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**TESS
SHARPE**

A NOVEL

**NO BODY
NO CRIME**

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A Novel

TESS SHARPE

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For my friends in the Trifecta,

*I am so grateful for all of you, your friendship, your advice, and your
perspectives on life and craft.*

*Also, I am sorry for talking about feral peacocks pretty much nonstop for
two years.*

Part I

THE CRASH

MEL

FORTY MINUTES AFTER THE PLANE CRASH

The first thing Mel thinks is: *that is not the plane ceiling.*

She stares up at the blue sky and pine trees that shouldn't be there, trying to make sense of it all. Her ears ring and her head aches like someone's taken a baseball bat to her temple.

What in the world? She blinks slowly. Then more rapidly, her eyes stinging, tears leaking out the corners.

Smoke. It's smoke. Choking, black and thick, acrid in her nose and mouth. She coughs, raising her arm to protect her face.

They're on fire.

No. That isn't quite right.

Another furious batch of blinking, her nose clogging against the toxic pour of black surrounding her and funneling through the front. No flames yet.

But the smoke. The plane ...

Oh, shit.

The plane crashed.

And then Mel's not thinking anymore.

She's just surviving. Struggling to get out of her seat, only to be jerked back by the still-buckled belt. She claws herself free, aware of how the floor of the plane is tilted dramatically to the left and unsteady under her weight.

Get to your feet, Tillman. She can practically hear her old high school coach's voice in her head as she pushes herself. She lurches to the side, her legs shaking uncontrollably.

Mel looks down, her pulse beating in her ears like a snake's rattle. A dark wash of blood spreads down her calf and the harder she stares at it, trying to comprehend, the more aware she becomes of a dull throbbing in her leg. She tilts her head to the right and, *oh*.

There's a steak knife stuck in her leg. From lunch. They'd been eating when ...

The chicken. There'd been something in the chicken.

But she doesn't have time for tracing back steps. She's been stabbed and drugged. The cockpit's on fire. The plane doesn't have a roof—or a ceiling, or whatever you call the top of a plane—any more.

How the hell is she still alive?

And where is everyone else?

Pilot. Co-pilot. Attendant. Chloe. She'd done a head count before she'd stepped onto the private plane. A seven-seater Cessna. Forty-two feet. Five passengers, including her.

Chloe. Her heart hammers as her name floats through her fuzzy head.

"Chloe!" she yells. "Chloe! Are you in here?"

No answer.

Did she get out? Mel looks around frantically. She'd gone to the bathroom during lunch. That was the last time Mel remembers ...

Fuck. What was in that chicken they served?

Breathe, Tillman.

She needs to un-stab herself. First and foremost. Then she needs to find Chloe. The smoke's thickening fast. If the fire reaches the fuel tank ...

Mel stares down at the knife, embedded a good inch into her calf. Her fingers wrap around the edges of the hilt. Bracing herself is pointless, so she

yanks it free, her scream filtering through her gritted teeth. Fresh blood streams down her leg as pain lances and then dulls to a throb.

She'll bandage it later. She needs to get out first. Tucking the knife into the waistband of her jeans, she stumbles into the aisle, toward the bathroom. But when she gets there, the bathroom's empty.

"Chloe!" she yells, staggering down the aisle, past her seat, toward the emergency lever. It's to the right. She'd made a note when she did her sweep. She just needs to get to it ...

Her foot catches against something. She barely has time for a "Fu—" before she crashes to the ground. Her elbow catches painfully against a seat, but she doesn't have time to think about it because, this low and this close to the ground, Mel can finally see what she tripped over: A body. Blond hair.

Please don't be Chloe. Please don't be Chloe.

"Chloe?" Mel touches the woman's shoulder, pulling her closer. She hates herself for the relief that floods her when she recognizes the flight attendant. Blood trickles down the woman's forehead. She must not have buckled into her crash seat in time.

Mel's fingers slide to her neck. No pulse. Mel's heart swoops, a sickeningly familiar sort of drop.

This is not her first dead body. But it is her first plane crash, which is maybe why she kneels there, desperately trying to find a pulse for way too long.

