

SHE THOUGHT SHE HAD HER LIFE BACK.
SHE WAS WRONG.

THAT'S NOT MY NAME



MEGAN LALLY

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CONTENTS

[Front Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty-One](#)

[Twenty-Two](#)

[Twenty-Three](#)

[Twenty-Four](#)

[Twenty-Five](#)

[Twenty-Six](#)

[Twenty-Seven](#)

[Twenty-Eight](#)

[Twenty-Nine](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Credits](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Back Cover](#)

For my dad.

*You would have been the most excited about this. I miss you
always.*

ONE

GIRL

DAY 1

I think I might be dead.

I try to gather my bearings, but I can't see. I feel *nothing*. Not even my own body. The lack of sensation, the way the silence wraps me in a hug and squeezes—it's unnerving. I want it to stop—

Until the pain comes.

It hits like a full-body punch. My mind scrambles to catalog what hurts, but it *all* hurts.

My hand twitches against something scratchy beneath me. I'm lying on my stomach, and something pointy presses into my ribs. I move my chin, and my cheekbone drags against damp earth. It smells like decay and old leaves.

Fear kicks up my pulse.

I'm outside? How the hell did I get here? I try to look around, but my eyelids scrape like my lashes are made of glass and nails. They slam shut before I can see anything.

An engine roars and I tense, pain shooting down my arms. My hair blows across my face as a vehicle whips past, then it's quiet again.

I'm beside a road. Did the driver see me? Why didn't they stop? I make another desperate attempt to see. My eyes flood with tears this time. I blink to clear my vision and shake the hair from my face.

Holy shit. It's so dark.

No streetlights, no houses. There aren't even stars in the sky.

My eyes slowly adjust. No wonder the car didn't stop. I'm lying in a long ditch, sunken into leaves and bracken. Twigs twist up into the air like claws. The ditch clings to the side of a narrow dirt road that runs straight out ahead of me, then disappears in a wobbly blur of trees.

Panic nests in my throat, and my mind fills with more questions I can't answer.

Where the hell am I?

How did I get here?

Am I in danger?

Why does everything hurt so bad?

I need to get up. I don't know where I'm going, but moving seems safer than lying here. My fingers dig into the dirt as I try to drag my knees beneath me. And for the first time, I notice how cold I am. I can barely feel the tips of my fingers.

My arms threaten to buckle, but I push myself to my feet.

Bruises stretch around my bones, and an involuntary wail escapes my mouth. For a moment, I forget how to breathe. The pain is everywhere. My heartbeat pounds in my ears, and it's at least eleven *ba-dubs* before I can draw in another breath.

Tears spill down my face, stinging my cheeks. I lift my icicle fingers to my nose. It feels hot. Swollen. My fingers come away dark and wet. I taste blood.

Fuck. My nose might be broken.

I have to get out of here.

The road looks the same in the other direction, only dirt and trees. I slowly make my way out of the ditch. Briars scrape at my bare arms. I duck to pass under a tree limb, and its branches pull at me like hands.

An image soars through my mind without warning. Tiny square doors with keyholes in a box by the road. A cluster mailbox, maybe? A burned-out streetlight. Big hands reaching for me.

I recoil and stumble into the middle of the road.

My heart rattles against my rib cage until my chest muscles hurt.

What the actual fuck was that?

Did someone grab me?

They're simple questions, but my mind supplies zero details. It just throbs. Like there's a wall between me and understanding what's happening. I clench my teeth and force another step. I need help. Maybe another car will pass or I can find a house. I have to keep moving.

I don't know how long I stumble along, but it feels like hours. My mind zones out and snaps back so many times that I wonder if I'm losing consciousness.

Maybe I already have. Maybe this progress is all in my head, and I'm still in that ditch. Or worse, maybe I *am* dead and this is hell. An endless purgatory of pain and solitude I'm doomed to wander until the end of time, looking for help that will never come.

