

## Chapter 1

“Are you okay?” John asks.

“How can I be okay? My child’s not okay. I may never be... okay,” I say.

Finally, we are on the road. The air in the car hangs heavy. I inhale her name, hugging it inside. I plead with God to help her. The cell phone buzzes with calls. After hanging up, I report each conversation to John. Both of our sons are now at the house with the dogs. Our oldest daughter, Charlotte, is trying to reach her fiancé. I speak to my sister, and John’s sister, cancel reservations, photographer, flowers. Charlotte and David will not be getting married at the beach this weekend.

*The phone had rung at about 4 am. I smiled. There were bound to be last minute questions. All of our family was gathering at the coast later that day for Charlotte’s wedding Thanksgiving weekend. The trunk of my car was already filled with the food I had made during the past week. I had just showered and was about to put on my clothes.*

*“This is Dr. Taber at Coast City General. Is this Mia’s mother?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Mia was injured early this morning in Coast City. She’s in critical but stable condition.”*

*“Excuse me, who is this? What did you just say?”*

*“This is the chief resident on the trauma team at Coast City General Hospital. Mia is hurt. EMS found her lying in the middle of the street. She has a right side*

*skull fracture causing bleeding into her brain, and a temporal break in front of her left ear as well as a facial fracture on the same side of her face. The breaks are causing bleeding into her sinuses. Her right foot, well, her foot was torn apart after being run over or dragged by a vehicle. We'll address it after we take care of the brain bleed. We just finished sewing her left eyelid back together and have repaired her cheekbone. That eye is in question. Her face is paralyzed, and she isn't able to hear on the left side. We are in the process of assessing other injuries. There are decisions to be made. She needs you here."*

*Freshly showered and dressed, John came into the room and said, "Only your sister would call just as we're trying to leave. Is she lost already?" he asked.*

*"Oh, John, it's Mia, dear God, it's Mia. She's badly hurt. We have to go."*

*After making only the necessary calls, mostly leaving messages, I filled a duffle bag, tossed it down the stairs to John, threw on my clothes, and we headed to the car.*

*My stomach clenched then screamed, for the three minutes it took us to take out the food I'd packed in my trunk. We piled white buttermilk cupcakes topped with mounds of coconut icing, golden crusted orange and lemon zest cheesecakes, honey baked ham, pine nut hummus, pounds of fragrant Brie, and a huge fresh turkey onto the refrigerator shelves. I shivered in front of the cold metal doors.*

## Chapter 2

The calls keep coming. Word is traveling faster than we are. What about Mia's boyfriend, Trey? Was he hurt too? Then her number appears on my phone. Hope floods my brain.

"This is Stacy, Trey's cousin. Have you talked to Dr. Taber?"

"Yes," I say.

"Well, just wanted you to know I can see Mia. They're working on her. I'll stay at the hospital until you get here.

"Where is Trey? Is he alright?"

"I don't know where he is. Haven't talked to him. See you soon. Bye."

How does Stacy have Mia's phone?

When we are almost to Coast City, my phone rings. "Caroline, this is Trey."

"Are you hurt?" I whisper. "What happened? Were you with Mia when she was hurt?"

"I need to talk to you before you see her. Call me when you reach the hospital. Have to go."

Why was he so abrupt? What is more important than telling me about Mia?

I call Trey as we pull into the primary-colored parking garage. Leaving the car we walk to the front of Coast City Trauma Center. Five minutes later, he strolls over to us. He's about five foot ten, has a dark tan, broad shoulders, tapered waist, Roman nose, and buzz-cut black hair.

We wait for Trey to say something. His eyes flit back and forth between our faces.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

He plunges into his story.

“Mia was drinking so much at the birthday party last night. She never does that. She started screaming at me when I told her about the girl across the room who was flirting with me. The girl kept looking over, and winking in that way, you know, the way girls let you know they’re real interested. Mia pulled her arm away from me when I told her how into me the girl was. We took a cab back to her apartment, fighting non-stop. She was so mad. I ran away from her. She chased me all over the neighborhood, throwing everything in her purse at me, screaming how much she hated me, and never wanted to see me again. She even tried to scratch me. I had to get away. She was out of control. She scared me.”

“How did she get hurt?” John asks.

