you eat up we can go out for ice cream sundaes after supper," Chris encouraged.

Irritated, Layla looked at her father. "Can I be excused? I'm tired."

Sighing, he gave in. "Fine. But I'm bringing you a snack to eat later."

Staring at her daughter's full plate, Mary shook her head. "When is she going to snap out of this?"

Placing his hand on his wife's shoulder, Chris tried for casual. "She's getting enough fluids, honey. Her appetite will come back soon. Maybe we ought to lower her Advil intake. Ibuprofen can cause stomach upset."

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“I haven’t given her any since yesterday.” Mary’s tone was matter-of-fact.

“Give it another day or two,” Chris advised, patting her hand. He glanced pointedly at Tasha, who was listening to the conversation, and then gave his wife a knowing look, indicating this topic would be better left until later.

Taking the hint, Mary lifted her plate and took it to the kitchen. “I’ve gotta go into the hospital tonight. Chris, are you going to be home?”

Taking a sip of water from his glass, he swallowed. “Yep. Not on call until six o’clock tomorrow morning.”

Mary nodded and stole a peek at her watch. “I’ll go get showered and ready now then. Maybe I can get back before morning.”

“I’ll be home, Mom,” Linda offered.

Mary gave her a weak smile. Linda was kind enough, but Mary was worried. She wanted to make sure Layla ate something before going to school. Suddenly the phone rang, breaking Mary from her anxious thoughts. She picked up the extension in the kitchen.

“Dr. Dixon,” Mary answered.

The female voice was clipped. “Dr. Dixon, this is Mrs. Harper. I’m a guidance counsellor over at your daughters’ school.”

“Yes?” Mary said; concern laced through her voice.

“There was an incident with Layla today.”

Mary closed her eyes and nodded. “Yes, she told me there were a lot of people staring at her.” Wanting to uphold the promise to her daughter, Mary was careful not to mention the fight she’d been involved in.

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“Yes, well, she was in to see me today, Dr. Dixon. She was very upset.”

Mary looked perplexed. Chris rose and stood beside his wife. His hands were placed on his hips, mirroring her worried posture.

“Whatever for? Did someone give her trouble?” The thought of Layla suffering from more physical encounters made Mary’s heart sink. It was no wonder the girl didn’t want to eat supper.

“Not exactly.”

Mary waited.

“Mr. Pinchot claims Layla simply screamed out loud in class,” Mrs. Harper explained. “It seems that something must have scared her.”

“What scared her?” Mary asked, confused.

“She wouldn’t say, ma’am. I was hoping you might be able to shed some light on that.” The counsellor paused. “I understand she was in a car accident recently?”

Mary hated lying, so she decided it was better to change the subject. “I’ll take care of it, Mrs. Harper,” she answered after a brief pause. “And thanks for letting me know.”

“Please stay in touch.”

Mary hung up. Linda had sensed the need for privacy and thus had corralled Tasha into her bedroom. She could hear the girls singing a nursery song, Linda adding in funny words to make the six-year-old giggle. “Layla had some kind of outburst in class today. She wouldn’t tell the guidance counsellor anything.”

“An outburst?” Chris asked.

Nodding, Mary expanded. “Apparently she just screamed out loud in class, unprovoked.”

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Blinking, Chris looked upward, as if in deep thought. “Did she tell you what her nightmare was about the other night?”

“No.” Mary’s face was sullen. “What do we do, Chris? Should we send her to Dr. Medson?”

Dr. Medson was a dear friend of Mary’s, and a child psychologist.

“I think she’ll feel embarrassed. She knows Dr. Medson and may be uncomfortable seeing someone who deals with kids more Tasha’s age.”

“What about Dr. Petty? You know him well enough, don’t you?”

Dr. Petty worked on staff with Chris. They hadn’t attended school together, but Chris had known him since he was hired on five years ago. “I think before we jump to any conclusions, we need to talk to Layla.”

Mary glanced at her watch and frowned. “Dammit. Can you talk to her? I’m going to be late for work.”

“Sure.”

...

Her stomach roared from hunger. The noise was almost so loud she nearly missed hearing the telephone ring. It was odd for anyone to call on the land line. Most people contacted the family through their cell phones. Only doctors, dentists and the school called the land line. Sensing trouble, Layla opened her bedroom door a crack. She heard Mary address Mrs. Harper and her heart leapt.

Straining to listen to the conversation taking place at the opposite end of the apartment, Layla finally heard Mary hang up. Unable to decipher what her mom and dad were saying because of Linda and Tasha’s rendition of A Spoonful of Sugar from Tasha’s room, Layla took a step out of her bedroom.

Moments later she heard Mary padding down the hallway and she quickly hopped back into her bedroom, where she zipped into her bed and under the covers. She waited. Twenty minutes later she heard Mary leave for work and then footsteps coming toward her bedroom door.

A soft knock was heard and then Chris's head appeared in the doorway.

Only she didn't see it. She'd closed her eyes and feigned a restful sleep.

...

All he could hear was the sound of the dripping faucet in the bathroom. The darkness enshrouded him while he tried to sleep. A cold and empty bed was never a welcome place for slumber to Chris. Mary would not be home for hours and there was so much on his mind, his wife would be the only one who could set his thoughts at ease. Turning onto his back, the doctor drew in a deep breath, blaming the leaky faucet as his reason for the bout of insomnia.

Giving in to his restlessness, Chris scooted out of bed, placing his slippers on to pad his movements. Slowly he strolled down the hallway and entered the washroom. Turning on the light, he stared at his sullen face, which would be riddled with under-eye baggage in the morning. He gave the tap one swift turn, silencing the constant ebbing of sound that came from it, when he heard a shriek.

He knew right away where it came from. As he hurried to her room he opened the door and saw his sixteen-year-old daughter sitting up in bed. She was hugging her knees, trembling as though some demon had haunted her in her sleep. "What's the matter, Layla?" he whispered, switching on her bedside lamp.