You need to get up, Tillman.

She can't just leave this woman here to burn. Mel knows all too well the pain of having no body to bury, of headstones over empty graves. So she grabs the attendant under the arms and begins to drag her toward the front. Smoke is billowing around them, tears making it hard to see until she realizes: the smoke is funneling *out*.

The emergency lever's already been pulled. The door's open.

Chloe. She got out. It has to be.

"C'mon," she says, half to herself, half to the corpse as she drags them both out of the plane and onto the ground. It's a drop. It's not pretty. On the

edge of vomiting, she fights to get control of herself. She needs to get away from the fire and wreckage.

Fifteen feet. That's as far as she gets dragging the body before she collapses on the ground, retching into the dirt, the horrible tang of jet fuel, smoke, and blood in her mouth.

"Chloe!" she yells.

Smoke spins up to the sky from the cockpit. She stares helplessly at it, trying to make out *something* through the smoke. Did anyone else get out? The pilot? The co-pilot?

Is she the only one left?

No. Chloe's okay. She has to be.

"Chloe!" She struggles to her feet once again, the world spins, a lazy sort of dip that makes her feel like she's in a fun-house-mirror situation. But she bites the inside of her lip and the burst of pain focuses her, clearing her mind of the fuzz for just a second.

She shuffles her feet forward. One step. Then two. Then she's moving away from the wreckage.

All she can see is pine. They landed right in the trees. Probably why the top of the plane was missing. Sheared off going down.

These are old-growth trees. Staggeringly tall. She's somewhere logging hasn't touched in a long time. National forest, maybe? She turns in a slow, limping circle, trying to gauge an idea of *where*. She'd closed the shutter on her window when they took off. It always made her feel queasy to watch the landscape grow smaller and more stamp-like.

They'd been in the air for what ... three, four hours? That would put them ... where, exactly? What forest was this? What *state* was this? Had they even made it out of Canada?

Her head throbs as the questions tumble inside it, finding no purchase and no answers.

"Chloe!" She cups her hands around her mouth this time, hoping her voice will carry. She has to find her.

Mel looks toward the plane. Had she missed her somehow? She has to check. To make sure.

She stumbles toward the flaming wreckage.

“Hey!”

Mel freezes. Her eyes slam shut against the flooding wash of tension. They pop back open, bulging with adrenaline.

She’s a rabbit caught in a trap. *Run, little Red, before the wolf gets you.*

Nat Parker, the PI who taught Mel everything she knew, used to tell her that fear is a gift. Once you experienced real fear, it left a scar. One that ached when you were about to step into some shit. Her body knows enough to recognize it at the start, instead of in the middle.

When you realize the danger at the start, you can fight back. When you realize it in the middle, you’re screwed.

“Hey,” says the voice again.

It’s a male voice. Not Chloe.

The pilot? No. He’d been British. The co-pilot, too.

She’d checked them both out. She’d done her job. She was great at her job. She’d met the crew. Memorized their faces and voices and mannerisms. She’d secured the plane before Chloe even stepped inside.

Mel’s hand curls around the steak knife tucked in her jeans.

Fear is a gift, Tillman. Now the voice in her head is a mix of her old high school coach and Nat Parker. Their voice is going to be the last thing she ever hears.

The knife’s in her fist. Tight to her side. It’s useless as a throwing knife. The weight’s all off.

Goddamn it, have the last eighteen hours *sucked*.

Mel turns slowly and yup, there’s a guy standing there. A guy who was definitely *not* on the plane.

And her brain starts doing that *thing* it does. A ticking time bomb of a list, building rapid-fire in her mind as her eyes dart from his hat—*knit and pulled tight over his ears*—to his jacket—*there’s a dark spot on the arm, he*

pulled a patch off it recently—to his shoes—sneakers, not hiking boots, bulge at the ankle.

Like ice spilled into a glass, it tumbles together in her head in a rush: He's got a vehicle stashed somewhere. Four-wheeler or dirt bike, with this terrain. Otherwise he'd have better shoes on. It's parked far enough she didn't hear an engine. And that bulge at his ankle is a gun. This is rifle and shotgun territory. A handgun means shit against a bear.