“She was psycho. Her keys and phone almost hit me. I could have been hurt.”

“How did Stacy call me from Mia’s phone?”

No answer.

“I got in my car to go home, to get away from your crazy daughter. To keep her busy, I threw her keys in the bushes. She jumped on my car. I wanted her off of it, and I wanted her to stop screaming. She must have fallen or something. I don’t know what she did. I left.”

I look at his dark, bloodshot eyes, his clean, perfectly pressed short-sleeved collared black polo shirt, his unmarked, clean-shaven face --and arms.

“But why did you leave her?” John asks.

“If I’d stayed, I would’ve been put in jail,” Trey says, his eyes studying his feet.

The word coward sticks like gum to the roof of my mouth. Surely he didn’t mean he left Mia hurt to save himself? If he just got to the hospital, what had he been doing since early this morning?

### Chapter 3

Mia is being moved to pediatric ICU just as we reach the Emergency Room. Even though she is over twenty-one, she needs the skilled attention provided in the unit. As we go up the stairs, I look at John's narrowed eyes, and straight mouth. Trey's words must have just sunk in. Bile sears my throat.

My daughter looks so very small in the hospital bed. Her neck is supported by a thick, stiff, yellow neck brace which suffocates her as she vomits. Her almond shaped eyes are swollen beyond recognition. The left one is lopsided, and ringed with black stitches. The mound underneath that eye protrudes, and is laced with thread.

Her right leg is elevated. Her foot is loosely covered. Tubes hang and monitors bleep. A strangled moan causes blood to pour out of her drooping mouth. Red bubbles burst from her nostrils.

When I approach the bed, I see her twisted left hand pierced by an IV needle. It is her other hand I touch. She feels cool but alive. She tries to speak. Only a gurgle comes out.

"I love you," I say.

John bends over and tenderly presses his lips to the top of Mia's head. He begins pacing in the small space, trying to keep out of the way of the ICU nurse and residents. They ask us to step out of the room while they continue to work on her.

As we stagger into the waiting area, Trey's mother, Rita, looks up from her chair. The clack of her heels greets us as she gets up and hurries over to where we stand.

"Well, she is looking good, don't you think? They just finished cleaning her up. She's going to be just fine. I had to rush over here to see her with my own eyes. I guess we aren't going to be able to write off her mood swings to PMS any more. Now it's going to be brain trauma."

Stunned silent, my eyes focus on her lips and wait for her to continue.

"Did you have a good trip? You made really good time. Trey didn't call me until almost nine. He knows I like to sleep in a little bit on Sundays. Did you see him outside? Bless his heart. He is shaken up. He almost cried when he told me about Mia. Do you know my niece, Stacy? Well, anyway, she has been here for hours letting him know how our girl was doing. Gerard wanted to be here but you know how it is with police detectives. They're always working. Today he's protecting a Coast City football coach but we'll probably see him later. You know, he's the one who really loves Mia."

*The first time I met the Pillars, I was in Coast City with my son, Mark, moving Mia into her apartment. At the time, it surprised me Trey wasn't there to help. Wanting to see him, and to meet his family to thank them all for looking out for my daughter, I asked them to join us for brunch at the Oasis. As we ate, Rita told me her husband, Gerard, worked undercover when Trey was young. With the help of the other women in her family, she raised her son.*

*He was her “sensitive” child, the one who stayed close to her even when he went away to college, calling her every day between classes for advice, and comfort. She said her other children were more independent, and tough-skinned. They had not shared the same childhood experiences. She said she never wanted her boy to go into law enforcement. He didn’t have the “right” temperament. That she didn’t want her son to be unstable.*

As I think about her comments now, I wonder if on some level Rita was trying to warn me about problems he developed as a child. If only I had thought about what she was saying – then. Mia has always at least listened to my opinion.

“What happened?” John asks her. “We still don’t know how Mia was hurt.”

“Well, I guess she did it to herself trying to keep Trey from leaving. It sounds like she went crazy. She shouldn’t drink like that. He didn’t know what to do, so he left.”

She turns to me. “You have really nice skin. I ruined mine by being in the sun too much. I keep telling the kids, protect your faces.”

