

LIBRIS | How could I know
We know me
when I'm already a ghost?



Where's Molly

a cat & mouse spin-off

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

H. D. CARLTON

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prologue

MOLLY

**PRESENT
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THE LOUD CRUNCH OF blunt teeth biting through bone is a lullaby I could fall asleep to for the rest of my life.

I wrinkle my nose.

The obnoxious sound of lip-smacking that follows is not.

“I can teach you to respect me, but apparently, learning manners is asking too much,” I mutter, my upper lip curling in disgust when bloody drool splatters onto the plastic tarp before my worn boots.

Gross.

I'm in my barn, crouched on the outside of their pens, keeping my distance while the five massive pigs eat their dinner. They can very easily grab me through the fence if I dare to get close enough, and that is not an attack I'm likely to survive. They're incredibly

strong, and if I do manage to escape, I'll definitely be missing a few limbs.

It makes me wonder why the world is so afraid of a zombie apocalypse, when we're already surrounded by animals more than capable of tearing us apart and devouring every last fucking bit of our flesh and bones.

We're just lucky they haven't figured that out yet. Or rather, they haven't figured out how to escape the prisons we put them in.

When finished, they eagerly sniff the hay, searching for their next piece.

"Last one," I warn them, as if they can even understand me.

Sadly enough, they're the only ones I *can* talk to most days. My human interaction is limited, and this pig farm gets awfully lonely. But it's something I chose for myself.

And I don't fucking regret it.

I toss the rest of the leg at their feet, watching them tear into the severed limb in earnest. Tendons, muscles, and veins shred in a matter of seconds, followed by that satisfying *crunch*.

Right then, my phone in my back pocket buzzes. Sighing, I slide it out and answer without bothering to see who it is. I already know.

"Is it finished?" the female voice asks tonelessly. She's been calling me for the last four years, and I still don't know her name.

"Yup," I answer. "They just ate the last of him."

"Good. We'll contact you when the next subject is due to arrive."

The phone goes dead before I can respond. Not that I would've bothered to—that's always been the extent of our conversations.

My human interaction is *very* limited.

Especially because that's what my pets like to eat for dinner.

"Thanks, Petunia," I chirp to myself. Every time she hangs up, I give her a new name. One day, I'm confident I'll have guessed her real name correctly at least once, though I'd never know.

I have a feeling it's not Petunia, but crazier things have happened.

I double-check that the last of the man I fed to the pigs is completely consumed, and then I start the tedious process of cleaning their pens, my table, and the tools, along with burning his hair and clothes and scattering his powdered teeth in the mountains behind my house. Ensuring every last trace of Carl Forthright is gone.

He who was once a rapist and child trafficker is now pig shit.

So fucking poetic.

"You're lucky I love you little assholes because you guys are fucking *messy*," I complain to the snorting pigs, wrinkling my nose when I spot a chunk of flesh on the floor outside their pen.

They're absolute pains in my ass most days, but I wouldn't trade them for the world.

They keep me sane.

And the devil knows that's hanging on by a goddamn thread.

chapter one

MOLLY

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO
OCTOBER 20TH, 2007

"I'M GONNA HEAD TO the gas station to grab Layla a few things," I tell Dad while frowning at the mess in the living room.

Five crushed, empty beer cans are scattered on the end table, along with empty chip bags and dip with the lid left open.

My father is anxiously peering out of the tattered curtains, shirtless, his pot belly bulging out over his jeans. His gray hair is balding on top, and despite his stomach, he's a tall, lanky old man with a defined jaw, eyebrows that are constantly furrowed, and wrinkles covering every inch of his face.

"No, I need you here. You've been gone all damn day," he snaps, hardly sparing me a glance.

It's after eight-thirty at night, and I've been waitressing at the diner all day. I'm exhausted, but for what feels like the millionth

time, she's out of diapers and no one mentioned it. I'm turning twenty tomorrow, but I'll have to pick up another shift now that I'm spending today's tip money on Layla.