Sobbing, she grabbed hold of her father, who sat next to her on the bed. Her dreams were real, but she hated the mocked-up lie she had

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

to use to leverage her plan. “I hate this place, Daddy,” she sniffed, still shrieking miserably. “I want to get out of New York.”

Practically clawing him, she repeated herself. “This doesn’t feel like home anymore.”

In his mind, Chris’s eyes rolled. What was it with teenagers? That was their answer to everything: to move away. Forget about dealing with problems. He knew she wasn’t serious, anyway. Layla loved New York, and the mere fact that she freaked when they even mentioned moving to North Carolina recently proved that.

Trying to calm her so she wouldn’t wake up Tasha and Linda, Chris rubbed her back as he held the unstable teen. “Shhh, shhh, Layla. It’s okay, honey. We’ll figure it out.”

She mewled, as though in pain. “The nightmares won’t stop, Daddy. And I’m seeing...things.”

“I know, I know,” he responded in a comforting tone. “We need to get you some help, sweetie.”

Reacting as though she’d been slapped, Layla pulled herself out of Chris’s arms. “No, Daddy! No!”

She began sobbing hysterically, each breath a tiny shriek, as though terrified. “No, Daddy!” Layla repeated.

Chris inched closer to her and cradled her head into his chest. “It’s alright, baby. Shh now, shhh.” He rocked her in his embrace, back and forth, as though she was an infant. When the tears finally ceased, and all that remained was hiccups, Chris pulled her gently away and tipped her chin upwards to meet his eyes. “You need to talk about what’s going on up here.” He pointed to her temple. “So you can rest in here.” He placed his hand on his chest.

He held her gaze and pursed his lips, asking silently for permission. “I can’t, Daddy.” A fresh tear fell down her cheek. “I just...I can’t.”

...

Linda lay in her bed, listening to Layla cry. Sighing with inward frustration, she turned over and tried to go back to sleep. What was with her sister? Why did she always have to act so dramatic? What's the big deal? So she got into a fight. It wasn't in Layla's natural ways to do so, but people changed. Linda figured Layla would probably get into plenty more before her high school career was over.

Pulling the blankets up further, she heard Layla's words loud and clear, and her eyes opened wide. Layla wanted to move. Surely she was joking? Layla and the production, always having to put on a show. Maybe she was priming Mary and Chris for something?

Then she heard the pained mewling, like the hurt was still fresh. Why was she so shaken by the fight? Apparently Layla was the one that started it. Linda began to panic, wondering if maybe Layla did want to move. The fact that her parents had just mentioned moving to North Carolina mere weeks ago made the implication even more frightening. What if they gave in? Both Mary and Chris already wanted to move, she knew that. What would she do? She'd just said yes to Brian's proposal, and even if Linda hadn't yet made up her mind about NYU, it didn't sit well that maybe the possibility of her going there had just been erased.

Linda vowed to talk to Layla in the morning. Without revealing too much, Linda had to convince Layla that moving was a bad idea. But how would she do that without telling her sister about her engagement to Brian? And what if Layla was serious?

She heard their dad leave Layla's room and considered going in to talk with her then, but immediately decided against it. If she did have to tell Layla about her and Brian, she certainly didn't want to take the chance that their dad would overhear.

## Chapter 16

Mary and Chris exchanged a quick peck on the cheek before Chris left for the hospital. “Did she eat anything?” Mary whispered, knowing everyone was still fast asleep.

“No, she was sleeping when I went in to talk to her after you left.”

Inspecting her husband’s face, Mary sensed there was more. “What happened?”

Staring at the carpet, Chris shook his head. “She had another nightmare.”

Swallowing, Mary remained silent. “I’m pretty sure she was babbling, but she said she wanted to move away from New York.”

Sighing, Mary lifted her hands. “What else? A month ago she wanted to join a convent because the boy she liked didn’t like her back.”

“I know. That’s what I thought,” Chris agreed. “She refuses to talk to anybody about it.”

“I wish I knew why,” Mary hissed. “What is it with teenagers? They yack and yack and yack on and on about useless crap most of the time, and then when something serious happens they close up tight as a clam.”

## SANDY APPLEYARD

Chris didn't respond, he simply scratched his head. "I gotta go. Make sure she eats something. I noticed her face is starting to sink in. Looks worse now that the swelling is gone."

Mary gave him a pained look. "Okay."

He wrapped his arms around his wife and she drew in a deep breath, taking in his fresh scent. "Why is it so much easier to treat our patients? Why is it so much more difficult to get our own kids better?"

"Have faith, Mary." He kissed her on the top of her head. "I gotta go."

"Love you."

"Love you, too."

...

Layla could smell bacon and eggs wafting in from the kitchen. She got up out of bed and stuffed her feet into her slippers, just as there was a knock at the door. "Morning, honey. I figured you'd be hungry, so I made some breakfast."

Mary's eyes were pink from exhaustion. When she was tired her nose became congested, and Layla could hear that she was stuffed up. Her heart sank. She hated doing this to her mom. "I'm not really hungry, Mom."

"Try?" Mary begged.

Nodding, Layla came out of her room, following her mother to the kitchen. Linda was behind them, still in her pajamas, eyes averted to the phone in her hand.

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

“Did you figure it out yet, honey?” Mary asked Linda, serving a plate full of bacon, eggs over easy, whole wheat toast and orange juice to Layla.

“Not yet. It would be so much easier if I didn’t have to replace the darn SIM card.”

Layla looked up at her older sister, feeling ashamed. She said nothing but began moving food around on her plate.

Mary ignored her comment. “Is Tasha up yet?”

“I’ll go wake her,” Linda offered.

“No, that’s okay, you go get some breakfast. I’ll go wake her,” Mary said.

Linda jumped on the opportunity. “I heard you last night.”

Layla glanced at Linda through the corner of her eye but said nothing.

“Why did you say you want to move?”