I look at the faint white scars on her face. I don’t know why she would draw attention to them or attribute them to sun damage. Is it possible she’s been hurt? What is she trying to tell me? I look at John. He raises his eyebrows, and then with his mouth closed, he blows air out through his nose.

We push the button beside the locked ICU door. Once admitted, we stand and gaze at our crumpled child. We still have no idea how she ended up in this condition. After awhile, they sedate her, and she sinks into sleep. We step back



into the waiting room. Seeing Trey, John asks him if he has keys to Mia's apartment. He gives us his set, and we drive to her place, about ten minutes away.

We pull into her spot and try to figure out where Trey was parked. We look for some sign of what happened. There are about thirty concrete block units with windows on her side of the complex. A street lined with mottled cottages on unkempt, small city lots is across from the parking lot. Someone must have heard or seen something. We still don't know who called EMS. Icy darts shoot down my back.

After I take a quick shower, John drives me to the hospital to spend the night.

## Chapter 4

The evening creeps on. They take Mia in and out of the room every other hour to scan her head. John comes back to the hospital in time to hear her brain has stopped bleeding. However, to save her foot, her raw, skinless, instep has to be pieced together right away. They prep her for the plastic surgery team. We watch our child being wheeled into the operating room. I implore God to guide the hands of the team.

While we are waiting for an update on Mia, the hospital business rep approaches John and asks him to come downstairs to talk about payment. Fifteen minutes later he comes back to the surgical waiting room and walks over to me. Red speckles his cheeks. His eyes are black holes.

“You are not going to believe this. Our car insurance will be covering Mia’s medical bills not her health insurance.”

“How can that be? She wasn’t driving.”

“EMS submitted a statement to the hospital saying she was involved in a hit and run which is a vehicular incident. The bookkeeper told me the police had to file a report as soon as she was picked up. She suggested I get a copy so I called CCPD but was told there wasn’t one available. I don’t get it. Hit and run is a felony.”

John walks over to Trey and Rita.

“You ran over Mia, didn’t you?” he asks Trey.

Rita answers. "It was an accident. We carry Trey on our insurance policy. We'll take care of everything," she says.

*It wasn't until much later that I realized -- they did. They buried everything but Mia.*

## Chapter 5

The first surgery is unsuccessful. There is no skin left which is strong enough to hold the top of Mia's foot together. The plan is to operate again in two days. Crimson teardrops stain her face as she begs for water. Her weak pleas wrench my stomach. My heart constricts. She cries for Trey. He is something I can give her. Without thinking, I let him into her room. The tears stop. Relief washes over me and my heart expands.

From the moment he enters the room, Trey's mouth does not stop moving. He cycles through the story of the "accident". He bombards her with his words. "I would never hurt you. I love you. I'll never leave you. You were the crazy one. You hurt yourself. I left you to keep from getting hurt. I left so I could take care of you. I don't know what happened to you. I left. You drank too much. You were jealous over nothing. You argued with me." I hear him repeat the same lines over and over again.

He coached her and she became his parrot.

John steps outside and calls our insurance agent to file a claim. While he is talking, Trey and I are moved out of Mia's room into the hall. When I see John coming toward us, I cringe. His face is almost purple. My legs begin to buckle. What now?

"Tell me what you did to Mia? How in the world could you leave her in the middle of the street?" John says to Trey.

"If I had stayed, I would've been put in jail. I couldn't go to jail. I knew Mia

would need me to take care of her. Anyway, Mia wouldn't want me there. We love each other. Remember, she was the crazy one. She caused the accident," Trey says, his eyes slipping past John's face.

"She needs you to take care of her? You left her, so you could take care of her? She almost died because you left her. And just how do you know she loves you? Last week she told her mother she was going to stop seeing you. She said she was sick of your games. Are you sure you didn't know that? Just how much did you have to drink?" John says.

"She was the one out of control, but I swear, I'll never have another drop of alcohol," Trey says. "And I'll never fight with her again. She'll never get hurt. I'll take care of her. She'll never be sorry she's with me."

Sucking in his breath, then clamping his teeth together, John glares at Trey, turns on his heels, and with fists curled into balls, walks away. I trail behind thankful no one was hurt.

After the exchange, we go to the hospital cafeteria for coffee and to discuss what our insurance agent said.

