

THE
RAVEN'S
WIFE

BESTSELLING AND AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

AMANDA
MCKINNEY

THE RAVEN'S WIFE

NARRATIVE OF A MAD WOMAN

AMANDA MCKINNEY

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CONTENTS

Dedication

Also by Amanda McKinney

Awards and Recognition

Let's Connect!

The Raven's Wife

Chapter 1

Julia

Chapter 2

Julia

Chapter 3

Julia

Chapter 4

Julia

Chapter 5

Julia

Chapter 6

Julia

Chapter 7

Julia

Chapter 8

The Other

Chapter 9

Julia

Chapter 10

Julia

Chapter 11

Julia

Chapter 12

Julia

Chapter 13

Julia

Chapter 14

Julia

Chapter 15

Julia

Chapter 16

Julia

Chapter 17

Julia

Chapter 18

The Other

Chapter 19

Julia

Chapter 20

Julia

Chapter 21

Julia

Chapter 22

Julia

[Chapter 23](#)

Julia

[Chapter 24](#)

Julia

[Chapter 25](#)

Julia

[Chapter 26](#)

Julia

[Chapter 27](#)

The Other

[Chapter 28](#)

Julia

[Chapter 29](#)

Julia

[Chapter 30](#)

Julia

[★ The Lie Between Her ★](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Reading Order Guide](#)

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DEDICATION

For Mama, who taught me that sometimes it's okay to embrace your inner
crazy.

ALSO BY AMANDA MCKINNEY

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THE RAVEN'S WIFE

Julia Klein killed her husband. Or did she?

On a frigid winter night, Daniel Klein was stabbed to death in his penthouse suite by his wife, Julia. At least that's what the police report reads. The truth, however, is far more sinister.

After relocating to a remote cabin in the middle of the mountains, Julia's only goal in life is to piece together her broken past. But questions about that fateful night arise when Logan, Julia's brother-in-law, shows up on her doorstep—with evidence that things are not as they appear.

It soon becomes apparent that someone else knows the details of that night, and they will stop at nothing to ensure what happened in the dark, stays in the dark.

Julia, not unaccustomed to drama, rises to the occasion, determined never to be a victim again. After all, she has been here before...

After all, behind every crazy woman is a man who made her that way.

JULIA



“*L*et’s start from the beginning.”
“I killed my husband.”

“That’s not the beginning.” Reese sighs heavily, rolling her aqua-blue eyes. *No patience for me today*, I note. “Julia, come on, you promised you’d try this. I’m worried about you.”

“I know, I know.” I clench my teeth, the pressure shooting to the headache already brewing at my temples.

“Okay, as I said, let’s start from the beginning.”

“I don’t see how *the beginning* is relevant.”

“The beginning is always relevant to the end. Just start talking. This is a safe place, Julia. *I’m* a safe place.”

Safe place, a location I’m unfamiliar with.

“The beginning,” she says again. “Tell me the first thing that pops into your head right now.”

“My nightmares.”

“That’s what comes to mind when I ask you to start from the beginning?”

“Yes.”

“Okay then, let’s start there. Did you have one last night?”

“I have one every night.”

“Are the dreams similar?”

“I guess it depends on your definition of similar.”

“Are they good dreams or bad dreams?”

“Bad.”

“All bad?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about the one last night.”

I shift in my seat, the faded leather couch groaning loudly under the movement. I wonder how many women have sat in this exact place, talking about the exact same thing.

“I was walking in the woods . . .” I cross my leg over my knee, noticing a new scuff on the side of my boot. “It was raining.”

“Was it day or night?”

“Night.”

The heater kicks on with a loud thud, followed by air whistling through the vents overhead. I’m already hot but bite my tongue.

A safe place . . .

“Where were you going, in the dream?” my best friend asks, oblivious to the stifling heat now blowing into the room, despite the fact that she is draped in a cashmere cape. It’s Reese’s fabric of choice during the dead of winter. I believe she owns fourteen cashmere sweaters. I own zero.

“I don’t know where I was going,” I say, returning to the point.

“What were you wearing?”

“My wedding dress.”

Reese’s perfectly plucked brow arches, followed by a grin. “Was your nipple sticking out like it was on your wedding day?”

“I can’t be serious about this if you aren’t, Reese.”

“Just trying to lighten the mood. Girl, seriously, look at your hand. You’re clenching a fist so hard your knuckles are white. Take a drink of water. Take a deep breath. God, you’re stressing *me* out.”

I lean forward—eliciting another protest from the couch—and pick up the paper cup from the coffee table. My hand trembles as I take a sip. The water is tepid and finishes with a sharp chlorine tang. I think I prefer the heat.

“Okay,” Reese says, “so you’re walking in the woods, in the rain, in your ill-fitting wedding dress. Then what?”

I slide the water back onto the table, lean back, and flatten my palms on my knees. “Then I see him.”

“Who?”

“Daniel.”

“And what is your husband doing in the dream?”

I hesitate, then push through the emotion. “He is standing there . . . just staring at me with no expression on his face. He is,” I swallow deeply,

“ripping out the line of stitches on his neck. One by one, pulling out the threads, stitch by stitch.”

There is a loud bang outside the room, followed by sobbing wails of duress, and then a rush of footsteps. A cacophony of placating voices, then finally, silence.

Women’s shelters are never quiet, especially in a rural county with one of the largest meth problems in the country. I recently read an article that reported meth seizures in North Carolina have increased two thousand percent since last year, mostly due to bulk shipments being received directly from Mexico. The cartels are getting smarter, the article stated, using East Coast ports rather than exclusively shipping through Southern states.

The women who come to the Reed County Shelter probably know this kind of life far too well. They are often addicted, homeless, or struggling with severe mental issues. All have been physically and/or sexually abused.

“Keep going.” Reese presses, her tone no longer playful.

I clear my throat. “In my dream, I watch him for a while.”

“Pulling out his stitches?”

“Yes.”

“Gross.”

“Yeah, I know. I can see the skin pull with the tug of each stitch, and blood trickles down his neck like little red snakes. The wound isn’t healed, and I think, why is he ripping the stitches out early?”

“That’s your thought when you see your husband clawing at his wound?”

“Yes. Sutures need at least ten days to heal.”

“Julia . . . is that *all* you were feeling when you saw your husband in your dream?”

“Yes.”

It isn’t the answer she wants, but it’s the truth. *If we’re going to do this, you’ve got to be honest*, she’d said at the beginning of this . . . experiment, we’ll call it.

Just then the phone rings.

Reese answers. “Reese Scott here,” she says, sending me an apologetic glance.

I flick a hand in the air—*it’s fine, take it*.

Who knew an executive director of a women’s shelter lives such a busy life?

I look around the office as Reese filters through a pile of papers, barking orders into the phone. The space doubles as a therapy room for the shelter's residents when the local psychologist visits on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become, a framed photo reads. *And here you are living, despite it all*, says another one. *Someone once asked me how I hold my head up high after all I've been through. I said because I am a survivor, not a victim*, reads a scroll hanging on the wall, the quote splattered with curious brown stains.

There are six boxes of tissues in the room—six. Which is ironic, considering the office is as large as a walk-in closet. Also, it smells funny, like one of those pink air fresheners you find inside the urinals at gas station bathrooms.

Anyway, Reese insisted we meet here. She said it was important for me to talk about what happened in a new, different environment—an untarnished place. *Okay*, I'd said.

Reese hangs up with a sigh, scribbles something on a yellow Post-It, then refocuses on me. "Sorry. Okay. Then what happened, in the dream, after he removes the stitches?"

"He starts laughing at me. And his teeth are missing. His mouth is a gaping black hole with bloody gums."

Reese wrinkles her nose, taking a moment to banish the image from her head. "Why do you think he is laughing at you?"

"Because, though he is the one with the severed throat, he won."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's laughing because he knows he won."

"Won what, Julia?"

"The fight—our fight."

"The medical examiner's report read differently."

"Physically, yes, I won, but mentally, he won. Daniel is still in my dreams, still in my mind. He still has my heart. He knows this."

"You speak as if he's still here."

"He is."

"That's pretty creepy."

I wipe my sweaty palms along my jeans, the harsh sensation of denim against clammy skin sending a shiver through my body.

"What did you do when he started laughing at you?" she asks.

“I tell him he needs to stop laughing and stop messing with his throat. That he needs to keep his stitches in. Otherwise, his neck won’t heal.”

A moment of silence stretches between us.

“And then what, Julia?”

“He turns into a bird, and he flies away.”

“A bird?”

“Yes.”

“Where does he go?”

I shrug.

“What kind of bird did he turn into?”

“A raven.”

“Wow.” Reese blinks. “That’s quite symbolic.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. Ravens symbolize death or impending bad fortune. An omen that something bad is about to happen. A prophecy, you could say.”

“See?” I cock a brow.

“See what?”

“He’s still with me. He’ll be with me forever. Cursing me.”

“Only if you allow him to be, Julia. You’ve got to stop this. The judge ruled it was self-defense. You killed your husband in self-defense. It’s done. You’ve got to move on. Begin to, anyway.”

Reese leans back in her oversize office chair, tucking a strand of blond curls behind her ear. Her face is tight (not just from the Botox), and her brow is furrowed in concern.

It is an expression I have become far too familiar with, unfortunately. Not only from her, but from everyone I cross paths with. An expression I despise more than watching my dead husband rip bloody stitches from his throat.

Reese has been interesting to observe through this ordeal. While her intentions are good, and I appreciate the sentiment as well as her help, I can’t help but feel the disconnect between her and me. The disconnect I feel between myself and society.

Something happens, something changes inside you, when you kill another human being.

This kind of life-altering torment is beyond Reese’s realm of understanding. It’s like a club—only people who have done it can understand it.

It's not entirely her fault; Reese only knows what is represented on film. Or misrepresented, I should say. I blame the entertainment industry. Movies, television shows, video games, all are culpable for inaccurately portraying killing as being far easier than it is.

There is plenty of literature and statistics offering information about the psychological effects of killing another human being. But when you have no mental illness, are neither a psychopath nor a serial killer, the statistics become a bit muddled. As do the reactions to the trauma. No one really knows what to do with you.

"Were you able to go back to sleep after the dream last night?" Reese asks.

"No."

"Are you ever able to sleep after a bad dream?"

"No."

"What do you do?"

"Turn on the TV. Sit there, stare at the wall. Sometimes, I walk around the house. Change my clothes."

"Why do you change your clothes?"

"Because I sweat."

"During the dream?"

"Yes."

"I was going to ask . . ." Reese glances at the door, as if someone could be listening. I suppose someone could be. Her postage-stamp-size office is bookended by the break room and the lobby. "Last time I was at your house, your bed sheets were stripped and I noticed the sweat stains on the mattress."

Heat spreads up my neck to my cheeks.

"Julia, honey, you gotta go to the doctor. You gotta talk to somebody about this. I can call Dr. Bell; he comes here every Tuesday and Thursday to talk to the residents. I can—"

"I *am* talking. Isn't that exactly what I'm doing right now?"

"Yes, and I'm proud of you. It's a great start, but you need more than I can provide. I'm not a doctor, just your best friend who happens to have tons of experience in this area."

"Then why the hell are we doing this?"

"Because you have to talk to *someone*. I do think I can help you, but you should be open to going to an actual doctor as well."

I begin fidgeting with the hem of my cardigan. Since when did I start wearing cardigans?

“Do you scream?” she asks. “In your dreams? Are you screaming when you wake up?”

My fingertips instinctively rise to my throat, still raw from waking up mid-scream not six hours earlier.

Reese nods, her face squeezing with pity. “You’re having night terrors.”

I don’t respond.

“I have Xanax,” she says.

“I’m not taking drugs, Reese, we’ve already been through this. And I don’t drink. I don’t want to.”

“You’re right, okay . . . you agreed to start by simply talking.”

I take another sip of water, attempting to quench that desert that has become my mouth.

“So, let’s start over,” my best friend says. “Let’s start from the beginning . . . before you killed your husband.”

JULIA



The beginning (before I killed my husband)

I met Daniel Klein on my thirtieth birthday, on a not-so-subtle setup by my best friend, Reese Scott. Reese and Daniel had both gone to UNC, the University of North Carolina, occasionally crossing paths when their social circles overlapped.

Reese spared no expense for the lavish event. She hosted two of my friends and six of hers (including Reese, I only have three friends, a number that apparently doesn't make a party) at a rooftop Japanese restaurant in downtown Charlotte.

Reese is rich, though you've probably gathered that by now. A trust-fund baby, the Marilyn Monroe lookalike (seriously, she won a contest) spent her twenties jumping from easy job to easier job until finding her passion for helping others. She began volunteering, and the rest is philanthropic history. Reese will be the first person to tell you she has dedicated her life to humanitarian work for no other reason than that it makes her feel good.

This kind of blunt candidness is what I love most about her. You ask and she'll tell you. Whether you like it or not.

Me, on the other hand? I tend to keep my emotions close to my chest. Reese is the beautiful, charismatic one. I am the smart wallflower. We make the perfect team.

Anyway, we were dressed to the nines, hair curled, lashes glued, nails painted. I'd even gotten highlights for the occasion, adding streaks of blond to my auburn hair, which, unfortunately, turned orange two washes later. But that night, I looked good.

Reese timed it perfectly. I had just ordered my third martini—and was solidly buzzed—when dashing handsome Daniel Klein joined the party.

You know the feeling, that dip in your stomach that happens when you meet someone special for the first time? That was me with Daniel. It wasn't just his boy-band good looks . . . it was the way he carried himself. Confident and unimpressed. Cocky.

And then when I noticed the sleeve of tattoos that ran up his arm and saw the motorcycle he'd driven up on, well, forget about it. I was toast. I will never forget the moment our eyes met. In one second, I knew that this man had a significant place in my life. There was no question in my mind.

I just didn't realize how dark the path would be.

We hit it off, began dating, and Daniel asked me to marry him six months later. It was quick, yes, but we were both in that weird early-thirties purgatory where society tells you it's time to either get married and procreate or move to Canada.

Daniel was a stockbroker at the time, working for a reputable investment banking firm in Charlotte. I was a clinical research associate at a start-up genetics lab in downtown Charlotte called Bateson Genetics.

My role was to collect data and prepare evaluation reports for ongoing clinical studies, including my favorite, the Marion Study, which collected blood tests from small-time criminals (who were paid for their donations) and studied the genome makeup of each participant to see if there were any commonality in their genes. *A you aren't evil, your genes make you evil* kind of study.

Anyway, Daniel's salary of \$75,000 a year dwarfed my fifteen-dollar-an-hour gig, and therefore, instantly made my job less important. I quit a month after we married.

Shortly after, Daniel was promoted—and then promoted again. Eventually, he started his own company, taking with him some of his previous employer's largest clients. It was all the gossip at the time. We purchased a nice home on five acres just outside the city.

Looking back, I realize signs of Daniel's aggressive behavior surfaced almost immediately after our nuptials.

For example, he was very jealous and possessive. At first, I actually liked this side of him. It reminded me of old-school chivalry, like, pre-#MeToo.

But then he started questioning my phone calls and visits with my friends, slowly easing them out of the two-person unit that had become “The Kleins.” I’m ashamed I didn’t see what he was doing. I’m ashamed I allowed my husband to brainwash me under the guise of starting a “new phase in life.”

Me and him—that was the phase. *Only* me and him.

Sign number one: Isolation. *Check.*

We started arguing a lot. Daniel accused me of cheating (I wasn’t) and began following me and checking my cell phone. He manipulated me into getting a new phone under his contract—with the location services turned on at all times, of course. Everything was in his name—the house, the cars, the credit cards, the phones.

In under a year, I went from me—to his.

Sign number two: Controlling behavior. *Check.*

Around the time of our one-year anniversary, the verbal abuse started. His shirts were never ironed correctly. The dinners I cooked were never good enough. I left spots on the mirrors, stains in the sink, dust bunnies under the couches. Nothing I did was good enough.

It was subtle, of course, little comments here and there that eventually added up to me walking on eggshells around him. Slowly, my self-confidence began to chip away. Of course, I didn’t see this as it was happening. Did I mention that Daniel was a very, very smart man?

The biggest red flag came to me in the bedroom when my beloved husband started making odd requests. It happened slowly at first—blindfolds, cuffs, whips, chains—and then ramped up from there.

He choked me once. We didn’t speak for days afterward.

After that, things started really spinning out of control. Daniel made me feel guilty for not living up to his expectations as a wife, as a homemaker, as a sexual partner. I was a prude because I didn’t like to be choked, because I didn’t want to strap on a dildo and do him from behind.

The first time he hit me was the most anticlimactic situation ever. I always assumed the first time a man hit a woman would be over something incredibly dramatic, like infidelity or money. That it would start with a massive argument, which would lead to the blow.

Not me. I was slapped across the face for accidentally breaking one of his wineglasses.

That’s it. Literally—that’s it.

And believe it or not, the most disconcerting part was that he was stone-cold sober. If he would have been drunk, there would have been an excuse. Alcohol always takes the blame, right?

I should have left then. But I didn't.

I often wonder what my life would be like today if I had packed a bag and left my husband that night. If I had called Reese and confessed everything. She would have been there in a heartbeat.

But I didn't do any of that. Why? Because I was embarrassed.

I was embarrassed for Daniel. I was embarrassed for myself. I was embarrassed that I allowed it to happen. Looking back again, I realize I had been expecting it, that it didn't surprise me when he hit me.

Do you want to know the really crazy thing?

I am more ashamed by my staying with my husband after the first time he hit me, than I am that I killed him.

JULIA



“We’re going to try something new today.”

I cross my legs and settle into the leather couch that sounds like farts when I move. There is a spark of excitement in my best friend’s eye today, which immediately transfers to me. Funny how that can happen, isn’t it?

Reese slides on a pair of leopard-framed reading glasses (fake) and ruffles her curls. “We’re going to go through a list of questions to help us determine what you like and don’t like.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re rebuilding your identity.”

“God, Reese . . .” I can’t fight the eye roll.

She holds up a hand. “I’ve read countless therapy reports and have counseled dozens of women here at the shelter. I know what I’m doing, and rehabilitation all starts with one thing: getting back in touch with who you really are. You, Julia, lost your identity in your marriage, and the first step in rebuilding your life is to rebuild your identity.”

“Sounds like an easier-said-than-done type of thing.”

“Well, not really. Let’s start with the basics.” Reese skims the piece of paper in her hand, something she’d printed before my arrival. “I’m going to ask you a list of questions, and you answer. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“What does Julia like?”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“That’s an extremely broad question.”

“What are your hobbies?”

I roll my eyes for the second time, then find myself pausing, stumped by the question.

“Aha! See?” Reese jabs a finger in the air. “Tougher than you think, isn’t it? You don’t know what your hobbies are anymore because your entire life revolved around Daniel. I’m right, huh? See?”

As if on cue, the heater bangs to life, funneling urinal-scented air into the room. And just like that—I’m hot again. I pull the scarf from my neck and unzip the red puffer jacket I’d dug out of the closet after waking to snow flurries and record-breaking lows.

“What did you like to do before Daniel?” Reese asks, apparently desensitized to both the smell and the temperature. “During your spare time? What did you do?”

I think for moment. “Read.”

“Ah, that’s right. I remember you read a lot when we were in junior high. Nancy Drews, right?”

I nod, surprised she remembers. Reese was a *Teen Beat* kind of gal.

“Didn’t Daniel let you read?” she asks.

“Yes, but I always felt like he was watching me, or judging me for relaxing, because I should’ve been doing something else, like cleaning.”

“God, he was a dick.”

I narrow my eyes, tilting my head to the side. “But he fooled you, didn’t he?”

“Guilty.”

We sit in a reflective silence for a moment. Reese speaks first.

“We’ve always had the worst taste in men, haven’t we?”

Neither of us disputes this fact. But the difference between Reese and me is that she limits her romantic rendezvous to flings, jumping from one bad boy to the next, while I, on the other hand, fell madly in love with each of them. Consequently, I got my heart shattered in the process, and yet never learned my lesson.

It’s just another difference between Reese and me. She has no interest in marriage, while I have been dreaming of white picket fences since the day my father walked out on my mother when I was eight years old.