Before Layla could answer, Mary re-entered the room. “She’s already dressed.” Mary grinned. She found it funny that her six-year-old had more zest for life than her two teenage daughters.

“Why do you want to move, Layla?” Linda repeated.

Mary interjected. “Linda, mind your business. We all say things we don’t mean when we’re upset.” Her tone was warning.

Layla slammed the fork down and rose abruptly. “I’m not hungry.” She left the room.

Mary glared at Linda. “Thanks. I was just about to get her to eat,” she seethed.

“What? I just asked her a question.”

Exasperated, Mary placed her hands on her hips. “Just like when you’re going through a rough time, you need to pay your sister some respect, Linda. We don’t always have reasons why we want things or why we say we want something and mean something else. She’s sixteen, Linda. And if you remember, sixteen is not an easy age.”

“Neither is eighteen,” Linda said under her breath.

“Young lady, if you have something to say, say it so I can hear you,” Mary advised in a tone that told Linda to back off.

“I said so is eighteen!” Linda shot back, stomping down the hall, slamming her bedroom door.

Little Tasha came out of her room, dressed in a sweet little shirt with pink frills over a pair of blue jeans. “Mommy, what the heck is going on?” she said with her hands on her hips.

Mary couldn’t help but smile at her little girl. She held her in her arms and laughed, relieved that she could still laugh despite the troubled morning. “Oh, sweetie. Nothing unusual.” She lifted Tasha’s face up to meet hers. “You might as well get used to it.”

...

It was getting late, but Layla and Linda were nearly ready for school. Mary had just taken Tasha down to catch the bus and she returned, expecting since her absence that the girls would be brawling over the discussion at the breakfast table. But to her surprise, the apartment was silent. Mary stood in the hallway, adjusting her watch, acting like she wasn’t hovering. She watched Layla step into the washroom and noted how loose her jeans were on her.

Mary remained there, and heard Layla doing her business. Before she left, the ping of the electronic weigh scale was heard. When the door opened, Mary was careful to be out of sight. As Layla went back into her room, Mary entered the bathroom and turned on the

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

scale. It was a high-end piece of equipment with several memory functions. Pressing her toe beside Layla's name, she pulled up her middle daughter's weight history.

Since her last record a little more than three weeks ago, Layla had lost more than ten pounds. The girl was always the perfect size for her frame, and Mary began to worry how far this 'rut' would take her. She envisioned her daughter being hospitalized, just like the many teenagers who starved themselves that she'd seen in her medical career.

Vowing to make Layla eat before school, Mary marched into the kitchen and poured her a bowl of cereal. When the teen appeared from her room, dressed and evidently ready to go, Mary stopped her in her tracks. "Please, Layla, you need to eat something. Even just a couple of bites. Please?"

Staring at the bowl of cereal sitting on the table, popping and cracking in milk, Layla relented. "Fine. But I've only got like five minutes."

"I'll take it," Mary insisted.

Seated at the table, Layla pushed the morsels down in the milk, buying time. A cell phone began ringing. The sound came from Mary's purse on the console table by the door. Huffing, she went over and fished it out. "Dr. Dixon," she answered tersely.

Layla drank some milk from the bowl as she watched her mother roll her eyes and sigh. "Yes, sure. I'll be there."

Mary ended the call and dropped her phone back into her purse. "Someone called in sick. I've gotta go cover in the emergency department for a while until they can get another person in."

Nodding, Layla took another sip of milk, pretending Mary wasn't clearly inspecting how much she'd eaten. "Please promise me you'll empty the bowl, Layla?" she pleaded.

## SANDY APPLEYARD

“I will,” she whined softly.

Mary kissed her daughter on the forehead and called to Linda to let her know she was leaving. A moment later it was just the two teens left in the apartment.

“Are you going to school?” Linda asked, pulling her backpack over her shoulders.

“Yeah. Just give me a minute.” Layla walked over to the garbage, lifted the lid and poured the bowl of cereal into the awaiting bag.”

“I thought you promised Mom you’d empty the bowl,” Linda reminded.

Layla averted her glance, placing the bowl in the sink. “I did empty the bowl.”

It felt good to Layla to be able to lie and tell the truth simultaneously.

...

Brian passed Linda a note during calculus class. It alluded to him missing her. She responded back that she was right there. He replied that he meant something else and Linda looked back at him. Brian winked at her in a way that told her exactly what he meant, making her blush.

After class he took her hand and led her to their bank of lockers where he kissed her tenderly in front of everyone in the hallway. She wanted to open her locker and hide, but it felt kind of nice to finally have their relationship out in the open.

“You wanna come over later? My parents are going to a movie,” he asked, rubbing his nose against hers. It sent chills down her spine.

Just as she was about to answer, she heard someone yell her name. Linda looked up and saw Sylvia running towards her, breathless.

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

“Linda! You have to come quick! Layla’s been beat up again! She’s passed out on the bathroom floor!”

“Oh my God!” Linda shrieked. Students in the hallway cleared a path so that Linda could run and catch up with Sylvia.

“Principal Martin’s called an ambulance, but he told me to come for you,” Sylvia panted, her words difficult to understand.

They reached the double doors leading to the stairwell, and again, students veered to the left or right to clear the way for the girls to run. Linda peeked out the windows with the view to the main road outside and saw the flashing lights of the approaching ambulance.

“Thank God they got here quickly.” Sylvia swallowed, slowing down as they neared the last step. The glass doors, which were mere feet from the women’s washroom, were propped open.

A sea of students surrounded the doorway to the restroom, but they’d left enough of an opening for a person to squeeze through. Linda entered the vestibule, which held six stalls, and saw her sister lying on the floor. “Dear God!” she cried, running to Layla’s side.

Her body was flat on the floor, her arms at her side. New gashes and cuts appeared on her face, almost in the same spots as the existing ones. Layla lay lifeless on the floor, but Linda could see the tiny pulsing of her jugular vein on the side of her neck. “The ambulance is here,” Principal Martin announced.

