

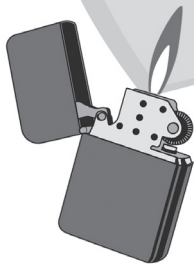
TESS SHARPE



For the girls who saved me:
Elizabeth May, Franny Gaede,
and Mercedes Marks.

With all my love,

—T/N



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]