

THE  
GIRLS  
I'VE  
BEEN





TESS SHARPE



Hodder  
Children's  
Books



HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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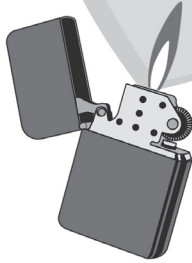
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For the girls who saved me:  
Elizabeth May, Franny Gaede,  
and Mercedes Marks.  
With all my love,  
—T/N







## Part One



# Truth Is a Weapon

(The First 87 Minutes)









# 1

August 8, 9:09 a.m.

It was supposed to be twenty minutes.

That's what I told myself when I woke up that morning. It would be just twenty minutes. We'd meet in the bank parking lot, we'd go in, we'd make the deposit, and it would be awkward, it would be so awkward, but it would be twenty minutes, tops.

I could survive twenty minutes with my ex-boyfriend and new girlfriend. I could handle the awkwardness. I was a freaking *champ*.

I even got donuts, thinking maybe that would help smooth things over after last night's make-out interruptus, which I know is downplaying what happened. I get fried dough can't fix everything, but still. Everyone loves donuts. Especially when they have sprinkles . . . or bacon. Or both. So I get the donuts—and coffee, because Iris is basically a grizzly bear unless she downs some caffeine in the morning—and of course, that makes me late. By the time I pull up to the bank, they're both already there.

Wes is out of his truck, tall and blond and leaning against the chipped tailgate, the bank envelope with all the cash from last night next to him. Iris is lounging on the hood of her Volvo in her watercolor dress, her curls swinging as she plays with that lighter





she found on the railroad tracks. She's gonna set her brush-out on fire one of these days, I swear to God.

"You're late" is the first thing Wes says when I get out of my car.

"I brought donuts." I hand Iris her coffee, and she hops off the hood.

"Thanks."

"Can we just get this over with?" he asks. He doesn't even look at the donuts. My stomach clenches. Are we really back to this? How can we be back to this, after *everything*?

I press my lips together, trying not to look too annoyed. "Fine." I put the bakery box back in my car. "Let's go." I snatch up the envelope from his tailgate.

The bank's just opened, so there are only two people ahead of us. Iris fills out the deposit slip, and I stand in line with Wes right behind me.

The line moves as Iris walks over with the slip, taking the envelope from me and tucking it into her purse. She looks warily at Wes, then at me.

I bite my lip. Just a few more minutes.

Iris sighs. "Look," she says to Wes, propping her hands on her hips. "I understand that the way you found out wasn't great. But—"

That's when Iris is interrupted.

But not by Wes.

No, Iris gets interrupted by the guy in front of us. Because the guy in front of us? He chooses that moment to pull out a gun and start robbing the freaking bank.

The first thing I think is *Shit!* The second thing I think is *Get down.* And the third thing I think is *We're all gonna die because I waited for the bacon donuts.*





## 2

9:12 a.m. (15 seconds captive)

The robber—white guy, six feet, maybe, brown jacket, black T-shirt, red ball cap, pale eyes and brows—yells, “GET ON THE FLOOR!”—you know, like bank robbers do. We hit the floor. It’s like everyone in that bank is a puppet and he’s cut all our strings.

I can’t breathe around it for a second, this giant lump of fear in my stomach, chest, and throat. It burns and snags in the soft parts of me, and I want to cough, but I’m scared that’ll draw his attention.

You never want to draw their attention. I know this because this isn’t the first time I’ve been here. I mean, I’ve never been in the middle of a bank robbery, but sometimes it feels like I was born in the line of fire.

When someone points a gun at you, it’s not like in the movies. There are no brave moments in those first seconds. It’s bone-shaking, pants-peeing scary. Iris’s arm presses against mine, and I can feel her trembling. I want to reach out and grab her hand, but I stop myself. What if he thinks I’m reaching for a weapon? Everyone and their mother has guns in Clear Creek. I can’t risk it.

Wes is tense on my other side, and it takes me a second to realize





why. Because he's getting ready to spring at the guy—that's my ex for you. Wes is instinctual and heroic, and has *such* bad judgment when it comes to tricky situations.

This time, I do move. I have to—Wes will get himself shot otherwise. I grab his thigh and dig my nails into his skin, right under the hem of his shorts. His head jerks toward me, and I glare at him, a *Don't you dare do it* look. I shake my head once and glare more. I can practically see the *But, Nora . . .* in his raised eyebrows until he finally slumps down, defeated.

Okay. Okay. Breathe. Focus.

