

"A COMPELLING, INTENSELY PROPULSIVE PAGE-TURNER. . . .

I WAS SPELLBOUND FROM START TO FINISH."

Heather Marshall, author of the #1 instant bestseller *Looking for Jane*

HOLD

MY GIRL

A NOVEL

CHARLENE

CARR

**HOLD  
MY GIRL**

*A NOVEL*

**CHARLENE  
CARR**

  
HarperCollinsPublishersLtd



# ***Dedication***

For Z:  
My inspiration.  
My daughter.  
My love.

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## Chapter One

# *Katherine*

She couldn't think about the voicemail. Katherine inhaled sharply. The muscles in her neck clenched. She took another deep breath, willing herself to relax. She wouldn't think about it. Not today. Instead, she thought of Patrick. Patrick, who managed to get to work on time, who kept perfect records for his clients, who never forgot a friend's birthday, but could not, no matter how much she emphasized the importance of it, put the keys in the bowl by the front door.

They needed a second set. They'd had a second set, of course, but Patrick had lost it.

Katherine wrenched the couch cushions to the floor and swiped her hand along the crevice. This was exactly why it did matter to vacuum everywhere, despite Patrick, and her mother, calling it anal. No nasty crumbs or sticky residue were on her hands.

Also, no keys.

Katherine stood, exhaled, and replaced the cushions, pushing them tight so the edges lay flush. She propped her hands on her hips and surveyed the room. This exquisite room in this stunning house Patrick had provided for her.

Mostly provided.

She hadn't worked full-time in over two years, and he'd been fine with it. Better than fine. She hadn't worked at all since Rose was born—almost a year now of putting her interior design business on hold. When she'd brought it up, asked if he thought it was time to start working again, Patrick, with his kind eyes, told her she worked plenty. She took care of him, Rose, the house. It was enough.

So maybe Patrick forgetting to put the keys in a practical place wasn't such a big deal. Maybe she should stop mentally lecturing him, preparing the argument—sharp enough to make an impression, but not so sharp to create an uncomfortable distance between them—for when he came home that night.



But he was making her late, and Katherine Matheson was never late.

“Mama!”

“Just a minute, sweetie.”

“Mama!”

Katherine scanned the living room again. Everything was where it should be, as it always was. She walked through to the kitchen. Scanned. Everything here, too, was where it should be . . . which was Patrick’s argument. Everything was always where it should be, so how hard would it be to see the keys if he left them on the counter, or the coffee table, or his dresser? She’d find them.

“Mama!”

Katherine clenched her jaw, fighting not to let frustration get the best of her. She’d told Saadia she’d be at the party fifteen minutes early to help set up, which was five minutes ago. And now, if she wasn’t in the car in precisely four minutes, she’d be late for the start, even if she caught every green light. Which meant she was already late, because how likely was that?

Katherine picked up her phone and clicked on Patrick’s picture. She paused. If she talked to him, asked where the keys were, he’d ask how her day was going, and what would she say? She’d received a phone call from the fertility clinic. A strange message, “a rather serious issue regarding your IVF procedure,” and she hadn’t called back.

Telling him would put voice to the fear she’d lived with for almost a year—that Rose wasn’t hers. Katherine was light-skinned for a Black woman, even a mixed-race one, but Rose, as a newborn, had been so white she made Patrick’s cream-coloured skin look tan. Her hair was fine and straight and almost blond. Her eyes were a bluish-green, which was possible. Patrick had blue eyes, and Katherine’s aunt on her mother’s side had a hint of green.

They’d joked about it in the beginning, Katherine forcing a smile. To her, it had never been a joke.

Katherine closed her eyes, swallowed. The call, whatever the doctor had to say, would be nothing, of course. A formality. Maybe someone’s life was about to irrevocably change, but it wouldn’t be hers.

“Mamaaaa!”

Katherine spun. A laugh burst out at the sight of her baby on the floor, the little miracle she’d nearly given up hope of having. Rose’s sweet chubby legs splayed in front of her, a grin on her face, and the keys held high in her hand, shaking them like a rattle. “You little scamp!”

