

THE FIX



A novel

MIA
SHERIDAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE FIX

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A novel

**MIA
SHERIDAN**

 Montlake

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To those whose kindness fills the gaps

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PROLOGUE

She woke with a scream on her lips, attempting to draw back her chest and fill her lungs with the air needed to expel the sound of fear and horror. But her body continued to disobey, a small trickle of air the only sound leaking from her mouth. *Where am I? Why is it dark? Why can't I move? Am I dead?*

She envisioned a flash of faces, leering at her, moving closer. One in particular. The betrayal pierced her somewhere inside, where she still felt pain. *Why? Why?* She'd turned and run. Away from him, from them. But they'd caught her and . . . Another flash, a bottle at her lips, liquid pouring down her throat as she fought and gagged.

The pierce of steady beeping broke through her consciousness. A machine. Close by. Was she in a hospital room? Relief descended. She'd been rescued. She was being cared for. She would heal.

And then I'll seek retribution.

Who knew revenge better than she?

The squeak of a door opening slowly sounded, and she tried to lift her head, but it felt like a bowling ball attached to her neck.

A shaft of light appeared, and in that light, she saw a tube protruding from her mouth and, far above her, a ceiling encircled by crown molding she knew well. *God. No. It can't be.* But, as if in answer, a soft whir met her ears, and her body began rising along with the bed beneath her.

He stood there at the footboard, a wicked smile on his wolfish face. "Hello, Posey."

And that's when she knew for certain she was still alive. But it would have been better had she died.

CHAPTER ONE

Cami was in no mood for a party. And yet there she was, clad in a bikini with a Jell-O shot in hand as a boisterous game of chicken fight was being played in the pool next to her. Her boyfriend, Hollis, had invited every member of the varsity football team and cheerleading squad to his house for a pool party. It appeared they were all having the time of their lives. Except her. *Buck up. What is wrong with you?* Except that she knew exactly what was wrong with her. She'd been plagued by a deep fatigue and lingering nausea for the last week. And her period was MIA.

She plastered on a smile as she gazed around nonchalantly and then, confident no one was looking her way, dropped the small plastic cup filled with spiked red Jell-O into a hydrangea bush.

The sun beat down on her bare shoulders, and a fellow cheerleader on one of the O-line's shoulders let out a shriek of laughter as she was knocked into the water by the whack of a pool noodle.

"Hey, Cam," Tia said as she approached, handing her another Jell-O shot. *Great.* Her friend tipped her head back and used her tongue to scoop out the shot, and then swallowed and grinned.

"Here, have mine too," Cami said. "I'm not feeling it."

Tia's brows dipped, and she peered more closely at Cami. "Are you okay?" Tia asked, adjusting her bikini top that had ridden up. "You do look slightly green."

Cami gave her a halfhearted smile and stepped to the side to avoid the incoming tsunami caused by a linebacker who'd just cannonballed into the deep end. "I'm fine. I think I just ate something that didn't agree with me."

"I hope it wasn't one of the hot dogs. I saw Ray drop half the package on the ground, and then throw them on the grill anyway. He assured me 'fire cleanses.'" She did air quotes and rolled her eyes.

Cami barely suppressed a grimace as she looked away. The talk of hot dogs had notched her nausea up at least a few levels. A couple more and Tia's French pedicure would be covered in vomit. "I need to use the bathroom. I'll be back."

"Okay—"

Cami dipped around a group of guys goofing about near the covered patio and headed for the pool house. “Hey, Cam, what’s the rush?” Kent, the team’s fullback, asked, his head tilting as he leaned to the side to make a show of checking out her ass.

“Secret mission. I’m not at liberty to discuss it,” she shot over her shoulder with a flirty wink.

“Sounds hot.” His laugh drifted behind her as she turned into the air-conditioned space.

She walked to the bathroom at the back and locked the door behind her. “Damn,” she muttered when she found that her period was *still* MIA. “Don’t panic.” There might be other explanations than the one she was most worried about. Cheerleading practice had been intense lately, and she’d been working out more than usual. Plus, finals were coming up, and she’d been stressed. Her dad expected her to maintain a 4.0 GPA on top of all her extracurriculars, which—back to current concerns—included sex with her boyfriend for an entire weekend last month when his parents were away on business. She’d lied to her mom and dad and told them she was sleeping over at Tia’s.

