

CHAPTER ONE

Four months after my father died, I told my mom that I wanted to see a psychiatrist.

“A psychiatrist?” she said from the driver’s seat of our station wagon. “How did you get that idea? Do you know someone who sees a psychiatrist?”

The radio was low, but I could hear the guy saying something about Watergate.

“No.” I picked at a ragged cuticle. A curl of skin fell to my bare thigh and I flicked it off. I stuck my arm out the window and spread my fingers wide, then cupped my hand to catch the warm Maryland air. Already it felt like summer even though it was only the end of April.

Mom stopped at a red light and turned my way. “You can’t talk to me?”

“No, it’s not that,” I lied, thinking, *I’ve tried, but you never want to*. “It’s just...” I turned to the side mirror. Tiny beads of sweat clustered around my hairline.

The reporter’s voice got louder as he said, “And now President Nixon is even more deeply engaged in fighting the most difficult political battle of his life.”

“Is it about your father?” Mom asked.

Of course it was about him. The whole thing didn’t make sense. A healthy person didn’t just drop dead from a heart attack. But Blaire and Mom didn’t want to talk about it. They were like, *He died, okay? Let it go*. Well, I couldn’t.

Behind us, a car honked. Mom flipped on her blinker and made a hasty right turn, which led us into a fancy neighborhood where, in fifth grade my best friend, Robin, and I

trick or treated and returned home with twelve Hershey bars each. Now cherry blossoms filled the street, their branches pink and fluffy as cotton candy.

“Speaking of your father,” Mom said, smoothing her hand over her thick, brown hair that frizzed and curled with the humidity the same way mine did. “I might need to get a new job.”

I readjusted my glasses. “What kind of job?” She’d been a real estate agent forever, but in the past few years she’d mentioned needing to make more money.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she sighed, slowing down at a red light. “We’ll just have to see.”

I placed my hand against my chest and counted the beats. “Do we not have enough money?”

The concealer under Mom’s eyes that was meant to hide the evidence of sleepless nights shone in the afternoon sun.

She patted my bare leg. “We’ll be all right, Martie. Don’t worry.”

But I did, and I would.

Across the street was a white house with black shutters, a wraparound porch and wicker furniture the color of pistachio ice cream. A real estate sign was stuck in the front yard. I waited for Mom to comment on how much it might be worth or what it might sell for, but she just stared at the house, a glazed look settling deep in her eyes.

“Mom?”

She turned to me. Her new, frosty lipstick lent her a pale, flat look.

“It’s green,” I said.

She blinked. “Oh.” She stepped on the accelerator and we lurched forward. She drove fast, almost missed our turn, then accidentally swerved, nearly sideswiping a blue station wagon with wood paneling on the side.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Stupid question. Of course she wasn’t okay. None of us were. Just last week she’d slammed on her brakes, skidding into the car ahead of us. What if Mom crashed into a tree and died? No. Nothing worse would happen to us. I said it over and over, *That was enough, that was enough, nothing worse will happen*, like a nursery rhyme, until Mom pulled in front of our small Tudor house and we carried the groceries inside and turned on the local news.

CHAPTER TWO

“The sudden disappearance of two young girls from the Montgomery Mall has left the community shaken,” the dark haired reporter with the thick sideburns said. “It’s now been a grueling forty-eight hours for the anxious parents.”

Mom hurried to the black and white T.V. that sat atop our refrigerator. “You don’t want to see this. It’s an awful story.”

“No!” I rushed in front of her. “I wanna see it.”

“It’s terrible. You shouldn’t watch it.”

“Yes, I should.” I turned up the volume.

The guy went on to report that the Hanley sisters, ten and twelve, had last been seen two days ago at the mall, eating French fries and talking to a mustached man who was doing coin tricks. Robin and I had been to that mall a million times, so I could picture the girls sitting at one of those wobbly tables outside of Surrey’s Burgers and Fries. But I didn’t get how someone could’ve taken them from such a public place. Or maybe the guy followed them as they walked home and then pushed them into his car.

A picture appeared on the television screen—two blondes with ponytails, laughing and squinting in the sun.

Before the broadcast ended, the dad came on. He wore a dark suit and a wide tie like my dad used to wear every single day.

