

# *Apple of My Eye*

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*Christine Barfknecht*

## ***Chapter One***

**Laurie**

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I'm not crazy. I know what I saw.

With a wave of dizziness, I hunch forward, my head hanging low as I press my palms against a cool, hard surface. The evening sky blackens before my eyes and the chill in the air raises goosebumps on my arms, despite the sweatshirt covering them. I can't think straight, can barely breathe.

*The silhouette in the darkness...that posture, poised to take action...*

I didn't need to see a face. I'd know that stance anywhere. But it isn't possible.

I chew on my lip, try to gnaw the panic away. It has to be possible. I saw with my own eyes.

I can't just stand here and wait, need to do something, find help. No one will believe me, though. It's hard enough for *me* to believe me. It won't help that everyone seems to think I'm out of my mind.

Tick tock, goes the clock.

Crazy Laurie, dickery dock.

A tingling sensation shoots through my head like a strike of lightning and heat spreads through my body, starting in my head and washing through my chest. My heart beats so fast I fear it will burst. I remind myself to breathe. It's just a panic attack. I've had plenty before and right now, it's no wonder. Soon it will be over. I'll be back to normal, get help, *make* someone believe me. Someone will help. They have to.

*Breathe in, one, two, three. Out, one, two, three.*

A fog settles in my head, sprinkling over my mind like chalk dust. I find myself gasping, my heart racing faster and harder. The fog is a new symptom. I blink, trying to focus on the brick surface of the street but it's a blur. The dust is growing thicker, an eraser materializing, brushing over my mind and randomly choosing which memories to wipe away.

Not my memory. I must remember.

My palms slide farther over the surface of...a table, counter...I'm not sure, but it's rough like a sheet of unfinished wood. I lean hunched over it, struggling to breathe as I peer beneath my arm to look behind me.

Emily. My sweet baby girl.

She sits in her stroller, kicking her feet and cooing at the plush doll in her chubby fist. Cold flushes her cheeks pink, but the fleece bonnet tied beneath her chin keeps her head warm.

She's here. She's safe. I think. I'm not entirely sure. The fog is getting thicker, her image waving in and out as if it may not be real. I have no way of knowing. In this state, I can't trust my eyes.

Maybe I can't trust what I saw before either.

No. That was different. Not panic induced. Real.

A high-pitched shrill slices my skull, piercing my eardrums before fading to a crackle. Light flashes, then dozens of white stars appear.

"Laurie?" A voice slices through the static.

I force myself to stand up straight and blink. Lights swim before a backdrop of blackness and voices echo around me. Screaming. But in a happy way. The scent of grease lingers in the air, mingling with a sweet and spicy smell, like sugared cinnamon.

The lights twirl and I blink again. A Tilt-a-Whirl spins, masses of people passing in front of it. My eyes are drawn to one man, not because I know him but because he looks like a marionette, his arms outstretched, pulled by strings. My gaze follows the threads to four little dogs, Teacup Pomeranians, the kind Jake would never let me have.

"Ankle biters. Useless yippers." His voice raged with the unwarranted anger I'd become accustomed to. "Food for real dogs, that's what they are." That's my translation, the clean version with every other word removed.

"Laurie, are you okay?" That voice again, soft and feminine, though drowning in background music.

I bring my vision in, noticing a woman standing on the opposite side of a counter before me. I know her, Rochelle, a good friend of my mother's. Two pies sit on the counter between us and she holds a wad of bills in her hand. A cool breeze brushes my skin, whisking the aroma of the pies toward me. Apple.

A memory washes over me, replacing Rochelle's current image with one of her in my mother's kitchen many years ago. I see Rochelle pressing dough into pie tins, hear my mother counting with me as I measure sugar and sprinkle it over a huge bowl of sliced apples. "One...two..."

I'm five years old and wearing my favorite apron. Mom made it for me, complete with an embroidered apple on the chest. In front of me mom's apple shaped clock ticks on the wall. Except for Christmas it's my favorite time of year, being with mom in the kitchen and baking pies for the festival.

I blink, focus on Rochelle. Present day Rochelle. I remember. The Apple Festival. I'm in a booth selling pies to support the school. I brought Emily. My friend, Josie, came too. I look beside me, but Josie isn't there. She must have stepped away.

Rochelle is still staring at me, her eyes wrinkled with concern. I force a smile and straighten my back, pulling myself off the countertop. "I'm fine," I tell her. "Just getting a migraine." I can't tell her the truth. Everything I love is already in jeopardy; Emily, my job. Thanks to Jake, rumors of my supposed insanity spread over town as quickly as softened butter over a slice of bread.

I'm fine. I am. Postpartum psychosis, the doctor called it. My-wife's-an-effing-nut-case, Jake called it.

Ex-wife. Almost. He forgets that part.

As I blink my thoughts away and hone in on Rochelle, I can't help wondering what she thinks of me. Does she believe I have a migraine or is she waiting for the right moment to make an emergency call to the mental hospital?

"You scared me for a minute there," Rochelle says, handing me the bills in her hand. "Keep the change. For the school."

I force another smile and take the bills from her, my hands trembling with the aftereffects of my attack. I'm still trying to get my bearings, breathe in and out, slow the hammering of my heart.

Rochelle hoists her purse on her shoulder, a huge tan bag that causes my shoulder to hurt just looking at it. "You sure you're alright?"

I nod and force my mind to focus. *My name is Laurie Brandon. I'm a second grade teacher. I'm in Jackson, Ohio at the Apple Festival. My hometown.* I glance at the surface of the street where my booth sits, the brick street confirming my location. A few blocks away, lights illuminate the water tower hovering over the town, painted red to resemble an apple and embellished in a green leaf with a pipe protruding from the top as the stem.

*I live on Mountain Valley Road. My parents are Gary and Paula Barreau. Emily is nine months old.*

My heart rate slows and my body relaxes, the routine stabilizing me. I take a deep, long breath. I'm okay. Everything is fine. I'll call the doctor in the morning. The medication she gave me has been working well. It's just the extreme stress, my psychopath-almost-ex-husband worsening my psychosis, if that makes sense.

I remember. There's more. I let out a gasp.

“I can tend the booth for you if you want to head home and lie down,” Rochelle offers.

I don’t hear Emily behind me. It shouldn’t surprise me. I can barely hear Rochelle over the crooning country band a block down the street. Still, I spin on my heels to check on my daughter.

She isn’t there.

My eyes shoot left to right so fast the plywood walls of the booth seem to flail. Emily... She was there just a moment ago in her stroller, wasn’t she? I saw her. I looked behind me, under my arm... I thought she was there.

My heart races again, my stomach turns, fog swirls in my brain. I can’t help questioning myself, replaying the day through my mind to make certain I brought Emily with me. I picture Josie in the booth and Emily right behind us in her stroller, just like I saw her earlier.

It was today, wasn’t it? My breathing grows faster, intensifying the dizziness. I’m not sure. The fog needs more time to clear. I force a deep breath. *In, one, two, three. Out, one, two, three.*

“Laurie?” Rochelle’s voice jumbles with my thoughts.

I just need a moment to get through this and then everything will make sense. Maybe I’m remembering another day. It wouldn’t be the first time it’s happened.

*In, one, two, three. Out, one, two, three.*

But I spot something on the street. I lean in, force myself to study it, make sure of what I see.

There is no mistaking; it's Emily's soft pink doll. If she wasn't here, where did the doll come from?

The next scream I hear rolling over the crowd is my own.