She’d gone on the pill, though, and she hadn’t missed one. She’d protected herself. She’d been *smart*.

So where the hell is my period?

Cami washed her hands and then grabbed the hand towel hanging next to the sink and stared at her reflection. Tia was right—she looked like she might have eaten an ant-covered hot dog. *Oh God, don’t think of that food item.* She pressed her lips together and pulled in a breath through her nose. Other than appearing a little peaked, as her mom would say, she looked like herself—glossy auburn hair pulled back in a ponytail, wide hazel eyes, and a face and body that had caught the attention of the star quarterback of their high school football team. Hollis Barclay III was arguably perfect—rich, gorgeous, and obviously headed for greatness—and Cami was the envy of all the girls in school, likely of all the girls in the small town of Aspen Cove, Virginia.

God, he’d freak if—

She tossed the towel aside and turned away from her reflection. Nope. She wasn’t going to spin out of control. This might be—it probably *was*—a false alarm.

The sounds of music and raucous laughter filtered in from outside, and for a minute she considered staying right there, where it wasn't hot and noisy and where she wasn't expected to be chatty and giggly and *fun*. But she couldn't hide inside indefinitely either. And it was almost time for her to go anyway. Her dad was leaving on a business trip in the morning, and she'd already told Hollis she had plans with her family.

Just one more hour. You can do it.

She left the bathroom just as a few of the other cheerleaders burst through the door of the pool house, singsonging hellos to her as they passed by. She brought forth her carefree grin and greeted them back.

When she stepped out into the bright late-summer day, the glare of sun blinded her momentarily, so that she squinted and turned her head as she waited for her eyes to adjust. When they did, her gaze was focused on the tops of the swaying trees in the Barclays' side yard.

All too soon, the leaves would be changing and the pool parties would come to an end, to be replaced by tailgating and bonfires. Eyes raised, she walked in the direction of the trees, away from the party and into the shade of a patio overhang that was situated next to the pool house.

As she watched those swaying trees, Cami felt an odd dwindling inside that she could only attribute to the impending end of one season as it shifted into another. But she also had this sense that it wasn't *exactly* that, and though she couldn't pinpoint it now, she'd be able to later . . . the way she sometimes looked back at a moment she'd experienced in her childhood that she hadn't known then was the final sled ride down a particular hill, or the last sleepover with her sister on her grandpa's porch before he passed away . . .

Movement behind a large potted plant to her right broke her from her reverie. She turned and leaned around the foliage to see Rex Lowe sitting in a patio chair that was mostly hidden behind the vegetation-filled planter. "Oh, hi. What are you doing hiding over here?" she asked. She realized the question had come out mildly rude, but he'd surprised her during a vulnerable moment, and though it might be irrational, she felt spied upon.

"I might ask you the same thing," he returned. She bristled slightly because his comment had hit the target, but the expression on his face disarmed her. It was sort of shy, and just a little teasing, and he appeared

nervous, in the way he'd straightened his back and was blinking as he waited for her response was any indication.

She released a breath and stepped all the way around the planter so she was even more hidden, like him. "I'm not really in the mood for"—she waved her hand in the direction of the pool, where the splashing and squeals of delight were ongoing—"that." She wasn't sure why she'd offered that level of honesty except, well, if anyone *got it*, it would be the boy safely concealed in the corner behind a plant.

He smiled on a breath. "Yeah, me neither. If you take one more small step to your right, no one can see you from any angle. I've done the equations."

She chuckled softly as she considered him. Rex Lowe had been on her periphery since middle school, but she didn't think she'd ever really taken a minute to *look* at him. He was one of those people who'd just always been background noise. He was a good-looking guy, but not in the way Hollis was—all toned muscle, cocky swagger, and megawatt smile. Rex's bangs were too long and flopped over his forehead in a sheet of ebony that hid his eyes, and he clearly didn't care much about his style. He typically looked like he'd dug in the bottom of his laundry hamper for something to wear, and sometimes his pants were a hair too short. He smelled vaguely like cigarette smoke, though she'd never seen him light up anywhere. Most likely he lived with a smoker. He had some acne on his cheeks and tended to walk slightly hunched over with his hands stuffed in his pockets like he was trying to make himself smaller.