He looked right into the camera and said he’d do anything to get their little girls back—“absolutely anything”—and then the camera cut to the news guy with the

sideburns. Patty Hearst had been kidnapped a few months ago, but that was different—she was nineteen. And that serial killer out in California had been murdering young women for the past two years, but the Hanley girls were young. Practically my age.

Our front door budged, then came a wave of heat, followed by the soft thud of Blaire's tennis shoes. She was sixteen, had perfect skin, long legs and a cute boyfriend named Danny who was a basketball star. They were the perfect couple; even my seventh grade classmates idolized them.

“What?” she said when she saw us in the kitchen. She glanced up at the T.V., tossed her tennis racquet on a chair and said, “Oh yeah. The Hanleys. Someone at school used to babysit for them.”

“It's terrible,” Mom said, shaking her head.

“How does everyone know about this except me?”

Blaire pointed to the screen. “Because it's right there on the news. Duh.”

I flipped on the sink faucet and poured a stream of Ivory dish soap into my palms. “What if they die?” My mind screeched from one horrible scenario to the next—the girls tied to trees, the girls being strangled to death.

Normally I'd call Robin so we could freak out about it together, but after school she and her mom had gone downtown to get passports. Her whole family was going to Singapore for the entire summer because her dad was in charge of some project over there. He worked for the State Department, but still I didn't get why the parents had to drag the kids there, too.

The phone rang, blaring through our tiny kitchen, revving up my heart and setting my whole body on high alert. Lately everything startled me—the click of the dishwasher starting a new cycle, the bell at school, the slam of a locker door.

It was Dad's sister, Aunt Julie. She lived in Wisconsin.

The two of them had been having marathon phone conversations for months. From Mom's end, I'd hear scattered words, like "I know" and "He was. It's true." Then sniffing, usually. Julie had stayed with us after Dad died, helping with funeral arrangements and all that. More than once, I'd caught her eying Blaire in a worried way like Blaire was the only one affected by what had happened.

Mom pulled the tan twirly phone cord all the way into the dining room until it was taut. I strained to hear, but she talked in a very low voice.

"No, not yet," she said.

Ten minutes into the conversation, the crying started. Over the years, I'd grown accustomed to the occasional tear dribbling down her cheek, but now her crying was like a choking deep inside, coming from a place I never knew existed.

Last week I overheard her say, "Sometimes I feel like I'm being crushed from all sides."

I ran to the bathroom, grabbed an extra roll of toilet paper from under the sink and handed it to her just in time to hear her whisper, "I know. I need to tell them."

In bed all I thought was, Tell us *what*? Did she know something about the Hanley girls? I couldn't get it out of my mind that two innocent girls could walk to the mall one spring afternoon and not return home. It was exactly what had happened to Dad—he

went to work and he didn't come home. All that was left was his half-filled coffee cup in the sink and his clothes and suits in the upstairs closet.

The air in our room was suffocating. Tonight would be another night of tossing and turning, my warm body desperate to locate cool spots on my sheets. The pathetic fan between our beds blew a few wisps of my hair. We had one air conditioning unit in the house and it was in Mom and Dad's room. Well, Mom's room.

"Where do you think that guy took them?" I asked Blaire, who laid on her side, reading an autobiography of Arthur Ashe.

"I dunno." She turned the page. Her hair was long and brown, but soon the summer sun would turn a strip in the front totally blonde. She'd pull that piece back with a barrette so that there'd be this perfect blonde streak going across the brown. It killed me how good she looked without trying. My hair, just for the record, had once been described by my mother as the color of dishwater. And my glasses, according to Blaire, made me look like a confused owl.

Photos of Danny covered her wall—"Dannyland," I called it—Danny in a pool, Danny playing basketball, Blaire on Danny's lap. He had blonde hair that swooped over his forehead, a deep dimple in his left cheek and very white teeth. Sometimes I stood in front of the pictures with my lips puckered, imagining we were kissing. Earlier in the year, Matt Fleming and I shared a peck on the mouth, but that was the extent of my kissing experience.

