

**JAMIE
MILLEN**

**YOU
DID
THIS**

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CHAPTER 1

Claire had blood on her hands when she limped home from school that afternoon. Tears blurred her vision. An October breeze ran icy fingers through her hair. Hurt and anger pumped in her veins as her sneakers pounded the cracked sidewalk. Claire had promised herself she wouldn't let Tina get to her again. Now she had broken that promise.

She turned a corner, and a two-level house came into view. The kitchen windows glowed with yellow light. For another girl from a different family, home meant warmth and safety. But the sight of her house filled Claire with dread, and on this day more than any other.

Sisters should love each other. Claire knew this the way she knew parents shouldn't fight and a mother shouldn't favor one daughter over the other. Life was never as it should be. Claire had tried to love Tina. But each time she opened her heart, her little sister drove a dagger into her soft, sensitive core.

Claire alone saw Tina for what she was—a cruel little witch. Her sister hid her true nature well. To the rest of the world, Tina was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed angel with dimpled

cheeks. Everyone fell for her disguise. Claire, too. Tina flashed that cherubic smile, and hearts melted. Every time.

But not anymore. Today, Claire had learned her lesson. Tina had gone too far. She had broken Claire's heart one time too many. Claire was done with Tina. The little bitch was dead to her.

Claire paused on the welcome mat, sucking in air and blinking back tears. *You can do this, Claire.* She'd keep her head down and go straight to her room. With luck, Tina and her parents would forget she existed until the party was over.

Armed with that miserable hope, she eased down the door handle with her elbow and shouldered her way inside. She inhaled the sweet scent of melted chocolate, and the knife blade in her heart twisted. Mom had baked her favorite treat, but the cake was not for Claire. It never was.

Claire made for the staircase and stole a glance at the kitchen. Balloons floated in the air, their ribbons anchored to kitchen chairs. Streamers arched from the ceiling. Gift-wrapped boxes waited on the counters beside salad bowls and trays of cookies. In the center of the display sat the cake. Two number-shaped candles crowned the dark icing. Today, Tina was fourteen years old.

Claire's mother smiled to herself dreamily while she sliced carrots on a cutting board. An apron covered Mom's new floral-print dress. Her blonde curls fell to her shoulders. She'd had her hair done for the occasion. But when she spotted Claire sneaking across the hall, her smile faded. Her mother saved her smiles for others. Teachers. School moms. Strangers on the street. And Tina. Always Tina.

Mom dropped the knife onto the cutting board. "Where is your sister?" The question was an accusation. *What have you done to her?* She always spoke to Claire as though she was addressing a mass murderer.

“How should I know?”

“You were *supposed* to walk her home.”

“I waited *ten minutes* for her.”

Her mother’s gaze moved to Claire’s cheek. Suspicion turned to fear, and her mouth dropped open.

“What happened to your face?”

Claire had forgotten about the blood. Her fingers were still sticky. She must have touched her face, smearing her cheek with a red mark of Cain.

Mom charged at her. “Claire, why are you covered in blood?”

She was exaggerating, but the question choked Claire up. Where *had* the blood come from?

Mom stood face-to-face with her. They were the same height now. Soon Claire would overtake her like her father. Under her mother’s paralyzing stare, Claire tried to remember what had happened. A knife had glinted in the sunlight. Tina had hurled insults, her lips curling into a snarl. And then...a gaping hole in her memory.

The searing pain in the calf of her leg jolted Claire back to the present. She looked down. Blood still oozed from the fresh gash in her skin.

“I cut my leg...I slipped on the curb.” *Yes. That’s what happened.* But would Mom believe her?

The distress in her mother’s eyes eased a little. She crouched on one knee and inspected the bloody tear in Claire’s leggings. Then she straightened and breathed a sigh of relief. The blood was Claire’s, not Tina’s. There was no need to fuss. And the blade in Claire’s heart twisted again.

“Can I go now?”

Mom didn’t answer. She returned to the kitchen and the birthday party preparations.

Claire climbed the staircase. In her room, fresh tears slid

down her cheeks. *It isn't fair.* Claire did everything her mother expected of her. She aced her exams. She had qualified for the track team at her new high school. Claire never complained about the move. But no matter what she did or didn't do, Mom had only one daughter, only one that counted.

A door opened downstairs. Her parents raised their voices—Mom's shrill questions and Dad's gruff replies. He had come home from work early for the party. Claire headed for the bathroom. Her mother would expect her to stand at attention and sing her sister "Happy Birthday."

"Then, get in the car," Mom yelled as Claire crossed the hallway, "and go find her. They'll be here any minute."

Claire swung the bathroom door shut behind her with her foot. She washed her hands in the sink, and the swirling water turned red. The shower head hissed when she pulled the handle. She waited for the water to heat. In the mirror, a sad girl with a red smudge on her cheek glared back. She had her father's inky-black hair and obsidian stare. Only Tina had her mother's golden curls and dazzling blue eyes. *And every drop of Mom's love.* A steamy mist wrapped her like a shroud.