Katherine dropped the phone in her bag, then stepped toward her

daughter. She scooped Rose and the keys into her arms and smothered the girl with kisses, her stress easing at the sound of Rose's laughter. She wouldn't be early, but if she were lucky, she wouldn't be drastically late.

KATHERINE PULLED INTO the last spot at Natural Ways Wellness Centre, the site of her first job when she'd branched out on her own, starting KM Interior Designs. Ten minutes late. It was fine. The five red lights and construction holdup weren't the end of the world.

Still, she'd wanted to be early. Saadia was Katherine's most loyal client. Each time Saadia expanded to another section of the building, growing the centre from a two-room fertility-focused naturopathy operation to one that could accommodate a second acupuncturist, an osteopath, two massage therapists, and a pelvic floor physiotherapist, she'd called Katherine for the redesign, and Katherine had come.

Today was a chance for Saadia to celebrate ten years in business, to show the world, and her family, all she'd accomplished. The media would be there. Past and potential clients would be there. Saadia's father, who'd written Saadia off as nothing more than a snake-oil salesman, would be there.

Although her demeanour and outlook on life were a little more New Age than Katherine expected of a serious business person, Saadia Medina was exceptional at her job. Katherine, who not too long ago would have nodded her head along with Mr. Medina's dismissal of a career in holistic health, was now a believer. After charting her basal body temperature, tracking her cervical mucous, multiple IUIs, and two rounds of IVF, with all the accompanying drugs and injections, it wasn't until Katherine finally stopped interacting with Saadia only as her client and became her patient that, on her third round of IVF, she'd gotten pregnant with Rose.

So, for Saadia, Katherine wanted this day to be perfect. She sighed as she turned off the car and unbuckled her seatbelt. Even if the day wasn't perfect, *it'd be perfect enough*. Those words were Patrick's, a phrase he hauled out when overwhelm flooded Katherine—fear that something would not go exactly as she'd planned. A phrase Saadia would echo.

Katherine glanced into the rear-view mirror, adjusting her curls and checking for any smudges of mascara, then stepped out of the car. She lowered her shoulders, relaxed her jaw. A smile played across her lips as she unfastened Rose's car seat, took in her girl's pink cheeks and bright eyes. Saadia wouldn't be stressed. The most easygoing person Katherine knew wouldn't be worried or annoyed either. She'd laugh about Patrick

forgetting to put the keys in the bowl yet again, place her hand on Katherine's arm, and say, with that calming voice and smile, "Katherine, he's not you."

Katherine pulled Rose into her arms and turned toward the centre, determined to have a good time . . . if only she could stop thinking about that voicemail.

## Chapter Two

# Tess

Tess wiped her brow and stared at the vials before her, making sure the labels were perfect, checking and double-checking her work. In her first weeks at Enviro Lab, labelling was all she did, with a dozen machines ticking and whirring around her, sweat pouring down her back, desperate to remove the gloves that stuck to her like a second skin, the goggles that made her observe the world as if through a fishbowl.

Now, at least, she had moved up the ranks enough to be a cookbook scientist—or so the higher-ups joked—following “recipes” created by people who knew more, had done better with their lives. Yet still there was the nausea that came from being stuck in this windowless space with its oppressive heat, the constant whir vibrating her bones, the acrid stench of chemicals burning her nostrils. The ache from standing, hour after hour, on hard linoleum. She’d sprung for high-end shoes with amazing support. They helped, but not enough. Tess pressed her hands into the small of her back, arching through the pain, her rigid muscles barely allowing a stretch. Last night’s outing made it all the worse. She pushed the pain away, wishing she’d thought to take some acetaminophen, then did a mental assessment of her morning’s work. She verified that assessment by one last glance at the protocol. She ensured her workstation was clean and organized, ready to continue where she’d left off at the start of her next shift.

Satisfied, she peeled off her gloves, goggles, and lab coat, then headed to her locker, nervousness flowing through her. She leaned against the wall to take off those high-end worth-every-penny-shoes and slip into her bargain-store sneakers.

“Can’t handle the rigour of a full day’s work, eh?”