You're either a criminal or a cop with an ankle holster in the middle of the woods. And this guy's facial hair is all wrong for a cop.

"Hey, you okay?" he asks, his dark brows scrunching together in concern as Mel's blood thrums *Run, run, little Red*, but her feet stay frozen because: *Chloe*. Where is she? Does he have her?

"I saw the smoke from my hunting cabin. Shit. Did you ... did you crash? Are you hurt? Are there other survivors?"

Semi-plausible story. She should believe it, but they're too deep in the woods for hunting cabins. He's scanning the area too closely.

And he hasn't even reacted to the flight attendant's body.

That tells her everything. His focus isn't on rescue. It's on something else. His eyes sweep over Mel's head, tracing the tree line.

The details don't line up and she's remarkably lucid. It makes her want to laugh and then she does, because it's kind of absurd. Even a plane crash can't shut her brain off. The way she noticed things and asked questions drove her father crazy when she was a kid and then it drove Bob's fist into her kidneys once or twice or maybe dozens of times and then she just stopped going home to the trailer park until she was sure he was fast asleep.

"You're gonna be okay," the man assures her as she continues laughing. "Why don't I—"

He steps forward, and as he does his right hand moves toward his back.

Run.

Her muscles tense and then her entire body *jerks* as something whizzes right past her, so fast and so close she can feel the air kick up against her ear. It's a *zip* through the air that startles her back and out of the way.

There's a certain *thunk* an arrow makes when it hits its target.

Mel knows the sound well. Even after all these years apart from her.

A second arrow sails past, neatly embedding in the man's chest, clustered tight against the first arrow.

Chloe always knew how to group her shots.

The man jerks, falling to his knees. When he pitches over, the gun he was going for falls from his hand and Mel's brain lights up like a strongman game at a carnival.

Ding, ding, ding. Another win for fear is a gift.

Mel turns.

And *finally*, there she is: lit by flames and backdropped by smoke like a goddamn action hero, her blond hair a messy halo around her head. There's a gash on her cheek, but she's alive. She just shot a guy—*Jesus Christ, Chloe*—but she's *there*.

Mel wants to clutch at her like they've been through a war, because haven't they? But Chloe's all business. She's got a third arrow nocked in her compound bow—where the hell did she have that stashed? Did it fold down into her backpack or something?

"You good?" Chloe's eyes sweep down. "You're bleeding." Her voice softens. It almost breaks through Mel's anger. *Almost*.

"The plane crashed," Mel says. "I woke up with a steak knife in my leg. I'm pretty sure there was something in that chicken they gave us. And you just shot some dude. So no, I'm not *good*, Chloe."

Chloe ignores the slow rise of Mel's voice and walks right past her, toward the guy.

"He dragged me out of the plane. He wasn't here to rescue us."

"Chloe—" Mel steps forward, but Chloe just kicks the guy over and Mel feels some of her anxiety dissipate because yeah, dude's super dead and that's probably a good thing, all guns considered. And then that anxiety spikes right back up because Chloe steps on the guy's chest and grabs the arrows' hilts with one hand, yanking them out with a visceral *squelch* that

sends blood and bits flying. Mel grimaces, trying to quell the sick churning in her stomach.

“We need to move,” Chloe says, stashing the bloody arrows in her quiver and kneeling down next to the dead dude. She sticks her hands in his pockets, searching. She comes up with nothing but an extra magazine, so she grabs the gun and holster. She pockets the bullets and gets up, holding the gun out to Mel expectantly.

Mel stares at her. Then at the gun. Then back at Chloe.

Her eyes squint. Her head pounds.

God, this has been a shitty week.

“Melanie.” Chloe kind of shakes the gun. “Take it. We need to move.”

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

Chloe frowns. And then! She *growls*. Like she’s the goddamn wolf and Mel’s standing in the way of her dinner.

That just sets Mel off completely.