She stripped and stepped under the flow of scorching water. The cruel smile on Tina's angelic face flashed in her mind. Her sister's hateful words rang in her ears. *Ugly. Stupid.* Tina had walked off, swinging her hips and shoulders. *Let her go. Who cares?* But Claire *did* care.

After school, Claire had waited outside Newburgh Middle School. She shifted on her feet while kids poured out of the gates. *Where was Tina?* If she came home late, Mom would blame Claire. She always did. Ten minutes passed on Claire's wristwatch before she gave up. Tina was probably home already, counting her presents. Claire would have to endure another agonizing birthday party for that spoiled brat. Tears had welled in her eyes on her walk home, distorting the world

around her. She didn't notice the broken curb of the sidewalk until her foot slipped, the world falling from beneath her, and the exposed metal edge slicing into her soft skin.

Claire worked the shampoo into her hair, the lather sliding down her shoulders. She hated Tina. She wished her sister was dead. Better yet, she wished her sister had never been born. The thought shamed Claire. She cried again, but this time the warm rain from the showerhead washed her tears away.

She scrubbed the dried blood from her leg and face. Claire wasn't ugly. The eyes of boys at school followed her when she walked by. She'd had a boyfriend in Boston. Well, sort of. Robbie Cline had invited her over to study for biology class. One secret kiss didn't make him her boyfriend, but he might have been. She'd never know for sure. Their family's move to Newburgh last year had cut that relationship short. Claire wasn't stupid either. She had the grades to prove it. Tina might fool the entire world, but she would never fool Claire again.

Claire toweled off and stuck a Band-Aid over the cut on her leg. She dressed in her bedroom, selecting a clean skirt, shirt, and underwear from her closet. Downstairs, the doorbell rang. High-pitched voices floated upstairs—greetings stuffed with phony cheer and the murmurings of grown-up conversations. Claire sat at her desk. She had a calculus exam tomorrow. Any minute, her mom would call her downstairs to face the firing squad. Until then, she'd study in peace.

Minutes passed. Claire lost herself in her penciled calculations. Her stomach rumbled. Mom still hadn't called for her. Maybe she'd forgotten about her? *Good*. Claire clenched her jaw and focused on her schoolwork. When she looked up again, the hubbub had settled. The house had grown quiet. Outside her window, night had descended on their street. Had her mother cut the cake without her? Claire had not heard the birthday songs.

She dropped her pencil on her workbook and got to her feet. The pain in her leg had faded to a dull ache. She opened her door and peered over the banister into the hall. The guests had gone. Her parents sat on the couch in the living room below. Two strangers sat on the armchairs facing them. Brown suits hugged their frames. The fat one spoke in low tones and recorded her parents' answers in a notepad. Tufts of wispy gray hair protruded from his brown fedora. His thin companion listened in silence. How long had they been sitting there?

Claire's mother crossed her arms over her chest. Her father placed his hand on her shoulder. Claire hadn't seen her parents touch in years. Dark clouds swirled within her. Who were the visitors? And where was Tina?

Her mother's body convulsed as she wept. Her father hugged her and whispered in her ear. Then the strangers got to their feet. The fat man handed her father a business card and tipped his hat. They left the house and closed the door behind them.

Mom clung to Dad, her hands clenched. She sobbed and sobbed, her body quivering. Claire froze at the banister, watching her mother cry, black dread pooling in her gut like spilled blood. *No, this can't be happening.*

Dad pulled free from her embrace and stood. "Come, Diane. We need to go."

He fetched their coats from the closet and helped her mother into hers. They were leaving the house without her.

Claire descended the staircase, the wooden panels creaking beneath her shoes. Her parents looked up.

"Mom, Dad, what's going on?"

Her father's face was pale and blank. "We have to go to the medical examiner's office. We need to..."

What was a medical examiner? Claire didn't know. But a visit to his office seemed like a terrible thing.

“Why? What’s happened?”

But Claire knew what had happened. Her darkest, most shameful wish had come true.

Mom stared at Claire, her eyes hardening, and she aimed a shaky finger at her daughter.

“You,” she growled, her nostrils flaring. “You did this.”

A chill swept through Claire. She shook her head. “I didn’t do anything—”

“Don’t deny it!”

Her mother lunged toward the staircase, but Claire’s father held her back.

“Easy, Diane. Calm down.”

“I won’t calm down,” Mom wailed. “She killed Tina!”

“Diane, don’t say that! Don’t you ever say that.”

Her father wrapped her mother in a tight embrace. Rage gave way to grief, and another fit of tears racked her body. Over Mom’s shoulder, Dad glanced up at Claire. His eyes filled with pain...and an unspeakable question.

Claire snapped out of her trance and bolted up the stairs. She fled to her room and locked the door. Without taking off her shoes, she leaped onto her bed and huddled in the corner. She rubbed her thumb over the ghost of dried blood on her palm.

Tina was not coming home. Not tonight or ever again. And it was all Claire’s fault.