Tess placed an equally cocksure smile on her face, wishing Tim would piss off, grow bored of making her—the one university dropout on the floor—the butt of his jokes. “Yeah, that must be it. Explains why I’m coming back tonight, then working a shift and a half tomorrow.” Tess

straightened. “When’s the last time you worked beyond your cozy eight to four?”

“Don’t need to.” Tim leaned against the lockers across the room. “You wouldn’t either, if you applied yourself.” He grinned. “Come out to dinner. I’ll tutor you. Help you get that degree.”

Tess slammed her locker closed. “If I wanted the degree, I’d get it.” She walked past Tim, avoiding his gaze, wishing it was just that easy, wishing she had the nerve to say what she wanted to—that while she’d heard around the proverbial water cooler that Tim had barely gotten his degree, struggling to maintain Cs and the occasional B throughout his schooling, Tess’s GPA, in the full three and half years she’d studied, had never dropped below a 4.00.

Outside, Tess squinted against the sun, resisting the urge to do a pit check, regretting that in her rush she’d forgotten to bring a change of clothes, or deodorant at least. She’d gone heavy the previous night: too many drinks, leaving the club at two in the morning with a one-syllable-name man. She’d crawled out of Rob or Bob’s bed at half past three, making it to her apartment in time for two hours of sleep before needing to wake for her shift.

If she had a car, she could race home, freshen up, change into something other than the plain T-shirt and torn jeans she’d worn under her lab clothes. Tess hesitated, debating whether she should head home anyway, skip the centre. When she’d received the invite—in the mail, not an Evite—she’d tossed it on the table. An event sure to be filled with oodles of formerly infertile women? No thanks. But then she’d thought of Saadia—her kind eyes, her reassuring voice, how she never made Tess feel crazy or desperate or weak. How when Tess had rushed into the centre—without an appointment—her face aglow, excitement coursing through her because her baby had made it past twelve weeks, the only one to make it that long, Saadia had stopped what she was doing, shared Tess’s joy, *ooed* and *aahed* over the blurry black-and-white image Tess held in her hand.

So Tess had picked the invite back up. She’d booked the time off work. She’d written to Saadia, telling her she’d come. As sad as it was, Saadia, her acupuncturist, was the closest thing Tess had to a friend, and except for her evening excursions, Tess hadn’t done anything social in months.

Besides, she didn’t want to miss the babies. The thought of seeing them terrified Tess, but if someone allowed her to hold one, breathe in its perfect scent, feel the air rising and falling within its living lungs, that’d be something. Not enough, but something.

Tess slowed her pace, the better to let the breeze cool her off, make her look half presentable, even if that meant she'd be a few minutes late. As she approached Natural Ways Wellness Centre, Tess slowed her pace even more. Half a dozen cars were already in the lot, women exiting the vehicles, waving with smiles, balancing car seats and diaper bags and toddlers on their hips.

Tess's phone buzzed. She pulled it from her back pocket to see the screen lit with the word UNKNOWN. That word hadn't flashed in over a year; back then, the letters ignited fear or excitement—usually both. Now, though, it would mean a telemarketer or scam caller. She was done with the fertility clinic, which meant they were done with her.

Tess set her phone to silent and slid it back into her pocket. She stood tall, lifted her chin, and opened the door, her eyes searching for Saadia, who stood across the room with three women around her. Her hand was on the shoulder of one of them, an earnest, comforting expression on her face. Tess continued to scan, looking for someone, anyone, who would ease this urge to bolt.

These were lovely women, Tess knew. Women who, like her, had been desperate to start a family. From the looks of it—the children weaving through the crowd, the laughter, the round bellies and glistening ring fingers—the majority of them had gotten it: a baby, or babies; a husband who stayed.

Once, Tess had been active in the Facebook group Saadia ran. Once, she had been blinded by hope and possibility. Tess had been wary when Saadia invited her to the group—a place to discuss what fertility diets they were trying, the herbs and supplements they were taking, whether this drug or that had better success rates, and most important, to share their stresses and fears, successes and losses. It seemed hokey. And it was, a bit. But it had gotten her through. A place where she could talk without shame.