She looked over to the group of spectators and shrieked. “Who did this?” Linda took in another breath to give more volume to her demand. “Who did this to my sister?” she yelled.

“Nobody saw anything,” Principal Martin explained. “A student came in and found her here a few minutes ago. Sylvia happened to be walking by at the time.”

Linda turned towards Layla again. She took her limp hand in hers. “God, Layla. Why did this happen again? Why? What happened?”

Layla remained still. A moment later, two uniformed men entered the building as the group of students shuffled to the side, allowing them entry into the restroom. They quickly but carefully lifted Layla onto the gurney and placed an oxygen mask on her face.

“How long has she been unconscious?” one of the attendants asked.

“I’m not sure. About five minutes, give or take?” Principal Martin answered.

Two police officers suddenly entered the washroom, one female, the other male. “Are you the principal of this school?” the male officer addressed Martin.

He nodded, “Yes, I am.”

“Did anyone see anything?”

“No, sir. A student just came in to use the facilities and found her.”

The female officer interjected. “Do you have security cameras installed in the school?”

“Just on the outside, at the exits I’m afraid,” Martin admitted.

The male officer turned to the female officer. “Maybe she’ll talk when she’s awake.”

Linda debated whether or not to betray Layla’s trust. She looked down at her sister, so helpless, and interrupted the officers. “This isn’t the first time she’s had trouble, Officer. Another girl got into a fight with Layla only a week and a half ago.”

“Are you her sister?” the female officer asked.

“Yes, I am. My name is Linda. Linda Dixon. And she’s Layla.”

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

The paramedics were checking Layla's pulse and pinching her skin, determining immediately that she was severely dehydrated. One of the attendants unceremoniously planted an intravenous drip into her arm and Layla stirred.

"Layla?" the attendant called. "Layla, can you hear me?"

Her eyes fluttered open. "Can you tell me where you are?" the attendant asked.

She didn't answer, but as Layla's head lifted slightly off the pillow, she saw the people standing there, and Linda, plus Principal Martin, the two police officers and the paramedics. "Can you tell me where you are, Layla?" the attendant repeated, looking directly into Layla's eyes.

Layla spoke so only she could hear. "Right where I need to be."

Amid the commotion, she closed her eyes again.

## The End

Thank you for reading this book. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. If you did enjoy it, leaving an honest review (even just one sentence) on Amazon would be very helpful, but there is no pressure. Here is a direct link if you care to leave a review:

Subscribe to my newsletter (so I can let you know when I have a new book coming out) and get an ARC (Author Review Copy) of *Don't Mess with Daddy's Girl* (LA Cops Series Book Two). Or

## SANDY APPLEYARD

you can pick it up on Amazon or Nook if you're not interested in subscribing.

Here is the link if you would like to subscribe:

<http://eepurl.com/bbOd65>

Find out what happens to Layla in ‘*To Hide in Holly Springs Book Two*’

Here is the direct link to Amazon to learn more:

### About the Book

A seemingly well-balanced, hard-working and good-natured family, the Dixons mesh well with the residents of Holly Springs. But when asked why such a dramatic move, their story is too practiced.

Layla makes friendships selectively. A ghost haunts her. Worst of all, everyone thinks she's fine when inside the teen is falling apart. Suddenly, when things go south, the girl goes missing, but strangely, her cell phone is left behind.

In her absence from home, a family member learns of the horror that has become Layla's life. After viewing an important clue, he knows that he must act fast...before his entire family is destroyed.

### Excerpt

### Chapter 1

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

Layla sat in the back of the cab, turned to face the grimy back window, watching the building on Second Street fade away. She felt her mother pull the back of her jacket, urging Layla to turn around and sit properly, as the cab driver glared at her through the rear view window.

The vehicle smelled of old cigarettes, body odour, and sickly sweet from a batch of donuts, which someone had left the remnants of on the floor. Chris, her father, sat in the front passenger seat with the driver, who looked less than thrilled to have a guest so close to him. There were holes in his fingerless black woollen gloves, and his matching wool hat had so many little fabric balls, or ‘pilling’ as her mother Mary would describe it, it looked like he’d glued them on himself.

While Chris made small talk in front, the other four Dixons sat, cramped like sardines in a can, in the back. Tasha, Layla’s younger sister, was crammed in between Mary and her older sister Linda, who was so enthralled in a steamy romance novel she barely looked up when the driver pounded on the brakes so hard, had it not been for seatbelts, all five Dixons would have plummeted through the windshield.

“Damn Yankees!” the driver screeched. Chris recovered from the abrupt stop and gave him a disapproving look. “Err...Pardon the language.”

JFK Airport was a long drive from Manhattan, New York, where Layla had grown up. It was there where they were headed to catch a flight to North Carolina. All their belongings had already been shipped via long haul transport and Mary prayed they would arrive before the truck did. They didn’t have much, but she’d heard horror stories of people’s property being sold and distributed long before the owner arrived at their destination. Proof it was time for Mary to get out of New York and into a small town where her wholesome ideals of life and people would be restored. Layla adjusted her red toque, which had almost fallen off as the car jerked forward, and glanced at her mother, who returned the oh-my-god-this-guy-is-crazy look.

Poor little Tasha was buried under her mother's arm, barely able to breathe. A small, muffled voice cried out and Mary lifted her arm, helping her youngest child, her baby, sit erect. "You going away?" the driver asked gruffly.

"Err...no, we're actually moving to North Carolina," Chris answered kindly.

The driver lifted a brow. "You got family there?" he ventured.

"No, we're moving there on business," Chris half-lied. Chris and Mary were doctors, and both worked in separate hospitals—Mary at New York Presbyterian, Chris at Lenox Hill— and they bought a commercial one-storey building, about the size of a house, in Holly Springs, just outside of Raleigh, North Carolina. This would be the location of the private practice they were opening, a dream of both doctors for such a long time.

