

SHAME
ON
YOU



SHAME ON YOU

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twenty7



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*For my son Zach, who grew alongside this book and
entered the world with it.*



Prologue

McDonald's is an unholy mess of drunks at this time of night. A bunch of lads scoff fries as they whoop over a video clip on one of their phones. Some porcelain dolls touch up their lipstick while quickly getting rid of their Big Mac packaging, hoping nobody noticed how much they ate. Then one interrupts the application of her red lipstick to reach for her iPhone. She holds up the camera and films the young woman running towards the counter. Although partially obscured by other customers, something about her hair, her stance, the way she moves, suggests that something is about to happen.

As the girl shifts into focus, Red Lipstick bleats in gleeful recognition. This is no ordinary woman, but *the* face of healthy, organic, gluten-free eating. The girl who cured herself from cancer and posts pictures of salads and smoothies every day. The girl who just put Oprah on a new diet. A girl who definitely does not belong in McDonald's. Is she here on a secret burger binge? Is she covering her face to avoid recognition? Either way, it must be recorded, saved and used as currency somewhere.

The girl falls to her knees a few steps in, prostrating right in front of the queue. Customers turn as one, eyes narrowed, annoyed at the craziness that has somehow blown inside. A security guard thunders towards her, his ketchup-stained tie flapping over his shoulder.

‘Excuse me, miss! excuse me! You can’t—’

The girl rears up like a snake. A dark, throttled scream curls the fat off the walls. She removes her hands from her face. Her palms are red. Dark, war-like gashes on her cheeks. Blood pouring now, soaking her neck, her shirt. As one shaking phone calls an ambulance, the others rise, silent, unblinking, capturing the writhing human form before them. This moment, so uncomfortable, so striking, had to be recorded.

Chapter 1

Holly

‘You’ll kill yourself if you keep doing that.’

Holly creaks her head upwards, shifting her gaze from her iPhone to the striking stranger grinning down at her. She can feel the urgency of the likes and comments collecting on her latest Instagram post prickling up her arms, but she resists the urge to look down. The shock of sandy hair against wide green eyes demands her attention.

He gestures to the stethoscope dangling from his top pocket.

‘Trust me, I’m a doctor.’

The trace of an accent curls around his words. A real Londoner would never just walk up to someone they didn’t know.

‘Do you always give out random medical advice to strangers in Starbucks?’

He laughs, pulls out the chair next to her, removes his overcoat (Burberry, she notices, clearly new) and takes a seat. ‘No, only the beautiful ones nursing an obvious neck spasm.’

Game on. He’s definitely flirting. Besides, he’s right. She hasn’t been able to turn her head either left or right for weeks. They clutch their coffees in silence, and he draws

in a deep breath. She braces herself for the inevitable awkward moment when he shoehorns into the conversation how he knows her from Instagram. The air always shifts when this happens. A pregnant pause as the other person gathers their courage. If he's discreet, he'll tell her he loves her photos. Or, disappointingly, he may reveal that his girlfriend is a huge fan of her recipes and could she please sign a copy of her latest recipe book *Holly's Home-Cooked Health*?

Fans would be surprised to know the despair that beats through her as they coo over her long, blonde hair. They'd be bewildered if they could feel the panic grinding her teeth as she poses for a selfie. All they see online is the confident Holly, the likeable Holly, the perfect Holly.

The unthinkable has led her here. A shock diagnosis of cancer. Hours of excruciating chemotherapy. Then a decision to turn her back on it all and try heal herself through a raw, vegan diet. Her love for cooking and healthy recipes blossomed. Throughout her cancer, remission, and further cancer scares, the likes, shares and comments of her followers pulled her through – each notification gave her a surge of adrenaline and purpose. Now, she's been clear of cancer for two years. She knows who to be for these people when she's arranging fruit for a picture or writing a sunny caption, but who is she when she comes across them off the screen? She wants to shake her fans by the shoulders and plead with them, 'Tell me: what is it you see in me?'

The doctor turns to her, licking the foam of his cappuccino off his spoon. There is a disarming childishness about him.

‘You haven’t told me your name yet,’ he says.

‘You never asked . . . but it’s Holly.’

He holds out a giant hand, ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you, Holly. You can call me Jack.’

‘Well hello, Jack.’

‘Now, how about we get you out in the fresh air and away from the glare of that phone?’