"She needs her diaper changed, and there isn't any more," I argue.

He snarls, letting the curtain fall as he faces me.

"She ain't none of your concern."

But she is.

She's sure as fuck not *his* concern, even though she's his daughter.

Dad scratches his arm, track marks blemishing his skin. Again, he glances toward the curtains, as if he's waiting for someone to show up. Probably one of his creepy friends, sure to arrive with a book bag full of drugs, despite the fact that he just made me buy him some yesterday.

"I won't be longer than twenty minutes," I reason. "I just need diapers and formula."

Anxiety spikes in my chest as Layla begins to cry from upstairs. I just laid her down, and I had hoped she'd stay asleep until I got back. She's been fussy for the past week. Right when her eyes close and I think she's finally asleep, they pop right back open and she releases a sorrowful wail that rips my heart out.

"Let me get Layla settled first, and I'll—"

"No," he barks. "If you're going to go, then go now. I ain't got all fucking night."

"Fine," I mumble.

My four-month-old sister is now screaming at the top of her lungs, while our mother is knocked out on the couch, her mouth open and drool trailing down her chin as she softly snores.

A used needle lies on the coffee table in front of her, a bead of blood still staining the tip.

She won't be waking up, which means that Layla will be left to her tears while I'm gone.

Sighing, I head toward the door, pausing briefly when I hear Dad call out, "And grab me a pack of cigs and another six-pack of beer!"

I don't bother answering—not that he expects one. He knows I'll do what he says. If I don't, I'll have to invest in another bottle of concealer. The one I have is almost empty.

The sound of Layla's screams is silenced as I shut the door behind me, my anxiety worsening and gnawing at my stomach. Her poor little throat will be sore, and I'm sure her head will be hurting by the time I get back.

She hates it when I leave her alone, and *I* hate what that implies. There are days that I wonder if it's more than just an attachment to me that puts that fear in her eyes when I walk away.

If Dad is hurting her like he hurt me...

I don't know what I'll do. Except when I'm finished, I'll be covered in blood.

My hands tremble as I speed-walk to the gas station a few blocks down the road. It's a warm and breezy fall night in October—likely one of our last before winter approaches.

Reaper Canyon, Montana, is surrounded by the Electric Peak range, and it's where I was born and raised. The daunting name of this small town is fitting, considering it's where everyone's dreams go to die. This state exudes beauty, but even the mountains off in the distance can't take away the ugliness of my world.

I keep my head down, focusing on the hole in the tip of my dirty tennis shoes. My feet are too big for them now, but I haven't had the money to get a new pair yet. All of it goes to Layla or buying my parents drugs.

On my sixteenth birthday, Dad threatened to kick me out of the house if I didn't get a job. Said I needed to start pulling my weight around the house, as if going to school, doing all the chores, and getting their drugs for them wasn't enough. Let alone being at his and Mom's beck and call twenty-four seven.

My entire first paycheck went on their cigarettes, beer, and drugs. Now, they rely on me to buy our food, and everything for Layla.

The overhead bell chimes as I walk into the local gas station, drawing the clerk's attention. Aside from Layla, he's the only person in this world I actually like.

"Hey, Mol," he greets, a smile stretching across his face, laugh lines forming in his brown skin. He's one of the few people I know who is always happy. I don't believe I've ever known that feeling. Maybe when Layla smiled at me for the first time. But it was fleeting. It didn't take long for my parents to steal away the joy again.

"Hi, Mario," I return, waving at him before disappearing down one of the aisles and heading straight for the coolers where the beer is held.

I'm not old enough to buy alcohol, but Mario now knows my dad well enough to understand that if I don't bring it home, I'll show up with bruises on my face the next day, pleading for him to let me buy it. He's tried to call the police, but each time, I get

on my knees and beg him not to. I didn't want to risk Layla being taken by CPS and put in the system.

Families love young girls to adopt, but so do predators, and I won't take the risk. At least at home, I can protect her.