As her father answered with a veiled lie, Layla pulled her right hand to her face, feeling the small yellow bruise that remained. The kidney-shaped blemish around the underside of her left eye was still tender to touch. Her lip had healed nicely and her left arm, still in a sling, would take a few more weeks before returning to normal functioning.

She felt her cell phone vibrate in her pocket and forced her mother to lean sideways so she could retrieve it. Wincing from the lingering pain in her injured arm she checked the display and as Layla had expected, it was her best friend Carla.

"Is it Carla again?" Mary asked with mild irritation. "Can she not survive five minutes without you?"

It had been a difficult goodbye. Carla and Layla met in kindergarten and had been best friends since. Sure, they had the occasional argument, but they always made up. When news of the move was delivered to Carla, she had pushed Layla away, fearing she would be phased out once her friend moved to a new state. Had she known

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the implications, Carla might not have followed through with her friend's important request.

"I'm moving eight hours away from her, mom, have a heart," Layla balked as she pressed a button to accept the call.

"I can't believe you're gone," Carla opened with. Her voice cracked, which surprised Layla, since Carla was not the emotional type. "Why couldn't you just change schools? Why did your parents have to move you out of the city?"

"Carla, I can't talk right now," Layla said, talking to her the same way she did when she comforted her six year old sister. "We're in the cab on our way to the airport right now. I'll call you as soon as the flight lands, okay?"

"You better," Carla warned, but the tone in her voice told Layla that it was an empty threat.

"I promise," Layla said sweetly as she hung up.

"She'll be fine," Mary assured, patting her daughter on the knee. "Before you know it the summer will be here. Her mother already said she could come stay with us."

Drawing in a deep breath, Layla stared out the window. She was worried. Carla never cried; the girl was tough as nails. Even when her father left she didn't shed a tear. To be fair, she barely knew him, since he was a truck driver and away most of the time, but still. With her seemingly coming undone, Layla couldn't help but feel anxious. Could Carla keep her secret?

Six months was a long time...

...

Layla

## SANDY APLEYARD

I can't believe I live here. The house is a small, two-storey building with hanging flower baskets, a porch swing, fluffy pink balloon-style drapes on all the windows, and this creepy attic that they're calling my bedroom. All it's missing is a yappy white teacup poodle barking in the front yard and it's grandma's house.

I hated my grandmother. Not my dad's mom, but my mom's mom. But I'll get to that later.

The people here talk as white trash as ever and they stare at me because of my New York accent. Well, how about their Southern twang? At least I don't sound like a reject from the annual honky-tonk wheel-barrowing competition. This place sucks. I miss my apartment, where I could sit in my bedroom all day and listen to my iPod, talk on my cell phone to my friends and nobody would bother me.

Here, you can't sit for five minutes without some creep knocking on your door with a pie or casserole in their hands, eager to welcome you to this stinking town. In New York, people mind their own business. I like it that way. I like having my own private life where you can do what you want and most people look the other way.

Already they know we're from New York, so I'm constantly being asked "What's Times Square like?", or "How's that Central Park? Is it really in the center of New York? That why they call it 'Central'?", and the best one yet: "Isn't that where that show *Friends* was taped? You ever met who was it, Janice Anderson?"

And the most infuriating part is that this town is a bunch of Jesus freaks. My mother is in her glory. We've already had the pastor over for supper twice and we've only lived here a month.

The TV stations are all different out here, the internet connection sucks, there's almost no place you can get Wi-Fi in any of the stinking coffee joints, and the way they dress is laughable. Nobody has ever heard of Prada or Coach, and when I mention Ugg they wait for me to finish, thinking I'm going to say 'ugly', or they pat me on the back because they think I'm choking.

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

Oh, I haven't even gotten to the music. Remember the honky-tonk I mentioned? Well, that's the kind of crap they listen to. The kind of music you'd listen to if you were at a rodeo or mucking down stalls at a horse ranch. Seriously. Nobody here has ever heard of Taylor Swift or Michael Bublé. When I mention Beyoncé, they ask me what her last name is. It's ridiculous.

The only nice thing about living here is that I actually get to see my parents, and I'm not constantly stuck at home babysitting Tasha. Mom and dad were smart enough to buy a house around the corner from their medical practice. And I simply have to walk Tasha over after she gets off the bus and hand her off to Mrs. B, the medical secretary, who is only too pleased to take her so her four-year-old has someone to play with in the back room.

Besides, mom and dad are home in time for supper every night too, which is a huge bonus for me. No more take-out. The 'Welcome to Holly Springs' casseroles are still streaming in so we've barely had to cook anything. And when they do finally cease, I can finally sink my fingers back into the kitchen, something I've been wanting to do since the stove broke in our old apartment.

That's another thing I'll admit to. The kitchen is great. I'm told that the lady who lived here (someone's grandma I'll bet), used to cook and bake for Holy Trinity United Church, which consequently we attend now. So, the oven is unbelievable. It's one of the ones with two compartments for cooking *and* a warming drawer in the bottom. It's both conventional *and* convection and has a rapid preheat button so you no longer feel like it'd be quicker to rub two dry twigs together to get a faster heat source.

The stove is about the only modern thing in this town, and it's in my house. Pretty cool. It must have been shipped from Raleigh or even Greensboro because the only appliance store in this town still sells typewriters.

Carla will have a cow when she comes in the summer because the guys here are very strange. They hold doors open for you and call

## SANDY APPLEYARD

you ‘ma’am’, even if you’re not retired. When they talk to you they’re actually looking above your breasts, even the shorter ones. Nobody flirts or makes fun of you either. Linda tried to flirt with a guy just last week and came home crying because he ignored her. And nobody noticed, or at least nobody mentioned they noticed, my bruises and busted arm.

I can’t tell you how much of a relief that is. Thankfully the cell phone plan mom and dad got me includes unlimited long distance, so I can call Carla whenever I want. She was only weepy that one time she called while I was in the cab on my way to JFK airport, which I’m grateful for. It’s tough being away from her.