Holly’s gone home with strangers before. Usually from pubs, but not in the past year though, not since her first book came out and her glowing face smiles down on the masses at London’s tube stops, but before, when she was new to the city and drunk on its potential. All encounters blur into one. A sloppy greeting, a drink, some superficial chitchat and a stumbling journey home soon after. Yet for all her one-night stands, the prospect of leaving a coffee shop with a stranger seems exciting, dangerous even. He’s sharply dressed, glistening with promise, so she picks up her bag and follows him out of the door. Imagine how happy her fans would be if she started dating a *doctor*.

Jack walks quickly, but looks across at her often. Maybe to check she’s keeping up, or that she’s still here, or that she’s real. Can he tell she doesn’t do this often, that she is never the girl that is chosen for good, never the vixen that edges from the shadows into a girlfriend? For all her beauty, her most romantic affairs have been imagined. The



‘connections’ she felt with male friends never acted on, the ‘spark’ of a one-night stand never igniting her phone with a call the next day. But something about Jack, the intent with which he looks at her, makes Holly hope that this is different.

He makes up a game called ‘Never Turn Left’. They walk aimlessly, turning right whenever they reach a dead end. She loves an explorer, someone who knows how to get lost in the city. Familiar landmarks – Marks & Spencer, Angel tube station, Sainsbury’s – give way to a private London language. Restored Victorian flats with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves visible through bay windows. Quiet streets occasionally interrupted by girls in tea dresses and worn brogues whizzing past on bicycles, their belongings in a straw basket at the front.

Their conversation flows in a rhythm as natural as their steps. He asks her questions incessantly. His enthusiastic curiosity bubbles up quicker than he can speak. It makes him instantly likeable. He doesn’t just ask questions; he asks them as if the world’s orbit depends on her answer. For every one of her replies, there is a long, considered silence. He runs his fingers through his mop of hair, so it grows higher and wilder. They cover favourite books, movies and songs, carefully mapping each other’s tastes, marking the places where they intersect. Searching for the source of the hot static humming between them.

‘So, what do you do Holly?’

‘I’m a food blogger.’ She can feel her face growing warm.



‘Full time?’

‘Yes . . .’

‘That can’t make you enough money to survive, surely?’ That’s what my father always says, Holly could tell him. He is practically willing her to fail – it’s there in every terse phone call. Yet to admit that now would open up a soft part of her she’s not ready to show yet. Instead, she takes a deep breath and recites her patient, scripted explanation.

‘Well, not always. But if a lot of people start becoming interested in what you do, you start to get advertisers, sponsorships, book deals . . .’

He stops dramatically in the middle of the pavement, busy commuters sighing as they push past him. ‘Wait a second. Am I walking through the streets of London with an author?’

‘Oh gosh, it’s not as big a deal as you’d imagine! But yes, you are.’ She laughs. ‘My second recipe book launched last month.’

‘What do you make?’

‘Mostly healthy stuff – raw food, juices, meals made from superfoods. It might not seem as fun as burgers or fries but I think my followers connected to my story, you know? My life was very different from what it is now; I used to be really sick, but I turned it all around by changing the way I eat.’ He doesn’t say anything, so she’s compelled to justify it a little more. ‘I just wanted to share my joy with the world. The popularity of the whole thing still feels quite surreal.’



He touches her shoulder; desire pounds in her chest.
'What was wrong with you, when you were sick?'

Holly's hands start shaking. She can't tell him, not now.
He'll ask too many questions.

'Let's not talk about it. It's kind of a second or third date conversation.'

'I don't understand – you think it's too intimate to share with me something that you were comfortable sharing on the Internet?' He's smiling, but his voice is barbed. There's an undercurrent that seems at odds with his gentle demeanour. Still, she'll take it. It's better than explaining.

'Enough about me, anyway,' she purrs. 'What type of doctor are you?' It feels hot between them again, the air stretched tight.

'Guess . . .'

She examines the contours of his face, his brimming smile. He's a charmer, the good-looking type, who probably sees repeat visits from divorcees with nothing wrong with them but loneliness.

'General Practitioner?'

'No, more specialised.'

'Oncologist.'

A shadow passes over his smiling face. He looks down.

'Too morbid. Try again.'

'Gynaecologist?'