Until her shame was too large to speak of. Until she knew, no matter how she wished it, she could never be one of them. Tess shuffled past the tables and chairs, past women who either didn't recognize her or decided not to, fearful of what to say.

She shouldn't have come. She would say hello to Saadia as soon as she got the chance, then she'd flee.

## Chapter Three

# *Katherine*

The instant Katherine stepped through the doors of the wellness centre, a layer of the weight she'd been carrying slipped off her shoulders. She'd chosen mystic lake grey for the walls, with the slightest hint of green. Large canvases of woods, waterfalls, and icebergs hung strategically, drawing the eye. Plush seats lined the lobby, the fabric dyed a Baltic Sea green, several shades darker than the paint. Katherine had designed every aspect to feel comforting, relaxing, safe. And it was. People lounged in the chairs, chatted in corners, stood around tables laden with food, contentment plastered across their faces.

Seeing Saadia busy with her guests, Katherine scanned the room for Tracey, Saadia's half-sister and one of the few genuine mom friends Katherine had. They'd met through one of Saadia's fertility meet-ups a few months before Katherine started her final IVF protocol. "My sister's been through it," Saadia had said, making the introductions. "Another IVF warrior. You two will align."

They had. One-on-one coffee dates throughout Katherine's pregnancy and half a dozen play dates since Rose was born. Late-night texts and phone calls when Rose had been cluster feeding and Katherine was at her wit's end, in a dazed exhaustion, terrified she was doing something wrong.

With no Tracey in sight, Katherine scanned the room again, this time registering all the familiar faces. In Halifax, a coastal city of over three hundred thousand, full of families who had been there for generations, it was typical to find someone you knew at any large event, but today was like a reunion. Most of the faces, even ones she'd never seen in person, she recognized from the fertility Facebook group. It was odd, seeing people in person she'd shared such intimacies with through the safety of a screen.

Katherine's phone buzzed, jolting her back to the voicemail, making her wonder if anyone else had received a message about "a serious issue," whether serious could be as devastating as Katherine feared. She slipped it out of her pocket, saw it was Patrick, decided to call back later. She turned

to Rose, who crawled to an end table and pulled herself to standing. Pride thrummed through her girl, green eyes sparkling.

A woman smelling of lavender and peanut butter sidled up to Katherine, a twin tugging at each leg. “She’s so big.” Tiffany grinned, her youngest child in a wrap, sucking hungrily at her breast. “Almost a year now?”

“That’s right.” Almost a year. *So why now? Why would the clinic call now?*

“These devils will be three next month.”

Katherine glanced at the boys. “They must be a handful.” She brought her gaze back to Tiffany, hoping to see a hint of the exhaustion Katherine had been fighting for months. But Tiffany seemed more relaxed as a mother than anyone Katherine knew, utterly content, and utterly and unabashedly unconcerned with what anyone thought of her.

Despite barely knowing Tiffany at the time, Katherine had been notable enough to receive an invitation to Tiffany’s youngest’s birthday party. When Katherine had walked into Tiffany’s house, the first mother to arrive, she’d walked into chaos. Tiffany’s crew ran up and down the hall and through the rooms like wild animals, climbing the furniture and tumbling over each other. Crumbs littered the floor, dog fur rolled across the laminate like tumbleweed in the breeze, jellied fingerprints spread through the house, reminiscent of ancient cave paintings. And Tiffany hadn’t seemed to care.

Even now, Tiffany shrugged. “Mostly they keep to themselves. Not today, apparently”—she laughed—“but mostly. Some days they’re so wrapped up in their own lives, they hardly seem to remember I exist.”

Katherine smiled and looked to Rose. Perhaps they should have tried for twins. Rose was in no way wrapped up in her own life. At home she clung to Katherine, followed her around, screamed if they were separated too long. Patrick blamed it on Katherine, for being too clingy herself: so afraid of something harming Rose she’d manufactured an unhealthy attachment.

In those first months after Rose’s birth, Katherine let her house fall to shambles, neglecting baseboards, inside the oven, windowsills, everything most people ignored. Things she imagined Tiffany didn’t even consider. Once Katherine had risen out of the haze of adjusting to life with a newborn, shell-shocked, with eyes bleary, she’d gone right back to it. The thought of living in a house like Tiffany’s made her sweat, made her feel as if she’d be failing everyone, Rose most of all.