Red and blue lights flicker on behind me, filling the road with color. A *whoop whoop* from a police car almost startles me to the ground, but sheer relief keeps me standing. Someone's going to help me. Tires crunch as they come to a stop and the lights create a me-shaped silhouette in the dirt. I start to turn—

"Do *not* move. Hands where I can see them!" a man shouts.

My hands go up automatically and a moment later a door slams.

What is this? Did I do something wrong? Is that how I ended up here? Am I running from the cops?

Should I run *now*?

"Turn around!"

I do, squinting into the bright headlights of the patrol car. An officer stands beside his vehicle, face in shadow, hand on the gun in his holster. I feel whatever blood's still in my face drain away, because when I glance down at myself in the light, all I see is dirt and blood.

There's so much blood.

"Jesus, you're just a kid," the officer says, taking his hand off his weapon. He creeps forward. "What happened to you? Did someone do this?"

I open my mouth to answer, but my knees give out and I drop. The cop tries to catch me, but we both hit the dirt hard.

He grabs at the radio receiver on his shoulder, but I can't hear what he says over the roaring in my ears and the caged animal thrashing around in my chest. I stare at my hands, my jean leggings, the front of my light gray T-shirt—covered in blotches of dried mud and dark rivers of blood.

Hands grip my shoulders. I look up at the officer. His words defog in my mind.

"Can you hear me? Paramedics are on their way, but I need to know who you are," he pleads. "What's your name?"

My name?

I blink at him and reach for the answer, but no matter how hard I try, I hit that wall in my mind every time. What's my name? How is that a hard question? I try to breathe but it's too much. I start hyperventilating. Fresh tears pool in my eyes.

What's your name?

I grab my throbbing head. "I don't know!"

TWO

GIRL

DAY 1

The gray walls of the police station look as lifeless as I feel.

The patrolman who found me, Officer Bowman, sits across the table from me. We're in a conference room—or maybe it's an interrogation room. There's only one window, but it faces the interior of the station and it's blacked out. He left the door open though, so I must not be someone they want to keep locked in. That's good at least.

He hasn't stopped worrying at his lip since I refused medical treatment.

I may not know who I am, but I sure as hell know that nobody can make me go to the hospital if I don't want to. Bright lights and loud sounds, more faces I don't recognize, no way of telling who is a threat and who isn't... No thank you.

A few hours ago, the paramedics cleaned the blood from my skin, which apparently all came from my nose. It's bruised, not broken, but hurts like a bitch all the same. And I have a lump on the side of my head. I've been told

to look for concussion symptoms for the next few days. They declared the rest of my injuries superficial and bandaged what they could.

“You look pretty bad,” Officer Bowman said after the paramedics failed one final time to get me to go to the hospital. “There’s a process here, procedure we need to follow. You should get checked out by a doctor. Get a rape kit—”

I blocked out the rest. There are some things I can’t even begin to think about. Not today. Maybe not ever. That’s one of them.

When they realized I wouldn’t budge about going to the ER, both paramedics and Officer Bowman exchanged a look and left me alone on a stretcher inside the ambulance to talk outside. If they didn’t want me to eavesdrop, they should have whispered. That creepy road was silent as the grave and did nothing to keep their voices from drifting back to me.

“All her bruises look new. I’d guess within the last couple hours. Fresh swelling,” the tall, wiry paramedic said. “That, plus the injuries to her face, could point to some kind of an impact. Maybe a car accident. She doesn’t have bruising from a seatbelt, but the injury to her nose could be from an airbag or a steering wheel. With a head contusion on the left, it’s possible she might have hit the driver’s side window. But it’s only a guess. Regardless, her vitals are fine. She’s not in any immediate medical danger.”

I clung to that version of events, my hands fisting in the papery stretcher sheets. A car accident was better than the other, darker, possibilities. And it didn’t require a rape kit.