The robber. He's shouting at the teller. The teller—is there only one? why is there only one?—is a middle-aged blond lady with glasses looped on an aqua chain. My mind's in overdrive, noting things like I'll need them later.

He's shouting about the bank manager. It's hard to hear because the teller is full-out *sobbing*. She's all shaking hands and red cheeks, and there is no way the silent alarm got pushed unless she did it by accident. With the gun in her face, she's in full-on panic mode.


Can't blame her. You never know how you're going to react until the gun's out.

None of the three of us have fainted yet, so I figure we're good. For now. It's something.

But when it comes to saving the day, teller's out. Sheriff's not coming unless someone hits the alarm. My eyes track to the left best I can without moving my head too much. Is there another teller hiding somewhere? Where's the security guard? Do they even have one at this branch?

Footsteps behind me. I tense, and Iris lets out a little gasp. I







press my arm harder against hers, wishing I could flood reassurance into her through our skin. But when there's a gun, there's not really a lot of that to give.

Wait. Footsteps—rushed. As they pass me, I look up enough to see the sawed-off shotgun in the guy's hand as he circles his way up to the front. It's a slow jolt to my chest, all dread and churning sick. It's not just one guy. It's two.

Two robbers. Both white. Clean jeans, heavy boots. Black T-shirts, no logos.

I swallow with a click, my mouth dry like the desert, my heart doing a tap dance in the rhythm of *We're gonna die! Holy shit, we're gonna die!*

My hands are sweating. I clench them—God, how long has it been? Two minutes? Five? Time goes funny when you're pressed to the floor with a gun swinging in your face—and for the first time, I think about Lee.



Oh no. *Lee.*

I can't get shot. My sister will kill me. But first, she'll make it her life's mission to hunt down whoever shot me. And when she's got a mission, Lee's scary. I speak from experience, because when I was twelve, Lee got me away from our mom with the kind of long con that even the Queen of the Grift didn't see coming. She's in prison now . . . Mom, not Lee.

And I helped put her there.

I can't let fear take over. I have to keep calm and find a way out. This is a problem. Work the problem to fix the problem.

When we came in, who else was in the bank other than the teller? I trace it back in my head. There'd been a woman at the front of the line. Red Cap pushed her aside when he started shouting.



Now she's on the floor to my left, her purse tossed a foot away. Gray Cap had come up behind us. He must have been sitting in the waiting area.

My stomach somersaults when I remember that another person was sitting there—a kid. I can't turn my head enough to see where she ended up, but I glanced at her when I came in.

She's ten, maybe eleven. Does she belong to the woman up front? She must.

But I've got a perfect line of sight on the woman, and she hasn't even glanced toward the chairs where the kid was.

Okay. Five grown-ups or almost-grown-ups. One kid. Two bank robbers. Two guns at least, maybe more.

Those are bad numbers.

"We want in the basement." Red Cap keeps shoving his gun in the teller's face, and it's not helping. It's making her more scared, and if he keeps doing it . . .

"Stop shouting."

It's the first time Gray Cap's spoken. His voice is gruff, not like he's trying to disguise it, but like that's just the way it is. Like years of living have torn the insides out and all that's left is a suggestion of a voice. Instantly, Red Cap steps back.

"Get the cameras," Gray Cap orders. And the one in red scurries through the bank lobby and behind the teller stands, cutting the cords of the security cameras before returning to Gray Cap's side.

Iris nudges me. She's watching them as hard as I am. I press back to let her know I see it, too.

The guy in red may have made the first move, but Gray Cap's the one in charge.

"Where's Frayn?" Gray Cap asks.





“He’s not here yet,” the teller says.

“She’s lying,” Red Cap scoffs. But he licks his lips. He’s spooked at the thought.

*Who’s Frayn?*

“Go look,” Gray Cap orders.

Red Cap’s shoes pass by us, and he disappears from the lobby.

I take advantage of the moment, as soon as I’m sure he’s out of sight and Gray Cap’s distracted by the teller, to turn my head to the right. The kid’s under the coffee table in the middle of the waiting area, and even this far away, I can see her shaking.

“The kid,” Wes whispers to me. His eyes are on her, too.

*I know*, I mouth. I wish she’d meet my eyes, so I could at least shoot her some sort of reassuring look, but she’s got her face pressed against the ugly brown carpet.

Footsteps. Fear kicks up a notch in my chest as Red Cap comes back. “Manager’s office is locked.”

The panic in his voice makes it crack.

“Where is Frayn?” Gray Cap demands again.

“He’s late!” the teller squeaks out. “He had to go get Judy, our other teller. Her car wouldn’t start. He’s late.”