Reese flicks a hand in the air. “Moving along. Okay, reading—this is useful. We can work with this.” She scribbles a note on the paper. “Let’s go to the bookstore this weekend and get you a few new books. Reignite that passion, that escape in your life. Brunch, then books. Yes?”

I concede, unable to remember the last time I visited an actual bookstore. And also, an escape sounds good.

“What about art?” Reese asks. “You’ve always liked art. Why don’t you try to paint? Try art therapy?”

“I have no interest in painting. I just like to look at it.”

She tilts her head to the side, regarding me closely. “Have you ever thought about going back to school? Getting your PhD?”

I shrug. I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought about it.

“Or what about reapplying to Bateson Genetics? I remember how much you loved your job there. Maybe you could work part-time and take some classes while you’re at it.”

“That would require a move back to the city.”

“So? You loved being in the city.”

“It’s been four months, Reese. And honestly, I’m kind of enjoying nature.”

“You’re turning into a hermit.” Reese holds up a hand. “Okay, I’ll stop pressing about that—for now.” She skims the questions. “Let’s see . . . what is your most prized possession?”

“My Ninja coffeepot.”

“Seriously?”

“You’ve had coffee at my place, haven’t you?”

“Yes—and you’re right, it is pretty good.”

“It’s excellent. It’s not the coffee; it’s the pot. Trust me on this.”

“Okay, but just so you know, a normal person’s response would be something super-sentimental like family pictures, a wedding ring, a loved one’s ashes, a family heirloom, your home, your car.”

“Nope. Coffee for me.”

A warm smile spreads across Reese’s round, ruddy face. “I love you, you know that?”

“I do.”

Reese winks, then refocuses on her notes. As she’s deciding which question to ask next, she mindlessly plucks a tube of gloss from the desktop and slathers it on her lips. Sparkling plum, her signature color. She replaces the tube, then leans back.

“Next, what would you like to be when you grow up?”

“Skinny.”

She throws her head back in laughter. “That’s actually a good one. This can give you a goal to work toward. You can have my treadmill; I never use it. We’ll get you an exercise journal. Yes,” she says as she scribbles more notes. “This is a good one.”

I’m not obese, to be clear. But I am soft and at least twenty pounds heavier than when I met Daniel. It’s funny how dignity and self-confidence go hand in hand. Lose one, and the other follows shortly after.

“Next. What is something that always makes you smile?”

I frown, shocked at my inability to answer the question.

Since when did I stop smiling?

Reese offers a deep sigh. “We’ll come back to that one.” She consults the paper one last time. “Oh, this is a good one. What’s on your bucket list?”

“Positano, Italy, on the Amalfi Coast,” I say with zero hesitation.

Reese’s blue eyes flare with excitement. “Oh my *gawd*, let’s do it.”

“I’ve already been looking at hotels.”

“Oh my g—you are taking me. *We* are going. Let’s plan on it. It’ll be perfect. You’ll get away, rejuvenate, have a one-night stand with a masseur named Lorenzo. It’s exactly what you need. Julia Klein’s journey of self-discovery.”

Reese releases a squeal of delight, loud enough for the entire shelter to hear.

Lost in dreams of a tattooed man named Lorenzo, I lean back on the couch.

Yes. Italy.

Something to look forward to, I think.

Something to work toward.

JULIA



*I*t's been four months since Daniel died.

Life is different, yes, but also the same. Anyone who has lived in an abusive household for an extended period of time will tell you that you become your circumstance. I don't mean that you accept it. Quite the contrary, actually. You adapt, changing to meet whatever survival demands of you.

Being married to Daniel turned me into an edgy, nervous basket case. This has not changed since his death. I am also as lonely as I was when I was his wife.

Honestly, my life and I are the same, just without him now.

For example, instead of walking on eggshells around the man I shared a house with, I now walk on eggshells anticipating any kind of communication from the outside world. Agoraphobia, I think it's called. Reese has really missed an opportunity with that one.

I don't trust myself with a gun. I'm not against having one in the home; I'm against accidentally shooting myself with it. Not because I am untrained in self-defense, but because I have woken up mid-nightmare more times than I can count.

There is a hole in my closet door where I punched it, thinking it was an intruder, and I've had to replace the window in my bedroom twice.

There is no question my night terrors are getting worse. I'm not a doctor, but if I had to guess, my body is locked in fight-or-flight mode, and the lines between friend and foe are becoming more and more blurry. I am always vigilant, always on alert. Always watching for angles.

Four months of this.

Four months of self-isolation and self-loathing.

Four months of nightmares.

I read an article somewhere that advised against making big decisions within the first year of a traumatic event. I consider this sage advice, so I am staying put for the near future.

Truth is, I'm more comfortable in my cabin deep in the woods than I was in Charlotte. My new home—which used to be our vacation home—sits on the edge of Bridget Piegan National Forest, in a small town called Reed Point, fifty miles west of Charlotte. The small town serves as a retirement community and vacation destination for many city dwellers seeking solace from the day-to-day hustle.

Daniel bought the cabin soon after his company took off, with dreams of weekend retreats, crackling fires, bottles of wine, and ample time to practice procreation. We bought the cabin from Reese's rich grandparents, who gave us "family" pricing. Reese has a lake house nearby, as well as an apartment in the city.

After Daniel died, I sold our suburban house outside Charlotte and moved to the cabin. There was no way I could sleep in the same place where I'd stabbed my husband to death.

The cabin isn't a mansion, but it is beautiful. *Very Southern Living*. A one-story, two-bedroom, two-bath, A-frame home that sits on a mountainside overlooking the Blue Ridge.

I've considered selling the pictures I've taken from the back porch as stock photos. The sunsets are that stunning. The interior is no exception—twenty-two hundred square feet of polished wood, flannel, leather, you get the idea.

I've learned to chop my own wood, and I've become pretty good at starting fires in the fireplace. I've perfected beef stew and quiche—two meals that keep for days.

My only brush with civilization is when I visit the Reed County Women's Shelter for my "therapy" sessions with Reese, when Reese visits the cabin, or when I go out for supplies. That's it.

And that's plenty.

This has got to change . . . I know this.

I have got to change.

If I want to live a normal life—whatever that may be—I need to revert to the person I was before I married Daniel. Reese is right about that.

I want to do this, to change, to better myself. The problem is . . . the desire is there, but the courage is lacking.

JULIA



*R*ese delivered the treadmill six days ago, and I have already put twelve miles on it.

My alarm goes off at seven. I strip off my sweat-laden nightgown, force the latest nightmare out of my head, wrestle into my sports bra, slip on my joggers, and stumble to the eyesore of a machine that now sits in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room.

The first day, I thought I was going to die.

The second, I was sure of it.

Today, I am less sure and more hopeful.

I've spent the afternoon reading old medical journals I purchased when working for Bateson Genetics, when I had dreams of going back to school and becoming a geneticist. I even googled a few online class opportunities, but quickly became overwhelmed with anxiety at the thought of actually going back to school. Being around people, all day, every day.

I'm so annoying, I know. I hate myself too, sometimes. I get it.

It is supposed to snow tomorrow, the threat written in the line of clouds floating above the orange glow that rests on the mountaintops in the distance. The last of the day's sun.

I stoke the fire in the fireplace, then sit there for a few minutes, mesmerized by the flames. The pops and hisses. The sound soothes me.

Although I have a television and several Alexas in the cabin, I rarely turn them on. Too much emotion in modern entertainment. Crime and evil on television, tears and heartbreak on the radio. I've had enough of both to last a lifetime.

I stand up, replacing the red-hot poker. My back hurts, and I make a note to order new running shoes soon.

I make a cup of chamomile tea, grab a blanket from the couch, and drape it over my shoulders like a cape. Then I step outside, into the bitter cold of dusk, and slip into the shadows under the awning.

Cupping my tea in my hands, I wait, as still as a statue.

And wait.

And wait.

The tea is cold by the time he arrives.

A pair of beady black eyes stare at me, his gaze finding mine as quickly as it always does. As usual, he has perched on the tallest branch of the pine tree that tops off just below the cabin.

A black raven. He is the largest I've ever seen, with a long, hooked beak, thick wings, and a fan-like tail. He's beautiful. Captivating.

We stare at each other, both unmoving, and I begin to grow nervous.

Finally, he extends his wings and dramatically swoops down, and a rush of excitement washes away the nerves. I watch as the bird glides on the wind, deftly landing on a tree closer to the deck.

Though my heart is pounding, I remain still, my body frozen in place, my hands wrapped around the cold teacup.

I must not scare him.

What feels like an hour passes, though it was probably only a few minutes. Finally, he dips off the branch and lands on the deck railing a mere six feet from me. Closer than ever before.

Though I am overwhelmed with delight, I rein in the emotion. Must not set him off. After all, we have worked up to this moment for months, he and I.

The black raven stares at me, unblinking. I can actually *feel* the electricity between us.

Finally—*finally*—he tears his gaze away from me and begins pecking at the seed that I have refreshed every hour, on the hour, for the entire day, awaiting his arrival.

Relief expels from my lungs in a loud exhale. I watch him eat, reveling in the fleeting moment of happiness I feel.

Screw pills, alcohol, drugs.

What does Julia like?

Acceptance.

JULIA



I finished reading the book I picked up at the bookstore with Reese earlier in the week and found three more books buried at the bottom of the blanket chest in the living room. Two mysteries and one historical fiction, all three old, judging by the faded covers and cracked spines. I'm unsure if they belonged to Daniel or the previous owners. Not that it matters.

I choose one of the mysteries, make myself another cup of tea, and settle onto the couch with one goal in mind—escape from reality until sleep sucks me under.

It is a frigid, blustery winter night. Perfect for exactly this.

I have just opened to the first chapter when I hear someone pulling up the driveway outside. Frowning, I push off the blanket and rise from the couch.

I tap the screen on my phone—no missed calls or texts. Reese always either calls or messages prior to her random drop-ins. I glance at the clock mounted above the crackling fireplace and learn it's 7:47 p.m.

I tiptoe-jog across the living room and peep through the curtains. I don't recognize the black dually truck rolling to a stop outside my front door. The windows are tinted, and the massive wheels sparkle under the porch light.

The engine turns off and the door opens. A large silhouette unfolds itself from the driver's-side door. Definitely a man. And as he turns, there is something familiar about him. The dark hair, large frame, wide shoulders.

The man rounds the hood and steps into the light.

My stomach drops to my feet. Satan himself could have shown up on my doorstep, and I wouldn't have been more surprised.

Actually, that's not true. I probably would have said, "What took you so long?"

My pulse beats faster as he strides across the driveway with a strong, confident gait.

I haven't seen Logan Klein, my brother-in-law, since Daniel's funeral. Logan is/was Daniel's older brother by eight years, and the two couldn't be more different.

While Daniel was tall and lean, Logan is as thick as an ox, with a tree-trunk neck, razor-sharp jawline, and shoulders as wide as a refrigerator. Daniel was the pretty boy of the family (most bankers are), and Logan the bashed-up misfit, the kind of guy your mother warns you to stay away from, but you secretly fantasize about behind closed doors. (I did.) Both men have tattoos, but Logan's are dark and mysterious. Creepy, almost.

Their personalities were opposite as well. Daniel was charismatic and charming (again, stereotypical banker), while Logan carried a quiet, brooding demeanor. Shy. Last I heard, he never married and had no friends, no pets, no life.

I survey all six foot three of him as he steps onto my front porch.

While there's no mistaking it's him—he and Daniel shared almost identical faces—there is no question Logan has changed since I last saw him at the funeral. He looks more ragged, tired. Older than his fortyish years. And he's lost weight.

I take a quick mental inventory of my appearance. I'm still wearing the jeans that I chopped wood in earlier (evident by the sap and dirt stains on the knees) and a gray sweater. No makeup. I stopped wearing makeup after Daniel died. My long auburn hair is pulled back in a messy ponytail. A pair of rainbow-striped wool socks cover my feet. It is my normal appearance, I'm somewhat ashamed to admit.

I wait until he knocks to open the door. When I do, a blast of ice-cold night air sweeps past me, sending a chill up my spine.

Logan blinks when he sees me, unable to hide his surprise.

The sting of insecurity is swift and sharp. Yes, I used to wear makeup, and I used to be twenty pounds lighter. I used to smile. I used to wash my hair. I used to be many things before I killed his brother.

"Julia," he says low, his voice deeper with a hint of grit I don't remember.

"Logan . . ."

“It’s been a long time.”

“Four months.”

We stare at each other for a minute.

“Am I stopping by too late?” he asks.

“No.”

I step back and open the door wide. I look him up and down as he crosses the threshold. A soft scent of sandalwood follows seconds later. He is wearing a flannel shirt and thick khaki pants, the kind carpenters wear, and boots.

He has a cardboard box in his hands.

Logan pauses and looks around the cabin. I wonder if he’s ever been here. Daniel bought the house after we married, and considering his strained relationship with his brother, I doubt he ever shared the news.

“Is it just you out here?” Logan asks.

“Yes.”

Blinking, he frowns at me.

He probably thinks it is odd for a single woman to live out in the middle of nowhere, but it suits me just fine and I shouldn’t have to defend myself.

As an awkward beat passes between us, my mind races, wondering what in the world could have brought him to my doorstep.

My brother-in-law and I hardly know each other. Daniel and I married at the courthouse, in jeans and T-shirts, with no one else in attendance. I know very little about Daniel’s family, other than that he and his brother grew up dirt poor, that his father was a severe alcoholic, and that they are estranged. Daniel from his parents, as well as from his brother. I got the vibe that Daniel and Logan’s parents didn’t create a loving and nurturing environment for their two boys.

Logan lifts the box in his hands. “I’m moving.”

“Here?” I crack a crooked grin, a feeble attempt to lighten the awkwardness between us.

It takes him a minute to get the joke. That’s when I remember that Logan never really had a sense of humor.

“No, I just bought a place outside Charlotte,” he says. “While I was packing up, I found this box.”

I purse my lips, having no clue where he’s going with this.

“It’s some of Daniel’s things, from when he was younger. I thought . . . wasn’t sure if you wanted it.”

Why would I want *more* memories of the man I killed?

Logan clears his throat. “Just didn’t feel right to throw it away, and there’s not much storage space in the new house, so . . .” He lifts the box again. “You want it?”

“You drove all the way out to Reed Point to give this to me?”

He shrugs.

“I have a phone, you know. You have my number.”

“You never answer it.”

I quickly search my memory, recalling the few times that Logan tried to reach out after Daniel died. I didn’t answer. Him being a cop, I assumed he was just checking on me. A brotherly duty.

“How did you know I moved out here?”

“Just a guess after you sold the house outside Charlotte.”

“I didn’t know Daniel told you about this place.”

“Just that he got it. That’s it.”

I wonder what else they talked about, considering I was under the impression the two hardly spoke.

“Well,” I shift my weight, “that’s very generous of you to come all the way out here.”

“No, I’m actually on a hunting trip. Here for a week.”

“A hunting trip. Really?”

I don’t know why this surprises me. Miles and miles of untamed wilderness surround this small town, and it is a common stop-off for tourists making their way through the Blue Ridge Mountains.

“What are you hunting?”

“Bear.”

My brows pop up. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“God, that’s . . . quite the hunt. Isn’t it illegal to hunt bears?”

“No, ma’am. North Carolina allows hunting of two species of bear, just no cubs and no females with cubs.”

I work a deep swallow. It sounds so primal. “Where are you staying?”

“A campground a few miles north of here.”

“Just you?”

“Just me.”

Another awkward beat.

“Nice that work let you off,” I say.

“I retired.”

“From the police force?” I can’t hide my shock.

Logan has worked for the Charlotte PD since he graduated from high school. According to Daniel, his brother never wanted to do anything else with his life.

Logan nods, then sets the box on the floor. It’s staying, apparently, and I decide that I’ll burn it later.

“Why did you quit?” I ask.

He glances at the window, a hint of somberness flashing behind his eyes. “Just time to move on.”

I don’t press, as it’s obvious he doesn’t care to elaborate.

He turns toward me, regarding me in a way that suggests he’s wanting to say something else. That there is something on his mind. Logan Klein didn’t drive all the way out to this cabin to deliver a box of his brother’s memorabilia. There is definitely an ulterior motive to this visit.

“Would you like some coffee? Tea?”

Logan stuffs his hands in his pockets. “No, thanks.”

Something is on the tip of his tongue, and I can’t imagine what the man has to say to me.

Does he want to confess that he hates me because I killed his brother? Or maybe thank me for it? Or is he here to kill me? Get revenge? What a plot twist that would be.

Whatever it is, I want him to say it. I’m not good with gray areas. I live in either the black or the white. Back and forth, but never in between.

The wind drags a tree branch against the window outside, making a pitched squeaking sound.

Logan takes a step back.

“I’d better get on,” he says finally, then pulls a piece of paper from his pocket and sets it on the back of the couch. “My number. In case you need anything.”

“O—okay . . . Well, thanks for the, uh, box.”

“Ma’am.” He dips his chin and disappears out the front door.

As I watch my brother-in-law descend my driveway, a knot forms in the pit of my stomach.

I think of the black raven that visits me in my dreams, and the one that sits outside my cabin. I hear Reese’s voice in my head. *Ravens symbolize death or impending bad fortune.*

I think of Daniel and how I can still feel him in this house, in my presence. And how odd that his brother—whom I never speak to—just visited me.

Yes, my Daniel is still very much with me.

The joke is on me.

It always has been.

JULIA



“*H*ave you had any more bad dreams since we last talked?”

“I have them every night, Reese. I already told you that.”

The heater kicks on, but this time, I smirk. Today, I am one step ahead, sans coat.

“Same type of dreams? Lost in the woods, wedding dress, Daniel, bloody stitches?”

“Yes, and he turns into a raven in the end.”

Reese nods, then tilts her head to the side. “You look terrible, by the way.”

“Thank the treadmill you gave me.”

“You’re using it?”

“It hurts me that you’re so surprised.”

“No, I—no, it’s good. I’m so glad.”

“My body isn’t.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“I hope so.” I smooth my hair, now frizzed from being freshly washed.

That’s the thing about dirty hair, no frizz. But it’s unacceptable, I get it, and after Logan’s surprise visit last night, I made a vow to take more care of my appearance. The *new* me. The me who reads and exercises, the me who shaves for myself, washes my hair regularly for myself.

Me, me, me. I guess I should start to like “me.”

“Now that you’re exercising regularly, you’ve got to get more sleep, Julia.”

“Logan Klein came by.”

“What?” Reese lurches forward in her chair, her eyes rounding. “Logan—as in—*Daniel’s brother*? Your brother-in-law? Are you *serious*?”

“Yeah.”

“He came to the cabin?”

“Yeah.”

Her jaw drops, and she stares at me for a solid five seconds before gathering herself enough to speak. “What the heck did he want?”

“He’s moving to a new house, and he said he found some of Daniel’s old things. Wanted to know if I wanted any of it.”

“No way.”

“Way.”

Our attention is pulled to the closed door where two nurses have gathered on the other side to discuss one of the residents.

“She showed up half-frozen at two in the morning with an awful black eye. No coat, no car, and I checked the cameras. No one dropped her off.”

“She walked?”

“That’s the assumption. Doesn’t speak a lick of English. She’s been asleep since we checked her in.”

“Does she have kids?”

“Not with her. She’s in room five for now. I’ll call Estrella . . .”

The voices fade into the adjoining break room.

Sometimes I wonder if Reese’s insistence that we meet at the women’s shelter is either intentional—an effort to show me what my life could become if I don’t start making smarter choices—or the epitome of insensitivity.

“Did you tell Logan the last thing you want in your life is something to remind you of your murdered husband?” Reese asks, refocusing on me.

“No.” I blow out a breath, leaning forward to rest my elbows on my knees. The jeans I’m wearing pinch my belly fat. “It was so awkward.”

“I’ll bet.” She shakes her head. “Well, you’re still alive . . . so there’s that.”

“I know. I half expected him to kill me.”

“Is this the first time you two have ever been alone together?”

“Yes. It’s the first time we’ve said more than five words to each other.”

“How did he act? I mean, *Jesus*, I can’t believe this. How did he act?”