Maybe that was the difference—conceiving naturally, as Tiffany had,



no need to worry about your legitimacy as a mother. In those long years of trying, in her lowest moments—when Katherine had felt as if she were the only woman going through it—she'd often wondered if she'd been meant to have a child. Her body, it seemed, wasn't made for it. It was only a trick, a miracle of science, that had allowed Rose's existence.

Katherine's throat tightened once again. The threat of moisture tingled behind her eyes. Probably it wasn't the difference of conceiving naturally. Probably it was just Tiffany. And just Katherine. Nothing to do with scientific intervention, with babies conceived in petri dishes or not.

"Oh, there's Joanna!" Tiffany's face became awash with pleasure. "Enjoy yourself." A friendly squeeze of Katherine's arm and Tiffany was off, rubbing Joanna's round and perky belly, leaning in for a one-armed hug over the bump. Katherine pulled her gaze from the two women. It landed on Tess.

Katherine's smile wavered. Her stomach sank. Tess, who should have been here with her own child. Their egg retrievals had been on the same day, but unlike Katherine, Tess hadn't had her embryos frozen due to ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome. She hadn't had swollen ovaries leaking fluid, bloating her abdomen and thighs, the pain tight, terrifying, putting her life at risk. She hadn't had to wait three months for her body to fully heal from the condition, then another two preparing for frozen embryo transfer. So Tess's child would have been older than Rose. Fourteen months by now.

Compassion twisted through Katherine, with a thread of guilt. It always did upon seeing the women who didn't get their happily-ever-after, no simple reason why Katherine and not them had been so lucky.

Tess stood in the corner. Alone. Furtive. Her green eyes, always so piercing, cast to the floor. She looked fragile. Though she was only four years younger than Katherine, the phrase "a wisp of a girl" came to mind, as if the trials of life could blow her right over.

But they hadn't. She was here among all these women, all these babies, with a stomach as flat as could be. She was brave. Katherine crouched to pick up Rose then walked over.

"Tess." Katherine hoped her smile was bright, friendly, without showing pity. It was hard not to feel it—the poor woman looked terrified someone was talking to her. Katherine had suspected the transfer didn't go well when Tess disappeared from the online chats, but Katherine had been so consumed with her own recovery, then her own pregnancy, she'd hardly thought of it. She only knew because Patrick talked to Tess's brother, who'd said she lost the baby.

“Katherine. Hi.” Tess tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, her cheeks flushing, looking like she wanted to sink through the floor. She bit her lower lip, then released it, as if someone had told her, or she’d read somewhere, that she shouldn’t do that.

“You’re looking lovely.” Katherine gestured to her. “New hairstyle?”

“Oh, uh, yeah.” Tess tucked her hair back again, though it hadn’t shifted.

Almost two years had passed since they’d run into each other in the waiting room before their egg retrievals. Now, Katherine had her child, here, in her arms, while Tess had lost everything, and all Katherine could think to say was “New hairstyle?”

She could smack herself. She was smarter than this. But what was there to say? It wasn’t as if she could ask, her hand on Tess’s shoulder, amid all these smiling women, *Why are you here? Why are you putting yourself through this?*

“You too?” Tess looked away. She clasped one hand over her wrist. Her lower lip twitched.

Her too, what? Of course, the hairstyle. Katherine touched a hand to her curls. “Yes. Decided to go natural.” She reached out and touched Tess’s arm. Tess flinched, but Katherine held it there, waiting for Tess to make eye contact. “I was so sorry to hear about your loss. Patrick, he told me about—”

“Yeah. Um.” Tess pushed out a smile. She shrugged, awkward, like a nervous teenager. “Life. Right?”

Pulling away from Katherine’s touch, Tess gestured toward Rose. “Your daughter is beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Katherine adjusted Rose on her hip as she cuddled into her, the weight of her girl settling against her shoulder like something always meant to be. Faulty reproductive organs or no, Katherine *was* made for this.