“You”—she points at Chloe—“are going to explain the last eighteen hours. And then, you’re going to explain the last six years.”

“I—” Chloe starts.

“Nooooo.” Mel drawls it out, partly because she probably has a head injury and partly because she is pissed. “Eighteen hours ago, I had to ford a river like I was a pioneer on the Oregon Trail only to find your place was *booby-trapped* to the gills like you’re growing reefer in the seventies. And to my surprise, once I’ve gotten through all the booby traps, I find that you don’t have some grand cannabis operation going on. You’re not running even a little grow. No. It’s just you! Living in the middle of bumfuck nowhere Canada like you’re Nell from that Jodie Foster movie. And you keep refusing to contact your family, which is why they hired a private investigator to come get your ass!”

Chloe frowns, rubbing at her forehead. It smears blood and soot farther across her skin.

“I can’t believe they hired you.”

Mel glares at her, wishing that she could set fire to things with her mind.
“They didn’t. They hired my boss Nat Parker.”

Chloe’s eyebrows snap together. “You work for Nat Parker?”

Mel grits her teeth and grinds the toe of her boot into the dirt. “Things got complicated after you left.”

“Nat Parker accused you of murder!”

“Like I said: complicated.”

“That’s not what I wanted when I left,” Chloe says. “Mel, I promise, that’s the last thing—”

Crack.

She flinches as the sound sends a cold trickle of dread across her skin.

Chloe’s bow goes up, knocking the arrow in a smooth movement. Blood drips from the tip. She moves in a slow circle, trying to track the source of the noise.

All is silent but the furious crackle of the plane burning.

“We need to go,” Chloe says. “I will explain. On the move.”

When Mel was seventeen, she knew Chloe’s face better than the back of her own hand. Every curve and freckle, that shine in her eyes that glinted into razor-sharp focus when it settled on her.

She made you feel seen in a way that cut you if you got too close.

And Mel got too close, over and over. Cut herself to ribbons on Chloe’s sweet sharpness and asked for more. Begged for it. Loved her for it.

She was the one who got away. Not just with Mel’s heart. With everything.

“Mel,” Chloe says. “I need you to trust me. Like I trusted you when I agreed to come home.”

She holds out the gun.

Cut me. Take me. Love me.

“I am the same person I’ve always been,” Chloe says.

Mel takes the gun.

She thinks: *that’s what I’m afraid of.*

Their fingers brush as she pulls away.

She thinks: *your skin is as soft as I remember.*

Mel releases the magazine, checks the rounds, snaps it back into place.

She thinks: *I should've never gone to Chloe Harper's sweet sixteen party.*

CHLOE

TWELVE HOURS AFTER CHLOE'S SWEET SIXTEEN PARTY

It's still under her shredded fingernails, a shadow underneath remnants of pink polish. When Chloe turns her hand around, there it is: blood tingeing brown.

She thought she'd gotten it all. She dips her hands back in the creek, scrubbing furiously even though it makes the tips of her fingers raw, and the nail she almost pulled out throbs under what's left of her skin.

Two days ago, her mom had taken her to get her nails done. It had been a special treat for her party. Mom got her nails done with Olivia twice a month, but she rarely took Chloe. There was no use, Mom said, because she was always chipping the polish at the stables or at the archery range Daddy had set up. Olivia didn't waste her time with such things, so she got manicures and spa dates.

Chloe lets the water stream through her fingers, wishing it could carry her away, too.

What's to come is almost as terrifying as what she just survived. But she can't run anymore.

She hears the *slide-clunk* of Mel's footsteps across the rocky creek bank, the water-smoothed rocks shifting under her feet. Chloe gets up, shaking the

water free.

“The car’s all ready,” Mel says. “It’ll take both of us to push it off the ridge.”

Chloe looks over Mel’s shoulder, where Chloe’s brand-new BMW is parked up on the ridge. Mud-streaked and already half-destroyed, one of the headlights and the windshield are shattered.

“My dad’s going to kill me.” It’s the one thing she can think to say.

“Well, he won’t be the only guy today who’s tried,” Mel says.