“You mean considering he was standing in the same room with the woman who killed his brother?”

“Exactly.”

“Weird.”

“Weird how? What did he say?”

“Literally, he just dropped off the box, stood there for a little while, made some bullshit small talk, and then left.”

Reese squints. “Something feels . . .”

“Fishy?”

“Exactly. Why wouldn’t he just mail the box?”

“I don’t know. He said he’s here on a hunting trip—staying at a nearby campground—so he thought he’d swing by with it.”

“How did he look?”

I glance up, under my eyelashes.

A mischievous smile curves Reese’s plum-colored lips. “Still hot, huh?”

“Oh yeah.”

She chuckles. “He got the looks, no doubt about that. Last I heard, he was a lifelong bachelor by choice. Can’t blame him.”

“I didn’t see a ring on his finger. Gay?”

“No way. I remember hearing rumors that he had a habit of sleeping with women he’d meet on the job.”

“What do you mean?”

“Women who’d call the station, scared of something—their neighbors, a sound outside their house—whatever. Single moms, widows. He’d do a follow-up visit and *boom*, sleep with them and never see them again.”

“Sounds like a jerk.”

“Yep. He’s the type that always goes for the damsel in distress. Nothing sexier to those types. White Knight Syndrome is the actual term for it. A man who feels like he always needs to rescue a woman. Anyway, what did you do with the stuff he brought you?”

“Burned it.”

“Sounds about right.”

“Did you ever meet him?” I ask.

Reese shifts in her seat. “Not face-to-face, no. Just heard stories.”

A beat passes between us.

“Do you think he knows about the video?” she asks.

“No.” Instinctively, I sit up, my back straightening like an iron rod. “You’re the only one who has it.”

“But didn’t they seize Daniel’s laptop after everything went down?”

“They took *our* laptop, yes, the one he and I shared. He had his own for work. But it wouldn’t be on either of those. I recorded the video from my phone and immediately emailed you the file, then deleted it. There is only one file. You have it.”

“What about the cloud?”

“No, I turned off syncing when I recorded it and sent it to you.”

Reese casts me a wary look. “Girl, I’m just saying, it’s odd that he showed up out of the blue . . . that’s the only thing I can think that would trigger a visit.”

“Even if the police did, somehow, get hold of the video, they didn’t allow Logan to be a part of the investigation, remember? Because it was his brother.”

“Yeah, but he still would have had access to everything.”

“You’re being weird.”

“No, it’s weird that *he* showed up.”

“You deleted the video, right?” I ask, my heart pounding like a drum.

“Of course. The minute you asked me to.”

“And you never watched it, did you?”

“No,” she says, but her gaze drops to the floor a second before settling back on me. “You made me promise, like, a million times I wouldn’t.”

I nod, then begin picking at the corner of a ripped fingernail.

“The video” is of my husband abusing me, and me curled up on the floor begging him to stop. I watched it and was so humiliated afterward, I cried for two days. The fact that the video exists at all is yet another thing that keeps me up at night. The embarrassment I would feel if anyone viewed it is almost inconceivable. But it had to be done.

Toward the end, I feared for my life. I honestly thought my husband was going to kill me. So, one day, I secretly set up my phone to record so that when I died, Daniel would be convicted. Two hours before what would be my final argument with my husband, I sent the video to Reese and asked her to hold on to it in case anything ever happened to me.

Little did I know at the time, Daniel would be the one to lose his life.

Reese knows the subject matter of the video because she forced me to tell her, but she promised to never view it. We even pinky-promised.

After Daniel died, I asked her to delete it from her computer. She said she did.

“Well, let me know if he stops by again, okay? Do you want me to stay over for a few days?” she asks.

“No, it’s fine. And I will.”

Reese nods, but the concern is still written all over her face.

“Okay,” she says, uncrossing and recrossing her legs. As she does, the pen slips from her fingertips and tumbles to the floor. She doesn’t seem to notice, or maybe it’s that she doesn’t care. “Let’s get back to you and the reason you’re here. The last time we met, we focused on reconnecting with yourself, and talked about your likes and dislikes. Did you read the book we got at the bookstore?”

“I did.”

“Good, and you’ve been exercising, so that’s good. Oh—I emailed you a health tracker, did you get it?”

“I haven’t checked email today.”

“Do it and print it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She smirks at my mocking. “Okay, today I want to try to go back to what happened to escalate things. You need to be able to talk about it; it’s a huge part of healing. Okay?”

I nod. She’s been pushing me to talk about that night for weeks.

“Let’s start from the beginning. From when Daniel started . . . getting physical.”

I pull in a long breath, exhale, then begin. “The first time he was . . . *physical* . . . he slapped me across the face.”

Reese leans forward, probably because my voice has dropped to almost a whisper. I can’t help it. I hate talking about it, which is why I don’t.

“And from that moment on,” I say, “it was like a switch flipped inside him. Like an animal with bloodlust. Do you have any water?”

Reese shoots up from the desk and grabs a bottle of water from the mini fridge in the corner of the room. “Keep going,” she says as she hands it to me. “You’re doing good.”

I grip the bottle between my hands but don’t open it. The cold plastic feels like a breath of fresh air against my sweating palms.

“It got bad quick. Went from slapping to . . . harder things. Bruises, black eyes.” I am speaking to the floor now because I can’t bear to look her in the eye. “At first, I was punished for my mistakes, like under-seasoned chicken or a dirty shower. But then it changed.”

“By punished, you mean beaten?”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean, changed?”

“The punishments. They—it—turned into a game.”

“A game?”

“Yeah.” I stare at the floor, my heart pounding harder.

“What kind of game, Julia?”

THE OTHER



Six months earlier

I can't breathe.
Despite feeling like I am suffocating, I control the impulse to gulp for air.

He can hear me when I breathe heavily.

I am lying on my side, hugging my knees to my chest, surrounded by a dozen little dust bunnies. I chide myself for wearing black leggings today. He will immediately see the streaks of dust on my clothing, and the punishment will be worse.

This is a new hiding spot for me. When he first started playing this game, I attempted to throw him off by selecting unusual spots to hide. Squeezing myself into cabinets, storage boxes, behind the hot water tank. But it was no use. He'd find me every time. Now I seek less creative spots, ones that are so obvious he might not check. Hide in the open, so they say.

Tonight, I am under the bed in the guest room.

As minutes turn into hours, it becomes apparent that he is making me wait. Most of the time, he finds me immediately. Sometimes, however, he prolongs the search by leisurely drinking a pint of tequila at the kitchen table, mentally torturing me before the real punishment begins.

Regardless of how the evening plays out, two things are always the same.

The beginning and the end.

The beginning starts with the same seven little words. Do you want to play a game? And in the end, I am punished. Sometimes he allows me minutes to hide, sometimes only seconds. Then he comes after me, slowly calling my name in a haunting voice as he searches the house.

There is no warning before he initiates this fucked-up game of hide-and-seek. The only consistent thing is that he's drunk every time, so it's impossible to prepare myself.

So, I prepare daily, staying on my toes, keeping one eye open, waiting for him to say the seven little words that will haunt me for the rest of my life.

Do you want to play a game?

It's a terrible way to live, I know this. Yet, despite everything, I love him. This man who beats me also holds my heart in his hand.

I don't expect you to understand. Even I don't half the time.

I believe he has serious mental issues, and despite my urging to visit a medical professional, he won't seek treatment.

He apologizes after every game.

He cries.

He buys me gifts and sends me flowers. Says he can't live without me.

He says, "I don't mean what I do."

I believe him. No matter how many times I have considered leaving, I can't deny this single fact: I believe he doesn't mean to do what he does.

I know, in the deepest depth of my soul, that he loves me. And yes, I am one of those women who believes their abusive partner will change. Because I know that even the most evil of men can—and have—changed. Think about it. As a society, we don't give up on people just because they fall off the right path. We rehabilitate them.

He needs someone now more than ever. To hold his hand, to heal his past trauma, to stand by his side. Everyone, no matter how strong they appear on the outside, needs a rock. I am his.

I often think back on the beginning of our relationship. The flowers, the candlelit dinners, the bubble baths, the whispers of family, of forever. The look in his eyes when he would tell me he loved me. The feeling I got when he would put his arm around me and lightly stroke the back of my neck with the pad of his thumb. I remember the way others looked at us, envious of a couple so in love.

No, he does not mean what he does. He is sick.

It's the hand I've been dealt, and I am ready to rise to the occasion, no matter how long it takes.

My breath halts when I hear footsteps in the hall.

A wave of heat rushes over my skin, the adrenaline in my body knowing it's time to kick into gear.

I close my eyes, trying to control my reaction. When you can't control what's happening, you control how you respond.

Inhale . . .

He stops outside the doorway.

Exhale . . .

He steps into the room.

Control, control, control . . .

He slowly walks around the bed. Stops.

My pulse roars in my ears.

I hear the pop of his knees as he squats down, like gunshots echoing through the silent house.

And then . . .

"Found you."

A scream tears through my throat as he grabs me by the ankle. I grasp at anything, my nails raking along the hardwood floor as I am dragged out from under the bed.

I cry, beg, plead, despite my promise to myself that I would control my emotions.

*"Be gentle," I choke out, sobbing, my nails scrabbling against the floor.
"Please, be gentle."*

He isn't.

I must do better next time.

JULIA



I've spent the entire morning visiting every campsite within a thirty-mile radius of Reed Point. So far, my quest to find Logan Klein has been fruitless.

My fourth and final attempt—according to the map I studied last night—is a campsite out in the middle of nowhere.

Hillside Creek Campgrounds is one of the smaller and lesser-known sites in the area. It is owned and operated by a retired Marine who relies solely on word of mouth for marketing. The site is frequented mainly by locals, or the occasional hiker traveling through. No kids. No fluff.

The road to the site is long and narrow, nothing more than a tunnel cut through the forest.

It snowed last night, a light dusting that still lingers on the ground and leaves. It's cold, too, with high temperatures projected to reach only the mid-thirties.

The gauge on my Jeep reads twenty-three, though the heavy cloud cover makes it feel colder. I'm prepared for this journey in a down parka, thick gloves, a fuzzy beanie I purchased from the gas station while filling up, and the latest T Swift album.

I am deep in dissecting the lyrics of a rather depressing song about love lost when I come to a fork in the road. I hang a right, following the crooked sign that reads OFFIC. I hope the misspelling is a result of the weathered sign and not a reflection of the IQ level of the campground guests.

The terrain becomes more manicured as I enter the grounds. Scattered among the trees are small one-room cabins with smoke billowing from the chimneys. It reminds me of a commune of sorts. Magical or incredibly creepy, depending on how you view it.

“Well, hi there,” a large burly man in a Carhartt greets me as I push open the office door.

To my delight, the small cabin is toasty warm, the air perfumed with coffee and cinnamon. Very welcoming.

To the left of the entry is a metal rack packed full of pamphlets and maps highlighting the trails. To the right is a vending machine. Ahead is a glass counter showcasing taxidermy—birds, squirrels, snakes—and a few random sticks.

“Hi,” I say, removing my beanie. “I called earlier, my name is Julia. I’m looking for a man named Logan Klein.”

“Oh, that’s right.” The man’s face crinkles with a smile. His skin is like leather, his eyes a sickly yellow. “Yes, you spoke to me.”

“Would you mind telling me what cabin he’s in?”

“Number eleven. I hope you don’t mind, ma’am, but I went ahead and contacted him. Just to make sure it was okay that I gave his information out. You never know out here . . . lots of locals, but we do get the occasional drifter. Pays in cash. Always.”

“Is Logan paying in cash?”

“I’m not at liberty to say, ma’am.”

I don’t know why I asked it. What does it matter?

“Okay, well, thank you. Cabin eleven, you said?”

“Yes, ma’am. Take a left out of this drive and take that curvy road all the way down to the river. Last cabin on the left.”

“Thank you.”

I drive slowly as I weave my way through the woods, studying each cabin as I pass.

An elderly couple, bundled in coats and scarves, glower at me as I drive by. Despite the frigid temperature, they are sitting outside in a pair of faded and frayed blue folding chairs.

The next two cabins appear dark on the inside but have vehicles parked outside—one, a rusted Chevy; the other, a vintage hatchback with at least a hundred stickers decorating the back glass.

Outside the next cabin, I spot a tall, skinny man wearing nothing but a white tank top and baggy sweats, pacing the withered grass as he angrily mutters to himself.

I lock my doors.

As I approach cabin eleven, I press the brake. There is no truck outside, no lights on inside, no smoke rolling out of the chimney.

Before I set out on this journey, I spent a few minutes researching bear hunting and learned that the best (and most common) time to hunt is early mornings. Considering it's not yet noon, it is a good bet that Logan is still somewhere deep in the woods, on the hunt.

Chewing on my lower lip, I glance in the rearview mirror, then at the road ahead. Not many places to park. I press the gas and disappear deeper into the woods. There are no cabins out this way, and I get the sense the road goes on forever.

Finally, I find a spot wide enough to turn around, and after debating my options, I decide to park next to the ditch across from cabin eleven. I don't want to risk missing him.

I turn off the engine and wait.

Silence envelops me, and I realize how desolate this area is. By habit, I search the treetops for a black raven but find none.

I can see the river through the trees in the distance, rushing whitecaps of freezing cold water. A rocky cliff lines the far side. I imagine it is picturesque when the sun is out. Today, it's incredibly bleak.

I pull on my beanie, zip up my coat, and settle in to wait.

Eleven thirty passes, then noon, then one p.m.

I am polishing off a pack of peanut butter crackers I found in the glove box when I see Logan's big black truck coming down the dirt road. I sit up, wiping the crumbs from my chest.

He doesn't give my van a second glance as he passes. In fact, he seems preoccupied.

And yes, I drive a minivan. A soccer-mom powder-blue tennis shoe on wheels. Why? I like the room. And it's four-wheel drive, *and* I got a good deal on it. Also, people don't suspect anything nefarious of the driver of a minivan. Certainly not a woman who stabbed her husband to death.

I watch as he pulls into the short driveway of cabin eleven and turns off the engine. Then, nothing. For at least three minutes, Logan remains in his vehicle. I can't imagine what he's doing behind the tinted glass.

Finally, the door opens and he steps out, dressed in head-to-toe camo. His cheeks are red and windburned.

He lumbers into the cabin. The lights click on.

I take a deep breath, pull down my sunshade mirror, and take a quick peek at my appearance.

“Okay,” I say, noting the trepidation in my voice. “Let’s do this.”

I start the engine and pull into the driveway, behind his truck.

Logan opens the cabin door the moment I shove the van into park, which makes me wonder if he had noticed me—and therefore, wonder why he didn’t acknowledge me.

Frowning, the rugged Klein steps off the porch as I get out of the van.

“Hey, Logan.”

“Everything okay?” he asks, his face awash with concern. It’s been a long time since a man asked me if everything was okay.

“Yes.” I stuff my hands into my pockets and step in front of the hood.

“What’s going on?”

I am taken aback by his slightly panicked expression.

Why is he so worried about me? Should something be going on? Am I missing something? Am I in trouble that I’m unaware of?

I clear my throat and dive into the dialogue I rehearsed on the way. “I wanted to thank you again for the box you brought over.”

His frown deepens. He knows that’s not why I’m here.

“And I . . .” I shift my weight, my nerves getting the better of me. Suddenly, everything I practiced goes out the window. “I just . . . it was pretty jarring to see you the other day. And I got the vibe that you had more you wanted—or needed—to say.”

His brow furrows as he stares down at me, saying nothing. Logan is extremely comfortable in awkward silences, I note.

I clear my throat. “Or maybe it’s that I feel like I need to say something.” The wind blows a strand of hair across my face, and I tuck it behind my ear. “I don’t know if I’ve ever said I’m sorry—to you—for what happened.”

“For killing my brother, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“It was in self-defense.”

“Yes.” I nod feverishly. “Yes, it was.”

Logan doesn’t accept my apology or refuse it, just continues to study my face as if it’s the first time he’s seen it.

“Do you want to come in?” he asks finally. “I just put on some fresh coffee.”

“Yes,” I say, a bit too quickly.

JULIA



J follow Logan inside the cabin. The air is stale and pungent with a sickening combination of ash from the wood-burning fireplace and natural gas. A dangerous and very questionable combination.

As expected, it is tiny—literally one room—hardly big enough to hold one twin-size bed, a wooden chair with stains on the cushion, and a dresser. On top of the dresser is a lamp and a coffeepot. On the floor sits a cooler that I assume contains his perishable food, and two bags, one beige, probably from a grocery store, and one black, definitely from a liquor store. Next to the fireplace is a narrow door that leads to a bathroom with only a sink and a toilet.

We are uncomfortably close in the small space.

Logan nods to the rocking chair, my cue to sit.

I do, perching on the edge so that the chair doesn't rock, and watch as he pours two Styrofoam cups of black coffee. He doesn't bother to ask how I take it.

After handing me the cup, Logan returns to the dresser to allow for distance between us.

Silence settles as we simultaneously sip our coffees. It is incredibly awkward. My stomach begins to bubble with nerves, and I decide I can't take it. I open my mouth to tell him I need to go when he says—

“Do you ever think it's funny that the lights were on when the cops arrived?”

I blink. “What?”

Logan slides his cup on the dresser and repeats the question, exactly.

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“The night you killed my brother. The night everything happened. When the cops got there, they turned on the lights. The lights were on during the interviews and while they searched your home in Charlotte.”

I blink. My memories of “the night everything happened” are hazy at best. Logan was off-duty at the time, but had his police scanner on, and once he heard (and recognized) the address of the “domestic disturbance,” he sped to our house and stayed at least an hour after everyone left.

“What are you getting at? Are you asking if I think the lights were weird?”

“Yes.”

I shake my head. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand. No, I guess I don’t think it’s weird that the lights were on.”

Logan drags his hand through his hair and begins pacing. It was not the answer he wanted, obviously. “You said in your interviews that the lights went out while you and Daniel were arguing. Remember? The electricity went out—you said that. Right?”

“Yes, that’s right, there was a terrible storm that night.”

Daniel and I were screaming at each other in the kitchen, and just as he raised his fist to hit me, everything went dark. He swung anyway, and I remember feeling the whoosh of air as he missed my face by a mere inch.

“And that’s when everything happened, right? In the dark. You stabbed Daniel in the dark, right?”

My stomach begins swirling. “I . . . I grabbed a steak knife from the table and started swinging it, in self-defense, yes. Yes, in the dark.”

“When I got there,” Logan stops pacing and turns toward me, “the lights still weren’t on. The light switches didn’t work. I had to use my flashlight.”

I vaguely remember Logan finding me in the kitchen standing next to Daniel’s dead body. I remember the bright beam of his flashlight blinding me, and him yelling something. But to this day, I have no clue what he was saying.

“But do you remember,” he says, “when the ambulance showed up, in the middle of all the chaos, somebody turned on the lights and—*boom*—the lights went on?”

“Yeah, I think I remember that. The electricity went out because of the storm, then came back on. That’s what everyone said.”

“Yeah.” He narrows his eyes. “That’s what *they* said.”

I begin tapping my foot. “Logan, just tell me where you’re going with this.”

He glances out the window, then back at me. “After everything happened, after Daniel’s body was taken away and after everyone had left . . . I searched the house, do you remember? I checked the rooms, windows, looking for anything random. I took some pictures.” He shrugs. “Just the cop in me, I guess.”

I remember that Logan was the last to leave that night.

He begins pacing again. “All the clocks in the house were blinking, because the electricity had gone out.”

“Right . . .”

“Well, the clock in the shed was the correct time. It never went out. I didn’t have to reset that clock.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that *somehow* the electricity to the shed didn’t go out.”

“How is that possible?”

“*Exactly.*” He jabs a finger in the air. “If the storm cut the electricity, which is what everyone assumed, then the clock in the shed would have been out of order, blinking like all the others. But it wasn’t.”

“So, what are you thinking?”

“Someone flipped the breaker to the main house but not everywhere else, and then turned it back on at some point during the chaos.”

My jaw drops. “Do you think it was Daniel?”

“Daniel was dead. How could he turn the lights back on?”