Rose raised her head and smiled, her glance as furtive as the one Tess had worn earlier.

Katherine shifted Rose so she was facing Tess. “Rose, can you say hi?”

Rose’s smile flickered, coyness and mischief behind her green eyes.

“This is Mommy’s friend. Tess.”

“Hi, Rose.” Tess’s smile beamed, but her eyes pinched. “What a pretty little top you have there. Do you like bunnies?”

Rose nodded, her smile growing.

“Katherine.”

Katherine felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see Mandy,

Saadia's assistant. Anxiety contorted her features. "I hate to bother you," said Mandy. "But I don't want to bother Saadia." She gestured to Saadia, standing in a group of women, her arms around one of them, comforting as always. "There's some mix-up with the caterer. He's on the phone, upset, and . . . well . . . I know it's not your job, but could you talk to him? He's on hold in the office."

Katherine suppressed a sigh. Saadia had mentioned that Mandy wasn't the most capable hire, but that all people needed a chance. "I have my daughter here. I'm sure you can handle—"

"He's so angry." Mandy pouted her lips.

"I'll take her." Katherine turned to Tess, who looked like she couldn't believe she'd spoken. "It'd be no trouble."

"Perfect." Relief flooded Mandy as her shoulders relaxed comically. "So, you'll come?"

Katherine let out a sound of surrender. Tess put out her arms, and Rose leaned into them without a whimper.

Minutes later, Katherine opened the office door and re-entered the party, the satisfaction at diverting a mini catastrophe thrumming through her veins. But where chatting and laughter had filled the space, a tense hush now permeated the air. The guests huddled around the reception desk. Silent. Listening. Katherine crossed the room, a lump in her throat.

Katherine looked at the swivelled screen, the words seeming to come at her in slow motion: "VitaNova Fertility Centre's only comment at this time is that any families involved will be contacted privately for testing. It is unclear how many families were affected or whether this was an isolated incident. The nurse accused of the crime is in police custody . . ."

The camera panned away from the reporter in front of VitaNova to an image of a woman. Irene. Katherine's nurse, Irene, head down, being led into Halifax Provincial Court.

"What's going on?" Katherine whispered as she sidled over to Tess, accepting Rose back into her arms.

Tess stared at the computer screen, mouth slightly agape, wordless, as the images flickered by.

"There was a switch." Tracey put her hand on Katherine's shoulder. "At the clinic. With the eggs. There was a switch."

## Chapter Four

# Tess

A switch.

The women had pressed in around her, their eyes on the screen, the words that had been their greatest fear clustering them in. The weight of Tess's phone seemed to triple, the pressure of that small object against her backside throbbing as her mind pulsed with the knowledge of that unknown call. And still she couldn't reach for her phone.

Her legs itching to dart, Tess had thrust Rose into Katherine's arms, then weaved her way out of the crowd of shell-shocked women. She stood outside the centre's doors, her heart pounding as she shuffled out of the way of a woman with a rounded belly pushing past her. Tess pulled out her phone. Not only a missed call, but a message. She clicked the screen to call her voicemail: "Hello, this is Samantha from VitaNova Fertility Centre. We were hoping you could come in to see Dr. Myers. We've had notice of an issue that needs clearing up. A . . ." Samantha's voice faltered. It was that hesitation, that squeezing of the throat, that sent a shiver of possibility through Tess. "A rather serious issue regarding your IVF procedure."

Despite the two years that had passed, a part of Tess itched to call Hyeon-Jun. It was possible a mix-up could have involved him, if it happened with her second or third procedure. But to call now, before she knew anything, would look pathetic, desperate. Tess's hand gravitated toward her abdomen, as it so often did, making her even more conscious of the emptiness there.

She had laid her hand on her belly the same way when her sweet baby girl somersaulted. Kicked. Punched. Declared her life—her will to live. Each move, each jab, no matter how hard, had sent a thrill through Tess. Each flutter had signalled hope.

Then the moves stopped.

When Tess realized it, she wasn't sure how many hours had passed. Four? Five? Few enough that the reasonable part of her mind told her it