

# 1

## Sister

I woke up to sunshine pouring in through the bedroom window of the holiday cottage. It was going to be another hot day. I yawned and sat up in bed, careful not to disturb Madison. Her long, dark hair was spread over the pillow. I brushed it gently back, revealing her sweet, heart-shaped face.

As I moved, Madison moaned in her sleep. Her lashes were long and dark against her soft cheek but I could see the tear-drops they still held. It had been like this every night since we'd arrived at the holiday cottage last week. A nightmare kept waking her – bringing her into my room, where I'd have to stroke her hair to get her back to sleep. Later, I'd wake to find her crying in her sleep . . . soft whimpers that broke my heart.

I bent down now and kissed her forehead, carefully drawing the quilt over her bare shoulder. I watched her for a moment as her breath grew less even and her eyes slowly opened.

'Hey, Lauren,' she mumbled. 'I was dreaming about Daddy again.'

'I know, babycakes,' I whispered. 'It's OK.'

Our father, Sam, had died suddenly nine months ago. Losing him was a big aching hole inside me, even though I

didn't grow up with him. He was my birth dad, but I had been kidnapped when I was tiny, and adopted, so I didn't know him until two years ago.

Sam had been really special and I missed him every day, but when I looked at my birth mum, Annie, or my sisters – Shelby and Madison – I could see that Sam dying so suddenly had been much worse for them . . . it had ripped their hearts out. Madison especially, being so young. She was only eight. My guts twisted thinking about how she must feel.

Now Madison nuzzled in close beside me. I stroked her hair and she yawned and stretched like a cat, arching her back and reaching her arms over her head. A moment later she was off the bed and scampering to the window. She turned to me with big brown eyes.

'Can we go to the beach today?'

I grinned at her. 'Sure – just as soon as you've had breakfast.'

'Yayy!!' Madison skipped round the room, her nightmares forgotten. She pulled on a pink tutu over her blue check pyjama bottoms. Her hair flew out behind her as she spun.

It suddenly struck me that I'd never understood that phrase: *a breath of fresh air*, before. But that was Madison – fresh air in a dull, flat world: the only person ever to raise a smile from Annie and the only person who always made me feel good about myself.

Madison stopped in mid-spin and stared at me. 'But no Shelby,' she said. 'Promise, Lauren. Shelby can't come too.'

I smiled. One of the many things that bound Madison and me together was a dislike of our middle sister. Shelby was

*always* rude and aggressive. Only yesterday, she'd made Madison cry by sneering that she was too old to still be playing with dolls.

'Sure,' I said. 'If you get dressed really fast we'll be able to leave before she even wakes up.'

With a wide-eyed nod, Madison vanished from the room. I pulled on my clothes quickly, then checked myself in the mirror – the denim shorts, fitted T-shirt and sandals all looked OK. I took a straw bag from the wardrobe and fetched two towels and some sun cream from the bathroom. It had been amazingly hot for days, considering it was only April, and today looked like it was going to be no exception.

I tied my hair off my face and applied a little eyeliner and lip gloss. I slid the lip gloss into my bag along with my phone. Madison would enjoy playing with both of them while I hopefully tanned my legs. I already had a bikini top on under my T-shirt. Grabbing my sunglasses, I left the room.

Madison was downstairs, wolfing down a bowl of cereal.

'Well OK, you and Lauren can go, but only if you stay close together,' Annie said, twisting her hands anxiously over each other. She was wearing her dressing gown and yesterday's make-up.

'We'll be fine,' I said firmly. 'I'll look after Mo and—'

'But who'll look after *you*?', Annie interrupted. She picked up her coffee cup and sipped at it distractedly.

*For goodness' sake.* I gripped the sides of the table. I *wanted* to be sympathetic. I knew how hard losing Sam had hit her. It was hard for all of us. But why did she have to act

like I was about to be kidnapped again every time I took two steps away from her? I was sixteen, and taking my GCSEs in a couple of months.

Swallowing down my irritation I forced a smile on my face. 'We'll be fine,' I repeated.

'Don't you want to wait for Shelby to get up?' Annie asked.

'No, Mom,' Madison said firmly. 'We want to go *now*.' She stood up from the table and looped her little blue bag over her shoulder. I caught her eye, knowing what was inside the bag.

'OK, but . . . but are you sure you wouldn't rather go for a drive and a picnic?' Annie said.

Madison and I exchanged an alarmed glance. Annie's idea of a picnic consisted of a short journey during which she complained constantly about the narrow country lanes and having to drive on the 'wrong' side of the road, followed by a random meal based on whatever she'd found in the fridge. Over the past few days we'd sat on quite a few beaches, trying – and failing – to find one of the caves which Annie said the area was full of, and eating bizarre stuff like boiled egg and dried apricot salad . . . or, on one occasion, a packet of seeds that turned out to be bird food.

'Er . . . no thanks,' I said.

'OK, well, take this.' Annie shoved a couple of twenty-pound notes into my hand. 'Promise you'll be back by midday, OK?'

I rolled my eyes. 'All right.'

Madison raced across the room and put her bowl in the

sink. She was dressed in denim shorts and a T-shirt that was a similar blue to mine.

As both of us have long dark hair and the same easy-tan skin, our eyes (mine blue, Mo's dark brown) marked the only real colouring difference between us.

'Hey, we're twins, Mo,' I said.

'I know.' She beamed at me. 'I'm ready.'

'Take a jacket, both of you,' Annie said, bustling out to the coat stand in the hall.

'No need, it's already boiling out there.' I held out my hand and felt Madison's warm, small fingers curl round mine. 'Bye, Annie.'

'Bye, Mom,' called Madison. Giggling, she let me drag her out of the kitchen door and round the side of the house.

As she skipped down the pavement, still holding my hand, I could hear Annie's plaintive voice behind us. 'Be careful . . .' Irritation coiled round me like a snake.

We walked on. The sun beat down on my face, warming me through. The closer we got to the beach the happier I felt, the cloying weight of Annie's worry lifting as we left her behind.

It didn't occur to me for a second that she was right to worry . . . that there was anything *to* worry about.

And yet, two hours later my whole world would be turned upside down. And, though I didn't know it at the time, it would all be my fault.