Something’s gone wrong. Whatever they’ve planned, the first step’s been messed up. And when people screw up, in my experience, they do one of two things. They either run or they double down.

For a split second, I think they might run. That we’ll get out of this with nightmares and a story that’ll give us mileage at every party for the rest of our lives. But then, any hope of that gets shattered.

It’s like slow motion. The bank door swings open, and that





security guard I'd been wondering about walks in, his hands full of coffee cups.

He doesn't have a chance. Red Cap—impulsive, shaky, and way too spooked—shoots before the guy can drop the lattes and reach for his stun baton.

The cups fall to the ground. Then so does the guard. Blood blossoms at his shoulder, a small stain that grows bigger by the second.

Things happen in rapid movement, like I'm being sped through a flipbook. Because this is where it gets real. Before the trigger's pulled, there's a slim chance of okay-ness you can hold on to.

After? Not so much.

As the guard falls forward, someone—the teller—screams. Wes throws himself toward Iris and me to shield us, and we curl up tight until we're this muddle of legs and arms and fear and hurt feelings that we really should be putting aside, all things considered . . . and me?

I grab my cell phone. I don't know if I'll have another chance. I slide it out of my jeans pocket as Gray Cap swears, stepping past our tangle on his way to disarm the guard and yell at Red Cap. Wes is leaning on it, so I can barely move my arm, but I manage to tap out a message to Lee.

*Olive.* Five letters. Definitely not my favorite food. Technically a fruit, just like the tomato.

And maybe the key to our freedom. For as long as I've known my sister, it's been our distress code. We are girls who prepare for storms.

Lee will come. My sister always shows up.

And she'll bring the cavalry.







# 3

## Phone Call Transcript between Lee Ann O'Malley and Deputy Jessica Reynolds

August 8, 9:18 a.m.

**Deputy Reynolds:** This is Reynolds.

**O'Malley:** Jess, it's Lee. Can you check to see if any silent alarms have been triggered at the bank? The branch on Miller Street, next to the old donut shop that moved last year?

**Deputy Reynolds:** You on a job? What's up?

**O'Malley:** Not a job. Nora sent me a distress signal.


**Deputy Reynolds:** You guys have a distress signal?

**O'Malley:** She's a teenage girl. Of course we have a distress signal. She told me she'd deposit the money the kids raised last night before coming into the office. I tracked her phone—she's still at the bank.

**Deputy Reynolds:** Someone mentioned the bank on the scanner earlier, but no alarms have gone off. Let me check . . . Here it is. The bank manager was in a car accident on the way to work. They took him to the hospital. You think Nora's pranking you?

**O'Malley:** She wouldn't. I'm heading over.





**Deputy Reynolds:** I'll meet you. Don't go in until I  
show up, okay?

*[Silence]*

**Deputy Reynolds:** Okay?

*[End of call]*



# 4

9:19 a.m. (7 minutes captive)

**They're arguing.** Red and Gray Cap. Red's freaking as the guard lies there on his back, bleeding into the carpet. Thank God he only got shot in the arm. He'll probably be okay. For now. But someone needs to put pressure on his wound, and they're just ignoring him.

"I told you this was a bad idea. You said no one would get hurt. That we'd just get Frayn into the basement to open the—"

"Quiet," Gray Cap growls, casting a glance toward us.

I keep my head down, but I'm listening to every word.

They've got to be talking about safe-deposit boxes. That's what's in the basement. Those things are gold mines of secrets. People love stashing stuff in there that they don't want anyone else to know about. But if the bank manager is the only person who can access the basement where the boxes are kept . . .

That's why they need him. And if he isn't here?

Boom goes their plan.

No wonder they're panicking hard enough to shoot. Someone might've heard the gunshot, but the bank is the only thing left in this once-full strip mall. And even if no one heard it . . . my text to Lee went through. Any minute, she's going to bring the wrath






of O'Malley Private Investigations down on these guys. She'll probably rope in the sheriff's department. They're not great, but they'll bring guns.

More guns aren't always good, though. In most situations, more guns make everything worse. And cops always make things worse. But it's a risk I had to take to let Lee know something was wrong.


"Lock the doors and go watch the parking lot," Gray Cap orders. Red Cap scurries to obey, like he's grateful for something to do.

He's gonna be the weak link here. The mark, if I need one. My mind's skipping like flat rocks on a still pond, trying to make a plan.

"You," Gray Cap barks. Wes stiffens. His chest's still practically in my face, and I can feel his muscles flex as I realize Gray Cap's talking to him. "You're husky. Drag him away from the windows."