I shake my head, having difficulty processing what Logan is saying. “No, Logan, it was the storm. It—”

“No, Julia, it wasn’t,” he snaps. “I called the electric company. *There was no power outage.* I verified it with them just last week.”

“Why are you telling me all this now? Daniel died four months ago.”

“I needed time to process it all. I mean, shit, I lost my only living relative. And if I’m being totally honest, I wasn’t even gonna bring it up. But I can’t get it off my mind.” He blows out a breath. “I can’t sleep.”

A long silence stretches between us. He does look awful. Stressed, like a man on the edge.

I narrow my eyes. “You’re not in Reed Point to go bear hunting, are you?”

“No . . . I needed to talk to you. I have to figure out what happened that night.”

I stand from the chair, unable to sit any longer. “So, if this is true, you’re implying that someone else was involved in what happened that night.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Logan, I killed your brother. *I* did it. So, really, what difference does it make? I did it alone. Nobody else was in the house.” I suddenly get a splitting headache. I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head. “You’re not . . . this isn’t making sense.”

“Julia, do you remember actually stabbing him?”

I stop mid-pace, turn, and meet his eyes. My heart begins to beat faster.

Logan closes the inches between us. “Julia, do you remember actually shoving the knife into my brother’s throat?”

“I . . . I . . .”

“Julia.” He grabs my hand desperately. “Do you remember?”

Uncontrollable tears of frustration, exhaustion, whatever, well in my eyes.

“Shit.” Logan drops my hand and whirls around. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

It is then that I recognize I am not the only one who was greatly affected by Daniel’s death. Logan has become a total basket case—just like me.

I sniffle, trying to stop the tears, and pull my shoulders back. “My memories are cloudy, I admit that. But what you’re saying is crazy. You’re implying that I didn’t kill him—which means someone else did.”

Logan turns and stares at me, his eyes pleading for me to agree with his crazy theory.

“So, what exactly do you think happened?” I ask.

“That someone either heard you guys arguing and came to your aid, or they broke in while you guys were arguing.”

“You think somebody just decided to do a random home invasion, then killed Daniel, and flipped on the lights on the way out?”

“Maybe not random.”

“You think someone meant to kill Daniel that night?”

“Daniel had lots of enemies, Julia.”

I think of the drama and gossip surrounding his exit from the company that had nurtured his career. Daniel had no qualms about leaving and taking

a handful of the company's largest clients with him, sending the company into financial ruin.

I scrub my hands over my face. "Jesus, Logan."

"I know. I'm sorry to bring this to you. But . . . something just doesn't add up."

Frustrated, I throw up my hands. "What are your intentions here?"

"I want to uncover the truth."

"The truth is that I killed your brother."

"I don't think you did, Julia. You said it yourself—you were blindly stabbing, defending yourself. It is the perfect setup. Think about it. Everyone knew that he was abusive. Whether you want to admit it or not, everyone knew. Someone could have been waiting in the wings for the perfect opportunity to set you up."

I wince, rubbing the pain at my temples.

"And a lot of people hated my brother, the cops included. Not just because of the business stuff, but because he was a wife-beater. Everyone I worked with knew he abused you. Don't you think it was crazy how quick they labeled it self-defense? Nothing was done. No investigation whatsoever. I should have . . . I should have taken more control, but they wouldn't let me."

"Why didn't you? You were the first responder."

He turns to me with squinted eyes. "But I'm taking control now. I'm going to figure out what really happened to my brother."

My jaw clenches. "I don't want to go on this journey with you."

Logan frowns, tilting his head to the side. "Don't you want to know if you didn't actually kill someone, Julia?"

The floor feels like it drops from underneath me. I hadn't connected the fact that if someone else killed my husband, this means that *I* didn't. It means that I am an innocent woman. I did not take the life of another human being.

I am not spending eternity in hell.

I blink, my mind racing.

What if I didn't kill him? What if the wary looks and pitying glances would stop?

What if I could live my life again? Or better yet, start a new one without the stain of blood on my hands?

JULIA



“*I* hate this couch, you know that?”
“I know, it’s awful, isn’t it? It was donated. You know what’s also awful? Your ridiculous attempt at deflection.”

I snort. It is officially my fifth “therapy” session with Reese, and I can tell she’s growing impatient.

I decided against telling her about my visit to the Hillside Campground to see Logan, or that we made plans to meet for breakfast before I left the cabin. I’m not sure why I didn’t tell her, other than I need more time to process it all. His suggesting someone else was involved in the night Daniel died—that someone else might have actually done it—has kind of thrown me for a loop.

Reese guides me through a list of questions that I’m quickly realizing are standard “break-the-ice” conversation starters, probably another list from the “how-to-be-a-therapist” website she’s been studying. Then she dives in, redirecting me to that night.

I take a deep breath. To my surprise, I find it easier to revisit the past now that I’ve already taken a walk down memory lane with Logan the day before.

“It was storming badly, do you remember? A tornado touched down in Newton County.”

“It was only four months ago. Yes, I remember the night.”

I nod and continue. “Daniel came home from work, and something was different about him.”

“What do you mean, different?”

“He seemed agitated—*extra* agitated, I should say. Abnormally hyper. He kept scratching the top of his head and peering around the room like he

wasn't quite sure what to do with himself. Like his brain was spinning. Honestly, I wondered if he was on drugs. Some sort of uppers."

"Daniel didn't do drugs."

"Right, but his behavior that night was that odd."

Reese nods as she begins fidgeting with her pen.

"I did something wrong, I can't remember—forgot to take out the trash or something—and we started arguing. But that night, it got bad fast. We started screaming."

I meet Reese's gaze. A moment lingers between us.

"And then what?" she asks.

"And that's when I saw the sparkly plum lip gloss on his collar."

Reese swallows deeply, then looks down.

I watch her closely. It's not the first time we've spoken about it, but it's the first time I am offering details. A part of me wonders if her pressing has to do more with morbid curiosity about how it went down, rather than a true desire to help me.

"Is that when you realized it?" she asks, her voice almost a whisper, guilt making her pale.

"Yes. You wear that goddamn lip gloss every day."

A beat passes between us.

"What did you say?" She's on the edge of her seat now.

"I asked him who it belongs to."

"And what did he say?"

"He made up some excuse. That it was probably the housekeeper, or something just got on him during the course of the day. Of course, I called him out on this bullshit."

"You weren't afraid he was going to hit you?"

"No, that's what was funny about that moment. I was more mad that he cheated on me with my best friend. That was all I could think about."

Another moment stretches between us.

"I kept pressing. Eventually, he admitted to it."

"Did he say my name specifically?"

"Yes."

"What a motherfucker."

I stare at the tube of lip gloss sitting on the desk. Sparkly plum. Reese's signature color.

"Reese, can I ask you something?"

“Of course.”

“Is this whole thing,” I gesture between us, “this fake therapy thing . . . more for you than it is for me?”

Tears fill her eyes. “I don’t know.”

“It’s okay if it is.”

“I have nightmares too. I think I blame myself. I blame myself for that night. None of this would have happened if not for me.”

“I’m not going to sit here and console you for feeling bad about fucking my husband . . . I’m not that selfless. But I will say that what happened had everything to do with his abuse, and not you.”

I notice my lack of emotion as I watch Reese attempt to gather herself. A detached observation of the woman before me.

Truth is, I forgave my best friend the second she asked for forgiveness. It was never about her. Reese was always a flirt, and truth be told, I always expected something was going on between them, considering they ran in the same circles in college. They’d known each other longer than he and I did, and honestly, they were a better fit. But it was never about her.

The truth of why I snapped that night runs far deeper than that.

“And then what happened?” she whispers, a tear running down her cheek.

To my surprise . . . I find myself pausing at the question.

JULIA



Logan and I meet for breakfast the next morning at a small diner outside of Reed Point called Horseshoe Hashbrowns. The location was my suggestion as Horses (as the locals call it) is the least popular diner in the area, and therefore the least crowded. I've had more communication with the outside world in the last two days than I have in months. It makes me itch.

Logan seems better this morning, like a weight has been lifted by confessing his suspicion that someone else (aside from me) was involved in Daniel's death.

Logan chooses the back corner booth and slides in across from me, his back to the wall, his view of the front door unobstructed.

It's the cop in me. His words from our last meeting echo through my head, and I wonder if he misses his job. Old habits are hard to kick.

We order two cups of coffee from the seventy-something waitress who's wearing a traditional uniform and an ill-fitting Raquel Welch wig. Her name tag reads *Gretch*.

It is nine thirty in the morning, the lull between the breakfast rush and the lunch rush (the timing also strategically chosen by me). The diner is vacant, aside from an elderly couple up front who are bundled up like marshmallows in winter coats, scarves, and hats.

Logan stares at me with the same intensity as from our last meeting. It's a look I can't quite discern, but what I do know is that it—*he*—makes me feel fidgety. Off-balance.

"So . . ." I cut to the chase, remembering how comfortable Logan is in silence (and I am not). "I'm assuming you have a few ideas of who would have wanted to kill my husband—other than me, of course."

Gretch delivers the coffee and asks if we want anything else. I wait for Logan to answer.

“Just coffee,” he says, and I nod in agreement.

After she leaves, he refocuses on me.

Finally, he speaks. “It was self-defense.”

The seemingly random remark catches me off guard. It’s the second time he’s reminded me of this.

“Yes, it was,” I say quizzically.

Logan leans forward. “You’re so nervous right now. Stop. You don’t need to feel guilty, Julia.”

I unclench my fists and look down, realizing how badly I’ve needed to hear those words. From anyone. “Thank you.”

He nods, then sips his coffee. And just like that, the mood lightens.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” I ask, settling back in the booth.

Logan glances at the front door. “Did Daniel ever mention the name Ricky Adler?”

“No, it doesn’t sound familiar.”

“Ricky went to work for Daniel after he started his firm. I’m not sure how they knew each other, or the details of their friendship, but Daniel hired him soon after the company took off. You’re sure he didn’t say anything about him?”

“Daniel never spoke to me about his work. Ever.”

Logan shakes his head. “He was always like that, you know. Kept his cards close to his chest.”

“I wish I could say the same about his fists.”

Logan closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I tried to talk to him about it once.”

“About what?”

“About you—the abuse.”

“You did? When?”

“About a year ago.”

“I didn’t even know you two spoke.”

“You wouldn’t, would you?”

I blink, wondering how many things I didn’t know about my late husband. “What did you—he say?”

“He denied it, of course.”

Of course he did.

“And then I saw you . . .” Logan looks down, begins slowly spinning the coffee cup between his fingers. “You were out for a walk two days later at the park a few miles from your house. I was on patrol.” He looks up, under his lashes. “You had a black eye and busted lip. I pulled over, watched you for a bit.” He leans forward. “Julia, I almost pulled you into my car and drove you to the station and forced you to make a statement that day.”

I am absolutely stunned by this confession.

“I regret not doing it,” he mutters. “Almost every day, I regret it.”

“Why?”

“Because maybe that would have been the wakeup call my brother needed to change. Maybe it would have prevented . . . everything.”

“His death, you mean.”

“Yes.”

I regard him closely. “You feel guilty too, don’t you?”

“I do.”

I can’t help but think of the trail of guilt I’ve blazed by killing Daniel. It’s deeply affected me, Reese, and Logan.

Daniel will never go away, I muse.

Logan picks up his coffee and sips, signaling he does not care to dive deeper into the subject. He clears his throat. “Anyway, soon after Daniel hired him, Ricky started having financial problems at home. Turns out Ricky had a gambling addiction and owed a lot of money to a lot of people. He asked Daniel for a loan from the business. Not only did Daniel say no, but he fired him on the spot.”

My brows pop. “He did?”

Logan nods, then continues. “Ricky had to file bankruptcy. His wife ended up leaving him, and took the kids because of it. Completely destroyed the guy’s life. Of course, he blamed Daniel for everything.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Ricky tried to sue Daniel.”

“What?”

Logan nods.

How the hell did my husband not tell me that we were being sued?

“It didn’t stick,” Logan says. “But Daniel called me once, wanting to make an official report of harassment. Said Ricky was harassing him.”

“Harassing how?”

“Threatening calls, stalking. Typical creepy stuff.”

“What happened?”

“I called Ricky, told him to back off or there would be charges.”

“Did he know you were Daniel’s brother?”

“No.”

“Did it stop?”

Logan shrugs. “For a while, yes. Everything went quiet. Then a few months later, Daniel was dead.”

I take a deep breath, needing a second to process everything. “So, you think Ricky could have been the other person there that night?”

“Yes. I’m trying to track his movements the week Daniel died. Of course, it’s not as easy now that I no longer work at the PD.” Logan frowns, scratching his chin. “Do you remember yesterday when I said that it was the perfect setup? Framing you for the killing? Think about it. It would have been the perfect revenge opportunity for Ricky.”

“Why don’t you just go to the cops with everything? Turn this over to them and let them investigate?”

“I want to get my head around it first. I need to have solid facts before I go to them. Your case is closed. You don’t understand—they’re not gonna want to reopen this. It takes *a lot* of hard evidence to reopen a case, and they’re understaffed as it is.”

I nod. “Who else? Could it be anyone else?”

“Clint Klein.”

I choke on my coffee, spewing drops onto the table. “Your *dad*?”

“Jesus, Julia.” Logan lurches forward with a handful of napkins. “You okay?”

I wipe my mouth, my eyes watering. “But your dad—Daniel’s dad—is dead.”

“Yeah, he died exactly two weeks after Daniel did.”

“I thought he died years ago.”

“No. Three months ago.” Logan shakes his head. “It doesn’t surprise me that Daniel told you he was already dead. He hated Dad even more than I did.”

“Is your mom . . .”

“She died of liver failure five years ago.”

I nod. “Daniel told me about that. So, why would he lie to me about his dad?”

“He hadn’t spoken to my dad in over twenty years. Not a single word. In Daniel’s mind, Dad was dead.”

“Had you spoken to him? To Clint? Before he died?”

“Yes. He . . .” Logan rubs the back of his neck. “He needed money. Asked Daniel several times, but Daniel never responded to the emails. Eventually, he came to me, regardless of the fact I made a tenth of what Daniel did.”

“Did you help him?”

“I did.”

White Knight Syndrome.

“He had to have been—what, eighty years old?” I ask.

“Seventy-eight.”

“I’m sorry, Logan, but I don’t think your seventy-eight-year-old dad broke into our house and stabbed his son in the neck.”

“Clearly, you don’t know our dad.”

A beat passes between us. “What happened during your childhood?”

“What didn’t happen is the more appropriate question.”

“Will you tell me about it? Please?”

“Let’s just say Daniel took a very similar path with his own life.”

“They were abusive?”

Logan’s jaw twitches. The look in his eyes is answer enough.

“I’m so sorry,” I say.

“No, I’m sorry, Julia. I should have stepped in when I knew my brother was hurting you.”

“Well . . .” I take a sip of coffee. “Karma got its way, didn’t it?”

We sit in silence for a few minutes, watching as trucks pull in, filling the gravel parking lot.

“So, what now?” I ask finally.

“I need you to try to remember every single detail about that night. Even the smallest thing. If you get a sudden epiphany that you don’t remember actually stabbing Daniel, then that’s significant enough to take to the PD. At least get the conversation going on it again.”

I’m considering Reese’s advice that it’s time I visit a real medical professional when Logan leans forward.

“I admire you,” he says.

I blink. “For what?”

“For coming out on the other side. Most women aren’t strong enough.”

A lump forms in my throat. I nod, then look away.
Logan smiles and dips his chin. "Want to get breakfast now?"
"Yes."

JULIA



Our brunch at Horses lasted two hours.

My attempt at gleaning more details about his and Daniel's childhood failed. Logan was a locked box of secrets. Instead, we fell into comfortable, casual conversation that eventually settled on his job as a police officer.

I was fascinated by the stories, particularly the evidence and forensics that led to arrests. I was also fascinated by his seemingly genuine interest in my old job as a research associate at Bateson Genetics. It felt good talking about it, the old me before I became a statistic. It felt good being on the receiving end of interest.

Together, we drained an entire carafe of coffee and ate our weight in blueberry pancakes. Minutes after arriving home, I crashed on the couch in a carb-induced coma.

It is now ten o'clock at night and I am still on the couch, wrapped in a blanket, staring at the dwindling fire, mentally chiding myself for not getting up and stoking it. The cabin is freezing, but I am oddly content. I can't remember the last time I slept so soundly, and I make a mental note to eat more pancakes.

It is another cold, dark night. The back deck is illuminated in a dim yellow glow from the porch light I keep on at all times. A pile of birdseed sits untouched on the corner railing. The raven hasn't visited since this morning. This worries me, and I wonder if I have displeased him somehow.

A sudden shrilling trill of noise screams through the house, startling me. A ringing telephone—but not my cell phone, the house phone. A landline

that Daniel insisted we put in shortly after buying the place, in case of emergencies.

I've never heard it ring, not once, and it is jarringly loud. My pulse races, a steady *thump-thump-thump* at the temples.

I have no idea where the telephone is. Daniel only told me that he had one installed in the cabin, not where he'd placed it.

When it becomes apparent the caller isn't going to hang up, I push off the couch and move from room to room. Following the noise, I eventually find the phone in the pantry, of all places, an old cordless phone tucked behind canned goods on the bottom shelf. No wonder I never noticed it.

I pick it up and press the green button. "Hello?"

Nothing.

"Hello?" I repeat.

No response.

A chill slithers up my spine. Though the other end of the call is silent, I know someone is there. I can *feel* their presence through the phone.

I hang up and return the phone to the dock.

I'm almost back to the living room when it rings again.

I run back. "Hello?"

This time, I can hear breathing on the other end.

"Who is this?" I demand in my best badass voice.

No response.

I stand frozen, my heart pounding. "I said, *who is this?*"

I give the caller a few more seconds to answer. When he or she doesn't, I hang up and hurry to the living room, where I pick up my cell phone and click into the internet browser.

I google my name and Daniel's.

Immediately, a national hotline number for abused women displays. Under that, dozens of articles about the Charlotte woman who killed her abusive husband in self-defense.

I cannot believe what my life has become.

As I suspected, the number to the cabin is not listed anywhere. I assume the charge is built into my cell phone bill that is automatically drafted each month. Other than that, there appears to be no proof of the landline.

Who else would know about it? A telemarketer? Perhaps the number was added to a random list that was sold to a third-party marketing company?

I text Reese. *Are you calling me?*
She texts back immediately. *No why?*
Someone is calling the landline here at the cabin. Just wondering if it was you.

Reese: I didn't know you had a landline.

Me either.

Reese: You okay?

Yeah. Sorry.

Reese: You sure?

Yes.

Reese: We still on for tomorrow?

Yep, see you then.

Reese: You sure you're okay, J?

Yes. Good night.

Reese: I rhymed there. Did you catch it.

I roll my eyes. *Yes. Good night, Dork.*

*Reese: *wink emoji**

The phone rings two more times before I finally call Logan.

"You aren't by chance calling my house, are you?"

"The cabin?" Despite it being ten o'clock at night, Logan sounds alert and wide awake.

"Right."

"No, I'm not calling. What's going on?"

"Someone keeps trying to call the landline in the house." I laugh, but it sounds more like a maniacal cackle. "I'd forgotten we even had a landline. Anyway, they don't say anything when I answer. I can't think of who would have the number . . . Thought maybe Daniel gave it to you at some point after he had it installed."

"No. Daniel never gave me a landline number to your cabin."

"Oh." I peer out the window, chewing on my lower lip.

"Julia . . . you okay?"

"Yeah—yeah, I'm fine. I shouldn't have called you, sorry. Just wasn't sure if it was you or not."

Twenty minutes later, a pair of headlights cut through the living room windows. I finish positioning the log on the fire, dust myself off, and stride to the window.

Logan.

I open the door as he steps onto the porch. “You didn’t have to come.”

“I know.”

“Thank you. I’m so sorry, I—”

“No, no, don’t apologize. I could tell you were pretty shaken up.”

I nod. “Come in.” I close the door behind him. “It’s just so weird. I’ve lived here for four months now, and the landline has never rung. Not once. Literally, I’d forgotten we had it.”

“The person calling says nothing?”

“Right. Nothing. That’s the thing—they just sit there. I can hear them breathing.”