We talk about lots of things, but never about what happened. We promised never to talk about that. If I have it my way she’ll be the only one who ever knows. I would just die if anyone ever found out. I’m hoping it’ll just go away along with my bruises.

Mom says my nightmares are from the adjustment to moving. It was a big step for me, having lived in New York all my life. They’re non-descriptive, like all the monsters have no faces and when they yell nothing comes out, but they’re terrifying and wake me up, screaming and soaking wet with sweat.

They started before we even talked about moving, which is what scares me. But my mom’s a doctor and she knows what she’s talking about.

I sure hope she’s right.

## Chapter 2

It was chilly enough that Layla had to place an afghan across her lap as she read while lying on the couch. Tasha sat in the armchair in the corner of the room while Mary was in the kitchen baking cookies for church the next day. Rock music reverberated from Linda’s room above the living room and Mary walked to the landing at the

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

bottom of the stairs, raising her voice to ask if she could kindly turn the volume down.

When Linda didn't answer, Mary hiked up her floor-length denim skirt and began walking up the stairs. Just as she was halfway up the stairs the doorbell rang. "Could you get that, Layla?"

Rolling her eyes, frustrated by the numerous uninvited visitors they always seemed to have, she dog-eared the page she was reading, set it on the wooden coffee table in front of the couch and scooched over to the window. Standing inconspicuously behind the gauze drapes, she checked to see who had called.

A lady, about sixty years old with curly, snow-white hair and a blue housedress poking out the bottom of her knee-length jacket, stood on the front stoop. In her hand was the proverbial pie plate covered with cellophane, cleverly wrapped into a ponytail-like heap on top, and a pretty pink bow in the center of a circle of pink ribbon. Her short-strapped black leather purse hung like a pendulum from her forearm. She had a warm smile on her face as she spied Tasha, who had snuck to the door without Layla's knowledge, pushing her nose on the glass surround of their interior door.

Layla tutted as she scooted Tasha out of the way and opened the door. "Hi."

"Well, hello there, Layla is it?" the lady ventured.

Layla pushed the latch on the storm door, allowing the lady entry. "Yes, that's right."

"I'm Winifred. My friends call me Winnie. Like the bear?" She offered Layla a gentle handshake and pinched Tasha's cheeks just enough to make the six-year-old giggle. "And this must be Tasha. Is that short for Na-tasha?" the lady asked. "I know another little girl named Natasha, that's why I asked," she said, as if her story required explanation.

Mary walked down the steps; the volume of music had been reduced dramatically. Just a quiet pat of bass was heard every couple of seconds. “And you must be Mary, right?” The lady extended her hand. “I was just telling little Natasha here that my name is Winnie, like the bear?”

Layla smirked. Winnie had absent-mindedly renamed her sister ‘Natasha’. Tasha caught Layla’s look and giggled as the sixteen-year-old nudged her, reminding the six-year-old not to further embarrass the old woman.

“Nice to meet you, Winnie,” Mary said kindly. “I’d love to introduce you to my husband, but it’s his turn to work today. We take turns on Saturdays.”

“Yes, the clinic is wonderful. My grandson was in there just last week with an infected toe. Do you remember him?”

Mary hesitated. “I think Chris treated him, but yes, I remember him.”

“Daniel’s his name. Poor boy, his mama passed,” Winnie said numbly as she handed the pie to Mary and removed her jacket, draping it over the doorknob as if she knew the place. “Had a big ingrown toenail that ran amuck. Had to soak it and stick a needle in it to get the pus out,” she went on, ignoring the disgusted expression on Layla’s and Tasha’s faces.

Mary placed the pie on the counter as the woman followed her into the kitchen. Layla and Tasha scurried back into the adjoining living room, not wanting to hear any more about pus. “Yes, I remember. Is he feeling better?”

“Oh yes, that cream your husband gave him dried it up like a raisin overnight.”

Mary was pleased. “That’s good.”

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

Winnie eyed the pie on the counter. “That there’s my own recipe,” she said proudly. “Blackberry pie. Of course, it’s better in the summer when I can grow my own blackberries, but everyone says it’s the best in town.”

Pulling at the ribbon, Mary produced an opening in the cellophane and took in a deep breath. “I don’t doubt it. Smells delicious.”

“You baking something in there, dear?” Winnie asked, watching the oven timer count down from thirty-five minutes.

“Yes, as a matter of fact. I’m baking sugar cookies for church tomorrow.”

“Reverend Edwards is a lovely man, isn’t he?” Winnie changed the subject. “He used to date my Paula, you know.”

“Did he?”

“Yes, ma’am. They were an item for a long time until his daddy got sick and he had to quit college.”

“Oh, so they dated in college, did they? I figured it would have been a high school romance.” Mary switched on the oven light and peered inside.

Winnie waved as her eyebrows furrowed. She looked angry for a moment. “No, my Paula wasn’t allowed to date until after high school. I wasn’t allowed to date until I was eighteen and look how I turned out.”

Layla, overhearing the conversation, scoffed under her breath. Linda had been dating since she was fifteen. Layla suddenly wondered what Winnie’s take on makeup and cell phones was.

Continuing, Winnie sat on the chair at the small luncheonette table along the wall opposite the oven. Her purse was firmly planted on her lap. “Been married to my Judge now for almost fifty years.”

## SANDY APPLEYARD

Mary was impressed. “Wow, that’s remarkable. How old were you when you married?”

Winnie’s eyes went to the floor as she casually brushed an imaginary piece of dust off her shoe, as if the question made her uncomfortable. “Old enough,” she answered.

“And you have how many kids?”

“Four kids, seven grandchildren.” She answered by way of counting on her fingers. She named them all off, explaining where each lived and who was married, saving Paula for last.

Mary listened intently as she leaned against the counter. One foot was draped over the other as her arms remained crossed over her chest. “And how old is Paula?”