"I told Tom that Mia was involved in a hit and run accident. Then I told him what Trey said including the part about drinking and arguing. He told me EMS had to give a statement to the police when they brought Mia into the hospital because hit and run is a felony. He also said if the driver is under the influence, the punishment is a mandatory seven-year prison stay. It is considered domestic abuse in Florida when the victim is in a relationship with the attacker. That adds another thirteen years. Trey has a bigger problem than me," said John. "The

police should pick him up soon, according to Tom. I gave him Trey's name and said he was on his dad's policy."

"John, I believe Trey when he said they were fighting. But then his story falls apart. Mia is feisty but she is also extra small, was wearing high heels and had been drinking excessively. I don't know how she could have chased him or caught him or hurt him," I say.

"Well, he always conveniently leaves out how much he had to drink and what he did to her," says John. "It's almost as though he's reciting from a script. Who would have prepped him like that?"

While John gets up to re-fill his cup, I wonder about Mia and Trey's cab ride home. Maybe the driver remembers how they were acting. I need to know what happened to my daughter. Surely, someone knows. Surely, the police are investigating. Mia almost died.

Fueled by caffeine and anger, John returns to where I'm sitting.

"How he could have told us, if he stayed, he would have been put in jail? He never thought about what could happen to Mia. Saying he left so he could take care of her – what a self-centered bastard. He deserves to be beaten bloody with a baseball bat and dumped in the street to die." John says as he sits down with a steaming cup of coffee. John is emerging from his cocoon of shock. His face is flushed. His nostrils flare. His wiry black and white eyebrows are raised so high they point. The heat from his body warms the room.

"John, this is a police matter. They will take care of Trey. You should go home tomorrow. Mia will have been stable for forty-eight hours. You can be more

effective in Pine City taking care of the insurance issues, and your business. And the boys can't tend our dogs much longer. I have Mia's car to get around in."

"You're right. I can get more done at home. I don't want you here by yourself, though. If Dottie can come down and stay with you, I'll go back to Pine City." He picks up his phone and calls his sister. Dottie answers on the second ring and agrees to drive to Coast City the next day.

After spending a fitful night in Mia's room, John once more drives me back to her apartment. Clean and fed, we return to the hospital. John looks in at his daughter one more time. Her condition has continued to improve. In spite of the good news, he leaves for Pine City with tears coursing down his cheeks.

When Mia nods off to sleep, I leave ICU and walk the hall to stretch my legs and back and slow down the pace of my heart. Peeking into the waiting area, I see Gerard, Trey's father. He calls to me. As I walk towards him, I notice that he is smiling at a young woman across the room. Slowly she lifts her hand to wave. When I reach him, Gerard says, "See that girl over there with the long black braid? I answered a call at her house and saved her from being killed by her husband. He was pounding her so I grabbed him and convinced her to file charges against him. Most women don't want to get their men in trouble but I can make them do anything."

Mouth open, I look at Gerard's jack-o-lantern face, turn, and head back to Mia.

Again, I miss the point.

## Chapter 6

While I'm sitting with Mia, a woman comes in and asks if she can speak to me for a moment. She says she is a neuropsychologist. Her brown eyes dig into mine as she explains that Mia has had significant brain trauma. She hands me a canvas bag packed with head injury information, grooming essentials, a notebook, and a disposable camera. She encourages me to read the materials, take pictures of Mia, and contact her with any questions. Not only do I not want to photograph her injuries, I am hoping a day will come when I don't see her smashed, blood-smeared, swollen face every time I close my eyes.

Only the notebook appears useful. In it, I begin to record Mia's medications and tests. I also write down conversations. Hours evaporate as I jot down everything I can remember about the past two days. Writing absorbs me until Dottie calls.

I hurry outside in time to see her sporty little white car make a quick turn into the hospital garage. It is driven by my very blonde, green-eyed, small framed, head-turning sister-in-law. Dottie jumps out and rushes into my arms. My body sags.

"Dottie, before we go up to Mia's room, you need to brace yourself. She looks so very damaged. Because of the skull fractures, her eyes and mouth are still leaking blood."

She nods. Arm and arm, we go up to see our girl.