Logan’s gaze skirts the windows. “Mind if I take a look around?”

“No, please do. It would make me feel better. Again, I’m really sorry.”

He holds up a hand. “Please, Julia, don’t worry about it.”

I busy myself in the kitchen as Logan checks the window locks and the doors in the cabin.

After about ten minutes, he meets me in the kitchen. “Everything appears secure. Nothing seems out of place.”

Before I can catch myself, I say, “Listen, uh, there’s a spare bedroom here . . . if you want to stay.”

“No, I don’t want to intrude.”

“Please. It’s no imposition at all . . . and honestly, I’d rather you be here if the phone rings again. Maybe you could answer and scare away whoever is prank calling me. And it’s better than Hillside Campgrounds, right?”

Logan glances out the window at his truck, apparently tormented by this decision. I begin to wilt in embarrassment. But then—

“Okay, I’ll stay.”

I smile. “Great, thank you. I’ve got some fresh sheets—”

“I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

White Knight.

After finishing cleaning the kitchen, I disappear into my bedroom as Daniel’s brother takes his place on my couch.

JULIA



I awaken to the loud trill of the phone.
My pulse skyrockets as I spring up from the pillow.

I am covered in sweat, either from a nightmare, or the fact that I slept fully clothed in a fleece pullover and sweatpants. I'm not sure.

Memories from the day before flash behind my eyes. Brunch with Logan at the diner, prank calls, Logan—*asleep on my couch*.

Eyes wide, I hold my breath, waiting to see if my brother-in-law will answer the ringing phone.

He doesn't. The phone continues to ring, and as usual, I imagine the most morbid, fucked-up scenario possible.

Logan must be dead. Someone broke into the cabin while I was sleeping, stabbed Logan to death, and left him lying in a pool of his own blood on the couch, and this is why he's not answering the phone.

"Goddammit." I throw off the blankets. As usual, the black-out curtains are drawn and there is no way to discern what time it is. Summoning my courage, I push off the bed and tiptoe to the doorway.

A bead of sweat rolls down my back as I crack open the door.

Early dawn seeps through the living room windows, washing the room in a dull, colorless light.

Logan is not on my couch. The blanket I gave him is folded on the armrest, the pillow balanced on top. His scent lingers in the air.

I scan the room for any sign of him but come up short.

The phone continues to ring. I hesitate, my sleepy brain taking its sweet time to decide what to do next.

Ignore the phone? Search for Logan? Or answer the damned thing?

"Logan!" I whisper-yell.

No response.

Slowly, I open the door and step into the living room. By habit, I glance out the window at the pile of birdseed on the porch railing. Still untouched. A light dusting of fresh snow covers the tree branches.

I storm to the pantry and pick up the ringing phone. “Hello?”

Nothing.

“I said *hello*,” I snap.

This time, a slow intake of breath registers on the other end of the call.

Goose bumps run up my arms and I disconnect the call, tossing the phone on the counter as if it might burst into flames at any moment.

The phone rings again.

I snatch it up. “Who *the hell* are you?”

The doorbell rings.

I spin around, the phone tumbling out of my hand.

Someone is here.

My thoughts immediately go to self-defense, to weapons, and I have none. My cell phone is in my bedroom, and Logan is obviously not here to protect me.

I stand frozen, my pulse roaring in my ears.

Seconds pass. Minutes.

After about five minutes of silence—no ringing phone, no doorbell—I creep out of the pantry.

Ears perked for any sound inside—or outside—the cabin, I walk into the living room, studying the window next to the front door. The sheer curtain is drawn, but there appears to be no silhouette standing on the porch, and no shadow of a vehicle in the driveway. Logan is definitely gone.

I feel the sharp sting of rejection.

Did he wake up regretting his decision to stay and bolted immediately? Or was the couch too uncomfortable for his large frame? Should I have offered him *my* bed? Am I thinking too much into it?

My pulse rate starts to slow as I consider that whoever rang the doorbell could have been a lost hiker, or perhaps someone stranded on the side of the road with shoddy reception.

I walk to the window, pull back the curtain, and peer outside. Logan’s truck is gone, evident by the faded tire tracks across the dusting of snow that covers the ground. From my vantage point, I see no fresh footprints leading to the front door.

Is it possible I imagined my doorbell ringing?

Frowning, I take a step away from the window, and for a solid minute, stare motionless at the front door.

When nothing happens, I decide to look outside.

My hand trembles as I reach for the brass doorknob. A blast of cold air whistles in as I pull open the thick wooden door.

I gasp, stumbling backward, focusing on the bloody carcass at my feet.

Lying in the middle of my welcome mat is the lifeless body of a black raven, its severed head a few inches away.

JULIA



I slowly squat down and examine the decapitated bird I've spent the last four months feeding, nurturing, guiding into my world.

Its coal-black feathers shimmer under the porch light, speckled with dark red blood. Beady black eyes stare directly at me from its severed head. It appears there was no struggle, almost as if the bird surrendered to its killer.

My stomach churns.

Ravens symbolize death or impending bad fortune. An omen that something bad is about to happen. A prophecy, you could say.

Reese wasn't wrong about the symbolic nature of a raven, but she left a few things out.

Being in the presence of a raven is a sign of good luck in defeating your enemy. Native American folklore suggests that when you are torn between right and wrong, the raven will teach you how to detach yourself from the conflict and do what is right for everyone.

What is right for *everyone*.

The thing is, ravens do not pay a visit to just anyone. They're attracted to the mystical aura of a chosen few, usually those who are working through a traumatic experience.

You see, the bird has chosen me, not the other way around.

Just like Daniel chose me, not the other way around.

As I stare down at the dead bird, I do not feel as though I have let him down. I feel like I am being led.

Leaving the carcass where it is, I stand, walk into the cabin, and grab my cell phone from the counter.

“Logan?”

“Yeah?” His voice is thick and gravelly on the other end of the call, and I wonder if he’d slept at all before sneaking out of my house. “You okay?”

“N—no. Not really. Where did you go?”

A long pause, then he says, “Back to my cabin.” Simple enough.

“Can you come back?”

“What’s going on?”

“Please. Just come back.”

JULIA



“*Y*ou have to stop this,” I say as I pull open the door. Logan strides onto the porch, his hair mussed, his eyes bloodshot and puffy. His cell phone is clutched in his hand, and I wonder if he even put it down after I called him. He’s changed clothes, trading his flannel and jeans for a sweatshirt and jogging pants. I wonder what the hell time he snuck out—and why.

He scrutinizes the carcass at my feet. “Are *you* okay?”

“Yes.” I dramatically gesture to the mutilated bird. “But he’s not. I found him, just like this. Someone prank called again, and then the doorbell rang, and then I opened the door to this mutilated bird. You have to stop whatever you’re doing, Logan. Whoever or whatever you’re investigating. You have to stop.”

Logan squats in front of the bloody welcome mat. A line of concern runs across his forehead as he examines the decapitated body.

I continue rambling, the adrenaline coursing through my veins too strong to push aside. “What are the odds that this happens right after you begin digging into Daniel’s past? Don’t you see that? The prank calls, and now this. You’ve got to stop. Somebody’s sending us a message.”

Logan considers the accusation.

I fist my hands on my hips. “You can’t just come into my life and mess everything up. I’ve spent the last four months trying to deal with my killing of your brother—it’s *a lot*, Logan—and you come in here and just . . . just flip everything on its head.” To my shock—and infuriation—I feel the sudden rush of uncontrollable emotion. “Just leave it alone, Logan. You need to leave it alone.”

I step back and bury my face in my hands, but before I can turn away, big warm arms wrap around me. I dissolve into nothing, sobbing into Logan's chest like a child, wetting the gray hoodie he's wearing. He doesn't care.

Logan sweeps me off my feet and carries me into the cabin, kicking shut the door behind us.

I am lowered onto the couch and covered in a blanket. Logan disappears, and a minute later, returns with a warm cup of chamomile tea.

It isn't until he hands me a coaster that I notice the ring twinkling from his left hand.

A wedding ring.

JULIA



“A decapitated *bird*?” Reese squeaks through the phone.
“Yes. I found it this morning. The prank calls continued through the morning.”

Logan just left, and I am manically pacing the back porch, wrapped in a thick robe and wearing fuzzy socks, with my phone pressed to my ear. A cold cup of coffee sits next to the pile of untouched birdseed.

“Jesus, Julia, that’s terrifying.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Could it have been an animal?”

I chew on my thumbnail. “Could be, I guess . . .”

“Like a cat or something?” she says, obviously trying to consider any angle that isn’t nefarious. “A cat killed it and brought it up on your porch to stay out of the snow?”

It’s plausible. I’ve considered it.

When I don’t respond, she presses. “But you don’t think it’s an animal, do you?”

“No, I don’t.” I heave out a sigh. “Hey, do you know a guy named Ricky Adler?”

“Ricky . . .” Reese pauses. “Ricky Adler, yeah, the name sounds familiar, but I can’t place it.”

“He would have been acquainted with Daniel at some point.”

Reese thinks for second. “Oh yeah, he went to Carolina. Ran around with Daniel in college, I think. Weird guy.”

So, that’s the connection. Daniel had gone to college with Ricky, which is why he’d offered him a job at his firm years later. Obviously, Logan is

unaware of their friendship, which makes sense considering Logan didn't go to college.

"What do you mean, he's weird?" I ask.

"A shy guy . . . one of those quiet guys that give you the creeps. Oh, and a total drunk."

"Did you ever talk to him?"

"No, just saw him a time or two. Doubt he'd even recognize me or vice versa. Hang on—why? Why are you asking about him?"

"Logan mentioned him—"

"I thought you said Logan only came over one time, to deliver the box of Daniel's stuff."

I wince. I still haven't told Reese about Logan's crazy theory that someone else might have been involved in the night I killed Daniel . . . or didn't kill him. Whatever.

"There's more," I say quickly, diverting. "But I don't want to get into it right now. Anyway, I know that Ricky and Daniel had a falling out, of sorts, and that soon after, Ricky started harassing him. Now, all of a sudden, I'm getting creepy prank calls and dead animals on my doorstep. Doesn't feel like coincidence."

"You want me to ask around about him?"

"Yeah, see what you can dig up."

"You got it."

"There's something else."

"What?"

"Logan is married."

"What? No, he's not."

"He was wearing a wedding ring."

"What do you mean, Logan was wearing a wedding ring?"

"Reese, I saw it—right there on his left hand. And here's the deal, he wasn't wearing it the first time I saw him."

"How many times have you two seen each other?"

"Just a few."

"*Humph.*" Clearly, my best friend knows there is more to this story, but to my surprise, she doesn't pry. "Are you sure he wasn't wearing one when he delivered the box?"

"Yes. I'm sure I would've noticed—I'm *sure* I would've."

"Did you say something about it?"

“No. It’s not my business, just surprised me is all, especially considering you told me he isn’t married.” I drag my fingers through my hair, pivot, and pace.

“Did he have a ring on at Daniel’s funeral?”

“I didn’t notice.”

“So odd. Maybe he got married sometime in the last four months.”

“Maybe.” Stop, pivot, pace.

“He’s not there now, is he?” she asks.

Why does it matter?

“No.”

I’m ashamed to admit that Logan’s abrupt departure disappointed me. I’m even more ashamed to admit I chased after him in the driveway, then offered to cook him dinner as a thank-you for coming over to check on me.

I knew I was attracted to Logan, but the moment I saw the wedding ring, I realized that my attraction was deeper than surface level. Hi, it’s me, a walking cliché of suddenly wanting what you can’t have.

Again, yes, I know I’m annoying.

“Anyway,” I say, “let me know what you dig up on this Ricky guy and —”

“Done.”

“What?”

“I just did a simple google search while we’ve been talking and, get this. Ricky Adler’s got a record.”

“A criminal record?”

“Yeah. Hang on . . .”

I wait impatiently as Reese scrolls through whatever page she’s dug up on the internet.

Stop, pivot, pace, repeat.

“Okay, Ricky Adler’s got two DWIs . . . I think he spent time in jail for the second one, and—*oh*—a charge for animal abuse.”

“Animal abuse?”

“Yep.”

“What does it say?”

“Nothing. It’s the arrest report. Just says what he was charged with along with his height and weight and stuff like that.”

I picture the mutilated bird on my welcome mat. “Where does he live?”

“According to his voter registration, Barrow Springs.”

“Isn’t that the next town over? Like, not even ten minutes from here?”

“Yes. Six miles, to be exact. Before that, it looks like he lived in Charlotte.”

When he was working for Daniel, I guess. Maybe he moved out this way after his wife kicked him out.

“Hey,” Reese says as a sudden rise in chatter echoes in the background. “I gotta go.”

“Find out what you can on Logan’s wife. Who she is, how long they’ve been married, the whole story.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Do it fast . . . things are starting to get weird.”

“Okay. I’ll start on it after I get my coffee. Hey, have you started researching hotels for our Italy trip yet?”

“No, I’ve been too busy with the sudden appearance of my hot brother-in-law and decapitated birds to think about a girls’ trip.”

“It’s what you need, I’m telling you.”

“We’ll book it after all this shit is over.”

“Promise, best friend?”

“Promise.”

THE OTHER



Five months earlier

I can't take it anymore.

Literally, my body cannot take this anymore.

I cry all day. I've lost eight pounds in four weeks. I can't keep food down and have recently spotted blood in my vomit and stool. Stress ulcers, according to a quick internet search. Worse than that, though? I don't look like myself anymore. My face is pale and gaunt, my hair stringy, my eyes encased in permanent dark circles.

I am no longer attractive, which means he is probably no longer attracted to me. Which means, it won't be long until he begins looking for a more attractive, carefree replacement.

I can't blame him. I've changed. I am no longer the woman he loved.

I've come to know that I've done everything I can do. I've stepped up my cooking, spending hours preparing gourmet dinners for him. I secretly take his clothes to the dry cleaner to ensure they are laundered to perfection. I offer him shoulder and foot rubs when he gets home from work. The house is so clean, you could eat off the floors. I even warm up his bath towel while he is in the shower.

Despite this effort, the punishments have gotten worse.

I'm letting him down. Fuck it—I'm letting myself down.

I can't keep disappointing him.

I'm going crazy, I can feel it.

I feel crazy.

I need to make a plan.

I need to fix this once and for all.

JULIA



*A*s promised, Logan returns to the cabin later that evening. Butterflies flutter in my stomach as I watch his tall, thick silhouette cross the driveway. Unable to fight the smile, I open the door. As I do, snow flurries begin to fall behind him.

Logan smiles back—that cheeky, perfect-teeth smile—and I can’t help but notice that this is the second time he’s put effort into his appearance. Tonight, he is wearing a navy dress shirt and jeans. Again, his hair is combed, his eyes bright and alert.

My gaze drops to his left hand—no ring.

“I should just give you a key,” I say with a wink.

Logan chuckles but sobers quickly. “How are you?”

“I’m okay.” Seeing his doubtful look, I sigh. “Fine, I’m a bit shaken up. But okay.”

“Any more calls or dead animals?”

“No.” I step back and open the door wide. “Come in.”

I fixed myself up today. Not only did I wash my hair, but I curled it as well. Shaved and lotioned. Spent an hour on my makeup. Spent longer on my clothes, eventually settling on an off-the-shoulder sweater and skinny jeans. No bra.

Logan notices, his focus dropping from my eyes and raking over my body.

He looks good too. Exceptionally. I wonder where he’s been. What he’s been doing.

Then he tells me.

“I ran into your friend Reese at the diner at lunch today.”

I close the door and spin on my heel. “What?”

“She was getting takeout for the staff at the shelter. Been a long time since I’ve seen her.”

My mind begins racing. I asked Reese to dig up information on Logan’s wife, but I expected she would do so from behind a computer. Is she following him? What are the odds Reese would casually run into Logan at the diner? Even more importantly, why didn’t she call and tell me she saw him?

“She mentioned you two are still friends, and also that she’s been trying to get you into therapy since everything happened, but that you’ll only talk to her.”

A shot of anger mixes with the jealousy, eerily similar to the feeling I got when I suspected she and Daniel were sneaking around behind my back. This is hitting too close to home.

Way too close.

I swallow the emotion and make a concerted effort to appear unaffected by the news. “Well, it sounds like you guys had much more than casual small-talk.”

“She’s worried about you. I can tell.”

I breeze past him into the kitchen.

He follows. “Are you working with her to try to remember details of that night?”

“Did she say we were working together to try to remember details of that night?” There’s an edge to my tone now, and I’m sure he notices. I grab a glass from the cabinet and begin filling it with water that I don’t want.

“No, I’m just curious,” he says, his eyes burning into my back. “Because, you know that’s what I want you to be doing . . . I want you working on your memory, trying to remember if you actually stabbed Daniel.”

I spin around, water flinging off my hands. “Forgive me, but between the prank calls and the dead bird, things have been kind of weird the last few days. I really haven’t been putting a lot of effort into my memory.”

“Did something else happened today?”

“You mean while you were gone?”

He bristles. “Yes.”

“No.” I pull open the fridge and grab a beer—from a six-pack I bought especially for him. Does he notice that I went out of my way for him?

I watch as Logan pops the top and takes a deep sip, then leans against the counter across from me. I catch the faded scent of his cologne. I wonder if Reese noticed it when they spoke earlier.

“Dinner is almost ready. Chicken parmesan sound all right?”

“That sounds great.”

“Good.” I don’t bother to tell him that before I spent hours on my appearance, I researched “meals men love” and then made a quick run to the grocery store for supplies.

“Have a seat at the table, if you’d like,” I say.

“No, I can help.”

“No, please. I’ve got it.”

Logan hesitates, but eventually pulls out a chair at the kitchen table.

I settle in front of the stove and flip the chicken that’s sizzling in the pan. “There’s something on your mind. Spill it.”

“I met up with an old friend from the PD, called in a favor. Ricky Adler, the guy who was harassing Daniel before he died, drives a red Toyota Tundra with all-black wheels. The same vehicle was spotted at the last intersection before your property, heading toward your house, the night Daniel died.”

My entire body stills.

“At six-oh-seven,” Logan says, “exactly eleven minutes after Daniel’s Mercedes drove through the intersection.”

I set down the spatula and slowly turn, my heart pounding.

“Julia, I’m telling you.” The words come out quickly now, like he’s relieved to get it out. “I think he was somehow involved. I mean, maybe Ricky didn’t kill him, but he was there that night. He flipped the breakers, then broke in. I’m sure of it.”

“Why?”

“Maybe he was searching for something—hell, maybe money. Desperate men do desperate things. Maybe he was out-of-his-mind drunk and decided to fix this once and for all. Get back at the man responsible for ruining his life.”

Logan drains his beer. I get him another.

He continues. “Maybe he’d intended to kill Daniel that night and you beat him to it. Shit, I don’t know, but he was involved. I know it.”

“Well, here’s what I know. Ever since you brought up his name, I’ve been getting prank calls and now a dead animal on my doorstep. Do you

know Ricky was arrested for animal abuse?”

Logan doesn't seem surprised by the news, but that I know about it at all.

“You're not the only one who knows how to dig up dirt.” I don't bother to tell him that this particular information was dug up by the Queen of Dirt herself, Reese. “I really don't think the bird and prank calls are some bored teens. It's a direct correlation with this rogue investigation you're doing.”

He shrugs. “Too late to stop now.”

My brows pop. “Did you take this information to the police? Officially?”

Logan nods. “The Reed County sheriff and I are old friends. Worked together on a few cross-over cases in the past. I couldn't keep it in. It's significant enough.”

“Did you tell him about finding the clock in the shed, about your theory on the breakers, about my prank calls, everything?”

“Yes. I'm not sure it will go anywhere, but it's something. It's a start. I'm going to go back to the station tomorrow. Continue to push.”

“Logan, I told you—this is going too far. I don't want to be involved—”

“You are whether you like it or not, Julia.”

I turn away, refocusing on the stove. A beat passes as my mind races. “So, we've talked about Ricky. What about your dad, Clint? You suspected him too, right?”

“Dad didn't do it. I spoke with a nurse at the facility he was in before he died. He never left, and even if he did, he was too frail to do anything. He couldn't possibly have been there that night.”