Chloe’s eyes startle to hers, locking onto Mel’s golden brown. The words hang there for a moment. Mel’s mouth twitches the longer the silence reigns. And then it’s too much, it builds and builds in her chest until laughter burbles out of Chloe. It rises in the graying predawn, Mel’s unhinged giggles twinning up with hers. The chill comes off the creek and her body shakes with laughter, making her bruised skin pepper with goose bumps.

When Mel’s hands close over her wrists, her laughter fades. Mel’s touch is so gentle, and the goose bumps spread for a whole different reason.

“We stick to the story. I convinced you to take the car out. I hurt my hand and we decided to go to the ER.” She pauses and it takes a second for Chloe to realize Mel’s waiting for her to finish.

“On the way there, I swerved to avoid a deer,” she says, her voice hoarse. Getting choked out does that to you. “We spun out, off the embankment and crashed. When we came to, we got turned around in the dark. Finally, we found the creek and followed it until we got to a road.”

Mel nods, but she worries her lower lip, gnawing it bright red. “We can’t be seen together,” Mel tells her. “Once they start asking questions and realize Toby’s missing. We have to go back to normal.”

“I know,” Chloe says. “I know,” she says again, not to make it real, but to taste the bitterness in her mouth. To learn it. She’s gonna have to get used to it.

Mel’s hands tighten around her wrists. No longer a suggestion, but a reality. Mel’s warmth against her bruises. She could power a whole town through the winter.

This is the last time she touches me. Chloe stares down at Mel's fingers, wondering when the first time was—just hours ago—so it shouldn't matter that now there's a last time.

But it does.

So much.

"It's gonna be okay," Mel assures her.

But it's not, because this is ending. This terrifying, endless, life-changing night.

She's not the same girl she was at five o'clock yesterday. When the first guests arrived at her party, she'd been a glimmer of who she is now.

But it's familiar, to change so much in so little time. It's what happened to her on the road last year, the tragedy that set all this in motion, that put her in Toby's path. And now she's here. Brand-new again.

Now, she's a girl who grasped something good while being hunted.

Now, she has to let it go.

It's the only way to save them both.

"Are you ready?" Mel asks.

Chloe wants so badly to tell her *no*. She needs to know why. She always needs to know the why of things. And this one, this is certainly the biggest why of her life. Because she cannot even begin to understand.

Why the hell did Melanie Tillman risk everything, for *her*?

She opens her mouth to ask, but Mel starts to pull her hands away from Chloe's wrists and she just ... can't. It can't be over. Chloe's hands scrabble, desperate to keep the connection, and their fingers wrap and entwine, careful of Mel's burnt skin and how all of Chloe's fingertips are rubbed raw.

The feeling punches the breath out of her: palm to palm, scrape against cut, bruise against blister.

This girl bled for her. Fought for her. Broke fingers for her.

Now she has to leave her alone. For good.

Tell me why, I need to know. Why didn't you just walk away?

Chloe licks her lips. Copper tangs on her tongue as she gathers her courage to ask.

“Mel, I—”

It’s too much to ask. It’s too much to know.

Everything about tonight is just ... too much.

She steps forward, crowds into Mel’s space, their clutched hands coming up to press between their bodies, the only barrier between them. Her tongue feels like cotton in her mouth, her heart hammers under her battered bones, and if she thinks anymore, she’s going to scream.

So she stops thinking.

Her thumb strokes Mel’s wrist, because that skin isn’t bruised and Mel’s eyes sweep down, following the movement, and when she looks back up, Chloe doesn’t look away.

She moves forward, until she doesn’t think there’s any closer to get, but when her lips touch Mel’s, she realizes that yes, there is closer. There is more.

There’s *her*.

It’s just this time, Chloe tells herself. *We can’t speak after this. I’ll never touch her again.*

Her breath hitches into Mel’s mouth, an angry sob at the ugliness of the truth in the beauty of *this*.

It’s the only time.

(It’s not, though. It’s the first time. Of many.)

That’s the funny thing about murder.

It can bond you like nothing else.