So, despite Mario's hatred for my parents, he risks his license and sells me the alcohol, seeing as he knows it's not for me anyway. He's already made me pinkie swear to wait to drink until I'm old enough, though he told me to stay away from cigarettes forever.

I readily agreed. I've seen addiction in my mother, who, at one point, was valedictorian and had a full ride to college. But then she met my father, and all those dreams and aspirations didn't seem to matter so much when she had euphoria coursing through her veins.

I grab Dad's favorite beer, diapers and formula for Layla, and a few packs of ramen for the next couple days.

Dropping the items on the counter, I pull out my cash while Mario turns to get a pack of cigarettes from behind him. Dad's favorite.

"How are you tonight, sweetheart?" he asks me, clicking the keyboard to ring everything up.

I sigh. "Same ol', same ol'."

"Dad still giving you trouble?"

I give him a dry glance. "Always. I'll be spending my birthday at the diner tomorrow. I was supposed to have the day off, but I didn't get good tips today and, well—" I wiggle the measly bundle of cash. "—it's all gone now anyway."

Mario shoots me an unimpressed look. "What's stopping you from taking Layla from them?"

Shame prevents me from meeting his eyes.

This isn't the first time he's asked, but every excuse I've come up with falls flat. Because the truth is condemning, and as much as I like Mario, what if I can't trust him?

When I refocus on him, my heart squeezes. His stare is soft, and he radiates genuine concern. I feel my resolve cracking.

"Please, Mol, you can tell me anything."

I sigh, and the last of my reservations crumble at his feet.

"My parents have proof of me buying drugs—their drugs—but it doesn't matter. It looks bad. They know I want her, and they've threatened to show it to the court if I try to take custody. Dad has pictures and videos I didn't even know he was taking, but he showed me them before he hid them. And if I just take her... I'll be kidnapping her. I'm legally an adult, but the moment I found out my mother was pregnant, I got comfortable in my prison. I can't leave her, Mario."

My friend shakes his head, utter disgust emitting from his brown eyes. "They're sick. Sick, sick people. And they're blackmailing you! Maybe a lawyer—"

"Lawyers cost money, Mario. Money that I *don't* have. All of it goes to them, and I..." My words fail me, helplessness taking root. Exhaling harshly, I finish with the only words that matter, "I'm trapped."

Tears burn the backs of my eyes as Mario stares at me with fury. Fury *for* me, I know. But his anger won't change my situation.

I don't even know how to.

"You don't have any other family?" he questions, the hope hanging on to his words brittle.

Frowning, I shake my head. As far as I know, both of my parents are only children, and their parents are either dead or estranged.

I have no one but Layla.

“I can ask my wife and see about you staying with us—”

I’m shaking my head before he can finish. “My parents won’t let me take Layla, and I can’t leave her alone.”

“Molly, *please* let me help you,” Mario begs. “We can figure something out.”

“I need time,” I snap, and he deflates. Guilt rises, and it only cements my helplessness. “Just... I’ll figure it out eventually, okay? She’s so young right now, so I just need to make sure I go about it the right way.”

He nods, relenting, though his stiff movements betray his true feelings. But just like me, he’s helpless.

Even if I take my parents down, they’ll be sure to bring me down with them.

“Then at least let me pay for Layla’s stuff, yeah? I’ll help you get anything she needs in the meantime. But don’t think I’m not going to find you a way out of this, little girl,” he tells me sternly. “I won’t ever stand idly by while you suffer.”

Tears well in my eyes, and I’m too overwhelmed with gratitude to thank him properly.

Eventually, I choke out, “Thank you. Even if I have no other family, at least I have you.”

His shoulders slump, though the conviction in his tone is strong. “You do, sweetheart. For anything.”

I smile softly, even if it’s hard to feel. But I am eternally grateful for him, especially since he’s the only person who’s ever been kind to me.

The bell chimes, and I glance at the newcomers walking in. Quickly, I do a double take, a frown marring my face.