Peering over her shoulder as if someone might be listening, Winnie spoke behind her hand in a hushed tone. “Well as a matter of fact, me and Judge, we’re planning a surprise fiftieth birthday party for her next week.” She pulled a small white envelope out of the front opening of her purse. “Here’s your invitation. She’d like it very much if you could come.”

Mildly shocked, Mary accepted the envelope and attached it to the refrigerator door with a small red ladybug magnet. “I’m sure we would all love to come.”

Layla flopped her book down on her lap. The last thing she wanted to do was go to a birthday party for a total stranger. It was the most ridiculous thing she’d ever heard. She blew a piece of hair from her face in frustration as the old woman continued yammering on incessantly.

“Then your young thing on the couch there, err...”

“Um, Layla, you mean?”

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

Winnie smiled. “Layla. She and Daniel, my grandson, are about the same age. They can meet at the party.”

Layla’s eyes widened. There was no way she was coming within ten feet of a guy who had nasty, pus-riddled feet or ingrown toenails. No way. She got up and carefully walked over to the kitchen, stopping at the wall so Winnie couldn’t see her. The old woman continued talking as Layla motioned to her mom, unbeknownst to Winnie. Mary glared at her and tipped her head sideways, letting her daughter know she’d better go back to the living room.

“You’ll see the whole Marshall clan there. I think you even met my youngest son, Bruce? He had some bad fish there a couple weeks ago and came to the clinic...”

Five minutes later, as Winnie finished talking about her children’s various ailments, she looked at her watch and said it was time for her to go. By that time, Layla was fuming. Not only had the old woman invited complete strangers to come to her daughter’s birthday, but she also had Layla and her grandson Daniel practically dating.

She missed New York more and more each day.

...

### Layla

Old people are such hypocrites. So this old woman, Winnie, like the bear, as she proudly described herself, comes over and brings this pie, which by the way tasted like the stuff you have dried up at the corner of your mouth in the morning, and bragged about how her daughter wasn’t allowed to date until she was sixteen. Sixteen! Do you believe that! These people are freaks around here...

I did the math, and not only was Winnie approximately seventeen when *she* got married, but Paula, her daughter, was clearly conceived *before* Winnie married, because Paula was turning fifty

and Winnie admitted that she and her husband hadn't yet celebrated their golden anniversary. How's that for hypocritical?

I'm so glad my parents don't allow the constraints of society to dictate how they raise their children. In so many ways, more and more, I don't think we belong in this town. I'm surprised my mother hasn't blown up yet. But then again, that's not in mom's character. She's used to being calm under the worst circumstances because she's a doctor.

Okay, back to Winnie. She wants to set me up with her pus-footed grandson Daniel, just because we're the same age. Where does she get off? I'm not even ready to date again, and even if I was it wouldn't be anyone in *this* freaky town, let alone someone some old senile woman sets me up with. Mom hasn't RSVP'd for the party yet. Hopefully she'll decline or someone will come down with the Ebola virus or something so we don't have to go.

Okay, so I'm a little dramatic today...

## Chapter 3

A knock at the door woke Layla from a deep sleep. "Layla? It's your turn to shower. Church starts in an hour." It was Linda. Layla turned over and groaned, still sluggish from slumber.

The door opened. "Layla?" Linda's voice was clear as her head appeared in the doorway.

"I'm up," she croaked, slapping the back of her hand onto her forehead.

Linda chuckled as she entered the room fully and closed the door behind her. Towering at least a foot over Layla, Linda had to duck from the vaulted ceilings of the attic/bedroom. Layla's bed was in the middle of the room, her dresser was flush with the corner wall, and a window was on the side that Layla's back was facing. "No you're not. What's up with you, anyway? You not sleeping well?"

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

The older sister rested her behind on a corner of Layla's chrome-framed bed. The metal was painted white, chipped from years of use. A refurbished antique four-drawer white dresser was throwing distance from Linda. "Not really."

"I didn't either when we first moved here. The climate is so different."

Layla's sleeplessness had nothing to do with climate, but she wasn't about to tell Linda that. "I don't even know what to wear there anymore." Layla changed the subject. When they went to church in New York, everyone dressed the way they wanted. There was one guy who always showed up in a black trench coat, wearing Bermuda shorts regardless of the weather, and he had a purple Mohawk and about a dozen golden earrings aligned on his left earlobe.

Here, the whole congregation was clad in their Sunday best. All the women wore hats, even Mary reluctantly caved and bought one, acclimating herself to the women of Trinity United Church. Tasha adored wearing frilly dresses and black patent leather shoes, but Layla and Linda both refused to wear such apparel. "You have a skirt?" Linda asked, trying to be helpful.

"Just a denim one."

"You can wear that and my long coat if you want. It'll probably reach your ankles so nobody will know what's under it."

"Thanks," Layla said, lifting herself up on her elbows. "You miss Brian?"

Layla saw Linda hold her breath for a moment. She looked nervous. Linda knew that Layla had no idea they were engaged. As far as Layla knew, Linda and Brian had only been dating for a couple of months before the move. Linda had been recluse since relocating, and Layla suspected it was homesickness for Brian.

"Sometimes. He calls me every night though, so it's not so bad."

## SANDY APPLEYARD

Linda was two years Layla's senior, but she failed grade two because of persistent ear infections that robbed her of time at school, so she would only graduate at the end of the year. Brian was also graduating this year, being a year younger than Linda. A question suddenly arose in Layla's mind.

"You hoping to go to school out of state? Maybe the same one as Brian?"

Linda blushed. "Maybe."

Layla smiled. Linda was a hopeless romantic. She'd read every Danielle Steele novel, despite her mother's disapproval. The sixteen-year-old had a feeling her older sister had something like that in mind; it made no sense otherwise, that she would be so comfortable with leaving him so early in the relationship. "I thought you had something up your sleeve. Brian was too cool about you moving."

Averting her younger sister's gaze, Linda smirked. "Can you keep a secret?"