Bowman took notes while Tall-and-Wiry climbed back into the ambulance and handed me a fresh icepack. “Good luck,” he said as he helped me down.

That icepack sits on the table between me and Officer Bowman, though it’s warm now. I’ve been here for hours. He squints at me, like he’s waiting for me to start screaming or for my head to spin around. And who knows, maybe it will. I mean, I’m basically a character from a teen horror movie.

Covered in blood? Check.

Bruised to hell? Check.

Wandering, terrified, in the middle of the night? Check.

A steaming cup of hot chocolate sits next to the room-temp icepack, but I don't reach for it. I don't move. I don't say a word. Wrapped in the scratchy blanket the officer draped around my shoulders, I try not to think. Because the alternative means navigating the holes in my memory, and I can't bear to do any more of that than I already have.

Officer Bowman's chair creaks as he leans forward. He's young...ish. Maybe twenty-six or twenty-seven. With a baby face and eager blue eyes, he looks like a lemur with a badge. "You should drink that," he says, nodding at the mug. "You may be in shock."

I shrug.

When the paramedics left, Bowman switched gears, apparently determined to make me feel better however he could. He brought me to the precinct, though I don't remember much of the drive. When he noticed my wrecked shoes—I don't know what color they were before, but they'd become a tie-dye of dried blood and forest sludge—he gave me a clean pair of black socks from his work bag and a sweatshirt. It's navy blue and says "Alton Police Department" on the upper-right side. It fits like a shower curtain, but the fabric is soft and warm.

Once I was dry, he smiled. "Feel better?"

I did. Right up until I caught sight of my reflection in the dark interior window and didn't know the person staring back at me. Now I don't want to talk. Ever. I don't have anything to share with him anyway. I'm a nobody, with no name, and a stranger's face.

"Miss?" he says. "Can you hear me?"

I nod.

"Miss, you need to drink something. I really wish you'd let me take you to the hospital. You're very pale."

The thought of the emergency room sends another barb of anxiety through my body. Being pale is the least of my worries. I shake my head.

Officer Bowman sighs. "Miss—"

I glare at him. "Stop calling me Miss."

He sits back in his chair, and it creaks again. "Okay. What should I call you?"

Good freaking question. "I don't know. But don't call me that."

My voice sounds a thousand miles away. Was that one of the concussion signs the paramedic warned me about? I should have paid attention.

Officer Bowman pushes the mug closer to me. "I'll make you a deal. You drink some of this and try to help me figure out where you came from, and I'll stop calling you Miss *and* I'll cool it about going to the hospital. For now."

I eye him.

"You have a nasty goose egg, but you're alert and responsive. You can walk unassisted, and the lights in here don't seem to be bothering you. If you start to slur your speech, lose your balance, throw up, black out, or show any other warning signs of a concussion, we're going to the ER. Until then, I can get you a fresh icepack and we can talk. Deal?"

Whatever. I nod and take a sip.

I won't admit it, but the warmth feels good on my throat, and it settles in my stomach like a rock thunking into a puddle, which makes me think I haven't eaten in a while.

He leaves the room, and I readjust the blanket around my shoulders. The wool prickles against my neck but I can't muster enough energy to care. Between the blanket and the sweatshirt, I've created a cocoon of heat around me, but I still can't stop shivering.

Bowman returns with a fresh icepack. I carefully press it against my hairline. It stings but dulls the throbbing.

He pulls his notepad from his pocket and sits. "Okay, so let's talk. I want to go on the record and say you're not in any kind of trouble. I only want to figure out what happened to you out there."

How could he know if I'm in trouble or not if neither of us have any clue where I came from? I could have stabbed someone in the face, and he'd have no idea. "You and me both."

His brow furrows. "You don't have any memory at all? Nothing before waking up in the ditch?"

I shake my head. "I thought I saw hands reaching for me, but I might have been spooked by the dark."

He writes on his pad. "Do you know how old you are?"