It's my dad, along with a man I don't recognize. I'd have thought they were two strangers who walked in at the same time if it wasn't for them being in the midst of a hushed conversation, their words halting when they finally catch sight of me.

My heart drops.

"What are you doing here? I'm getting your stuff..." I ask, trailing off with nervousness when I realize the other man is staring at me with an expression I can't quite describe. It's a look I don't *want* to decipher, with how it immediately has the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

He's short and stocky, with trimmed hair and a square, pronounced jawline. His pale skin is covered in shitty tattoos, and there's a cold gleam in his brown eyes.

Dad strides toward me, gesturing for me to move aside. "I'll take that off your hands. You're too young to be buying alcohol anyhow. Why don't you go with my friend here and wait for me till I'm done?" he orders gruffly.

My mouth drops, bewildered and increasingly suspicious.

My dad has *never* come to take anything 'off my hands'. Which means there's a reason he's here, and that terrifying man has something to do with it.

Like hell I'm going anywhere with him.

"It's fine, I got it—"

"Go," he barks. "*Now.*"

My spine snaps straight. It isn't the harshness in his voice that has me on edge, but rather, the urgency.

Dumbfounded, I look to Mario, and find him a lip curl away from all-out snarling at my dad. He's glaring at the two men with distrust and wrath that burn hotter than the underworld beneath

our feet. But what can he do? If he calls the police and accuses me of trying to buy beer just to get me away from them, I would still end up going home with Dad later, and Mario could get his license revoked if they find out he's sold to me before. And if he claims Dad's a threat to me, it'll only separate me from Layla.

I could run... But where would I go? I couldn't leave my four-month-old sister alone, nor did I have anywhere safe to take her.

My mind is spinning over different scenarios, but each time, I come to the same conclusion. I'm helpless.

"I've actually been needing some help around this place. Why doesn't she stay here with me, and I'll pay—"

"You got eyes for my daughter or somethin', buddy? Why don't you mind your own goddamn business, huh?" Dad snaps, glaring at Mario.

"It's fine," I whisper, glancing at the strange man nervously. He's still staring at me, sending a cold shiver down my spine. Whoever he is, he's the reaper, and wherever he takes me, I won't be going anywhere but down.

"Go with him, Molly. I'm not gonna tell you again," Dad barks.

Working to swallow, I hesitantly step away from the counter. Sparing Mario one last glance, I tuck my chin down and walk toward the man, adrenaline releasing into my veins with an intensity I've never felt before. My pulse is thundering in my ears, and I'm beginning to feel nauseous.

A wicked smile curls one side of the stranger's lips, and my stomach fills with acid, bile teasing the bottom of my throat.

"Your dad and I are good friends, don't worry," he assures, grinning wider as if that's supposed to ease my nerves.

It feels as if there is glue on the bottom of my feet, making each step difficult as we head toward the door.

I can't do this. I can't just let this man take me so easily. Wherever I'm going, I won't go without a fight.

I'll take Layla and find somewhere for us to go. Because wherever that is, it *has* to be better than where we are now. Even if I'm a fucking fugitive wanted for kidnapping, I'll find a way for us to survive.

Just as the man opens the door, the bell chiming, I take off down the aisle to my right.

"Hey!" Dad shouts, prompting his friend to whip around. He wastes no time charging after me, causing my heart to jump in my throat.

Instinctively, I grab a few items from the shelves and throw them on the ground behind me. Bags of chips, granola bars, and other foods scatter across the dirty tile, but it doesn't deter him. He jumps over them, his finger skating across my shoulder as I round a corner, only to find my dad standing right there. I scream, nearly smacking directly into his chest.

His arms come up to wrap around me, so I duck below him, scarcely evading them. I just manage to squeeze past him, hearing their muttered curses from behind me.

"Goddammit, you little bitch!" Dad spits.

Heart pounding viciously against my rib cage, I dart down another aisle, seeing Mario come into view. He's holding a baseball bat while speaking frantically on the phone with people who I assume are the police.

"Get here now!" Mario shouts over the phone.