Cami's eyes moved to the notebook on his lap, the top page filled with numbers and symbols that she didn't recognize. "So now you're what . . . devising an escape plan?" she asked, tipping her chin toward whatever he was working on.

He let out a laugh that sounded vaguely surprised, as though she was the last person he'd expected to amuse him in any way. He looked down at his paper filled with equations or whatever and then back at her. "What? You think it's overkill?" he asked, his lip quirked.

She couldn't help smiling back. "Probably, considering you could just"—she pointed past the opposite side of the patio—"walk out that gate."

His smile grew, and their gazes caught before he cleared his throat and looked away. "I have a tendency to complicate things."

And just like she'd caught him by surprise when she'd made him laugh, she hadn't expected him to say something like that, something worth pondering, to be honest. It struck her, right then and there, how shallow the conversations she'd grown used to really were, how most of her interactions boiled down to throwaway comments tossed at others with a wink and a smile. Meaningless. Boring. "Hmm," she murmured, "that's interesting because I have a tendency to simplify things."

Their eyes met again, his lips quirking in that same disarmed way, but this time he didn't laugh. "What have you simplified lately?" They both stared. God, the way he was looking at her, like he cared deeply about her answer, caused a small fluttering at the base of her throat. She raised her hand and put her fingers there, her pulse beating steadily beneath her skin. And she suddenly felt . . . *seen*, as though she'd been living as a blurry shadow of herself, and she'd just now come into focus and by the most unexpected of people at the most unlikely of times. It was like, for a moment, she'd stepped into an alternate world when she'd ducked behind this potted tree.

What do you see when you look at me?

How odd that she really, truly wanted to know.

Did he even know her name?

"I'm Cami, by the way. And you're Rex, right?"

His eyes flared slightly like he was surprised that she knew who he was. And again, she saw herself from the outside. Someone who'd gone to school with others for many years and yet had never so much as said their names or met their eyes.

And as she watched him, it occurred to her that Rex was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and she was standing next to him all but naked in her hot-pink bikini. She suddenly wished she had a towel or a cover-up or something to drape over her, which was weird, considering she felt confident in her skin and had never had much of a problem knowing eyes were on her. In fact, she'd relished it because she knew it was a big part of why she'd been accepted into this popular crowd. But Rex . . . he confused her in some way she couldn't quite define for herself. He very suddenly seemed . . . more than what she'd thought he was. More *what*, she didn't know. And here she was complicating her own thoughts after she'd just told him she had a habit of oversimplification.

But before Cami could even think about how to answer him, Rex's gaze moved over her shoulder. She turned to see Hollis approaching, his navy-and-white swim trunks sitting low on his narrow hips and clinging to his muscular thighs. Water glistened on his six-pack and dripped from his tanned pecs, and he ran his hand through his dark hair as a gleaming smile lit up his handsome face.

He didn't so much as acknowledge Rex before he wrapped an arm around Cami's waist, pulling her into his body and grasping one ass cheek as he planted his lips on hers in a wet smack. "I almost didn't see you back here. I've been looking for you," he said when he pulled his head away from her.

"You found me."

He grinned again. "Yes, I have." He uncurled his arm, and she stepped back, feeling off kilter and embarrassed by what felt like an inappropriate public display of affection in front of Rex. But when she looked back at him, he was standing, his notebook held down at his side.

"Leaving so soon, Lowe?" Hollis asked.

"Yeah, uh, I've gotta get home. Thanks for having me. It's a great . . . pool." He cleared his throat. "Cami. Take care."

"You too, Rex."

Rex turned and began walking toward the gate, his shoulders curled forward per usual, hands tucked into the pockets of his baggy jeans.