'Wrong again.' He sighs. 'I heal people, like you do. Not through food though. I'm more traditional than that. I help people through cutting them open. I'm a surgeon.' His





hands move back and forth in manic, slicing movements. It's not that funny but she laughs anyway.

He takes another breath, as if he wants to say more. Instead, he takes her hand and they continue walking. A summer dusk fades into a cool night as they find themselves in the lantern-lit streets of China Town. *Just enjoy it, Holly. Oh please, just try to enjoy it*, she thinks. But her mind is whirring with the risks of the meal ahead, the pressure of holding his interest. He likes her, she really thinks he likes her, but her gluten-free, sugar-free, vegan requests may make her look like a freak. He wouldn't be the first man who found her diet too high maintenance.



A small door in a dark side street reveals a dim sum bar she's never seen before. The cool, grey interior soothes the strangeness of their previous conversation. She snaps a photo of the pink neon sign against the wall, that says THE GOOD LUCK CLUB, her instinct to capture the moment as quick as a reflex. She'd filter the colours later to make them brighter before posting it to her feed, her perfect composition matched by a rush of dopamine. They sip jasmine tea and she beams at him, overcome with gratitude for her new life and the precious things that keep entering it. This is something special here. She can feel it.



Holly picks on a salad and pushes the spinach-and-cream-cheese dim sum into her lap, then onto the floor. Isn't this what everyone does on a first date anyway, act as agreeable as possible? Faking normalcy has its rewards.





Her face is sore from smiling by the time the dinner ends. They stand facing each other in the narrow alley, the chaos of Oxford Street roaring on the other side. Her hands ache to touch him as he moves closer to her, running his fingers over her arms. He smells like bergamot and sandalwood. It seems expensive and grown-up, hinting at an adult life she hasn't quite built yet.

'I want to tell you something,' he whispers, arms snaking around her waist. She edges closer and tilts her chin upward, finding his face for a kiss. She knows what's coming next – she's lived this moment at the end of many nights, in many quiet streets.

'Tell me anything you want.'

'You don't know how much I ached to find you,' he whispers like a romantic hero. 'I've been waiting for this night for so long.' Her stomach flips. This feels dangerously good. A glint of silver catches her eye. She doesn't understand what it is yet.

His arms tighten around her, holding her. She can't breathe; she can't think. This must be a game, surely he's playing a game? But his clenched jaw says no. The way he viciously contains her struggling says this sudden hatred is real. It spits out of his pores, acrid and urgent. 'Holly Evans, you're a fucking fraud.'

People always say just poke your attacker in the eyes, just kick him in the balls, because these are static targets carelessly overlooked. But he is everywhere and nowhere, efficiently pushing her down, slamming her golden head



over and over again into the filthy muck on the pavement. It's the pain that makes her freeze eventually. The horror as he holds his scalpel above her face in triumph, and calmly presses it into each cheek while holding her jaw in a strong grip. She tries to scream as it breaks the skin, yet by the time he tears through the muscle her voice is a hoarse whimper, the otherworldly sound of an animal. Blood rushes down her temples and chokes in her throat. The cool night air hits the gashes in her face. As he disappears into the darkness, she raises her hands against her wet face. One thought blinds her, she never once told him her last name. Not once.

Chapter 2

Holly

Sleep is a black pit Holly can't crawl out of. She grabs at consciousness, then collapses back to where she came from. Finally, she becomes aware of the stiff sheets wrapped around her, of the pillows propping her up and the soft gauze caressing her face. Her face. A reminder of the horror of the night before. Her mind strains and grasps at fragments that don't make sense: his bright smile, the heat of his hand in hers, the shocking hatred burning behind his eyes. Holly's breath catches in her throat – this was no accident.

She scans the room, searching for something that will help her understand. There are signs of visitors. Bunches of flowers crowd the room in makeshift vases. An empty coffee cup teeters on the side table. Cards are stacked on every surface like a shrine. The air around her aches with care. Tears push at the corners of her eyes – the sheer, uncomplicated love is overwhelming. A fear pulses beneath the calm, ugly and urgent. If he could find her in a coffee shop in Islington, how much easier would it be to find her now, trapped within the confines of a hospital bed? All the love in the world can't save her now.