Wes glances down at me, just a one-second glance before he stands up, and the look on his face tells me not to worry.



Which, of course, sends me into a freaking tailspin. What's he going to do? He better just follow the guy's directions.

Gray Cap's gun and attention are on Wes as he moves toward the security guard, and it makes my skin crawl. My hand twists in Iris's, and she squeezes, trying to reassure me, but there's none of that here.

Wes bends, hesitating as he tries to figure out the best way to move the guard without hurting him more. He hefts him up in one movement. Wes is tall and strong, and sometimes that helps him, but here, right now, it makes him the biggest threat in this entire bank to those men, and my teeth dig into my lower lip as he turns to look at Gray Cap.



“Where do you want him?”

“Over there.” The man gestures with the gun toward the little lobby area, where the kid’s still hiding under the table.

My stomach drops, because Wes hesitates. That gun in Gray Cap’s hand snaps back to him so fast, Iris sucks in a soft breath next to me.

“Was I not clear?” Gray Cap asks, and there it is. The anger in his voice. I’ve been waiting for it. Poised on a knife’s edge until I heard it.

There’s nothing like an angry man with a gun. I learned that early.

“Sorry, man, this is gonna hurt.” Wes shifts the guard up, his face twisting as the man lets out a punch of a sound, all pain and fear. Wes handles him as gently as he can—I can see how careful he’s being; Wes is always careful—but more blood spills down the man’s arm as Wes places him down in the lobby area, away from the glass doors.

Gray Cap grabs one of the heavy posts that holds a sign advertising mortgage loans, tears the sign part off, and threads the metal pole through the handles of the bank’s door, making it hard to flee and harder to breach.

This is getting worse by the minute. We don’t have police in Clear Creek; we’re too small and rural. We just have the sheriff and his six-deputy team, two of whom are part-time, and the closest SWAT team is . . . God, I don’t even know. Sacramento, maybe? Hundreds of miles away through the mountains.

“All of you, get over there in the waiting area.” Gray Cap gestures to where the guard and the kid are. We obey, and the teller joins us, her face still wet with tears as she stares down at





the guard. Iris whips off her cardigan and presses it against the guard's shoulder, and then the teller seems to snap out of it, taking over for her with a shaky nod.

"It's gonna be okay, Hank," she tells the guard. His mouth twists in pain as she tries to stop the blood.

"Are you okay?" I ask the kid. Her eyes are wide and glassy. She jerks her head quickly.

"It's going to be fine," Wes tells her.

"Quiet, all of you. I want your phones, purses, keys, and wallets, everything in a pile, right there." Gray Cap points with the gun to the lobby table.

I place my phone and wallet on the table, Wes following my lead.

Iris sets her wicker-basket purse carefully next to our stuff, the red Bakelite cherries attached to the handle shaking at the movement. She glances at me as she sits back down, a gleam in her eye, and my stomach jolts as I realize what's missing on the table: She still has her silver lighter. I saw her pocket it in the parking lot. And it's still there, tucked in the folds of her vintage dress. The skirt is full, falling over Iris's second-poofiest crinoline, and the dress is tailored so well that the pocket's hidden in the sharp folds of cotton.

*They don't make clothes like this anymore, Nora.* She'd said that the first time we met, when she was spinning in that red skirt of hers with the gold swirls. It had flared out around her like magic, like she was the flick of flame before an inferno, and I hadn't been able to breathe around how much I wanted her to be *something* in my future.

Just like right now. She's my present and my future, with our





only weapon tucked into deceptive layers of cotton and tulle. She's already thinking this through to freedom, and it's the spark of hope I need.

I nod the slightest bit to let her know I get it. One edge of her mouth quirks up so her dimple flashes, just for a second.

Asset #1: Lighter





# 5

## The Iris of It All

When I met her, I didn't fall for Iris Moulton like a ton of bricks.

No, I actually tripped over her, like she was a ton of bricks.

One weekend last year, I'd been running some files downtown for Lee, and I wasn't looking where I was going. Next thing I know, I'm falling ass over ankles, the papers are everywhere, and this girl, this freckled brunette who looks like she's cosplaying a Hitchcock movie, is tangled up with me.

It was the perfect meet-cute, except when you're a girl who likes other girls, there's this little additional dance, because what if she doesn't? So you're not looking for red flags like a girl does with a guy—you're looking for rainbow ones.

I thought we were going to be friends. And we were, at first. But I told myself that's all we could be. After everything with Wes . . . I told myself I *couldn't*. Not until I figured out how to explain everything in a way that didn't ruin everything. And I was pretty sure that was impossible, so basically, I was looking at a life of celibacy and misery and hiding.