Hoisting herself up straight in bed, Layla eyes widened. "Sure."

"Brian and I have been dating longer than you think."

Layla's mouth opened. "How long?"

"Fourteen months."

Layla gasped. "What?"

"Shhh!" Linda placed her index finger on her lips. Her white blouse was buttoned up, completely concealing her neck. The eighteen-year-old reached up and fished a gold chain out from under her shirt. Layla watched patiently as Linda lifted a small trinket. She gasped again as she observed her older sister holding a gold ring as it dangled from the chain.

## TO HIDE IN HOLLY SPRINGS BOOK ONE

Layla's hands steepled over her nose as she stifled a squeal. "Oh my God! Is that what I think it is?"

Linda didn't answer, but she laid the princess-cut diamond ring on her palm. It wasn't gleaming like a new jewel; rather, it had a patina like that of an antique. "It was Brian's grandmother's. When his mom and dad divorced, his father demanded it back from her. Since Brian is the only child, his father gave it to him for safekeeping until he got engaged."

"So you're engaged?" Layla was in shock.

Linda's face told the tale. "It appears so."

"Are you going to tell mom and dad?"

Her eyes flared. "No. Not until after college. And you can't tell either, okay? Promise?"

Raising her right hand, as if swearing-in before a judge, Layla nodded emphatically.

"Good. Now go get in the shower before we're late."

Layla sat in bed for a moment, watching her older sister leave. Part of her remained completely stunned, a million questions finding their way inside her brain, but part of her felt absolutely relieved.

She was no longer the only one in the family with a secret.

Here is the direct link again if you would like to learn more about *To Hide in Holly Springs Book Two*:

Other Titles:

Blessed and Betrayed (Betrayal Series Book One)

[http://www.amazon.com/Blessed-Betrayed-Betrayal-Book-1-ebook/dp/B00AGA59MI/ref=asap\\_bc?ie=UTF8](http://www.amazon.com/Blessed-Betrayed-Betrayal-Book-1-ebook/dp/B00AGA59MI/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8)

Betrayal Only Comes in Green (Betrayal Series Book Two)

[http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00XFMG7XO?\\*Version\\*=1&\\*entries\\*=0](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00XFMG7XO?*Version*=1&*entries*=0)

The Wife of a Lesser Man (LA Cops Series Book One)

[http://www.amazon.com/Wife-Lesser-Man-Cops-Book-ebook/dp/B00BZAVEE0/ref=asap\\_bc?ie=UTF8](http://www.amazon.com/Wife-Lesser-Man-Cops-Book-ebook/dp/B00BZAVEE0/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8)

Don't Mess with Daddy's Girl (LA Cops Series Book Two)

[http://www.amazon.com/Dont-Mess-Daddys-Girl-Cops-ebook/dp/B00OP45P8E/ref=asap\\_bc?ie=UTF8](http://www.amazon.com/Dont-Mess-Daddys-Girl-Cops-ebook/dp/B00OP45P8E/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8)

The Wheels of Change (LA Cops Series Book Three)

[http://www.amazon.com/Wheels-Change-Cops-Book-ebook/dp/B00SA9UZYE/ref=asap\\_bc?ie=UTF8](http://www.amazon.com/Wheels-Change-Cops-Book-ebook/dp/B00SA9UZYE/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8)

She Only Speaks to Butterflies (Meaningful Suspense Book One)

[http://www.amazon.com/Only-Speaks-Butterflies-Meaningful-Suspense-ebook/dp/B00W5QS9A0/ref=asap\\_bc?ie=UTF8](http://www.amazon.com/Only-Speaks-Butterflies-Meaningful-Suspense-ebook/dp/B00W5QS9A0/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8)

The Message in Dad's Bottle (Short Reads Book One)

[http://www.amazon.com/Message-Dads-Bottle-Short-Reads-ebook/dp/B00BILSTJY/ref=asap\\_bc?ie=UTF8](http://www.amazon.com/Message-Dads-Bottle-Short-Reads-ebook/dp/B00BILSTJY/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8)

I'll Never Wear a Backless Dress (Short Reads Book Two)

[http://www.amazon.com/Ill-Never-Wear-Backless-Dress-ebook/dp/B008YK6822/ref=asap\\_bc?ie=UTF8](http://www.amazon.com/Ill-Never-Wear-Backless-Dress-ebook/dp/B008YK6822/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8)

No Thanks, Mommy, I Peed Yesterday (Short Reads Book Three)

[http://www.amazon.com/No-Thanks-Mommy-Peed-Yesterday-ebook/dp/B00N5EADCS/ref=asap\\_bc?ie=UTF8](http://www.amazon.com/No-Thanks-Mommy-Peed-Yesterday-ebook/dp/B00N5EADCS/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8)

## About the Author

Thank you for reading my work. If you've made it this far I'd say that's a good sign! My writing career began back in 2006 when I was up to my elbows in dirty diapers, caring for my two children. I always had a desire to write something but up until then I didn't really know what to write.

Inspiration struck and it took me two years but I finally wrote my first book: a fifty page memoir, and I was so excited about it. After my second book, another memoir, was self-published, I realized there was something more to it than a hobby. I've been writing ever since.

Giving up my full-time career in the corporate world was not an easy decision to make. But coupled with personal reasons and the drive to do something really meaningful, was the ache of creativity that has kept me motivated for the last nine years.

I hope this book gave you something to think about, entertained you and made you laugh at least once, because that is what I strive for when I write.

Seeing as you've read most of my bio I'll insert the mundane stuff now. I'm a married Canadian who lives in Niagara Falls with my husband, two daughters and a loving, eleven pound cat. If you would like to see more of my work it can be found at [www.sandyappleyard.com](http://www.sandyappleyard.com).

**PS**-I love hearing from readers! Please feel free to drop me a line any time via [rsappleyard@hotmail.com](mailto:rsappleyard@hotmail.com)

Happy Reading!