Silence settles between us, and as usual, I can feel him staring at me.

Logan suddenly pushes out of his chair. “Please, Julia, let me help with dinner.”

“No,” I say quickly. “It's my pleasure. Sit. Relax.”

Not another word is spoken about Daniel, Ricky, prank calls, or dead animals.

We eat dinner at the table, even share a few laughs. It's the first time in four months that I haven't had dinner alone. That I have actually been able to eat without feeling like I was going to throw up afterward. The first time that I've laughed with a man.

Logan enjoys the dinner I'd prepared for him, says so several times. He also likes the beer, this evident by the slight slur in his voice now.

I am washing the dishes when Logan comes up behind me and places his hands on my shoulders.

Goose bumps ignite from his touch.

He leans in, pressing his body against my backside.

“I’d like to pay you back,” my brother-in-law whispers in my ear, “by cooking you dinner tomorrow night.”

I set the soapy plate in the sink, grab the dish towel, and turn. But before I can speak, Logan presses his lips against mine.

JULIA



“Girl, you are not going to believe this.”
“Talk to me.” I press the phone to my ear, balancing it on my shoulder as I grab another six-pack of Logan’s favorite beer and set it into the cart.

“Where are you?” Reese asks.

“The liquor store.”

“I thought you didn’t drink.”

“I don’t.”

“Get me a bottle of rosé while you’re there.”

I turn around, grab the cheapest bottle I can find, and set it next to the six-pack in the cart. “Done.”

“Thanks. Okay, as I was saying, you’re *not* going to believe this.”

“I’m not going to believe that you ran into Logan at the diner yesterday?”

There’s a long pause on the other end of the phone. “How did you—”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Reese?”

“I—I didn’t want you to be mad. We talked, yes—not long, I promise—and I might have mentioned that I was worried about you.”

I stop in the middle of the aisle. A man using crutches curses me as he stumbles around the cart.

“Julia, you’re not yourself lately. And now someone appears to be messing with you. You’re not sleeping, you’ve lost weight. How did you know, anyway? Did he tell you?”

“Yes. He came over last night,” I say, my tone indignant.

I omit the fact that we kissed, that we were seconds from having sex when the landline rang and ruined the mood. Logan left shortly after.

“Okay—girl, listen. *Shit*. Maybe you should call me back when you’re in the car.”

The sudden sense of urgency in Reese’s tone has me veering into a corner, out of the way, where I can give her my full attention.

“No, talk. Now. What did you find out about the ring?”

“I verified that Logan *is* married.”

“How?”

“I found the records. And then I spoke with someone he used to work with at the station.”

“Who is he married to?”

“A woman named Clara. Her maiden name is Larsson.”

Clara.

“How long have they been married?” I ask.

“Not long, like a year. Maybe not even that.”

“Daniel didn’t know—I didn’t even know.” *Or he didn’t tell me.*

“Yeah, I think they eloped. But hang on, this is not the news.”

“Shit.” I drag my hand through my hair.

“Logan and Clara just bought a new house, right outside of Charlotte.”

“Yeah, I know. He told me.”

“Well, listen to this—he moved because they needed more space for *her* nurses.”

“What?”

“She’s completely disabled.”

“*What?*”

“Yep. Five months ago—so, right before Daniel died—she got in a really bad car accident. Almost died.”

“You are freaking kidding me.”

“Nope. He keeps her at home with twenty-four-hour nursing care.”

“So, that’s why he quit working, isn’t it?”

“Exactly.”

“You said she needs twenty-four-hour care? So, it’s *really* bad.”

“Yeah. I mean, I think it’s bad enough that someone has to bathe her, feed her, change her clothes and stuff. I’m sure she’s on tons of medication, the whole nine yards.”

I am speechless.

“And let me tell you something. I spoke with a few of the in-home nursing companies, and it ain’t cheap.”

I frown. “I don’t get the vibe that Logan has a lot of money. Or ever did.”

“I know, right? Especially being a retired cop. How much is their retirement payout?”

“Apparently enough to pay for an in-home nurse?”

Reese grunts, validating my thought that something doesn’t add up.

The memory of our kiss flashes behind my eyes. The kiss I shared with my brother-in-law while his wife, Clara, lay disabled at home.

“Julia, you there?”

“Yeah.” I put my hand to my forehead, suddenly hot and sweaty. “I’ve gotta go.”

I don’t remember checking out at the register. I don’t remember getting into my car. I barely remember pulling onto the side of the road seconds before exploding into tears.

I am crying because I’m sad. I am crying because I’m mad. Because I feel guilty. I am crying because my taste in men is so unbelievably fucked up, that I have nowhere to go from here. I cannot seem to break the cycle.

“*Fucking idiot,*” I whisper to myself. “*You fucking idiot.*”

JULIA



The drive to Charlotte feels shorter than I remember. Probably because when Daniel and I used to drive it on the weekends, I was always a ball of nerves in the passenger seat.

Not this time. Now I'm the one behind the wheel.

I despised taking road trips with Daniel, or even driving to the grocery store. I was not allowed to speak or move, lest he lose his temper and blame something on me—like a red light or an incompetent driver. Always my fault.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I glance at the clock—10:41 a.m. I have roughly eight hours until Logan arrives at the cabin for our scheduled dinner. Plenty of time to drive to the city and back. Still, I'm a bit nervous about the whole thing, so before the sun came up, I drove through Hillside Campgrounds, confirming he was at his cabin. I don't need any unexpected obstacles today. What I am doing is risky enough.

I turn up the heater and shake off a shiver. It is a cold but cloudless morning. The sun is shining in a stunning sapphire-blue sky, its bright yellow rays beginning to melt the snow on the side of the roads. I've been blessed with good weather for this journey. A good sign.

Things are falling into place.

I glance at the address I scribbled on a piece of notebook paper while speaking to Reese earlier, after she dug up Logan's marriage certificate and new home address in under ten minutes—2416 Raine Road.

Just then, an automated voice booms through my speakers, ordering me to take exit twelve in exactly two point two miles. According to the GPS, my estimated time of arrival is less than three minutes.

Logan's subdivision is like every other cookie-cutter suburb in the country. Rows of mid-sized homes, each a replica of the one next to it, just a different shade of blue. Upscale grocery stores crowd jogging trails and manicured playgrounds tailored for stay-at-home moms.

I can't imagine Logan in this kind of life. His brusque, burly demeanor is much more suited for hunting bear in the wild than hosting backyard barbecues in suburbia.

I slow, peering at the row of homes that are so close together that the residents could practically reach out their window and touch each other.

A labradoodle bounds into the road, causing me to swerve and slam the brakes. A woman wearing head-to-toe Lululemon sprints into the street, screaming at the top of her lungs, her tall, lithe silhouette resembling a manic stick figure.

My grip tightens around the steering wheel, and I press on.

There's 2412, 2414, and finally, 2416.

The home is tall and narrow, stacked like a toy house. It is all white, almost blindingly so, compared to the neighboring homes that are dueling shades of blue. An American flag sags dispiritedly from the porch like a defeated soldier. A rolled-up newspaper sits on the welcome mat next to an ordinary wicker patio set.

I park next to a teal Chevy Bolt and turn off the engine. My stomach tickles with nerves.

Taking a slow, deep inhale, I pull down the sunshade and check my reflection. The dry shampoo I sprayed on my roots has given life to the curls still hanging on from last night. I make a mental note to curl my hair more often. After swiping away the smudge of mascara under my left eye, I close the mirror, slip my keys and cell phone into my coat pocket, and step out of the car.

An elderly woman with a fluffy swath of gray hair opens the door. Wearing a pair of pink scrubs and green crocs, the woman appears more suited for working in a children's hospital than being an in-home nurse. I recognize the logo stitched on the breast pocket—Rolling Oaks Home Care.

She greets me with a warm smile, the wrinkles crinkling around dark, curious eyes. "Hello, how may I help you?"

"Hi. My name is Julia Klein."

The nurse blinks. Her smile drops.

I continue, though I don't think I need to. "I am—was—Logan's sister-in-law."

"Yes, yes." She steps back and opens the door wider. "Come in, Mrs. Klein."

I am uncomfortable with the woman's lack of caution, so carelessly allowing someone she's never met into the home. But clearly, she knows who I am and is aware of the dynamic. I can't imagine Logan opening up to his "staff," so I assume she recognizes me from the endless news stories that aired for weeks after I killed Logan's brother in self-defense.

The scent of bleach is so strong that my eyes water as I cross the threshold. The inside of the home is sparsely decorated, as if it has been staged for realtors. There is not a speck of dirt anywhere, and everything matches in a dull monochrome palette. The home is cold and unwelcoming.

The nurse closes the door. "My name is Maria. I am Mrs. Klein's day nurse. What can I help you with?"

We stand awkwardly in the small entryway.

"I was curious if I could meet Mrs. Klein? If it wouldn't be too much trouble?"

Maria frowns. "You've never met Clara?"

"No."

She nods. "I guess I'm not surprised. I know that Logan and his brother weren't close."

"Maria, I didn't even know Logan was married."

"You're kidding."

I shake my head.

"Are you aware Mrs. Klein is disabled?"

"Yes."

The nurse studies me for a moment. "She is unable to speak . . ."

"Yes, I understand." I let out a deep breath. "I'm sorry, I'm a bit nervous. This is part of my therapy . . . from . . . you know."

"Oh. Yes. I see." Her pale face wrinkles with pity. "I'm so sorry for what you went through. What an awful, awful man Logan's brother was."

"Yes, thank you." I look down.

When Maria gently places her hand on my arm, her fingertips are like ice. "It's okay, dear. This is a safe place."

I force a smile. "Thank you. Anyway, yes, this is part of my therapy. I'm having trouble remembering details of that night. My therapist says it is

suppressed emotion, or something like that.”

Her milky eyes water, though I can't tell if it's emotions or something else.

“My doctor, Dr. Williams,” (aka, the only therapist in Reed Point—in case she decides to check my story), “suggests revisiting those involved, especially family, to begin to heal. To acknowledge and address what happened instead of burying it inside. To talk about it, I guess.” I shift my weight. “Logan and I have met several times. We had a nice chat.”

Her brushy gray brows pop. “Have you really?”

“Yes.”

“That's fantastic, dear. It's great you two are talking. He—he hasn't handled everything well.”

“How do you mean?”

Maria hesitates, just long enough to make me think she is considering how much she should—or shouldn't—tell me.

I wave a hand in the air. “You don't need to tell me—not my business, I get it. Anyway, this is kind of a check-the-box scenario, me meeting my sister-in-law.”

“I get it and have personally been through similar therapy.” Maria gestures for me to follow her down the hall. “But please understand that you shouldn't expect much from this visit.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Right this way, then.”

Maria leads me through the living room that is furnished with a couch, two chairs, a coffee table, and a rug. Not a single picture hangs on the walls or sits on the tables.

The smell of antiseptic and bleach precedes our arrival to the master bedroom, reminding me of a hospital. The door to the room is shut, and I don't know why this bothers me so much. It is as if Clara is locked away from the world. It is also dark in this part of the house. The shades are drawn, and only a single lamp shines from somewhere in an adjoining room.

Maria pauses at the door, her hand on the knob, and turns to me, offering a “get ready” look.

I nod. My heart starts to pound.

The door slowly opens to a large, dark room. Streaks of sunlight that have escaped the slit in the curtains slash sharp lines across a barren

hardwood floor.

A king-size bed is the focal point of the room. Lying on it like a porcelain doll, is a pale, frail woman with long blond hair spilling over her shoulders. The blankets are pulled up to her chin, her arms resting on either side of her body. Her eyes are open but stare blankly at the ceiling.

A hideous jagged scar mars the side of her face, extending all the way to her hairline, to a bald spot where the hair has not grown back. It's jarring to see. Like someone has taken a Sharpie and drawn from the top of her head down to her neck.

The nightstand is stacked with prescription medications. A cup of oatmeal sits on the corner, next to a wooden stool. I've interrupted feeding time. Behind the stool is a floor lamp (which is off) and an IV stand.

The nurse glances at me before approaching the side of the bed.

I clasp my hands together and linger in the doorway.

Maria's voice is loud and placating as she leans over the bed. "Clara, there's someone here to see you. Her name is Julia. Julia Klein." She pauses for a long moment, waiting for a reaction, and then continues in a tone that reminds me of a parent speaking to a toddler. "She is your sister-in-law. Daniel's wife. Julia Klein is her name."

There is no response from Clara, not as much as a flicker of acknowledgment.

Maria sends me a pitied glance before addressing Clara one more time. When she receives no response the second time, the nurse straightens and walks over to me.

"I'm sorry you drove all this way, but this is likely the most you'll get out of her."

"Does she ever talk?" I ask, my gaze locked on Logan's wife.

"No. Not since the accident."

"You know," I say to Maria, "Daniel never told me the details of the accident." *Or that it happened at all.*

Maria shakes her head. "It was terrible."

"What happened?"

We are speaking in hushed voices now.

"Clara went out on a really stormy night. The cop said she was driving far too fast for the conditions. She lost control of the vehicle and slammed headfirst into a tree. Thank God she was wearing her seat belt. Anyway, the windshield exploded, and that's where she got the scar." Maria takes a deep

breath. “It was around one or two in the morning, so she wasn’t found until dawn, when somebody drove by and saw the car. Blood was everywhere, so I hear.”

“It happened early in the morning?”

Maria nods.

I frown, wondering why Logan didn’t go in search for his wife when she didn’t return home. “What caused her to leave the house at that time of night in the first place?”

The nurse shrugs. Not the point, I guess.

Just then, the phone rings.

“I’ve got to get that,” Maria says. “It’s the doctor about refilling some of her medications. Do you want to . . .?” she gestures to the bed.

“Yes, please.”

Once Maria is gone, I slowly cross the room to the edge of the bed. I consider the ring sparkling from Clara’s left hand. A small solitaire diamond on a gold band.

I take a seat on the wooden stool. I receive no indication whatsoever that Clara knows I’m here. Or who I am, for that matter.

I stare at her small, delicate face for a while. She’s pretty, but in an average, girl-next-door way, and I decide that Logan is far too good-looking for her. I wonder what he saw in her, where they met. I wonder how he asked her to marry him. Did he plan a romantic evening? Get down on one knee?

I survey the room, searching for anything of his, but come up short.

A stack of books sits in the corner, likely the nurse’s, next to a potted Ficus badly in need of pruning. A wheelchair waits idly in the shadows with a flannel blanket thrown over it.

When my focus shifts back to Clara, she is looking right at me.

A chill shoots up my spine. Instead of the dead, dull stare she had when I walked in, she is now looking directly into my eyes, pinning me with an expression so intense that my stomach flips.

My immediate instinct is to flee.

“H—hi,” I stutter. “I’m Julia. I was Daniel’s wife.”

Clara doesn’t speak. I can’t even see the rise and fall of her chest. She just stares at me like a creepy porcelain doll, the kind whose eyes follow you as you cross the room.

Then she blinks.

I lick my lips and lean in, my heart a roaring thunder in my chest. “Hi, Clara,” I whisper.

I came all this way because I thought you should know, your husband is cheating on you. The admission floats through my head, but I push it aside.

With my eyes locked on hers, I pull the folded envelope from my jeans pocket, quietly open the bedside table drawer, and slide it inside.

Her lips part.

Just then, something shatters on the floor in a nearby room. I surge to my feet as Maria rushes into the room.

When I look back at Clara, her blank gaze has returned to the ceiling. Fixed on the exact same spot she was staring at when we walked in, with the same blank, emotionless expression.

“Sorry, I broke a glass in the kitchen.” Maria’s finger is wrapped in a blood-spotted paper towel. “Did she startle? I hate to scare her.”

“No, she’s fine.”

Maria exhales, then says, “Did you get anything out of her?”

I shake my head. “Thank you for letting me see her. I’m so sorry to interrupt your day.”

“No, no, dear, it’s fine. Can I get you some coffee or tea, or anything at all?”

“No, I need to get going.”

I follow Maria out of the bedroom. When I step into the hall, I pause and turn back one last time. Like a clap of thunder, our eyes meet again. This time, Clara’s finger lifts from the comforter and points at something.

At me.

JULIA



The afternoon has grown dark and dreary, a stark contrast to the cloudless morning. I click on my headlights as I glance at the blanket of gray overhead. Nothing but layers and layers of feathered clouds.

Snow is moving in.

The view outside my windshield has changed as well, lines of mid-sized homes traded for endless pines. Bustling city highways have faded to pitted two-lane roads.

I am a few miles from Reed Point when I see a swarm of flashing lights ahead. Two police cars, an ambulance, and several unmarked cars—either law enforcement or well-meaning citizens, I can't tell. I press the brake, glancing in the rearview mirror at the vacant road behind me.

As I draw closer, I realize the commotion is due to a vehicle accident.

Then I see him.

Logan Klein is standing with his hands on his hips, next to Reed County Sheriff Barron, whom I've seen in news stories. Both men are wearing thick coats and hats, staring at what appears to be the back end of a red pickup truck sticking up from a ditch.

Logan turns, squinting into the headlights as I drive closer. Slow recognition is followed by surprise as he sees me.

After muttering something to the chief, he strides across the pavement in my direction. I slowly pull to the side of the road, parking behind the ambulance and an unmarked truck. As I do, I get a clear shot of the scene ahead.

Headlights illuminate a body on the pavement, a man, based on the size. His clothes look like they've been through a shredder, covered in blood and

dirt. What was once the man's face is now nothing more than a bright red, oozing filet of flesh. Only a single clump of brown hair remains on the top of his head. Everything else has been ripped away in a long, bloody trail on the pavement.

I don't need to see the front of the man's truck to know that he was ejected through the windshield and rolled several yards before finally settling on his back, his legs and arms splayed out like a child about to make a snow angel.

"Julia." Logan taps on the window.

I startle, swallow the bile in my mouth, and roll down the window. Greedily, I gulp the blast of cold air that shoves inside.

Logan follows my gaze, realizing the clear view I have of the dead man.

"Oh shit." He grabs my chin and turns my face toward him. "Don't look. Look at me. Shit, you okay?"

I am two seconds from vomiting in my lap.

"Jesus, you're turning green."

Logan pulls open the door, catching me as I propel myself forward. He slowly lowers me onto the cold pavement, then kneels next to me as I pull my knees to my chest.

A line of cars has formed behind the accident, their headlights shining directly on us.

"Put your head between your legs. Breathe . . . Are you okay? If you need to throw up, it's fine. Someone else already did."

"No," I croak out. "I think I'm okay."

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

Logan gently strokes my hair, allowing me a minute to compose myself. Snowflakes drift down from the sky.

"What are you doing out this way?" he asks.

The question catches me off guard. I lift my head from between my knees. "I had some errands."

He nods. I knew there was a risk that Maria, his wife's in-home nurse, would call Logan and inform him of my visit. But based on his lack of follow-up questions, I feel confident he is unaware.

"What happened?" I ask.

Logan wraps his hand around the back of his neck. "It's Ricky Adler."

"What?" I squeak.

He nods and glances at the sheriff, who is now talking to someone holding a black body bag. “Ricky is covered in booze. You can smell it all over his clothes.”

“Oh my God . . . so it’s a drunk-driving accident?”

“Appears that way.”

“He’s—he’s obviously dead, right?”

Logan nods.

A tow truck slowly rolls to a stop behind my car. The sheriff yells something in our direction.

“We need to move your car.” Logan stands, then helps me off the pavement. “Can you drive?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Go home. I’ll be there soon.”

The dinner. Yes. I’d momentarily forgotten about our date.

“Keep your eyes down,” he says, guiding me into the minivan. “I’ll hold traffic and direct you out. Just reverse, then pull onto the road. Don’t look up until you pass.”

I nod.

Logan shuts the door, reaches through the open window, and cups my cheek in his hand. “I’ll be there in a few hours. Everything will be okay.”

“Okay,” I whisper, feeling the sting of tears.

“Be careful.”

“Hey, Logan,” I yell as he steps onto the road, stopping an oncoming vehicle.

“Yes?”

“What are you doing here?”

He frowns, then tilts his head to the side.

“No, I mean, *here*. At this scene.”