Then there was Iris, with her poofy fifties sundresses and her wicker purse shaped like a frog and that fixation on fire that







would be creepy if you didn't know she wanted to be an arson investigator.

It took months. She slow-rolled a kind of subtle romantic warfare I didn't even see coming, and then one day, I was on a date with her before I even realized what was happening. It was a whole Mr. Darcy/Elizabeth Bennet *I was in the middle before I knew I'd begun* sort of thing, where I was Darcy and she was Elizabeth, and I do not have the gravitas or snobbery to pull a Darcy, let me tell you. But apparently, I had the Darcy cluelessness, because we were halfway through dinner before I realized it was maybe a date. Partly because I kept telling myself it *couldn't* be a date.

And I wasn't completely sure until she turned to me on our way home, halfway through the crosswalk on the empty street, and just stopped. Her hand slipped around my waist and her hip brushed against mine like she belonged there, and it felt like she did, in every vital part of me. The last thing I saw before her lips met mine was the WALK light illuminated in her eyes, and she kissed me like I was prickly, like I was already understood, like I was worth it.

It had been *sparkly*. I hadn't even realized you could feel sparkly. I thought it was strictly a sequin-and-glitter-and-precious-gemstone thing, but then all of a sudden Iris Moulton kissed me and proved me wrong, and it was just sparkles lighting up my darkness everywhere.

I didn't fall for Iris like a ton of bricks.

I fell like I was a star and she was the end of the world. A cataclysmic crash of two people, never to be the same. Never getting back up.

Not unless we were doing it together.





# 6

9:24 a.m. (12 minutes captive)

*1 lighter, no plan*

## “What’s this?”

Gray Cap’s pulled the bank bag from Iris’s purse. He unzips it, inspects the thick wad of cash, and then looks at her.

“It’s money we raised for the animal shelter,” I say quickly. His attention slides from her to me, and the relief knocks inside my ribs like that silly, ornate bee door knocker Lee put on our front door. “We had a fundraiser. Take it. There’s almost three thousand dollars.”

He laughs, and it’s a sound I know, just like the gun is a sight I know. It’s curling in its cruelty and condescension. Designed to snake around me and make me feel even smaller than the gun does.

But I’m past the fear now. It’s not gone, but it’s not useful. I can only do useful right now.

“Handing over the big bucks, huh?”

The more he talks, the more I learn. So I should keep him talking. “It’s what we’ve got.”

He tosses the open bag on the table, and the money skitters out, fanning across the polished surface. “It’s not what I want.”

Then he grabs the table, dragging it—and all our phones—away from us.





*What do you want?* That's the question, right? My mom used to tell me: *Give a person what they want, you'll have them in the palm of your hand.* That goes double or maybe even triple for bank robbers whose plan has gone kablooeey.

They want the bank manager. They can't have him. So that means they need what the bank manager would have given them.

Access to the safe-deposit boxes.

How do I give them that? Do I need to give them that? Or do I just need them to *think* I can give them that?

A plan is flitting in my brain like a bug around a porch light, but I'm not sure where all the pieces fall yet. I need more. More information. More clues. More time to understand the dynamic between these two.

But I'm not going to get it. Red Cap lets out a noise from the door, startled and worried.

"Someone's coming," he calls from his lookout spot. "Woman."

Gray Cap's focus whips from us to the door.

It's like the seven of us tense as a unit when the sound of the door rattling fills the dead-quiet bank. The sound echoes off the walls and then stops. Agonizing seconds tick by.

"She's heading back to her car."

"Keep out of sight," Gray Cap snaps.

It's a breath-holding moment, and just when they're about to let it out . . .

Feedback lances through the parking lot. You can hear it clear inside the bank before her voice booms through the walls, magnified by the megaphone:

"I'm talking to the person who's got the gun inside the bank. My name is Lee. In a few seconds, the phone in there's gonna start





ringing. That'll be me calling. Pick up, we can figure out a solution to this problem you've found yourself in. Don't pick up? Well, that's a choice you can make. I don't think you want to make that choice, though."

As soon as she stops talking, I start counting.

*Ten. Nine. Eight.*

Red Cap scrambles away from the door, peering out the window instead.

*Seven. Six. Five.*

Gray Cap rounds on us, the wounded guard, the scared teller, the older lady, the three teenagers pissed off at each other, and the kid.

*Four. Three. Two.*

His gun's rising. Mouth's opening. Anger's coming. The dangerous kind.

*One.*

The phone behind the teller's booth starts to ring.

*Go Time.*