"Nope."

"What about family? Can you tell me who your parents are?"

I stare at the clock on the wall, watching the second hand tick around. "No."

"Okay. You look young enough to still be in school. Do you remember its name? Maybe the mascot? A phone number we can call? Anything?"

I shrug again. "I don't know."

"Did you run away?"

"I don't know that either."

"*Could* you have been in a car accident?"

I let out the most epic sigh. How many times do I have to say it before "I can't remember" clicks in his brain?

When I don't respond, he frowns and taps his pen on his chin. "Okay. New plan. I'll be right back." He disappears into the main office and reappears a minute later with a laptop. "To be honest, this is way above my pay grade. I basically write speeding tickets. I put in a call to my boss, but he probably won't answer until morning when the precinct reopens, and I don't want to wait that long to start getting you some answers."

That makes two of us.

"So let's do what we can in the meantime. Since you have no ID, we'll search missing person reports, first here in town and then expand our reach. Someone must be missing you, and your face could be here in the database attached to a name and contact info for your family. It might take us a while but finding out who you are is the first step to finding out what happened. So let's see what we can dig up, hmm?"

I nod, and he starts typing.

We spend the next hour sifting through files. We weed out the locals almost immediately. There's only one missing person in town, and it's some old Santa-looking man who "disappeared" while barhopping. Bowman

makes some comment about having to track down that guy every other month, then moves on to the county's missing list. Turns out Alton is about halfway up the Oregon coast.

I wait for any of this to feel familiar, but it doesn't. I can't even tell him if I live in this state. How messed up is that?

I mostly sit and drink my hot chocolate. He convinces me to drink another cup and eventually the sandwich he packed for his night shift.

"Well, you're definitely not eleven, so this isn't you," Bowman mumbles at about one thirty in the morning. He clicks to another listing and squints at the screen.

I wonder how long we're going to keep this up. At some point, I have to leave this place, right? The thought fills me with dread. Where would I even go?

"What happens if you can't figure out who I am?" I ask.

He looks up with his kind lemur eyes. "You have nice clothes—if you look past the blood. Name-brand shoes. You're in good health. You don't appear to have been living on the streets. You must belong to someone. We'll either find your people, or they'll find you. We may have to kick this up to a more-equipped precinct in the morning though. This is a small office for a small town. We don't have the same resources as the larger stations. I have to sift through these reports one at a time, and I've barely worked through half the missing persons in this county, much less the state or beyond."

I nod. That makes sense. This whole office is basically an open space with two desks, this conference room, a short hallway with bathrooms, a break room with a copy machine, and a holding cell.

A loud bang comes from the front of the precinct. I jump out of my chair and into the corner of the room.

Officer Bowman peers through the doorway and turns back with his hands out, palms facing me. A gesture clearly meant to calm the spooked animal in front of him. Someone's knocking on the front door. "You're safe. Nobody's going to hurt you here."

I nod. My head throbs from standing so fast, and my heartbeat thumps like a Lizzo chorus.

Oh, hey. I guess I remember Lizzo. If all else fails, at least I like good music.

“Stay here. I’ll be right back,” Officer Bowman says. He walks out, and I hear the metal-on-metal creak of the front door opening. “Can I help you?”

I can’t see him anymore, not from this angle. I pull my blanket tighter around me and creep toward the door, curious who would show up at a closed precinct this late.

“God, I hope so,” a man says. His voice is much deeper than Bowman’s but also a lot quieter. I have to lean toward the doorway to hear the rest. “My teenage daughter is missing. I can’t reach her on the phone; I’ve been driving around for hours trying to find her. I think I have to file a missing person’s report.”

Holy shit. Missing daughter? Was Bowman right? Did my people find me?

I inch closer until I can see out into the precinct. Bowman stands with the front door cracked open, his entire body blocking the open space. I can’t see the man in front of him.

“What’s your name?” Officer Bowman asks.