Dottie gingerly holds Mia's bruised right hand and whispers she loves



her. She asks God to give Mia what she needs. Her niece opens her intact eye, and then closes it, sucked back into drug-induced twilight. While Mia sleeps, we go downstairs and sit in Starbucks, my hospital refuge, and I sip a frothy steamed milk drink. It tastes like everything is okay. I sit in the quiet, aware that it isn't.

When we get back upstairs to ICU, Trey is in the waiting area. Last summer, Dottie met him during his visit to Pine City. She goes over to talk to him. I follow.

“So, Trey, how are you doing?” Dottie asks. “You must be feeling awful?”

“Why? Mia was the one who started it. I tried to get away. She was going to scratch me,” Trey says.

“Were you protecting yourself from Mia when she was hurt?” Dottie says.

“Of course I was,” Trey says.

“Just how much did you have to drink?” Dottie asks.

“All I know is that I'll never have another drink. Having to be here is awful. I don't ever want to do this again,” Trey says. “And ... I don't want to talk about it.”

Dottie shakes her head. Words hide in her throat. I return to ICU to sit with Mia.

After a few hours, Dottie leaves the waiting area and goes to Mia's apartment to call and touch base with all of our family and friends – and get some rest.

While Mia sleeps, I think about something she mentioned about a month ago. After Trey screamed at her at a party, she said one of his best friends from high

school comforted her. He told her Trey's personality always changed when he drank, but by the next day he would revert back to being his agreeable self. Mia confessed that Trey probably did drink way too much when they were being "social". That it was something they probably needed to work on.

I wish they had.

## Chapter 7

At about two thirty in the morning, the backlights in Mia's room come on. A young nurse dressed in pale pink scrubs, appears. An aura emanates from the silvery blonde French braid trailing down her back. I sit straight up in the sleeping chair. Unlike the other nighttime nurses, this one lingers. My shoulders drop as she approaches the bed.

She whispers to Mia, "I want to wash your hair. I promise I won't hurt you. Is it okay?"

Mia tilts her chin up a bit then down.

I watch as the young woman fills a pale blue plastic bowl with water and shampoo at the sink in the room. She then tucks a few hair tools into her pocket and tosses a pile of towels over her shoulder. She carries the basin to Mia's bed. The foamy liquid exudes a faint lavender scent. She undrapes Mia's marred body, covers her and the bed with towels, and then dips her spider web mass of hair into the water. Gently she separates the tangled mess. She pats it dry and then uses a wide toothed comb to eat through the clumps of dark, grimy filth, and glittering glass stuck in the strands she holds. Mia's hair begins to fan out against the hospital bed. I watch the big wall clock. Two hours pass. At last, a crown of normalcy tops Mia's head. The nurse's gift quiets my quaking soul.

Dottie returns to the hospital. We are standing together in the waiting area when

Trey walks in. My eyelids are heavy and my body is limp. Watching me blink, Trey volunteers to stay with Mia. I nod agreement.

Orderlies come to move Mia. The three of us follow her bed to the room where she will remain until her next surgery. I bend over to stroke the top of Mia's flower-scented head and tell her good-bye. Dottie and I drive to her apartment to rest.

As soon as I sit down, I fall asleep on the couch in the living room. When I stir, drinking an Alka Seltzer cocktail sedates me. I get up when Dottie dashes into the apartment.

“While you slept I walked around the complex talking to dog owners, and smokers. Someone must have seen or heard something ‘that night’. It’s just a matter of finding them. With God’s help, I’m going to be the one to do it.”

I smile and shake my head.

Mia is agitated when we get back to the hospital room. She keeps saying someone hurt her. Before leaving, Trey tells us a nurse jabbed her with a needle. I sit with Mia and tell her she will be able to drink once the surgery is over. It seems to comfort her. Four days have passed since she’s had water. Looking at her makes my throat close. She has suffered so much.

Dottie slips into the hall to try to find out what happened to Mia while we were gone. When she returns to the room, a nurse is with her.

“Did you know there was a man here with Mia?” the nurse asks me. “He kept saying she was ‘psycho’. He told her she caused her injuries and she was

lucky he loved her and forgave her.” Her face contorted and splotchy pink, the nurse continues, “I see women like Mia every day. They are battered until the final surrender. ”

A frigid wave surges up my spine, turns left and freezes my heart. Is the nurse right? How could I have left Trey alone with Mia?