“Oh.” He glances back, toward the body. “I drove up on the accident. A few minutes after it happened.”

“Oh.”

“Okay, come on.” He gestures me forward. “Nice and easy . . .”

I pull onto the road.

As I maneuver around the scene, I notice not one, but two sets of skid marks.

JULIA



At precisely six o'clock, my doorbell rings. I've been cleaning like a madwoman, a feeble attempt to distract myself from the images of Ricky's dead body and Clara's dark eyes that are dominating my thoughts.

I quickly return the broom to the utility closet, smooth the cashmere sweater I purchased while in the city, and open the door.

Every word I'd spent the entire afternoon rehearsing vanishes the moment Logan reveals a bouquet of wildflowers from behind his back. In the other hand, he clutches a bottle of expensive French wine and a bag of groceries. On his face is a crooked smile that would melt any woman's heart.

My courage dissolves in the blink of his perfectly feathered black lashes.

"What is this?" I ask.

"A prerequisite to a man inviting himself over for dinner."

I tilt my head to the side. "Are you sure these aren't *I'm so sorry you saw a dead body today* flowers?"

He snorts.

"I'm just joking."

"I really am so sorry you had to see that."

"Not your fault."

I sneak a glance at Logan's left hand as he offers me the flowers. As I predicted, his ring finger is bare.

"Come in."

After closing the door, Logan follows me into the kitchen.

I grab a vase from below the sink and begin filling it with water. “So, anything new on the accident?”

“No.” Logan sets the groceries on the counter. “Like I said, he was covered in booze, and later we learned there were four open containers in his truck. He also had a gun in his console.”

This gets my attention. “A gun?”

“Yep. The fact that he had one isn’t a surprise, but the fact that he was driving around drunk with it is extremely concerning.”

“Where was he going?”

Logan shrugs. “They called his ex-wife. She had no idea. They don’t speak, apparently.”

“What did the sheriff say about it all?”

“That Ricky had it coming. The guy was always drunk.”

“Didn’t you recently tell Barron your concern that he might have been somehow involved in Daniel’s death?”

“Yes.”

“Does he think this has anything to do with that?”

“No. He was drunk, Julia. That’s the story.”

I attempt to refocus on the flowers I am arranging in the vase, but I can’t keep my mouth shut. “So, the working theory is that Ricky has been the one prank calling me and putting dead birds on my doorstep. But now that he’s dead, theoretically, the pranks should stop . . . this should stop everything, right?”

“What do you mean, everything?”

“Your theory that he could have been there that night. He and your dad were your only two suspects. Now they’re both dead. It makes no sense for you to continue pursuing this crazy theory.”

Logan doesn’t say anything for a long moment.

“Let it go, Logan.”

He closes the few feet between us, takes the vase from my hands, and slides it onto the counter. “I was thinking . . .” He sweeps a lock of hair off my shoulder. “Tonight, let’s forget everything, okay? Just for tonight. Tonight, I promised to cook you dinner, and that’s that.”

He lifts my chin with the tip of his finger.

“Sit down, Julia, and relax for a change. I’ll bring you some wine.”

A bottle and a half later, the dinner is put away, the dishes are washed, the table wiped down. The evening has gone even better than the one before it.

Logan is charming, flirty, and most importantly, interested—as I am in him. I can't help it. My brother-in-law gets more attractive each time I see him. And for some reason, he is suddenly dazzled by me. It is the perfect storm of confusion.

I want to be honest here. Yes, there is a part of me that feels like this is the ultimate revenge on his brother. I will not deny that. It feels good. Vindicating. But more than that, I *am* physically, mentally, and emotionally attracted to this man.

They say you don't choose love, love chooses you. And I can't help but wonder if maybe, just maybe, Logan is the universe's way of apologizing for Daniel.

I settle onto the couch as Logan places the final log in the fireplace. Not surprisingly, the outdoorsman is a pro at starting fires.

He stands, wipes the soot from his jeans, and turns.

I smile.

Even with the flames backlighting his tall, thick frame, there is no mistaking the heat in his eyes.

My heart beats a little faster as I wonder how long has it been.

How long has it been since I actually enjoyed sex? When it was for pleasure, rather than pleasing? When was the last time a man looked at me like this?

Slowly—tentatively—Logan crosses the room. The fire pops and hisses as he sits down next to me.

“Julia, I . . .” His voice is thick with wine. “I want you to know how sorry I am that I didn't stop him.”

“Stop,” I say, pressing my finger to his lips. “It's in the past. I forgive you.”

He cups my face in his hands, and as if he is unable to fight the attraction a moment longer, he kisses me.

Again.

Like a switch flipping, my entire body bursts with tingles from the inside out. The sudden urge to have sex is nothing short of primal.

There is no asking, speaking, convincing. We disrobe, our clothes tossed carelessly on the floor while we kiss like long-lost lovers.

His erection is hard and thick in my hand as I lift my leg and straddle him on my knees. I tease him for moment, reveling in his groans, before spreading my knees and lowering myself onto him.

“*Fuck, Julia.*” He moans before taking my nipple in his mouth.

I am crazed, someone I don’t recognize as I ride him, my nails cutting into his shoulders. His obvious pleasure, his moans and grunts, only arouse me more. Beads of sweat roll down my back.

The moment I feel his release inside me, I am sent over the edge.

I scream my brother-in-law’s name as I climax.

When my vision steadies, I am taken aback by what I see in front of me. A single tear runs down Logan’s cheek, and I softly wipe it away.

“Julia,” he says.

“*Shhh . . .*” I lift off of him, wipe away the mess with a nearby blanket, then take his hand and pull him off the couch. “Let’s go to the bedroom.”

Like a whipped dog, my brother-in-law follows me.

One more time, I think.

One *last* time to feel this way.

JULIA



Logan sleeps so soundly, I muse as I stand over him. Like an angel, not a care in the world.

His face is completely relaxed, his chest rising and falling heavily. There are no bad dreams for Logan Klein. No anxiety, no fear, no regret.

I loathe him because I am the exact opposite. I can't sleep. It is the first time I've had someone in my home since Daniel. Not to mention, another man—in my bed. It is also the first time I've had sex since Daniel.

I wrestle with the regret, try to justify it, but to no avail.

My heart races as I trace the back edge of the knife with my fingertip, the dim glow of the moonlight twinkling off the tip.

Back and forth, back and forth, I stroke it, the cool steel soothing my warm skin.

I am sweating, light-headed, wrestling with emotion.

Tonight, the weight of the last four months feels heavy on my shoulders. I am reflective as I stare down at this man sleeping in my bed. I see his brother in his bone structure, see Clara in the tan line on his ring finger. I am overwhelmed with a feeling of impending change.

Of anticipation of what lies ahead.

It is just after three o'clock in the morning when the landline rings, even though Ricky is now dead.

The hair rises on the back of my neck.

After slipping the knife back into its place under the mattress, I hurry to the pantry.

“Hello?”

No response.

I hang up and wait.

It rings again.

“Hello?”

Still nothing.

I tiptoe-jog back to the bedroom and peep inside. Logan remains fast asleep.

Lingering outside the bedroom, I begin pacing, checking every few seconds to ensure he doesn't wake.

The phone rings again. Five minutes after that, once again.

And again.

Still, Logan doesn't wake.

At 4:30 in the morning, I busy myself by starting a pot of coffee.

I decide I want Logan gone. I want this over.

I splash water on my face, grip the sides of the sink, and stare out the window where frost is forming along the edges. Snow is falling gently, catching on the wind and slowly drifting into the blackness that surrounds the edges of my porch light.

The coffeepot beeps, signaling the end of its cycle, but I don't pour any. The smell has made my stomach sour.

I am standing in the living room, staring at the woods when the phone trills again.

This time I let it ring.

I slowly turn and stare at the front door.

Somehow I know.

I just know.

Knees trembling, I walk to the door, slowly turn the knob, and pull it open.

This time, only the tiny head of a bird rests on my doorstep, centered in a pool of blood.

From inside, I hear the phone ring. But this time, it's not the landline.

It's my cell phone.

JULIA



“Julia, hey.”

“Reese, what are you doing calling so early in the morning?” I am hiding in the utility closet, my cell phone pressed to my ear, hoping Logan doesn’t wake.

“I just . . . are you okay?”

“No, actually, I’m not. Why do you ask?”

“I just had the worst dream and woke up with the worst feeling. What’s going on?”

I drag my fingers through my hair and tell her about the bird.

“Just the head of a bird?”

“Yes.”

“Did you call the police?”

“Not yet.”

“I’m coming over.”

“No—*no*. Logan is here.”

“He is?”

“Yes.”

The length of her silence on the other end sends a little red flag popping up in my head.

“Reese?” I ask, my voice cracking.

“Shit, J . . .”

“What?”

“I . . .”

“What did you do, Reese?”

“How close have you and Logan gotten?”

“Why?” I snap in a cringe-worthy defensive tone.

“I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

“*Hurt?* Reese, I am completely capable—”

“Julia, no. Listen. Do you remember when I told you about the rumors of his hooking up with women while on the job? Logan is obsessed with the feeling of being a caretaker, probably because his parents were so bad to him. It gets him off—saving the girl in trouble. And by the way, how ironic that his wife now needs twenty-four-hour care.”

“You’re implying he caused the accident? Are you serious?”

“I’m just saying, Julia. You need to be smart.”

I close my eyes, shaking my head. “Well, thanks for the warning. I’ve gotta go—”

“No, Julia, stop.” Reese groans. “I gave him the video. The one you gave me.”

Of all the things I have been through in the last year, this single sentence sends my entire world crashing down on me. I am completely speechless.

She continues, speaking quickly now, as if she has to get the confession out or she will wimp out.

“I’ve been worried about you, really bad. When I ran into him at the diner, he said he was investigating some things surrounding Daniel’s death. I didn’t know what he meant, but then when the pranks kept up, I got extremely worried. Yesterday, I sent him the video, thought maybe it could help whatever was going on. I don’t know, J, I just wanted to wash my hands of it, you know. It’s—*fuck*. I’m so sorry.”

“What the *fuck*, Reese? How *could* you?”

“I was just trying to help you. Please don’t be mad.”

“You *promised* . . .” Breathless from the betrayal, I can’t even finish.

I’m a safe place, she once said.

I’m a safe place.

“Julia, please let me come over. Let’s make a plan. We’ll go away for a while—I’ll pay. Italy. Then we’ll come back, and I’ll help you get your old job back at the genetics place. We’ll start over.”

We’ll . . .

“Stay the hell away from me.”

“I’m sorry, J. I’m so sorry.” Her voice shakes. “I’m so—”

I kill the call and dissolve into a mess of tears.

The utility room door opens.

“Julia, what’s wrong?” Logan gapes down at the train wreck I have become.

I begin wildly wiping away the snot and tears, trying to pull it together.

“Hey . . .” When I don’t respond, he gently grabs my arm and pulls me to him. “Julia, baby, come here.”

I am pulled into his arms and wrapped in warmth. Unable to resist, I bury my face into his sweatshirt. *Leave me, hate me, kill me*, I think. I don’t care. Just let me have this moment.

“Did you watch it?” My voice quivers between the shuddering sobs. I am overwhelmed with humiliation. I want to die. Right there in my utility closet.

Logan squeezes me tighter. “I couldn’t. Made it about four minutes. Had to turn it off.”

So, that’s why he fucked me. It was a pity fuck. He’d watched the video of his brother abusing me—that my *best friend* gave him—and he felt sorry for me. Me, the ultimate fixer-upper. Me, the lost puppy, and he, my savior. I have become his new porcelain doll, fragile, easily broken, something that needs protection. All thanks to my “best friend.”

How could I be so stupid?

“I can’t believe she gave it to you,” I whispered.

“She’s worried about you. I’m a former cop. It makes sense, Julia.”

“No, Logan. No, it doesn’t.”

JULIA



“*T*here are no tracks outside.” Logan dusts snowflakes off his coat as he kicks the door closed behind him. His cheeks are rosy from the wind, his eyes ice-cold.

The sun has come up and Logan refuses to leave. I don’t push it and try to be as composed as possible, while in reality, my insides feel like they are clawing to get out.

After disposing of the bird head, Logan spent thirty minutes checking the perimeter of the cabin, as well as every lock, nook, and cranny of the interior. He’s just come in from making a second perimeter check, to ensure he missed nothing.

“Are you sure you didn’t see or hear anyone outside this morning?” He crosses the room.

“I’m sure.”

Logan sits next to me on the couch and places his hand over mine. His fingers are like ice. “Are you doing better now?”

“Yes, thank you.” I bite my lip. “If it’s not Ricky, who is it? And why?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll find out. I promise.” A moment stretches between us. “Could it have been placed there last night? While we were . . .?”

A blush creeps up my cheeks. “Maybe. But the calls didn’t start until this morning, and last time, the bird was left right around when the calls started up.”

A line of worry creases his brow as he stands, unable to sit still. “Just doesn’t make sense. There should be tracks in the snow, then. Either tire or foot.”

“Did you call the sheriff?”

“Not yet. I will.” Logan scrubs a hand over his mouth, his thoughts running a mile a minute, and then he turns to me. “Speaking of tracks, while I was walking around, I noticed the dent on your bumper. Looks like you hit something with red paint. What happened?”

“Huh.” I shift on the cushion. “Not sure.”

Just then, my cell phone buzzes from the table.

Logan stands to hang up his jacket. “Reese again?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t understand why you won’t answer.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

“She’s worried about you,” he says. When I look away, he shakes his head. “I will never, ever understand female friendships.”

I pause, choosing my next words carefully. “True friends stab you in the front, not behind your back.”

Logan’s brow cocks. “Okay, but isn’t she like your only friend?”

Just then, the landline rings.

One ring, two—then silence.

A slow smile spreads across my face.

THE OTHER



Five months earlier

I wait until he's asleep. Passed out from too much whiskey. My stomach is in knots as I tiptoe to the kitchen, carefully climb onto the counter, and open the top cabinet.

The rusted metal hinges squeak like a mouse, but the sound might as well be a foghorn to my ears. I freeze, then slowly peer over my shoulder.

Moonlight streams through the living room windows, pooling on the stained carpet, illuminating the room just enough to ensure no one is coming.

Once I am certain the noise didn't wake him, I carefully pull the canvas duffel bag from the cabinet, biting my lip so hard that blood seeps into my mouth.

Ensuring the metal hardware on the straps doesn't click against the wood is tricky. Good thing I have practiced this maneuver exactly fourteen times in the last week.

Hugging the bag like a newborn baby, I shimmy off the counter and onto the cold linoleum floor.

I kneel down and pull out a pair of dark gray jogging shoes, then slip them over the two pairs of thick socks that cover my feet. A black hoodie and black yoga pants complete the outfit.

Panic zings through me—have I packed everything?

No, I think. Too late to panic now.

I quickly feel the contents of the bag.

Two sweatshirts

Two T-shirts

Four pairs of underwear

*Three pairs of socks
One bar of Dove soap
Razor
Deodorant
Toothbrush
Toothpaste
Tampons
Rape whistle
Pack of wet wipes
Two bottles of water
Ten energy bars
Five hundred dollars in cash
Bottle of Xanax
Driver's license
One burner phone*

And last, an envelope of pictures, each highlighting every bruise he has ever given me, along with the date and time written in ink on the back.

After pulling out the small flip phone, I zip up the pack.

My heart feels like it is about to explode out of my chest, the fight-or-flight response in full swing.

Suddenly, staying quiet is the last thing on my mind. I am completely overcome by a rush of panic. Like when the monster steps out of the shadows in a dream.

Flee. There is no more thinking, no more creeping.

Flee.

I lunge to the garage, swing open the door, and jump into my car.

My hands are trembling so badly that I drop the keys once, twice.

"Dammit." My muscles stiffen. I have never been so scared in my life.

Finally, I start the car and hit the button on the garage door opener.

"Oh my God." Tears of emotion flood my eyes.

Shoving the car in reverse, I accelerate out of the garage and back into the dimly lit street. The rain is coming down in sheets. I don't bother to close the garage door.

Leaving the house, I flip open my cell phone and text the only number in the contacts. The only person I can trust.

Julia.

My text contains three words.

I did it.

A bolt of lightning slices the sky.

Just then, a light clicks on in the kitchen and the front door opens.

The cell phone tumbles to the floorboard as I stomp on the gas.

JULIA



*T*wo hours later, the landline rings again. Logan glances at me from under his lashes. He is sitting across from me, reading a book. I am doing the same. Pretending to, anyway. In reality, I've been watching the clock like a hawk.

He refuses to leave. Though he doesn't say it, he is concerned for my safety.

White Knight Syndrome.

Logan closes the book, then uncrosses his legs to stand and answer the call. But this time, the phone only rings once.

I glance at the clock—8:44 a.m.

A moment passes as we stare at each other.

I close my book, inhale, and rise from the chair.

It's time.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"I'm going to make some tea."

"Want me to sit next to the phone in case they call back?"

"No, it's fine."

They won't call back.

I pad into the kitchen.

"You okay?" Logan asks from the sofa.

"*Hmm,*" I say, setting the kettle on the stove.

I can feel him watching me.

"What's wrong?" He slides his book on the coffee table and joins me in the kitchen.

Ignoring him, I fill the kettle and click on the burner. It glows red hot as I turn to him.

“When were you going to tell me about your wife, Logan?” I watch as his eyes round in horror. “That’s right, I know about her. About Clara.”

Logan opens his mouth, but no words come out. A deer caught in the headlights. I’ve seen the look before.

I repeat the questions as droplets of water begin to sizzle on the bottom of the kettle.

“I . . .” He exhales a desperate breath. “Julia, she’s . . .”

“Disabled, I know.”

“How do you know?”

“Reese hasn’t only been running her mouth about me, you know.”

“Reese told you? How did she find out?”

“She’s a woman. We can find out anything. Answer my question—when were you going to tell me?”

“I . . . I don’t know.” Desperation sparks in his eyes. “Julia, I don’t regret it.” He gestures between us. “Please. I’m sorry for being married, for cheating on her, yes, but I don’t regret being with you. You have to understand, Clara and I have basically no relationship anymore. Add to that, we were only married a few months before the accident.”

I pull away as he grabs for my hand.

Clearly frustrated, Logan groans and begins pacing.

“Julia, I have had feelings for you since I met you the first time. Do you remember? You were with Daniel at that coffee shop—you know, Pour Café, on the corner of Seventh and Jackson? You were so beautiful, captivating, graceful. I remember wondering how the hell my brother got someone as good as you.”

He takes a deep breath.

“I knew he was abusive. He was to his girlfriend before you too. After you two married, I found myself worrying about you. About him too. What would he do? How far would he take things? What would the ripple effect be? Would his stupidity affect *my* job, *my* life? After all, no one would trust a cop with an abusive brother.”

He drags his fingers through his hair.

“Trust me, I’ve seen so much domestic abuse in my job—and in my childhood, for that matter—that I know how it can wreck entire families.” His eyes narrow. “Daniel did exactly to you what our dad did to our mom.”

“The apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree, does it?”

Logan stills, then turns fully to me.

“Was it really the fact *he* was abusing *me* that made you crazy? Or did it hit a bit too close to home for you, Logan? Did you worry if people started digging into him, that you would be next?”

The blood drains from my brother-in-law’s face. “Daniel and I are *not* the same, Julia. We are *not* the same.”

Something dark flashes in his eyes now. I’ve hit a chord, exactly as I intended.

I step past him, cross the living room, and pull open the front door. “Go home. Go home to your wife, Logan. Forget about everything else. Take care of *her*.”

“No, Julia . . .” Logan rushes me. “I’m not leaving Reed Point until I know you’re safe. You’re not thinking straight. Please. Let me explain—”

“*Out.*”

He hesitates, his eyes boring into me as he whispers, “You’re making a mistake.”

“Add it to the list,” I say as I slam the door behind him.

I fall against the door and release a long exhale. I wait until I hear his truck fire up. The sound of his tires rolling over gravel fades in the distance before I retrieve my laptop from the counter.

I don’t bother to lock the door. He’ll be back. Men like Logan don’t handle rejection well.

At least, that’s what I’m counting on.