“Wayne Boone.”

“Okay, Mr. Boone. How old is your daughter and what does she look like?”

“She’s seventeen, with short brown hair, freckles, and green eyes. Around five foot five.”

Bowman looks over his shoulder and locks eyes with me. His gaze flickers toward the conference room, and I reluctantly slip back out of view, fighting the urge to check my swollen nose for freckles in the reflection in the glass.

“Step inside for me. I’m going to need some identification.”

The door creaks and I hear it click shut a second later. “Of course,” the deep voice says, closer now. “I also have photos of her if you need them for

the report?”

“Actually, I have someone here matching that description, and I—”

“She’s here?” the man shouts. “Mary’s here?”

Mary? My Lizzo heartbeat speeds up. Is that me?

I peek around the corner again. The men are in the entryway, standing by a long wooden bench. Mr. Boone is kind of wiry. His arms are slightly shorter than they should be for his height. His hair looks like it’s thinking of going gray but hasn’t committed to the change. The silvery strands stand out around his ears, but he’s slicked most of it back. Not with product though, like he’s been running his hands through it for so long it’s been forced to obey. He’s wearing a black sweater and dark jeans.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen him before.

But what would I know?

“We have *someone*,” Officer Bowman says, carefully.

Mr. Boone folds his arms, looking impatient, and as his eyes sweep the station, he catches me staring at him. His arms drop and his face glows with relief. “Mary?”

I freeze.

He tries to step toward me, but Bowman stops him with a hand to his chest. “Oh my god. I’ve been looking for you for hours. Are you okay? What happened to your face?” He says all this in one breath. Each word more panicked than the last, and I flinch because I know exactly what he means.

It was a shock to see myself too. I look like I lost a fight with a two-by-four.

I stare back at him and wait for...a rush of knowing? A giant lightbulb to shine through this numbness and tell me who I am? For his face to unlock a memory? Nothing happens. He’s still a stranger.

“She’s okay, a little bruised. She might have a concussion,” Officer Bowman says, blocking his advances. “Now I need you to give her some space while I run your ID and verify who you are.”

The man looks at Bowman and finally takes a step back. “What do you mean? She’s right there. She can tell you who I am.” He looks at me like he

can't understand why I'm not running to him.

"She can't remember anything, Mr. Boone. Now please sit down while we sort this out."

Mr. Boone looks at me again, his confusion morphing into unease. "You don't remember me?"

I don't know what to say. How can my supposed father be standing right in front of me and I still can't remember him?

"I'll prove it," he says. "I can prove who I am. I have pictures on my phone."

Pictures? I inch sideways until I'm out of the conference room. The promise of clues draws me forward. Mr. Boone pulls his phone from his pocket and swipes a few times. I creep up behind Officer Bowman as he turns the phone to show us his screen.

Sure enough, it's me. Same stranger from my reflection, same girl he described at the door. Dark brown chin-length hair, green eyes, freckled nose—though my face looks different when it's not so bruised and swollen. In the photo, I'm sitting on brick steps, smiling at the camera and sticking out my tongue. He swipes again and I'm with a group of kids my age on the dock of a lake or pond. He swipes again and I'm younger, sitting in a restaurant, surrounded by gift bags stuffed with pink tissue paper. There's a rainbow-sprinkle-covered birthday cake in front of me with a giant 15 candle dripping pink wax. I smirk at the camera, sitting beside the man standing in front of me now. In the picture, Wayne grins for all he's worth.

Nothing about these photos feels familiar...except maybe the candles? I can't figure out if it's *actually* familiar or if I'm so desperate for a connection that my brain is fabricating one.

But it's me in these pictures. That's hard to argue with.

"You really don't remember anything?" the man asks.

He looks so upset I almost want to pretend I do, but that wouldn't help anyone. When I don't say anything, he shakes his head. His sadness slipping away, replaced with something like...determination?