"That dude's a little weird if you ask me," Hollis said, running his index finger over the edge of her bikini top. "I hope he wasn't bothering you."

She had this urge to bat his hand away but smiled instead. "He wasn't bothering me at all. He was just sitting there. And if you think he's weird, why invite him to the team parties?" Rex wasn't a football player, but he did something with the coach regarding stats and was at every practice.

"Out of the kindness of my heart. I didn't really think he'd show up. He doesn't even have a car."

She looked over at Hollis. How was it kind if he was only inviting Rex as an empty gesture, believing the guy wouldn't show? "Then how did he get here?" Hollis knew Rex didn't have a car and hadn't even offered him a ride?

“No idea. But don’t feel too bad for him. I was trying to give him the opportunity to make a play with the ladies. The dude’s probably never been laid in his life. But I guess an eyeful of my girlfriend in her bikini is enough for the spank bank, and now he’s headed home to take care of business.”

She pushed at him. “That’s rude. He was being perfectly respectful.”

Hollis raised a brow. “Well, I don’t plan to be.” He started walking her back in the direction of the pool house, and a wave of nausea overcame her.

She forced a laugh and pushed at him again as he lowered his head to nip at her ear. “Hollis. I have to go, remember? I promised my parents I’d be home. My dad’s leaving on that trip to New York, and we’re doing a family dinner.”

“I thought you had to leave at seven. We still have thirty minutes.”

“My mom texted and asked if I could stop by the store for something she forgot,” she lied.

Hollis lifted his head and sighed. “Can you come back over later? Meet me here at the pool house. My parents will be at a thing tonight.” He pulled her toward him again and kissed her neck. “I need you.” He ground his hips against her to show her how much.

She let out a small moan. Despite the nausea and not being in the mood at all, Hollis was good with his hands and his mouth. *And maybe that’s why you’re nauseous.*

Cami pulled away, then leaned forward and gave him one more kiss before running her thumb over his lips and smiling prettily. “I’ll text you later.”

She turned, and he gave her a soft swat on her behind as she walked away to collect her things from one of the loungers by the pool.

She quickly pulled on a sweatshirt and a pair of shorts and left the party. When she made it out to the street where her car was parked, she looked up and down the block for Rex, but he was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER TWO

The pregnancy test felt like it weighed fifty pounds as she carried it to the drugstore's self-checkout, praying she wouldn't see anyone she knew. Cami curled her fist around it to hide the packaging as best she could, scurrying to the register and scanning it quickly before dropping it in a bag. Then she paid, her hand shaking slightly as she swiped her bank card, took the receipt, and then double bagged the item.

She headed to the back of the store, where there was a restroom. The last thing she wanted to do was carry the test in the house and then pee on a stick while her mom was downstairs cooking pasta. She hoped to God she'd take the test, see it was negative, discard it underneath some paper towels in the public trash, and go back to living her life.

Please, please, please.

Cami went into the stall and unfolded the directions with her unsteady hands. She went through the outlined steps, swearing softly when she peed on her fingers. But she'd gotten plenty on the stick, and so she carefully repackaged it, wrapped it back in the plastic bags, and left the stall to wash her hands as she waited for the test to do its thing.

As she lathered the soap, for some reason her mind returned to the remark she'd made to Rex Lowe. She'd told him she had a habit of simplifying things, and he'd asked her what she'd simplified lately. Hollis had interrupted them before she could answer, but if she had, what would she have said? Because despite the half-joking way she'd tossed the statement at him, it'd felt like one of the truest things she'd said in a long time. She simplified her reactions, and her opinions, and most expressions of her intellect. She did so because it was easier to fit in that way. At least with the crowd she was in.

Not that she thought she was any smarter than any of them. In fact, she knew that she had to work a lot harder than many for the grades she got. No, it wasn't intellect. She had this feeling that they were all pretending in some way or another. Most of them just weren't bothered by it. Like Hollis.

Would she have even known how to say any of that to Rex? Cami turned off the faucet and pulled a paper towel from the dispenser. No,

probably not. It was the first time she'd really said it to herself.