I click into my email and filter to *Adler, Ricky*. After a glance over my shoulder, I click into each email. Him, blackmailing me for money after his attempts at reaching Daniel failed. Him, threatening me, threatening my husband. Me, suggesting a compromise. Me, the offer. Him, accepting.

I highlight each email, then click delete. Move them into the trash folder and erase from there as well. Then I sync with the cloud. I’m not worried about Ricky’s phone or computer; the cops will never search there. He was drunk and deserved to die. Just like Daniel was abusive and deserved to die. Neither man deserves a proper investigation into their deaths.

After shutting down the laptop, I grab the basket of laundry from the dryer and hurry into the bedroom. After setting the basket on the bed, I lower to my hands and knees, drag the suitcase from under the bed, and flip open the top.

My pulse picks up as I unzip the front pocket and retrieve the folded envelope containing airline tickets and an itinerary. After reviewing the

details one last time, I carefully replace the envelope in the pocket.

I stand, then begin folding, stacking, packing.

Fourteen hours.

In fourteen hours, this mess will be over.

Tomorrow, my new life begins.

JULIA



After a full day of packing, planning, and confirmation calls, I eventually fall sleep, waiting on Logan to return.

I have another dream. Of Daniel, of the raven. Although this time, instead of pulling the stitches from his own neck, he's pulling them from mine.

This time, I am the one with the severed neck. One by one, Daniel removes the stitches from my oozing flesh as I cry in agony. In the shadows, I see his brother, Logan, watching with an evil smile on his face as he masturbates to my screams.

You see, although the Klein brothers are separate individuals, they are still the same. Bred from the same stock, if you will.

When I was a little girl, I convinced my mother to adopt a dog from the animal shelter. A cute, cuddly brown ball of fur who loved me unconditionally.

Unfortunately, this was the extent of his love. Max (I'd named him) turned out to be a pit bull mix, the pit being most prevalent. During one of his evening walks, he sprang from his leash and attacked an elderly couple's poodle. Soon after, he killed a stray cat, then another, and another. When he growled at our neighbor's newborn daughter, my mother insisted we give him back to the shelter.

It was my first real heartbreak.

I visited Max every day at the animal shelter, sat next to his cage, spoke to him, stroked his little spotted nose. It soon became apparent that no one was interested in a pit bull with an attitude problem.

For two months, I visited Max. Every day after school, I fed him contraband bacon treats. Until one day, Max was no longer in his cage.

He'd been euthanized.

Years later, I came across an online article that suggested certain behavioral traits, such as aggression, can be genetically passed from generation to generation. Meaning, if a dog's parents were trained to be aggressive (guard dogs or fight dogs, for example), their physiological makeup becomes altered (a survival mechanism) and is then passed down through genes.

This is where my interest in genetics originated. At one point, I had dreams of obtaining my doctorate and opening my own research facility.

Those were pipe dreams.

I've never forgotten Max. So sweet and loyal and perfect to me, but deadly to others. A stereotypical Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde scenario.

Daniel reminded me of Max.

Not long after he first hit me, I found myself researching the human genetics of violent behavior. I learned that, as with certain dog breeds, there are genetic markers that predict destructive human behavior.

For example, a mutation in the MAOA gene—known as the warrior gene—often results in increased reactivity to stress and aggressive behaviors. I didn't need a blood test to confirm the Klein brothers share this mutation.

Logan and Daniel's parents were abusive, an environmental factor that shaped how their brains functioned. This, combined with the genetics of two horrible parents, ensured the brothers' lifelong struggle with aggressive behavior.

To put it plainly, Max, Logan, and Daniel were nothing but byproducts of bad genes. And until gene replacement therapy becomes a thing, there is unfortunately only one way to fix it.

I awake with a start, my chest heaving, my body soaked in sweat. The house is dark. Outside, the security light washes over the dark woods.

I hear something in the living room. A faint creak of the floorboards. My eyelids peel open, trying to see through the darkness. I remember I didn't lock the door.

Another creak is followed by footsteps.

My pulse skyrockets.

It's time.

I gently pull the knife from underneath my pillowcase and grip the hilt tightly in the palm of my hand.

“Julia?”

My body stills. It is Daniel’s voice.

No, that’s impossible. But it sounds so familiar.

For a moment, I don’t know if I’m still dreaming.

“Julia . . .” The voice moves closer.

I close my eyes and my body begins to tremble.

I see his face. Smiling, asking me to marry him. Then frowning with disappointment over one of my many failed attempts at dinner. I see his face contorted with rage, his eyes bulging grotesquely from his head, the vein in the center of his forehead pulsing.

Then I see her face.

Clara.

“Julia.” Logan gently places his hand over my forehead. “I’m still here. I can’t leave. I can’t leave you like this.”

My eyes slowly open. For a moment, we stare at each other.

I whisper, “It’s okay, Logan . . . I don’t mean what I do.”

There is a moment of recognition in his eyes. Then of sheer terror.

I raise the knife, propel myself off the pillow, and send the tip of the blade into my brother-in-law’s jugular. Blood sprays on my face.

I drop the knife and scramble back, wiping madly at my eyes, and slam against the headboard. Logan stumbles backward, gripping his throat with a desperate gurgling plea.

I watch him, in awe of this moment. Daniel, then Logan.

The line is finally broken.

Eventually, he lets go, his body dropping to the floor like a lead weight.

A minute passes in silence. Two, then three.

I lean over, turn on the lamp, and stare at my brother-in-law, dead, in a crumpled, bloody heap on the floor. An eerie calm comes over me.

I dig out the burner phone from the pillowcase and flip it open.

She answers on the first ring.

“It’s done,” I say.

JULIA



Two weeks later

The air smells like fresh flowers and orange blossom. The ocean is a crystal-clear turquoise blue, the sun shimmering like a million diamonds dancing on the surface.

“Would you like another drink?” the bartender asks in halting English.

I tear my gaze away from the shoreline, smile, and nod.

Lo Scoglio is a small open-air bar next to the ocean where locals and tourists are welcome as they are—shoeless, shirtless, sandy feet. No one cares.

I am wearing a yellow sundress, no bra. Very liberating. My hair is windswept, hanging in tangled knots down my back. No makeup. I’m most comfortable without makeup. And again, no one here cares.

Italy exceeds my every expectation. It is, without question, the most beautiful place on earth.

The bartender delivers my drink. Leaving in the little pink umbrella, I sip, smiling. Turns out, I remember how to smile after all.

My attention is pulled to the television mounted in the corner. A red banner blinks breaking news. The volume is off, but the subtitles are on, in English, per my request.

The American tourist tragically killed in a car accident has now been identified as thirty-eight-year-old Reese Scott from Charlotte, North Carolina, United States. The investigation remains ongoing, although a preliminary report suggests faulty brakes as the cause of the accident. Stay tuned for more . . .

I lean back and watch a pair of toddlers splash at the shoreline. It is the first time in my life I feel relaxed.

The truth is, I remember every detail of that night. I did kill my husband—willfully, gladly—and would do it again if the situation called for it. I do remember shoving the knife in his throat, feeling the warm blood run down my wrist.

I remember Logan's arrival shortly after, the way he scrutinized me, standing over Daniel's body. I remember him checking the clocks, the lights, and I remember being so damned nervous he was going to see Ricky's footprints in the mud outside.

But Logan was too blinded by his need to comfort me that night. My white knight. He chose not to believe that the woman he'd secretly fantasized about for years would kill a man, let alone his brother.

I understand that kind of denial. Unfortunately, so does Logan's wife.

The thing is, Logan—and Daniel for that matter—don't know the strength of a woman. They don't know the will to survive that burns deep inside, born of decades and decades of suffering. They don't know our resilience, that there is nothing stronger than a tribe of women, a truly unstoppable force. The bond, forged over tears and laughter, is rarely broken—but when it is, there is no going back. There is no greater pain.

This lesson, unfortunately, Reese had to learn.

Fucking my husband, I could get over. It's easy to forgive infidelity when you hate the person you're married to in the first place. But going behind my back to his brother, sharing my secrets—with me in my weakest, most humiliating state—crossed the line. I'd trusted her.

I was wrong to.

I feel her presence before I see her. A smile tugs at my lips as she slides into the seat next to me.

The bartender comes over. "Can I get you a drink?"

"I'll have what she's having."

The bartender nods and turns his back.

We smile as we look at each other, a million words hanging between us that need not be spoken.

Her blond hair is braided to the side, her scar covered in makeup, her cheeks a bit pink from the sun she's already gotten. Unlike me, Clara has reconnected with her feminine side, evident by the pink lipstick that matches a pink caftan that probably cost a fortune.

It makes me smile. I am so proud of my sister-in-law.

The bartender delivers her drink.

I raise mine, and she raises hers. “Cheers to never being victims again.”

Clara smiles. “Cheers.”

We sip, then settle in.

“It just hit the news,” I say quietly.

“Good.”

“You settle off?”

“Yes. Paid a random kid to pay the rental car guy to tamper with the brakes. Nothing links back to us.”

I nod.

“Oh.” Clara reaches into the woven purse I bought her at the market the day before. “I got you something.”

My brow cocks as I consider the flip phone in her hand.

“The landlord needed a contact number for us,” she says. “Figured you could be the main contact.”

“Works for me.” I take the phone and slide it into my handbag.

“I don’t want a phone,” Clara says. “Setting my alarm to prank call you for weeks did me in.”

“And I don’t want a pet bird,” I say with a shudder. “Cutting their heads off did *me* in.”

Clara grins. “Works for me.”

The original plan had been made a year earlier after Clara (the other wife) and I connected on social media, where we soon realized both our husbands, the gorgeous Klein brothers, were abusive. We began emailing and became best friends, our secret correspondence increasing to multiple emails a day. Together, Clara and I vowed to leave our husbands.

I was ready, but Clara was hard to break. She truly loved Logan. She believed he meant the many times he’d told her, “I don’t mean what I do.”

Clara always went back—emotionally, anyway—taking half the blame and promising to do “better for him.” It broke my heart. I didn’t understand how a woman could be so mesmerized by a man.

Clara was on the way to my house the night she got into the car accident. We were going to leave together, she and I, without a trace. We were going to get fake IDs and skip the country.

I learned of her accident the next morning—after staying up all night worried about why she didn’t show—when Daniel told me his sister-in-law

was in a coma. I obviously couldn't go visit, because Daniel didn't even know that we knew each other.

I became an absolute mess. An emotional train wreck. Blamed myself. Hated myself. Was overwhelmed with guilt.

This is when I received my first email from Ricky Adler, threatening me and my husband after many failed attempts to reach Daniel personally. Trying to extort us for money, or else he'd sue for wrongful termination—again.

I recognized the opportunity immediately. Ricky easily accepted my offer of ten thousand dollars in exchange for ensuring I never saw my husband again.

Ricky was supposed to kill Daniel that night. He was the one who had tripped the breaker and broken in. But, as usual, the universe had other plans. When Daniel and I started arguing that night—over something stupid—I snapped. I went off script and killed my husband myself.

I do not regret it.

Ricky ran, and we never spoke to or saw each other again. After all, he knew I had just as much dirt on him as he did on me.

The next week, I woke to an email from Clara. She was still recovering but had cleverly decided to seize the opportunity to pretend she was mentally disabled so that her abusive husband would no longer hurt her.

We began planning immediately.

“Have you heard anything from back home?” Clara asks.

I shake my head. “Just the news about the house fire in Reed Point. The cabin burned to the ground; I ensured that. They won't find his body.”

She shakes her head. “I can't believe he attacked you.”

I nod, and to my surprise, feel no guilt. It was self-defense—that's what I told her, anyway.

“I wonder when anyone will miss him,” she asks.

I snort. “Your nurses will when they don't receive the final payment for caring for the patient that is no longer there.”

Clara sips, then inhales deeply, tilting her head to the sky as she smiles.

She is free.

I can't help but smile.

Clara had been hesitant at first when I'd emailed her that Logan had come to visit, and that I believed we had an opportunity.

Together, we decided that I would take advantage of his newfound interest in his brother's death (and in me), and lure him into either, a:) a drunken confession of abuse, or b:) blackmail him into the confession. Then we would take that information to the police. Logan would be locked away, and then Clara and I would be gone.

I knew Logan would be difficult to lure, but I also knew his weakness. Reese was right . . . the former cop was addicted to women in trouble. So, I had to step things up a notch.

The raven, as symbolism goes, guided me. I purchased two birds from the pet store, kept them in a cage in the garage, covered with a black towel. Each was sacrificed for the greater good—to make Logan think I was in real trouble. Between that and Clara's prank calls, I was the ultimate damsel in distress.

We even had a code in the number of rings. Two rings: get ready. One ring: it's time.

"What about Ricky Adler?" Clara asks, twirling the umbrella in her drink. "Anything on him?"

"No. Like I said, he was a drunk. The cops won't look into anything, certainly not his emails."

"Do you really think he would have ratted you out when Logan began asking questions?"

I shrug. "Wasn't worth the risk."

She shakes her head. "I still can't believe Logan didn't realize the dent in your van was from running Ricky off the road."

"No one will. The minivan has been left in a distant parking spot at the airport, cleaned out, the license plate removed. It will be towed eventually, unclaimed, and sent to the junkyard."

Clara nods.

We toast again.

Running Ricky off the road was more difficult than I had anticipated. I never meant to actually make contact with his truck. Afterward, I pulled into a gas station to assess the damage and catch my breath. Then, I circled back to make sure he was dead. I had no idea his vehicle had already been discovered, and that Logan was also on the scene. Thanks to the chaos and dark afternoon, Logan didn't notice the dent in my vehicle. Then, anyway. Luck was on my side, as it continues to be.

Clara and I have officially been drunk all day for fourteen days straight. I arrived in Italy first, and she the next day.

Clara held my hand as I called Reese, telling her I forgave her and inviting her to meet me in Positano for our girls' trip. She did—tried to, anyway. Together, Clara and I arranged the faulty rental car for Reese.

Now, the wrongs have been righted, our slates wiped clean. Clara and I are finally in the driver's seat of our lives.

I want to be clear here . . . I did not expect to be attracted to Logan.

Just like his weakness for troubled women, I have a weakness for fucked-up men. But Clara will never find out about our secret rendezvous. That secret died with him, and I will take it to my own grave. Sooner, rather than later, I have a feeling.

A pair of businessmen sidle up next to us, obviously fresh from a meeting in linen dress shirts and slacks. They look terribly out of place next to the locals wearing next to nothing.

"What's your name?" the dark-haired one asks me.

"Julia."

"Nice to meet you. And yours?"

"Clara."

"You are from the United States, yes?"

"Yes." I nod.

"My name is Xavier, and this is Miles. We are here on business, from Canada."

"Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. Would you like another round?"

Clara smiles. "Please."

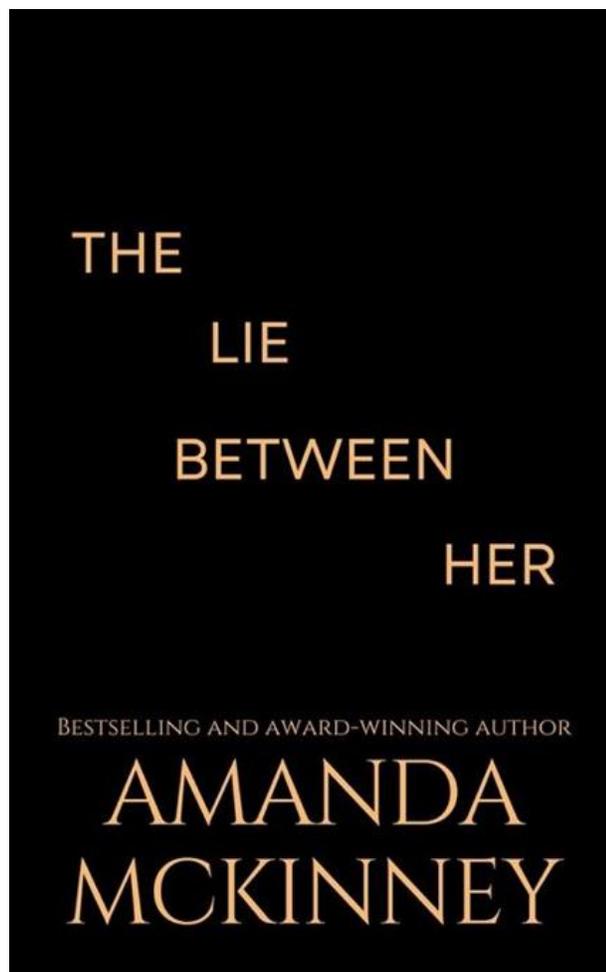
Xavier motions to the bartender.

As we wait for our free drinks, I lean back, smile, and tilt my head. "Xavier?"

"Yes?"

"Would you like to play a game?"

★ THE LIE BETWEEN HER ★



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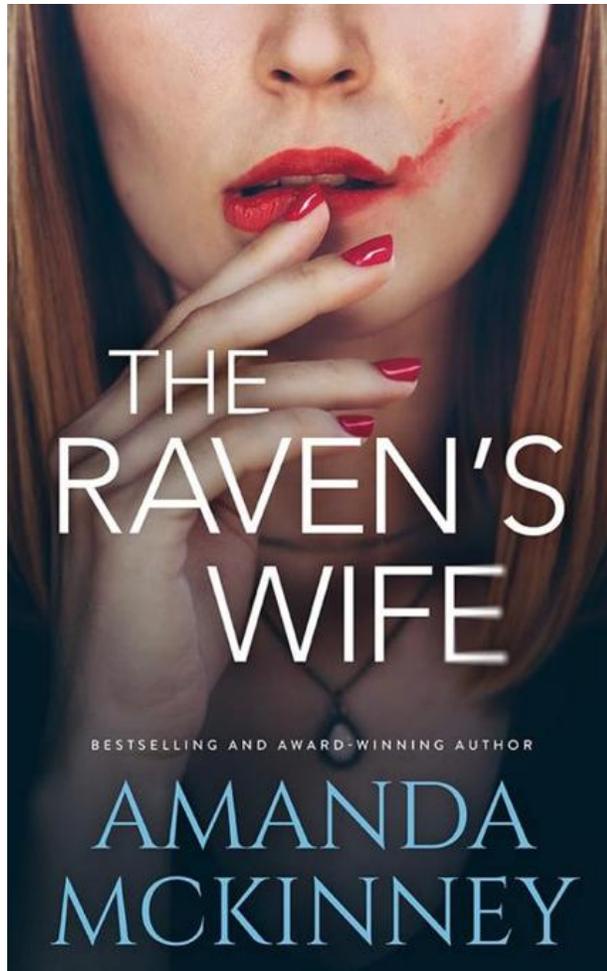


Amanda McKinney is the bestselling and multi-award-winning author of more than twenty romantic suspense and mystery novels. Her book, *Rattlesnake Road*, was named one of **POPSUGAR's 12 Best Romance Books**, and was featured on the *Today Show*. The fifth book in her Steele Shadows series was recently nominated for the prestigious **Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in Mystery/Suspense**. Amanda's books have received over fifteen literary awards and nominations.

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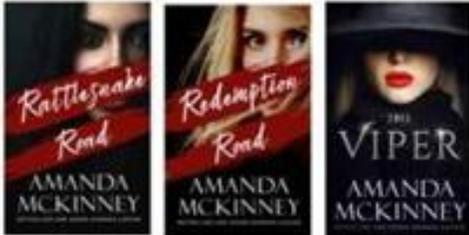
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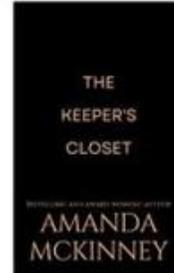
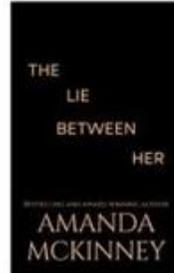
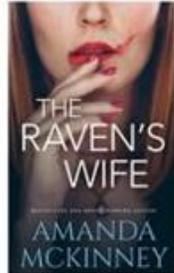
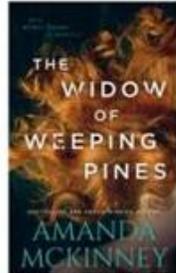
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