She takes a deep breath in and out, trying to still her heart. She gives in for a moment to the pale blankets and



the soft edges of the morphine that swells in her blood. Pushes away the fear for a few more minutes. The panic. Nobody would guess how complicated this is. Nobody needs to know. Get well soon, get out of here. Carry on as if this never happened. Everything will be just as it was in no time. If only she could remember what he said to her! She tries once more to touch the night before in her mind, but the memory of how she got here is out of focus, a blur making its way out of the room, down the passage, past the sad hospital coffee shop and into the streets of London.

Despite her throbbing face, a familiar delicious sensation overcomes her, just like every other morning. Her phone, untouched for hours, has accumulated likes, shares and messages she hasn't read yet. Although her throat is crying for a glass of water, this is far more urgent. She summons the strength to strain past the tubes and paws through the drawers next to the bed, until a cool rectangle slips into her hand. While the tubes, flowers and cards look like a dream, what people are saying online will make her pain feel real, even justified. In the white silence of this room, she needs to hear a chorus of voices cry out, 'Something terrible has happened to you, and we are all so sorry.'

Of course, Holly's chorus of voices is larger and more practised than most. They joined her one by one as she struggled through the devastating lows of her illness, and travelled with her into this brave new life. Like a circle of friends, they are outraged that she has been cursed with yet another struggle. But she is not their friend. She is a brand





that people believe and invest in. A symbol. It surprised her, the first time someone called her that – ‘a brand.’ She’d blushed and humbly batted the compliment away. Now it’s become a natural wonder, a force with a destiny of its own. However, in this desperate moment, it doesn’t matter what they think she is. There is nothing she needs more than this all-encompassing feeling of love.

She goes to Facebook first. Thousands of hysterical fans have been posting on her page. A trend has started where people share pictures of when they met her at book signings. Image after image of her with her arms around red-faced, emotional, smiling young women. She, the luckiest girl in the room. Holly starts to wonder if she’s already dead and her spirit is hovering over her body, flicking through her social media profiles with ghostly fingers. There are angry demands to the ‘managers of her Facebook page’ to deliver a statement as to what happened and how she’s doing. Nobody would guess that, besides her publicist, she has no staff at all. Every post made on that page is a result of her own hard work.

Instagram is even more overwhelming. After she works her way through the cluster of likes on her latest post (an atmospheric, warm-toned portrait of her almond-milk flat white taken at Starbucks), she gets to the tags. More than 8000 people have tagged her in photographs in the past few hours. She scrolls through the bright rainbow of food photographs, being sure to like each one, until they all start to look the same. She almost misses the first blurry photograph



of herself collapsed on her knees, hands over her face. Then they keep coming, a flood of pictures from all angles that swallows her whole. There's no need for her to remember even a single moment of that night. Everything, from her blood-soaked clothing to the paramedics lifting her from the floor, has been casually recorded. While the captions and comments to each photo are compassionate, Holly can't help but feel the force of everyone tugging at her trauma, trying to grab a piece of it to claim as their own.

Still, it is soothing to go through all the get-well wishes and imagine a world of strangers gathering to support her. Surely, if so many people are outraged, she doesn't need to feel so uneasy? Surely there would be signs that she did something to deserve it, signs other than the sticky mass of guilt clinging to her chest?

Years ago, when she was in and out of hospital and hunched over her computer researching alternative therapies, she felt desperate and isolated. But with every milestone reached and picture shared, she found new followers and friends, all connected by the basic human desire to survive. These same fans, and more, will carry her again. Panic rises. Her thoughts turn to the horror that lies beneath her bandages. Ugliness. Shame. Invisibility. She has to be stronger than the pain that lies ahead of her because it's the only power she has. If there is one thing Holly knows, it's how to heal.

No matter how many hundreds of likes or comments a person has on social media, eventually they all run dry.

The room has darkened by the time she gets to the last one. It's not enough. She's always waiting for something just out of her reach that she can't quite make out. Sometimes she thinks she keeps checking her phone in anticipation of receiving something important enough for her to want to put it down for good.

The aching shadow of her concussion begins to close in on her. She really should get some rest. But wait, there is one more message. A private message. She sees it in a flash of orange out of the corner of her eye. A video from a private account. It plays automatically, before her shaking fingers can stop it. It keeps looping long after she has dropped the phone to the ground with a gasp. Over and over again, a scalpel slicing a signed photograph of Holly's face into ribbons. A caption that taunts, "This is only the beginning."