The door banged open as she was drying her hands, and she held back a cringe as one of her mother's bridge partners, Mrs. Rolland, came in. "Cami!" She gave a little laugh. "Fancy meeting you here."

Cami smiled and grabbed the bag containing the pregnancy test off the counter. "Hi, Mrs. Rolland. How are you?"

"Oh, just fine. I swung in to pick up Gerald's prescription before going to Pilates. Will Farrah be there tonight?"

"No. My dad's leaving for a business trip tomorrow morning, so we're doing dinner tonight." She kept the bag by her side and took a few steps toward the door.

"Oh, safe travels to him, and tell Farrah I'll see her on Friday."

Cami pulled the door open. "I will. Bye."

She practically flew out of the store, plunked into her car, and tossed the bag onto the passenger seat. She had no idea if it'd been ten minutes, but she decided she'd look at it behind the locked door of her bathroom after all. Then she would put the—again, please God—negative test at the bottom of her purse and throw it away in the morning.

But first, she needed to calm the hell down. She flicked on her radio and turned up the volume, rolled her head on her shoulders as she turned out of the lot, and then took a long sip of water from her drink tumbler.

Everything was going to be just fine. The nausea had faded, and she was actually hungry. Her stomach growled as she pictured a steaming plate of her mother's spaghetti and meatballs with a crunchy piece of homemade garlic bread.

She was just *stressed*. Stress did all sorts of funny things to a female body. She'd look at that test when she got home, and then she'd head downstairs for the biggest celebratory dinner she'd had in a long time.

Her mother's car was sitting in its usual spot in the driveway, and she pulled behind it, grabbed her stuff, and hopped out of her car, humming the song that had just been blasting on her radio as she walked to the garage and typed in the code.

She stuffed the bagged pregnancy test into the pool bag on her shoulder as she moved toward the door that led to the mudroom, and zipped it shut. Cami entered the house and kicked off her shoes, pausing for a moment as she listened for the sounds of her mom in the kitchen. The

missing scents of garlic and basil that she'd expected to greet her elicited a frown, an uncomfortable prickle raising the hairs on the nape of her neck.

"Mom?" she called as she moved toward the open door of the room that led into the hall off the kitchen. "Elle?"

A body stepped into her path, causing her to rear back and drop her bag. Her scream dissolved into a garbled gasp when a fist slammed into her face. She barely registered being caught before she could hit the floor, the pain in her cheek so intense it blinded her.

"That's it, pretty thing. I saw your photos on the wall. I've been waiting for you."

Cami groaned, managing to open her eyes a mere slit as a man wearing a medical mask carried her past her fuzzy kitchen. The red fog in her brain cleared so that she became aware of what was happening, and a blast of panic shot through her system like lava. She screamed against the man's clammy palm and then kicked backward and thrashed her head. But the man just laughed and clamped his arms around her more tightly. "AJ," he called. "We got a wiggly one here." He leaned in and licked the side of her face as he dragged her up the stairs. "You like to wiggle, hot stuff? Yeah, I like to wiggle too." He laughed again.

His arms unclamped, and he threw her forward so that she landed on her stomach with a breath-stealing thud. "Get the tape," she heard the man say to the other one he'd called AJ. Cami raised her head and turned it slightly, only catching a glimpse of black hair leaving the room as the man with the tape knelt on her back and bound her hands. Hot tears slid down her cheeks and another scream lodged in her throat when she raised her head again and saw her mother and sister sitting against the opposite wall, their eyes rimmed in red, duct tape covering their mouths.

"Mom!" she sobbed, scrambling to get up. But the knee at her back pressed down, causing her to yelp and hit the floor again. A hand reached around her neck, holding her head steady as a piece of tape was stretched over her mouth. The man rose, and she attempted to kick backward again, but he stepped aside and then punched the back of her head. She groaned as her mom's and sister's muffled cries intensified behind their tape. Then one of the men used her hair to pull her lolling head up, and she felt another piece of tape being pressed over her mouth.

She sank to the floor, heart pounding wildly with terror, adrenaline sluicing through her veins as she opened her eyes. Then she and her mom and baby sister stared at each other in wordless horror.