"What do you think he said to them?" I asked, imagining all the lines Mom had warned us about: *Can you help me find my puppy? Want some candy? Come see the surprise in my car!*

I sat up. “I mean, to get both girls in the car, he must’ve—”

“*Sh. I’m reading.*”

I turned away from her and my eyes landed on the brown smear against the wall where last week Blaire had smashed her sandal against a centipede.

My scalp prickled. I shot out of bed and moved through the thick air to the bathroom, where I drenched a washcloth under cold water, wrung it out and pressed it against my forehead like I had a fever. What kind of person hung out at a mall with the sole intention of kidnapping children?

I stayed awake for what felt like hours, my legs flopping all over the sheets. I got up and doused the washcloth again with cold water, laying it on different parts of my skin until finally, desperate for relief, I sucked out the water, hoping for a coolness to wash over me, but nothing worked.

CHAPTER THREE

“I’ve been thinking,” Mom said to us as we sat down to dinner. She wore a sleeveless white blouse with a big rounded collar, a light brown linen work skirt that went to her knees, and brown heels the color of a Hershey bar. She’d made tuna from the can, green beans and carrot salad with a Dijon vinaigrette. It was a good meal—one of her only meals—but I missed Dad’s greasy steak and potatoes and his grilled peppers and onions.

“About what?” I couldn’t get the newspaper sketch out of my mind. The *Post* reported that the guy with the closely set eyes and the disgusting dainty mustache was seen talking to the girls the day they disappeared.

Mom cleared her throat. “I know it’ll sound sudden but...”

I slid my mood ring up to my knuckle and back down again, then did it over and over. “But what?”

“We need to sell the house.”

“What?” Blaire’s fork fell from her grasp and clanked against her plate.

“We could use the money, and a move would be good for us, I think,” Mom went on, obviously giving us a speech she’d practiced. Probably with Aunt Julie.

“Move where?” I said.

“Wisconsin. Where Julie lives. To start over.”

“Start *over*?” Blaire said, her voice rising. “Why do we need to start over?”

My fingers found each other and started to pick at loose skin around my nails.

Mom inhaled deeply and blew out her breath, which she'd been doing a lot lately. A balloon slowly deflating.

"Let's face it," she said. "We can't live in this house without your father. Everywhere we turn. Everything we do...and knowing that he's not..." Her hand went to her chest and I wondered if she was counting her heart beats like I'd started to do. She shook her head and her hair bounced. "I can't do it. I just can't do it anymore."

"I'm not leaving Danny," Blaire said, biting the side of her thumb. "You can't make me."

Our house was where Dad lived. Where we all lived together. Where he taught us how to knead dough and how to slice potatoes super thin and fry them in a pan with oil and salt. Dad was in the woodwork. We couldn't just leave him.

"You girls would have your own rooms," Mom said, hopeful. "Houses are a lot less expensive out there."

"Mom," I started, pulling a thread off my cut-offs. I knew what I wanted to say—scream, actually: *I'm not leaving!*—but nothing came out. I'd never yelled at her. That was Blaire's job.

"Don't try to bribe us!" Blaire yelled. "We're not going! *I'm not going!*" Her face turned splotchy, the blue veins in her temples clear as a road map.

The two of them locked eyes and, for a crazy second, I half-thought that Blaire was about to pick up her glass of milk and throw it at Mom. Or vice versa. But ever since Dad had died, it seemed like Mom had given Blaire permission to act however she wanted, no matter how rude.

Neither threw a glass; Blaire bolted from her seat and ran upstairs. Our bedroom door slammed and I knew she was facedown on the bed, tears soaking into her pillow like one big dark cloud.

I turned to Mom. Her lipstick had worn off even though she'd barely eaten. Her chin dropped to her chest like she couldn't bear to hold it up for one more second.

Outside, Arlo, the big dog down the street, barked. Beyond that, the crickets hummed.

"It'll be okay," I told her, awkwardly placing my hand on her back. Some people just knew what to do in those moments. Robin's mom would say something like, "Aw honey, everything'll turn out. Just you wait." In our case, though, things wouldn't turn out all right, especially now, since Mom wanted to move us halfway across the country. If only I were strong enough to yell at her and convince her that moving was a stupid idea, then maybe we could stay where we belonged. One day I'd stand up to her. But for now, I kept my words safe inside me, alongside my pounding heart.